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**Experimental Women:
Mapping Cinema and Video Practices
from the Post-War Period up to Present**

Edited by
Sarah Keller, Elena Marcheschi and Giulia Simi

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The Experimental Women: An Introduction

Sarah Keller, Elena Marcheschi and Giulia Simi

Experimental cinema, video art, and new media art have always been fields in which the presence of women has proven significant. It took Feminist Film Theory¹ to make us clearly understand that experimental audio-visual practices represent a privileged space for female action where, in the absence of the economic constraints and censorship typical of the cinema industry, greater freedom for research and production has been allowed. It is in fact in the porous area where independent and experimental cinema encounter art practices that women have managed to move the boundaries of (self-)representation and build an active laboratory to experiment and explore their subjectivities. We can't also forget that, between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, many of the female presences linked to electronic art began, with great vigour, to carry out their creative activity in parallel with the demands promoted by the second wave of feminism. Nonetheless, feminist momentum and perspective, both in a creative and theoretical sense, are just some of the threads that, over the years, help us to read and interpret an experimental female audiovisual production that has been growing, becoming enriched and diversified thanks to the evolution of technologies and the hybridization of the intermedia process.

Over the past several decades, scholars have addressed the history of women working in experimental cinema and video in a similarly rich variety of ways. What seems most consistent about the output of both critical and creative work by women in experimental film and video is the same thing that makes it difficult to characterize as a whole. That is, it tends toward particularity, diversity, and multiplicity, with the work of a single filmmaker in this realm often plumbing the depths of her own specific experience, expertise, and ambitions. While the same might be said of any filmmaker/artist, for reasons not entirely transparent,

¹ See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6–18; Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't. Feminism Semiotics Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror. The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Theories and Representation and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Pschychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993); Veronica Pravadelli, 'Feminist/Gender Studies e storia del cinema', in *We want cinema. Sguardi di donne nel cinema italiano*, ed. by Laura Buffoni (Venezia: Marsilio, 2018).

this individuation is neither made of quite the same stuff as the cult of the genius artist/auteur, nor conversely is it cause to conclude that there are no common threads or trends across women's film and video work at all. Of the former, scholars have identified in feminist artists the strategy of '[refuting] the EuroWestern ideal of the individual artist, expressed not least in the idea of the cinematic auteur', as So Mayer puts it, which allows an unsettling of usual social and artistic hierarchies.² And of the latter, several writers locate constellations of interests across experimental work, such as artists who are linked in their pet themes, types of genre-bending, or stylistic tendencies, for instance in the loose groupings provided by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman's collection of writing about female experimental filmmakers or in Mathilde Roman's studies.³ Amid the usual ways of configuring trends for media studies, women pose a special case, and a kaleidoscopic view of their work rather than an auteurist or movement-oriented programme is more honest to the nature of that work.

One of the ambitions of this special issue was to provide a more legible map of this work with a wider international scope, the better to track both creative and scholarly work and to link avant-garde films with contemporary video-based practices. We aimed to trace — and to fill in the areas we traced with details — with a view to understanding women's experimental audio-visual production framed in historical and theoretical terms. By virtue of the nature of the works under consideration, that aim has been elusive, both in the multiplicity of work that we might call 'experimental' and in the approaches to that work. Indeed, the dyad of creative work and theory about it for women's experimental media tends to focus on a panoply of forms or genres, types of imagery, notions about subjectivity, undercurrents of theories in political and popular culture, and constructions of gender and sexuality. Our call cast a wide net, in some ways increasing the challenge from the beginning to create a unified, universal version of a history of experimental women's work. As part of the process, however, we came to appreciate that maybe we do not need a whole new map, exactly, so much as a new set of eyes for understanding how to read the maps that are already there. Like the creative work we seek to locate, it has been harder to *read* these maps because they don't look or act quite like the ones we are used to. Often figures or films we might study are (and this is not a bad thing) treated like individual stars, for instance in Robin Blaetz's essential collection of essays on women's experimental cinema, even while with a slight adjustment of our lens, it is possible to see these stars constitute a grouping like, let's say, the Pleiades.⁴

² Sophie Mayer, 'To::For::By::About::With::From::Towards Solid Women: On (Not) Being Addressed by Tracey Moffatt's *Moodeitj Yorgas*', in *Female Authorship and the Documentary Image: Theory, Practice, and Aesthetics*, ed. by Boel Ulfsdotter and Anna Backman Rogers (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 164.

³ *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, ed. by Virginia Wright Wexman and Jean Petrolle (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Mathilde Roman, *Art Vidéo et mise en scène de soi*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

⁴ Robin Blaetz, *Women's Experimental Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

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If we aim to navigate what is more like the night sky than what is immediately visible by the light of day, the darker, less intelligible contours of an eclectic set of practices may better be viewed from certain angles and at the right time in order for them to come together, surprisingly, into constellations of all manner into figures of mythical proportions. In any case, Trinh T. Minh-ha, among others, rightly cautions against the universalizing impulse of art for feminist art, arguing that adopting a hegemonic artistic language in a bid for being taken more seriously, women gain a kind of universality but lose their individual voices and real power as artists.⁵ To make an art that is readily legible *as* art might well simply mean that it hews in some way to a norm to which feminist and experimental artists ought not force their unique views to conform.

Part of the work of scholars dealing with experimental work must be to show the connections — the lines between the stars that make the figures clear. We take seriously the need for reconstituting the history of the avant-garde cinema to include and give greater attention to more women, many of whom have been outshone by brighter but not more important lights; at the same time, we also need to highlight the contexts in which these women's work has emerged. As a recent essay by Jennifer Peterson on Barbara Hammer's film *Jane Brakhage* (1974) has shown, the forgotten or undertheorized histories of women's work, both artistic and otherwise, make them ripe for revisitation: Peterson tidily brings the two sides of a single familial coin into dual relief to show how experimental work by women might be taken out of the shadow cast by the giants — in this case Jane's husband and, in a certain sense, collaborator, Stan Brakhage — of experimental cinema.⁶ Comfort with the idea of variety is paramount even to identifying this kind of work; variety is also characteristic of the mode through which women's subjectivity has found a cinematic means of expression. Experimental women like Barbara Hammer — but also Ana Mendieta, Adrian Piper, Agnès Varda, or Minh-ha to name only a very few examples — frequently work in ways that look very different both from each other and even from their own existing bodies of work. The experimental quality even of the search for an appropriate form among these artists qualifies them as experimentalists in the best (and most expansive) sense of the word.

Studying women's experimental cinema over its history has been complicated by but also enhanced by its borderless, timeless qualities. It doesn't belong in one specific national context; nor does it belong to one single time period. While its many contexts (where/when it was made, who made it, under what conditions) are essential for better understanding it, to study (or, certainly, to create) such work also requires an expansive mode of thinking out of time. So although, of course, creative and critical/theoretical work from the 1970s has been crucial to

⁵ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 27.

⁶ Jennifer Peterson, 'Barbara Hammer's *Jane Brakhage*: Feminism, Nature, and 1970s Experimental Film', *Feminist Media Histories*, 6.2 (2020), 67–94.

the serious and sanctioned study of women artists in that this moment intersects with the establishment of university programs in women and gender studies as well as film studies, making that fact the center of understanding it may be most useful simply for understanding certain biases of history. The intersection of institutional programs with creative work has historically biased the ways experimental women have been understood, categorized, or positioned — both within the academy and beyond it. As Laura Mulvey — whose essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ from 1975 is still going strong and has spurred untold numbers of amateur and professional reflections on the nature of women working in and on films — has reminded us, perhaps the radical work of feminists became absorbed into the academy in a way that was ‘rather too abrupt’.⁷ Indeed, feminist film theory and women’s experimental film practice have not always been amenable to each other, though their close position to each other in academic circles might give another impression. Thinking about the temporality of the emergence of ideas on feminism and film, Mulvey notes: ‘it is more rewarding to think about time, and a period that has now become history, as a confusion of temporalities than as a linear succession in which decades and eras follow each other in chronological order’.⁸ Keeping in mind that connections might be rendered in a more poetic sense through allusion, rhythm, or an emphasis on sensation rather than in terms of causality, chronology, or principles of continuity — such that we might say, in a vertical vs. a horizontal way⁹ — might keep us closer to the spirit of experimental work.

Similarly, audio-visual experimental practices have been a privileged site for bringing women’s agency and other concerns from the province of women’s experience/s to light, as the domains of experimental media practice have frequently offered far greater liberty compared to the economic exigencies of the cinema industry. In this sense, women’s experimental works have acted as a laboratory for new forms of women subjectivities. By drawing contours of these new subjectivities, all of which are expressions of what the Italian feminist theoretician and activist Carla Lonzi called the ‘Unexpected Subject’,¹⁰ we observe that these works are a privileged field for learning a new vocabulary

⁷ Laura Mulvey, ‘Introduction: 1970s Feminist Film Theory and the Obsolescent Object’, in *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference, and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*, ed. by Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), p. 17.

⁸ Ivi, p. 18.

⁹ Maya Deren compared a ‘horizontal’ (causal, chronological, narrative) mode with a ‘vertical’ mode, the latter of which, rather than progressing forward in linear, narrative, chronological or causal terms delved into the heights and depths of any given moment, investigating it poetically, as ‘an approach to experience’ adopting and expressing a ‘different point of view’ (pp. 173–74). Here and elsewhere, she considered these terms as a way of describing her own experimental film art (as vertical rather than horizontal). See ‘Poetry and the Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler. Chairman, Willard Maas. Organized by Amos Vogel’, in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. by P. Adam Sitney (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), pp. 171–86.

¹⁰ The term is coined by Lonzi in her essay *Sputiamo su Hegel* [Let’s spit on Hegel] (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1970).

The Experimental Women: An Introduction

of audiovisual experience, involving both the artists and the spectators as new active subjects of moving image construction. This clearly emerges by reading the essays collected in this issue, which appear as a veritable constellation of meanings and symbols with consistent references.

The inquiry of the body as a new language is present in all of the artists analyzed: the body is the centre of a new haptic, synesthetic experience which challenges the priority of sight and becomes an instrument to know, think, and express the world. This is true from the very beginning of women film experimentations, as Rebecca Sheehan points out: her essay on Maya Deren, Marie Menken, and Sara Arledge focuses on the forms of the somatic camera and the tactile gaze as a means to build a new dynamic relationship between the body in movement, the machine, and the world. In the same wake, Shana MacDonald's inquiry about the performing body of Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer demonstrates how both artists challenged, through the proximity of a relationship between artists and spectators, the artist's authority and the related modernist concept of authorship. The body becomes the very measure of the world in the analysis of Oksana Chefranova on Ana Mendieta and Ana Vaz, where a circular and layered concept of time intertwines with a landscape perceived as a space of traces, connections, memories. Memories are likewise at the centre of Ivelise Perniola's and John Powers' essays: the former explores Marguerite Duras' cinema as an act of iconoclasm, where the gaze is rooted in memories grounded in loss, grief, and absence; the latter rediscovers the still little known figure of Caroline Avery and her aesthetics of emotional memories and artisanal practices. Anita Trivelli investigates the contemporary scene of Italian documentary filmmakers by pointing out their revolutionary and transgressive *flânerie*, which brings them to explore with their bodies territories traditionally denied to women and to redefine them as spaces of relationship and exchange between the individual and the community. Community as a network of bodies and their stories is also at the centre of Polina Golovátina-Mora's, Ana María López Carmona's and Bridget Sheridan's investigation. They analyze the South American indigenous communities and the concept of *warmipura*, meaning 'among women', demonstrating a weave of practices based on a circular transmission of knowledge where the body is still at the centre of an intimate relationship with landscape and nature.

Across these multiple modes of expression of a subjectivity outside the norm, experimental women's film practice and scholarship looks to other horizons for meaning, to which this issue seeks to draw a beginning.



'Give me a body then...': (In)corporated Thinking in the Cinema of Menken, Deren, and Arledge

Rebecca A. Sheehan, California State University, Fullerton

Abstract

For Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze, the human body is essential to cinema's ability to advance thought, but the American avant-garde filmmakers Marie Menken, Maya Deren, and Sara Kathryn Arledge go much further in locating thought in embodiment rather than beyond it, even as their films are generally absent from Cavell's and Deleuze's writings. For instance, as Menken's hand-held camera emanates with the movements of her body, her *fidgetiness* expands upon the *metaphysical restlessness* Cavell describes as essential to thought. Menken's camera's immersion in her bodily movements (rather than standing apart from them) joins her work with Deren's Bergson-inspired films as, for instance, the context of outer space in *Very Eye of Night* (1952) is impossible to stand outside of or apart from, analogous to Bergson's notion of the body *in the stream*. Arledge's *Introspection* similarly situates the body where what T.E. Hulme might describe as a 'complex sense of varying directions of forces' replaces a sense of distanced sight. While Deleuze pronounces, 'Give me a body then... The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking...' and turns to Antonioni's, Warhol's, and Cassavetes' *tired* and *waiting* bodies as exemplary, I argue, it is Menken's, Deren's, and Arledge's dancing, fidgety bodies that perform Deleuze's epiphany.

Film-philosophers have long struggled to explain the relationship between cinema, thought, and the body. From Stanley Cavell's Emersonian-inspired writings that lean on classical Hollywood cinema to Gilles Deleuze's Bergson-inspired writings that lean primarily on the Post-War Art House, philosophers have reframed for cinema the age-old problems of skepticism, especially the extent to which a body is *at once* inside and outside of the world it views. For instance, Deleuze conceives of cinema as a 'membrane which puts an outside and an inside in contact',¹ while, for Cavell, the camera's 'implication'² reminds us of the ways

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 206.

² Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 126–27.

in which we are endlessly limited from seeing ourselves *in* the world, and thus endlessly distanced from that world (hence that cinema is a 'moving image of skepticism').³ Deleuze and Cavell share a common belief, call it a fantasy, that cinema might be able to reconcile the divide between subject and world, putting to rest the worries of skepticism by seizing cinema's ability to stage encounters with the world from which, at the same time, the camera's very distance, its purported objectivity, reminds us, we stand apart. Compellingly, they share this belief with a number of central figures of the American avant-garde. Stan Brakhage, for instance, employs cinema to overcome limitations he perceives of his own body as he wonders in *Metaphors on Vision* how many shades of green are visible to a baby crawling through grass before learning the word 'green',⁴ attempting to answer this question in *Scenes from Under Childhood*, or when he fixates on death as, per Ludwig Wittgenstein, a limit that is not lived through,⁵ in films like *The Dead* (1960) and *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971), or where he contemplates the limits of his gendered body in films like *Loving* (1957) and *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959). Brakhage's films are intent on making present an everyday world to which he has assumed an embodied absence, a pre-ordained distance. In a similar vein but with a structuralist approach, Hollis Frampton imagines cinema overcoming the distance and difference between word and world, where

we may come to visualize an intellectual space in which the systems of words and images will both, as Jonas Mekas once said of semiology, 'seem like half of something', a universe in which image and word, each resolving the contradictions inherent in the other, will constitute a system of consciousness.⁶

Andy Warhol's cinema has been similarly theorized by Steven Shaviro and others as aimed at realizing a closed distance between a body and its image. As Shaviro argues, Warhol treats cinema as a machine that 'is already immanent to the world, rather than a device standing at the transcendental threshold of the world, and mediating our perceptions and representations of it'.⁷

Contrary to thinking of cinema as an apparatus to overcome the body's pre-ordained distance from the world it nevertheless inhabits, in diverse but importantly overlapping ways, the cinema of Marie Menken, Maya Deren, and Sara Kathryn Arledge, each locate thought *in* embodiment rather than *beyond* it. As I will show, this is a quality that unites their cinema while critically distinguishing it from their

³ Ivi, p. 188.

⁴ Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision*, ed. by P. Adams Sitney (New York: Film Culture Inc., 1963), unpaginated.

⁵ See *Metaphors on Vision* (unpaginated) where Brakhage cites Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.4311, 'Death is not an event of life, we do not live to experience death...'.⁶

⁶ Hollis Frampton, *Circles of Confusion: Film, Photography, Video, Texts 1968-1980* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), p. 10.

⁷ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 214-15.

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‘Give me a body then...’

male avant-garde successors whose works, having garnered more critical and scholarly attention, have come to define the intersections between avant-garde cinema and philosophy. Indeed, even as this group of 1940s female filmmakers proved influential on the next generation of male American avant-garde filmmakers (Brakhage, Warhol, Frampton, etc.), the philosophy of embodiment their cinema collectively advances seems at the very least to have been overlooked if not critically misunderstood by that influential generation. Re-examining Menken, Deren, and Arledge, in the context of film-philosophies of embodiment (even as many of those have shaped and been shaped by their male avant-garde successors) has the potential to shift the very philosophical foundations of skepticism-fueled experiments like those of Brakhage, Frampton, and Warhol, that use cinema to overcome various perceived divides between the embodied subject and the world. While numerous films and filmmakers have been put to the service of film-philosophy’s exploration of the relationship between cinema, thought, and the body, glaringly absent from these discussions have been these three filmmakers whose films, especially when taken as a whole, focus so intently on the interfaces between the body and cinema. While Menken’s cinematography, or what Sitney has called her ‘somatic camera’,⁸ constantly resonates with the movement of her own body, from a different but related angle, the *cine-dance* experiments of Deren and Arledge make the cinematic apparatus constantly dependent upon and emergent from the movement and shape of the human bodies it represents. That both Menken’s camerawork and Deren’s and Arledge’s cinematography and editing *begins* by locating thought *in* embodiment rather than beyond it raises paradigm-shifting questions for philosophers following Deleuze and Cavell that contemplate cinema’s thinking through the body more broadly.

The embodied nature of the cinema of these three filmmakers is unsurprising given the extent to which in the at times scant critical writings on them, descriptions of their films are intertwined with descriptions of their own bodies. In fact, the attention to the bodies of Deren and Menken included in everything from anecdotes to some of the only serious analysis and descriptions we have of a number of their works, is absolutely unmatched when it comes to the bodies of their male counterparts. In his obituary for Menken and Willard Maas (who died four days after his wife) in *The Village Voice*, January 14, 1971, Jonas Mekas writes of Menken, ‘There was a very lyrical soul behind that huge and very often sad bulk of a woman, and she put all that soul into her work [...]. Marie’s films were her flower garden [...] they were all very colorful and sweet and perfect, and not too bulky [...]’,⁹ a description with which Scott MacDonald prefaces what

⁸ P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 23. Sitney opines that the description of the ‘[...] walking camera or the somatic camera might more vividly convey the identification of the mobile frame of the ultimately projected image with the movements of the filmmaker’.

⁹ Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, 2nd edn (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 419.

would become the first major description of her work in avant-garde scholarship (as MacDonald himself notes) where it serves as the first epigraph to the section 'Marie Menken: *Glimpse of the Garden*', in *The Garden in the Machine*.¹⁰ Indeed, Stan Brakhage frequently describes Menken's body in the same breath as he does her work. In a talk delivered in 1992 at the Innis Film Society, he prepares the audience for a screening of *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957) by saying that Menken gets '[...] close up on these little flowers that are really overlookable as she must have felt. She who was so large, but whom the man she really loved saw around her so often (sic), or overlooked her, as we say'.¹¹ Brakhage begins his chapter on Marie Menken in *Film at Wit's End*, one of the first scholarly considerations of her work, with this description, 'When I arrived at the apartment, Marie was there. She was an enormous woman, easily six feet, two inches tall, with broad and solid shoulders, a surprisingly slim waist and stout but shapely legs, like a dancer's'.¹² When Brakhage describes Menken's 'free, swinging, swooping hand-held' shots, which he credits with 'liberat[ing] a lot of independent filmmakers from the idea that had been so powerful up to then, that we have to imitate the Hollywood dolly shot, without the dollies', every time he does so he also includes a description of her body. About the context for the camera movement in *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (1945), Brakhage writes, with an impressive degree of detail for someone who wasn't actually there,

So she barreled into Noguchi's studio with as big a noise as possible and as expansive a swinging of the camera, which must have practically disappeared in the enclosure of her large, cupped hands, just as Noguchi's sculptures probably seemed quite fragile as she danced among them, turning them this way and that on film.¹³

Writing about *Bagatelle for Willard Maas* (1961), for the filming of which Brakhage was actually present, he writes of accompanying Menken to Versailles, 'Imagine this large Lithuanian woman hurling herself into the air with her little, obviously amateur camera in hand, on the golden gates of Versailles'.¹⁴ Thus, just as he fantasizes a way for cinema to deliver him beyond the limits of his own body, Brakhage fantasizes that Menken is attempting to do the same (while ascribing so many limitations to her body), but through these descriptions he ironically

¹⁰ Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2001), p. 54. MacDonald begins his section on Menken by noting, 'As of 1999 probably no woman who has had as significant an impact on American cinema as Marie Menken remains as little celebrated. Except for several of her colleagues of the 1950s and 1960s — Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, and P. Adams Sitney — virtually no one has been interested in assessing her films and their impact on others; and only Brakhage has written as much as a chapter on Menken'.

¹¹ 'Stan Brakhage on Marie Menken', *Film Culture*, 78 (Summer 1994), 1–9, (p. 8).

¹² Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End* (Kingston, NY: Documentext McPherson and Company, 1989), p. 33.

¹³ Ivi, p. 38.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 46.

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makes her body as immanent to her cinema as she understood it to be (without, I will argue, registering it as the hindrance Brakhage did). Brakhage similarly links Maya Deren’s cinema with her embodiment in his chapter on her in the same volume, ‘Maya herself possessed a rare intensity [...] I’ve seen big brawny men — Irish writers or someone just out of the pen — arrive at Maya’s and become like terrified small children [...]. Not only because she was fierce, but because she was also incredibly sexy. Ah! Just to shake hands with her was arousing!’.¹⁵ Of course, by placing her own body, often as a choreographed dancer, into her films, it remains foregrounded in Deren’s cinema not as an obstacle but as part of the means of cinematic expression itself, similarly to the way the body features in films of another pioneer in cine-dance, Sara Kathryn Arledge, whose work has received considerably less attention than Menken’s and Deren’s but who I include in this article for the innovative ways in which she experiments with collapsing the distance between the body and cinema. Arledge’s work between figuration and abstraction, painting and experimental cinema almost always meditates on the body but, similarly to the reception history of Deren and Menken, her work is often entangled in her biography, one which includes mental illness and institutionalization. Writing about the Armory Center for the Arts’ recent retrospective of Arledge’s work entitled *Serene for a Moment*, critic Jessica Simmons is right to note, ‘While [...] personal fractures, traceable via the exhibition’s biographical framing are illuminating, they are also unnecessary. All too often a woman artist’s biographical narrative governs the discourse surrounding her work, tainting the ground for more critical readings’.¹⁶

The ‘Metaphysical Restlessness’ of Menken’s Camera

In a register completely contrary to Brakhage’s anxiety about the bodily limits of his experience and his use of cinema to overcome those, Menken’s willingness to affirm her presence in her cinema inscribes her own means of visual and haptic perception into her filmmaking. As Melissa Ragona explains in reference to Brakhage’s acknowledgment of the revolutionary nature of Menken breaking free from Hollywood’s dolly shots, ‘The smooth pan that implied the invisibility of the camera, a seamlessness without human error, was a norm that Menken challenged [...]’.¹⁷ At the time Menken made her *Notebook* films, the inscription of the camera (and the embodiment of the person holding it) was as unorthodox to experimental filmmaking as it was to Hollywood, as P. Adams Sitney notes in

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 102.

¹⁶ Jessica Simmons, ‘Sara Kathryn Arledge at the Armory Center for the Arts’, *Contemporary Art Review.la*, 21 February 2019, <<https://contemporaryartreview.la/sara-kathryn-arledge-at-the-armory-center-for-the-arts/>> [accessed 30 October 2019].

¹⁷ Melissa Ragona, ‘Swing and Sway: Marie Menken’s Filmic Events’, in *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 20–44 (p. 20).

Visionary Film, where he examines Menken's objections to a 'straight-forward observational film', the kind that other lyrical filmmakers (like Brakhage and Mekas) had made vogue. Sitney refers to the instance where Menken forces nature's hand in *Rain Drops* (1963) (from *Notebook*) by shaking a branch she's filming so that the rain drops fall from it.¹⁸ Whereas Brakhage's films explore the everyday or what Cavell might have called the 'missable' from the standpoint of overcoming an inherent distance between body and world, transgressing the limitations of embodied experience and knowledge, Menken's cinema, by contrast, celebrates the body's mediation of the everyday world, refusing to acknowledge the premise of the problem skepticism poses about the unreachable/unknowable nature of a world beyond the subject. Her images as they 'swing and sway', are a constant testament to the embodied interface between subject and world. In Menken's cinema, there is an important coincidence between the significance of the 'ordinary' as the overlooked material of the everyday (e.g. the raindrop), the stuff of her notebook, and the material and formal *means* of cinema that involve the often un-pictured or undetected body of the cameraperson. This coincident foregrounding of both previously overlooked everyday images and the often-overlooked cameraperson underscores Menken's refusal to even raise the questions of absence with which skepticism begins; in her cinema, she is always already in the world and that world is always already in rather than beyond the embodied perspective of her camera. Where Brakhage reflects upon the limits of his embodied perception, the *problem* of the body as either interferingly asserting itself *between* the subject's mind and the world out there (as in the eyes that can only see certain shades of green limited by knowing the word for green), Menken's camerawork embraces the infinite potential (whether clumsy or graceful, planned or incidental) of encounters registered by the movements of her camera. This embrace of entanglement between subjective vision and world is nowhere as evident as it is in the sequence of Menken's *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1958-1961) in which the geometric designs of Spanish tiles take on the appearance of graphic animation, seeming to dance on their own. That this animation is produced by Menken's embodied camera and its interface with these designs and not through the editing that might have been done if this were a Hans Richter or Oskar Fischinger film, speaks to the degree to which Menken has enveloped her body in the production of images rather than attempting to extract its presence. If, as Cavell claims, cinema offers encounters with the world that might overcome skepticism — where Cavell turns, for instance, to Fred Astaire's (extra) ordinary footwork on a train platform as a demonstration of cinema making visible the missable — ¹⁹ Menken's hand-held camerawork makes such encounters more immediate through embracing contingencies that

¹⁸ Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000*, 3rd edn (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 160.

¹⁹ Cavell, 'Something Out of the Ordinary', in *Cavell on Film*, ed. by William Rothman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 238–39.

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are ever-emergent between the world and both the filmmaker and spectator. In this way, we might argue that Menken falls within the philosophical purview of what Richard Rorty called philosophers and poets who ‘recognize contingency’ rather than trying to transcend it, invested in a ‘truth’, or a relation to the world that is *made* rather than *found*.²⁰ Brakhage’s Romantic leanings makes his cinema inherently strive for something *beyond* the body, whereas Menken’s cinema is intent on the creation (rather than discovery) of embodied experiences in the world.

In his essay, ‘What Photography Calls Thinking’, Cavell examines what he calls the ‘camera’s knowledge of the metaphysical restlessness of the live body at rest’ by turning to a scene in Frank Capra’s *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) where the main character, Longfellow Deeds, appeals to ‘the concept of thinking’, ‘the condition that causes universal fidgetiness’ when he asserts that ‘Everyone does silly things when they think’.²¹ Cavell reads this scene in the context of Emerson’s ‘Behavior’ essay, which he sees as ‘an effort to return the mind to the living body’,²² arguing that

[...] while thinking is no longer secured by the mind’s declaration of its presence to itself [Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*], it is now to be secured by the presence of the live human body to the camera, in particular by the presence of the body’s apparently least intelligent property, its fidgetiness, its metaphysical restlessness. In Descartes, the proof of thinking was that it cannot doubt itself, after Emerson the proof of thinking is that it cannot be concealed.²³

There is a palpable ‘metaphysical restlessness’ of the kind Cavell describes in *Mr. Deeds*’ courtroom scene in Menken’s embodied camera movements, the quick pans and tilts that refigure Noguchi’s sculptures in *Visual Variations*, or the camera’s flighty brush over the flowers in *Glimpses of the Garden*, what we might call their Cartesian assertions of the body’s insistent presence. For Menken, the presence of the body is not ‘to the camera’, but as a premise for the camera’s very presence, thus the title of *Glimpses of the Garden* is appropriately analogous to her own perceptual acts. Here, the declaration of body’s presence refutes that it could have ever been absent. Cavell’s description of Mr. Deeds ‘taking on the proof of his own existence, as if against its denial by the world’,²⁴ suggests the metaphysical stakes of Menken’s hand-held camerawork: the absence of a picture of the filmmaker’s body in the film implying the world’s denial of the subject and Menken’s swinging and swaying, the persistent immanence of her hand to the camera’s motions, as always already present as ‘the proof’ of her ‘existence’.

²⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 25–27.

²¹ Cavell, ‘What Photography Calls Thinking’, in *Cavell on Film*, p. 127.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ivi, p. 130.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 128.

Cavell argues that the camera plays a key role in the ‘course of Deeds’ lecture to the court, each time [it] follows his attention to a person’s body’s motion, [and] that person’s reflex is shown to be an attempt to hide the motion’.²⁵ Here, for Cavell, the camera ‘reveals and records [...]’ our knowledge of something ‘fundamental to our existence which we resist’.²⁶ The camera is able to spotlight our least significant movements, fidgeting and our obliviousness to it or our oversight which suggests for Cavell our ‘obliviousness to our existence’,²⁷ an oversight whose possibility Menken’s camera denies through an ‘Emersonian proof of [...] existence [...] a perpetual visibility of the self’.²⁸

If Menken’s camera performs this ‘perpetual visibility’, redeeming the motions Hollywood cinema with its obsession with smooth dolly shots might cut, motions like those in *Mr. Deeds* that are represented as the ‘silly things we do when we think’, it is also performing Emersonian’s ‘aversive self’ through recovering what society deems unimportant, resisting conformity by making visible and important the idiosyncrasies of the self. Emerson’s agenda in his ‘Behavior’ essay, which Cavell describes as ‘return[ing] the mind to the living body’,²⁹ and the social aversions and non-conformity that blossom philosophically from a cinema like Menken’s (wherein the mind has never departed the body) find an important correlation in the work of two philosophers who also suggest the ways in which Menken, Deren, and Arledge might reshape the foundations of film-philosophy. First, Cavell’s Emersonian reading of *Mr. Deeds* bears an important relationship to Deleuze’s discussion of the role of the body in the transition between what he calls cinema’s *action-image* and the *time-image*, as the latter disrupts the former’s conformity to the logic of movement and time. Second, the role of the body in Deleuze’s formulation of the *time-image* borrows heavily from Henri Bergson’s interest in recovering ‘life’, and ‘vital phenomena’ from the intellect’s ‘mechanistic theories’ and its interest in matter, in other words, of overcoming a perceived distance between body and thinking, philosophies that directly inspired Maya Deren through her study of the English poet and critic T.E. Hulme. When Deleuze writes, ‘Give me a body then [...]’, he notes that this is ‘[...] a formula of philosophical reversal. The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life’.³⁰ Menken’s (and Deren’s) work *plunge* us into the body in ways that celebrate that it was never an obstacle but the means to achieving what Hulme might call ‘intuitive experience’, as I discuss later. Thus, just as Menken poses a potential revision to Cavell’s premise of cinema’s

²⁵ Ivi, p. 131.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Ivi, p. 127.

³⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, p. 189.

philosophy in skepticism (the distance between subject and world), here, we see another potential for philosophical revision. What Deleuze calls the 'plunge' into the body is precisely what distinguishes Menken's lyrical celebration of her embodied presence from Brakhage's desire to use film as a means of overcoming his body. Since the body locates the sensori-motor logic of the *movement-image* for Deleuze, it is unsurprising that the body features so largely in the emergence of the *time-image*, particularly the 'tired' and 'waiting' body, such as those Deleuze identifies in Michelangelo Antonioni's films or the 'everyday body' of Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) and *Eat* (1963).³¹ To these 'attitudes' of the body Deleuze enumerates, Menken's films suggest one more; the body in motion or the dancing body, a body which might better accomplish a sense in which the body is 'no longer an intermediary', or an 'obstacle', descriptions Deleuze uses to describe what he sees as a 'new direction' in cinema. In fact, Deleuze claims this 'new' cinema as the 'first to mount the camera on an everyday body',³² but from his descriptions of Antonioni, Warhol, and Cassavetes (where he sees the everyday 'gest' reasserting the body), it is evident that, in these instances he chooses, the camera stands *apart* from the bodies it films, even as it meditates upon what these bodies are doing between eventful or 'meaningful' actions that might be the only pictures of them previously shown in a mainstream film. Indeed, Menken goes beyond what the filmmakers Deleuze cites do by literally 'mount[ing] the camera on an everyday body', through her handheld work.

The fact that dance's intentionality is present-oriented rather than future-oriented and thus with it the body typically subjected to the logic of the *action-image*, is suspended *in-between*, moving for the sake of moving rather than moving for the sake of driving the plot, revealing what happens *next*, makes Menken's dancing camera movements ideal for demonstrating the new cinema of the *time-image* that Deleuze instead draws upon other examples culled from 'experimental cinema' to locate. As with Cavell's argument that *Mr. Deeds* uses cinema to attune us to the body (and its fidgetiness which like Deleuze's tired or waiting bodies, is an in-between state that an efficiently event-based narrative cinema might otherwise overlook, cut, or ignore) as 'proof of his existence, as if against its denial by the world',³³ where Menken's cinema obliterates the very premise of this denial (through the persistence of her fidgety body that was never absent from her cinema), we see here that Menken similarly eliminates the very premise of Deleuze's 'formula of philosophical reversal',³⁴ because her cinema does not propose a possibility for the body to have ever been separate from cinema or from its thinking, something into which Deleuze imagines a 'plunge'.³⁵

³¹ Ivi, p. 191.

³² Ivi, 189.

³³ Cavell, 'What Photography Calls Thinking', p. 128.

³⁴ Deleuze, p. 189.

³⁵ Ibidem.

It is interesting that Deleuze doesn't examine filmmakers like Menken who employ hand-held and thus *embodied* cameras in the context of the 'new direction'³⁶ he describes, confining his study of the American avant-garde's depiction of the body to Warhol's long-takes and *Geography of the Body* (1943) by Moore and Maas (a film which by all accounts was mostly shot by Menken). Menken's interaction with both of these examples seems worth briefly exploring. We might think of her film, *Andy Warhol* (1965), as Menken's commentary on Warhol and his cinema, but along with her contributions to *Geography of the Body*, *Andy Warhol* teaches us how Menken not only collapses a proposed or perceived distance between cinema and the body, the representation of a skeptical divide, but negates and even undoes its very premise. If films like *Eat* and *Sleep* present the 'everyday body' in a radical way for Deleuze, they do so because they collapse the distance between the image of the eventful or important body and the reality of the everyday body. These films assert the primacy of the image, reminding us of the ways in which the real is already an image, they thus collapse the distance between the body and image (what Deleuze might take to be an act of thinking). By creating a portrait of Andy Warhol in which she uses fast-motion to produce something that resembles animation, Menken's response to Warhol's cinematic portraits, which themselves use cinema as a machine to collapse the distance between a body and its image, goes beyond this collapse, positing that Warhol himself is always already *in* the machine of cinema, literally animated by the creation of images. As Ragona notes, 'Menken turns Warhol into the mechanical, serial self he always claimed to be ("I am a machine.")'.³⁷ By doing this, Menken undermines the very position that postulates a distance from the machine or the machine's representation (the image) to be overcome, placing the artist's body in the machine just as Menken's own body always emanates from her hand-held camerawork. Her film thus ironically suggests that Warhol's attempt to collapse the distance between body and image actually recognizes and reasserts that distance as a premise, something her film undoes by always having located the artist *in* the machine. Similarly, *Geography of the Body* suggests the obliteration of a distance between body and representation. Through a series of close-ups, the film offers us defamiliarizing glimpses of bodies that without the context of establishing shots and set to a poetic voice-over invent fantastic possibilities for the worlds the parts of the bodies signify. Just as Ben Moore's poetry experiments with the different ways in which the body might represent, exploiting the distance between image and word, Menken's cinematography, the use of extreme close-ups but especially her use of a 'dime store magnifying glass'³⁸ attached to the camera lens, collapses the very distances playfully bridged (and thus ironically asserted) by Moore's elaborate poetic descriptions.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ragona, p. 36.

³⁸ Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 75.

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Deren's and Arledge's Bodies in the Stream of Time

Deleuze clearly generates his idea about the body being 'that which [thought] plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life',³⁹ from Henri Bergson's theories of vital phenomena, or getting beyond the intellect to 'life'. Deren was inspired by the same theories through her study of T.E. Hulme whose notion of 'intensive manifolds' borrowed from Bergson's metaphor of the 'stream of time'. Bergson suggests the intellectual error of thinking of time as a stream we stand apart from and view from a distance (from which we can turn it into the successive parts that constitute the measures of duration, an instant, a minute, an hour, in other words, from which we can *spatialize* it), insisting on the reality that we are *always in time*, and thus, that we are *in* the stream, not standing apart from it. Hulme does not just imagine the subject *in* the stream, he imagines *the body* of the subject in the stream and the interactions between the body itself and the *life* flowing around it. Hulme writes,

If you think of mental life as a flowing stream, then ordinary intellectual knowledge is like looking at that stream from outside: you get a clear and perfectly describable picture. Imagine now that you are turned into a cross-section of this stream, that you have no sense of sight, that in fact your only sense is a sense of pressure. Then although you will have no clear picture or representation of the stream at all, you will in spite of that have a complete knowledge of it as a complex sense of the varying directions of the forces pressing on you.⁴⁰

Deren's *The Very Eye of Night* (1958) capitalizes on the complex concept of outer space as a setting that suggests Hulme's 'varying directions of the forces pressing' on the body as the camera interfaces with optically printed bodies dancing across numerous vectors of the blackened screen littered with 'stars'. Outer-space, like Bergson's and Hulme's stream of time, is not something the body can stand apart from our outside of, rather, it is always already in it. *Very Eye of Night* experiments with such a body, opening a variety of three-dimensional vectors that interrupt our sense of the two-dimensional screen, vectors akin to Hulme's 'varying directions of forces', through the human bodies of the dancers that act as a central and universal measure, what we might call a taring device as we adjust our expectations of their embodied movement to what Deren presents on screen. Just as we come to depend upon the bodies of the dancers to define the space of *Very Eye's* illusion of depth, Deren uses optically printed images to challenge us to discern whether it is the body contained by the image which moves or whether the optically printed image itself is *moving* through space. Here, Deren sets up the same attention in the spectator to bodily movement

³⁹ Deleuze, p. 189.

⁴⁰ T.E. Hulme, 'The Philosophy of Intensive Manifolds', in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. by Herbert Read (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1924), pp. 171–214 (p. 188).

and the 'known pulse of an action',⁴¹ as she does with regard to the origin of the dancer's movement in *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946) where the slowness with which the faun character 'falls' to the ground makes us wonder about whether the movement originates in his body or the cinematographer's manipulation of the film's speed. Deren explains her use of slow-motion,

[...] It is not simply slowness of speed. It is, in fact, something which exists in our minds, not on the screen [...]. When we see a man in the attitudes of running and identify the activity as a run, one of the knowledges which is part of that identification is the pulse normal to that activity. It is because we are aware of the known pulse of the identified action while we watch it occur at a slower rate of speed that we experience the double-exposure of time which we know as slow motion. It cannot occur in an abstract film, where a triangle, for instance, can go fast or slow, but, having no necessary pulse, cannot go in slow motion.⁴²

Thus, bodies are essential to the very expression of much of Deren's cinema as without such bodies (e.g. with an abstract film), and our familiarity with them ('the known pulse of the identified action'⁴³), we would have difficulty comprehending the temporality of the images on screen. Indeed, many of Deren's experiments with cinematography and editing emanate from and critically depend upon the body. In *Anagram*, Deren writes about two instances where she uses the bodies of dancers to transgress the continuity of space and time in her films. Referring to an iconic match-on-action sequence in *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) where a dancer's leg begins to come down in a forest in one shot and in the next continues that motion this time in a living room, Deren claims that the 'integrity of the time element — the fact that the tempo of the movement is continuous...[holds] together spatial areas which are not, in reality, so related'.⁴⁴ In the second 'inversely related'⁴⁵ example, from *At Land* (1944), Deren claims to eliminate 'the spatial indication of the time that has transpired', and uses the body of the girl (Deren herself) which disappears over a sand dune only to reappear in an impossibly short amount of time from behind a dune much farther away, to allow for a 'continuity of space' to 'integrate periods of time which were not, in reality, in such immediate relationship'.⁴⁶ These instances exemplify the extent to which Deren's cinema depends upon the body's interface with the medium (with the camera, with editing). In each instance, the audience relies on the movement of the bodies to register that the original limits or rules of space

⁴¹ Maya Deren, 'Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality', in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. by P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1978), pp. 67–73 (p. 68).

⁴² Ivi.

⁴³ Ivi.

⁴⁴ Deren, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film* (Yonkers, NY: The Alicat Book Shop Press, 1946), pp. 50–51.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 51.

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and time presented to us have been transgressed (the forest of *Choreography*, the spatial distance between the sand dunes in *At Land* and the time it would take to go between them). Without the dancer's body in *Choreography* joining through a match-on-action cut two radically distant spaces, we would simply see a cut to another location, not a transgression of the body's experience of the limits of space. Without the dancer's body in *At Land*, we would not register any temporal compression at all.

Deren's films think through the body in the ways Hulme (following Bergson) imagined as getting beyond the 'perfectly describable picture', of 'ordinary knowledge', to accomplish 'intuition',⁴⁷ and Deleuze describes as 'plung[ing]'⁴⁸ us into the body. In fact, Menken utilizes the body and what Deren describes as its 'known pulse of action'⁴⁹ to a similar effect with her use of fast motion in *Andy Warhol*, a film which is completely dependent upon Andy Warhol's embodied movements, where seeing the irregularities with which this jittery body on screen moves depends upon us knowing how bodies typically move. Making the tempo and nature of the body's movements so central to the temporality of the film is another important way in which Menken and Deren put bodies 'in the stream of time' (implying that they were always already there), making our perception of their films radically dependent upon the movements of the bodies pictured.

The ways Deren uses the body as a taring device, a universal register for determining 'real' time, which assumes the premise that a body is always already *in* the world (subject to the forces of gravity, and the limitations of its movements), rather than standing apart from it, forces us to rely on bodies, our own and those on screen, rather than attempting to transcend them or to think they are somehow keeping us/distancing us from the world. Similarly, Sara Kathryn Arledge's *Introspection* (1947), 'the first American abstract dance film',⁵⁰ according to David James, defines screen space around the bodies of her dancers which are visually collapsed into the cinematic medium through a wide-angle lens (similar to the effect of Menken's use of the magnifying glass in *Geography of the Body*) such that the world this film presents seems positively defined and organized around these bodies as if they were 'everything that is the case',⁵¹ much as Wittgenstein defined 'the world' in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* or the way he defined language, 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world'.⁵² Although, as David James notes, 'the camera is static throughout'⁵³ *Introspection*, the bodies of Arledge's dancers are never divorced from the camera, they never

⁴⁷ Hulme, p. 188.

⁴⁸ Deleuze, p. 189.

⁴⁹ Deren, 'Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality', p. 68.

⁵⁰ David James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 249.

⁵¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by Charles Kay Ogden (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922), p. 25.

⁵² Ivi, p. 74.

⁵³ James, p. 250.

stand neutrally in front of it. Rather, they are contorted through the perspective of its lenses and through the optical printer that uses them to define alternative arrangements of the cinematic rectangle just as Deren's *The Very Eye of Night* (a film that came after *Introspection*) uses optically printing bodies of dancers moving along competing vectors to destabilize the rectilinear relationships between x, y, and z axes. Thus, for both Arledge and Deren, cinematic space emanates from a body that is always already central to it, in a way that is related to Menken's organization of her cinema around her hand-held shots, her own embodiment. It is as if Arledge and Deren through their cine-dance propose that 'the limits of their bodies are the limits of their world' and that their attitude about such a situation also follows Wittgenstein's attitude towards language, as their films present the body not as an obstacle to mourn (as philosophers have mourned the distance between language and world), to try to overcome (as their male counterparts have endeavored), but as something whose interface with the world might produce infinitely new undefined experiences. Their cinema comprises experiments with bodies we already know rather than imagining that cinema might bridge body and thought, thus standing us apart from our experience of the body, perceiving it as both an obstacle preventing us from being in the world and, like Deleuze, as something which we also don't yet inhabit.

Deren's *Study in Choreography for Camera* resists the sequential movements of the body that interested the proto-cinematic motion studies of Marey and Muybridge (which characterize figures going from one point to another, rather than not going anywhere, dancing as it were) and which help define the *action-image* for Deleuze. Deren uses editing and choreographed bodies in *Choreography* and *At Land* to disrupt the continuity *within* or *between* shots and the actions they picture. The dancer in *Choreography* who is in a living room for the first part of his leg's movement and then suddenly in the woods for the last, and the similar false match-on-action in *At Land* where Deren's feet are on a sandy beach in one moment and in the midst of the next movement trodding through grass, both tidily exemplify what Deleuze might call 'false continuities' and 'irrational cuts',⁵⁴ and both radiate from and depend upon the very movements of embodied subjects. Through its repeated incorporation of figures of circularity and curvature, Arledge's *Introspection* similarly resists sequential, linear movements, which confront both the logic of the *movement-image* and the linearity of Bergson's stream of time. For instance, the effect of the fish-eye lens itself disrupts the linear logic of the screen (and the rectilinear arrangement of x, y, and z axes) by producing curved images, yet another way in which her cinema inhabits the body which is itself comprised of curves rather than straight geometric lines. At the same time, many of Arledge's optically printed bodies and body parts are often assembled into rotating wheels and circles confronting the rectilinear screen with a circle as when at the beginning of the film numerous images of a man's

⁵⁴ Deleuze, p. 278.

'Give me a body then...'

head are optically printed to rotate or when optically printed dancers perform unending pirouettes (layered on one another) or when a wheel of disembodied arms churn from background to foreground where their hands experience the extreme curvature of the lens. Such images fundamentally disrupt the causal motion and progress of the body (as moving from point a to point b) by making these bodies' motion one of perpetual return. In terms of theorizing bodies that create aversions to what Deleuze saw as the purposiveness of the *action image* or what Cavell following Emerson saw as the conformity of meaningful behaviour, Arledge's use of repetition and circularity might also be held in the same thought as the actions which Deleuze and Cavell imagined working against these tendencies (the waiting, sleeping bodies of Antonioni, Warhol and Cassavetes for Deleuze, the fidgety bodies in *Mr. Deeds* and the tap-dancing body of Fred Astaire for Cavell), actions I've compared to Menken's fidgety camera. Menken, Deren, and Arledge by contrasting the *objective* view of movement and duration afforded by Muybridge and Marey, a view that corresponds to philosophies that conceive of the world as *out there* apart from us and *waiting to be discovered*, challenge this philosophy with one in which the subject is immersed in and co-extensive with the world whose meaning is made through embodied encounters with it.



The Aesthetic Lives of Performers: Rethinking Intermediality in the Films of Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann

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Abstract

This article reads together the work of Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann, as situated between film, performance, as well as dance and painting, considering what their work reveals about a specific intermedial feminist aesthetics developing at this time. It argues these traits in their work are not isolated commonalities but are shared with a wide range of feminist artists working in the 1960s and 1970s and are still echoed in contemporary feminist art. Further the article proposes to think through these intermedial relationalities as a mode of feminist aesthetics. It argues Schneemann and Rainer successfully extend the position of the female body in cinema beyond the traditional role as object to include both an embodied form of authorship, and a complex, affective performance of woman onscreen and provides the historical foundation and influence for my reading of the embodied, intermedial experiments found in feminist experimental film and media in the ensuing decades. The comparative reading of Schneemann's film *Plumb Line* and Rainer's film *Lives of Performers* index the artists' shared positioning of their own bodies in the dual roles of performer and author within their films. In my analysis, this aesthetic innovation actively engages with the different embodiments of the artist/performer, the bodies onscreen and the embodied spectator the films address.

The 1960s were a rich creative period in the early careers of both Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann. In this decade both Rainer and Schneemann established themselves as internationally recognized artists, performing and exhibiting for the first time many of their best-known works.¹ Schneemann and Rainer developed their formative aesthetic styles in response to major shifts unfolding in the New York art world at the time, including minimalism, Fluxus,²

¹ See Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who... Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1999); Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co, 1979); Teresa de Lauretis, 'Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer', in *Feminism and Film*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 265–86.

² See 'Experimental Women in Flux: Selective Reading in the Silverman Reference Library' <<https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/womeninflux/>> [accessed 20 February

Happenings, and performance art.³ They were thus informed by a space of artistic experimentation whereby artists 'were actively re-imagining what the work of art could be'.⁴ For Schneeman and Rainer, as Elise Archias importantly notes, this included a materialist oriented exploration and challenge of more traditional forms of modernism through their bodily practices.⁵ Further, it is important to point out how from early on in their careers, both artists notably incorporated different media into their environments, performances, events and choreography, including the use of moving image technology in conjunction with live bodies. This incorporation of an intermedial aesthetic is central to Schneemann and Rainer's work including their respective films *Plumb Line* (1968–1971) and *Lives of Performers* (1972).

This paper offers a comparative analysis of their work, considering how their film works in particular draw on their engagement with performance, dance, sculpture, and painting in order to advance their direct critiques at the representational codes and cultural conventions they sought to undermine. This comparison considers the types of formal experimentation they each engaged with and how this led to their different negotiations with Modernism, language, and gendered representation. My use of the term intermedial describes aesthetic works that construct an engaged relationality between different media. The 1960s mark the emergent use of cinema and moving image screens within visual art environments. This emergence is characterized most often as 'the beginnings of an "intermedia" condition', or a loosening of the borders between film and art practice.⁶ This emergence produced 'hybrid filmic objects, installations, performances and events' in place of traditionally separated forms of film, painting or sculpture.⁷ This sense of intermediality is present in expanded environments created by Schneemann and Rainer's art events, performances and films throughout the 1960s and are foundational for their respective film works in the 1970s and beyond. Their early work with intermedial environments and performances directly challenged modernism's attachment to medium specificity and in particular the constraints of the static frame within painting, theatre, which they both integrated and exploded within their respective approaches to film.⁸ Rainer and Schneemann explored the

2020] for more information on Rainer and Schneemann's participation in Fluxus (and sometimes alienation from) at this time.

³ See Rainer, 1999; Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotic's: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

⁴ Elise Archias, 'The Body as an Everyday Material in the 1960s: Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton', *Wreck*, 3.1 (2010), 1–5 (p. 1).

⁵ Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁶ Tanya Leighton, *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Tanya Leighton (London: Tate, 2008), pp. 13–14.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ This is something Schneemann herself argues in her notebooks from 1958–1963, reprinted in *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 52.

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performing, represented body, and their own bodies in particular, as materials to be used in the service of modernist critique.

They both employ intermediality not only to offer this critique of modernism but also to further their distinct explorations of language as a cultural system of power and gendered representations on screen. They both successfully extend the position of women's body in cinema beyond the traditional role as object to include embodied forms of authorship that consequently work to destabilize the fixity of language and media within the structuralist and modernist frames of the 1960s and 1970s. Their representations of complex and wholly agential woman on screen provide a historical foundation for the equally embodied, intermedial experiments found in feminist experimental film and media in the ensuing decades.

My comparative reading of the two artists focuses in on Schneemann's film *Plumb Line* and Rainer's film *Lives of Performers* in order to index how they each explore, in wholly distinct ways, what Rebecca Schneider calls 'the explicit body' of feminist art.⁹ This is seen first in how Schneemann and Rainer position their own bodies in the dual roles of performer and author within their films, and second in how both artists directly challenge to the valorization of cinematic specificity so common within the experimental art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. This I argue, they both do in distinct ways through foregrounding the body of the artist as both on screen image and author off screen. This move, or what I term below the double gesture of the artists, pushes against the conventional fixity of the diegetic film frame and addresses the audience in affective and visceral ways. In my analysis, these two related aesthetic innovations actively engage with the different embodiments of the artist/performer, the bodies onscreen, and the embodied spectator the films address. In order to understand how their specific aesthetic approaches developed, it is necessary to consider their histories within this space and time of the 1960s avant-garde art scene in New York City.

Shared Histories of 1960s New York

In the winter of 1967 Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer both participated in Angry Arts Week — a collective event of happenings, performances, and art inventions in New York City protesting the Vietnam War. Rainer performed *Convalescent Dance*, a variation on her well-known work *Trio A* at the Hunter Playhouse. *Convalescent Dance* sought to connect the vulnerability of her body, at the time recovering from major surgery, and those of soldiers' bodies in the Vietnam War. The performance was not overtly political but rather proposed an empathetic relationship between her 'frailty and the condition of soldiers wounded in action'.¹⁰ During the festival Schneemann presented her intermedia performance *Snows* at the Martinique Theatre. This architecturally

⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁰ Ramsey Burt, *Judson Dance Theatre: performative traces* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), p. 17.

complex performance art event combined performers and film projections with lighting and audio sequences controlled by audience movements within in an immersive environment. Her film *Viet Flakes*, which includes graphic images of violence against Vietnamese civilians, was projected as part of the performance. Schneemann brought these various elements together within the performance space in order to make the viewer acutely aware of the bodily consequences of war from their own embodied position as viewers affectively addressed by the performance.¹¹ Rainer's and Schneemann's performances took place in an era when daily images of violence in the media prompted many women artists to 'make work in which bodies themselves took on the status of media'.¹² Both artists' focus on their bodies as an art medium in these performance spaces formally contested the political apathy and conservatism present within dominant American culture at this time.

Rainer arrived in New York in 1958 from San Francisco where she had previously trained as an actor.¹³ Once in New York, she quickly gravitated towards a group of dancers who were experimenting with John Cage's practice of chance operations and incorporating the quotidian into their performances. Rainer was deeply influenced by both Cage and Merce Cunningham and sought to employ their ideas within her work.¹⁴ During this period Rainer choreographed extensively, premiering key works such as *Three Satie Spoons* (1961), *We Shall Run* (1963), and *The Mind is a Muscle* (1966) which included her most famous dance *Trio A. Three Satie Spoons*,¹⁵ a solo dance in three sections, developed out of workshops held by Robert Dunn at Cunningham's studio in 1960, where Rainer and others explored ways to *adapt* Cage's scores into choreographed dance.¹⁶ The dance includes Rainer's signature interests in placing everyday actions contra the psychodrama celebrated in modern dance at this time. Rainer writes on the impact of watching Simone Forti do an improvised dance during a workshop session, she states 'what [Forti] did brought the god-like image of the *dancer* down to human scale... It was a beautiful alternative to the heroic posture' that was prevalent in Rainer's training

¹¹ For a detailed account of this performance see Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press), pp. 60–73.

¹² Pamela M. Lee, 'Bare Lives', in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Tanya Leighton (London: Tate, 2008), p. 140.

¹³ Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, pp. 49–50. For a more detailed history of Rainer's move to New York see *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 151–97.

¹⁴ In an interview with Christine Iles, Rainer notes: 'The early 1960s was a very fertile time for intermingling of avant-garde activity in all the arts, primarily through the influence of John Cage; his writings about chance and Zen and silence affected painting, sculpture, dance and performance. Some of this activity took place in Yoko Ono's loft between 1960 and '61. Also, at the Ruben Gallery and the Judson Church Gallery artists like Robert Whitman, Claes Oldenburg and Allan Kaprow presented their work'. See Iles, 'Life Class', *Frieze Magazine*, 100 (2006) <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/life_class/> [accessed 12 October 2011].

¹⁵ Rainer's *Three Satie Spoons* is actually re-performed in the film *Film about a woman who...* (1974).

¹⁶ Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, p. 55

at the Graham School.¹⁷ It was within these group studio sessions with Forti, her then-husband Robert Morris, and others that Rainer began incorporating pedestrian movements and the everyday into her choreography.

This interest was taken further in *We Shall Run*, where non-professionals and dancers dressed in everyday clothing run continuously in various patterned formations. The piece incorporated elements of the everyday (bodies, clothing, and movements) in an effort to counter the more elaborate staging and costuming of modern dance at the time. Again, the work was a direct response to the feted tendencies of modern dance — ‘the ecstatic, the heroic, the regal’¹⁸ — which Rainer recalls ‘seemed very tired to us, used up, effete’.¹⁹ In contrast, *We Shall Run* celebrated the ‘pedestrian, the quotidian, and the athletic’ body foregrounding it as an equally viable subject of choreography and performance.²⁰ Rainer describes a Robert Dunn course she attended where ‘all he did was present various examples of chance operations: mostly chance-derived scores created by John Cage, which could be adopted to dance’. From this course Rainer developed her ‘own movement tendencies’ which included ‘a lot of gesture’ as well as ‘sounds and sentences — not necessarily related to the movements that accompany them’.²¹ The favorable response to this work, and later on to *Trio A*, situated Rainer at the vanguard of 1960s minimalist dance. This alignment with minimalism was explicitly supported by Rainer’s publication of the ‘NO Manifesto’ in 1965 and ‘A Quasi Survey of Some “Minimalist” Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*’ in 1966.²² Both texts eschew the humanist and romantic tendencies of modern dance, adopting instead painterly minimalist principles into the realm of dance.²³

In the mid-1960s Rainer began using film, and later in the decade, narrative structures in her choreography. These particular explorations with film and narrative reveal Rainer’s growing tension with the minimalism she had readily ascribed to earlier in the decades.²⁴ These explorations and the tensions they produced greatly impacted the direction her film work would take in the following decades. Her earliest films made between 1967–1969 were projected

¹⁷ Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design: 1974), p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Rainer, *Feelings*, p. 243.

²¹ This quote is taken from a lengthy letter Rainer wrote to her brother Ivan Rainer reprinted in *Feelings*, p. 204.

²² On the ‘NO Manifesto’ see Rainer, ‘Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called Parts of Some Sextets,’ in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. by Mariellen R. Sandford (London: Routledge, 1995); ‘A Quasi Survey of Some “Minimalist” Tendencies’ was first published in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

²³ Rainer later notes that ‘the mantra of minimalist aesthetics’ required art to ‘eschew topicality, metaphor, reference, organizational structure’. These are tendencies that are clearly present in her dance works from the 1960s. Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, p. 28.

²⁴ Rainer offers a very candid account of the shortcomings of minimalism in relation to politics in *A Woman Who...*, pp. 130–34.

during dance performances and reflected her on-going interest in ‘the body in motion’,²⁵ as she sought to juxtapose the bodies moving on-stage with the more tightly framed bodies and objects in motion onscreen.

Schneemann also produced a significant body of work in the 1960s that established the major themes and what Brandon Joseph notes were the recurring formal concerns of her aesthetic practice in the ensuing six decades.²⁶ Schneemann settled permanently in New York City in 1962 after completing her MFA at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.²⁷ In the early part of the decade Schneemann developed her painterly interest in the human figure within and against the dominance of abstract expression at that time.²⁸ Schneemann cites the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, and Claes Oldenburg as formative influences on her experiments with what she called kinetic sculpture and kinetic theatre.²⁹ Her earliest work includes the action-environment *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963), the performances *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Snows* (1967), and her most well-known film *Fuses* (1964-67). Much of her work at this time explored ways to re-sensitize viewers to their bodily experiences and bring forward a politics of eroticism into what she perceived as a thoroughly repressive dominant American culture. Amongst her distinct interests at this time, it is in her focus on ‘liberatory politics’ that the influence of Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, and the later phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty are most clear.³⁰ The body in her films, photographic installations, and on-stage performances prompted a sensual awareness in the audience through tactile, material entanglements with other fleshy, visceral objects. Even at this early stage Schneemann displayed an interest in the energetic interchanges between performers on-stage/onscreen and viewers in the audience.

For instance, *Eye-Body: 36 Transformative Actions* is a series of actions of Schneemann’s nude body situated within a collaged environment made of mirrors, glass, and motorized objects. In response to her encounters with ‘a few artists... introducing real and literal materials to an extended canvas (or picture plane),’

²⁵ Quoted in Peggy Phelan, ‘Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film’, in *A Woman Who...* ed. by Rainer, p. 8; original quote in Rainer, *Work*, p. 209.

²⁶ Brandon Joseph, ‘Carolee Schneemann’, *Artforum*, May 2019. <<https://www.artforum.com/print/201905/carolee-schneemann-79501>> [accessed February 20, 2020] (para. 1 of 3).

²⁷ For a history of Schneemann’s early career and move to New York see ‘Interview’, *ND 14* (1991), reprinted in Schneemann, *Imaging*, pp. 113–26.

²⁸ Schneemann’s use of the term kinetic is in direct reference to her own personal brand of collage-based work and performance which operates on the principles of objects and bodies in motion. For further discussion of these ideas see Schneemann, *Imaging*, pp. 125, 229, 251, 256, 261.

²⁹ In a letter from November 1961, Schneemann observed a move in the New York art world away from abstract expressionism, which she observed was losing popularity: ‘The gang, swinging on top of its own scene, has finished with FEELING’ [capitalization in original], and towards the Happenings, events and experiments of Oldenburg, Kaprow and Rauschenberg. She counts herself as being similarly aligned in her experiments with the latter three artists. Schneemann, ‘Letter to Peter and Collie Hooven,’ in *Correspondence Course: an epistolary history of Carolee Schneemann and her circle*, ed. by Kristine Stiles (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), pp. 51–54.

³⁰ Joseph, (para. 2 of 3).

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she chose to incorporate herself in her 'work as an additional "material"'.³¹ In 1963 these movements were photographed by Icelandic artist Errol to become 'a variation of the environment itself',³² *Eye-Body* reflects Schneemann's abiding interest in multi-disciplinary aesthetic environments and in positioning her body as the central subject of her artwork.³³ It also reveals how she sought out formal experimentation as a means of countering the constraints she experienced as a woman in the art world at that time. Schneemann notes:

In 1963 when I first came to New York City and began an enormous construction, there was already a sense of specific exclusion of my work because I was told it resembled in its rhythms and its density... Cornell and Rauschenberg and that these visual territories were already occupied and yet I had indeed a related sense of materiality and energy and density in the work so I decided I would motorized the constructions that I was working on because the men had not already done that. I began to see motors as an extension of both... technology and the energy of my body.³⁴

This prompted Schneemann to explore how to combine her body with the material constructions and became the impetus behind a work like *Eye Body*: body as extension of painting/collage constructions.

The piece established Schneemann's desire to move beyond the confines of the painting canvas and into more multi-dimensional aesthetic spaces. After *Eye-Body*, Schneemann continued developing performances in complex spatial environments that challenged the boundaries of media frames. *Meat Joy*, first performed in 1964, included live performers interacting with everyday items, such as fish, chicken, paint, and paper, and responding to a collaged musical score. This early performance reveals Schneemann's interest in undoing media boundaries, an interest that finds its fullest expression in *Snows* which, as noted above, combines sculptural environments, cinema and live performances and audience participation with complex lighting and audio scores.³⁵ In *Snows*, audiences entered the back door of a performance space through 'two floor-to-ceiling foam rubber "mouths"' and then crawled along planks leading from the stage to the aisles.³⁶ Once seated, the performance mixed film projections and

³¹ Schneemann, *Cezanne She Was A Great Painter* (New Paltz, NY: Tresspass Press, 1975), np.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Schneemann, *Imaging*, pp. 55–56.

³⁴ Schneemann quoted in documentary *Reclaiming the Body: Feminist Art in America* (Michael Blackwood, 1995), 10'50"-11'20" min.

³⁵ Schneemann describes *Snows* as comprised of 'revolving light sculpture above 20x15x4 foot rear wall construction in an open grid filled with plastic sacks containing colored water. 20x30x6 foot floor-to-ceiling collage of torn white paper. 75 white branches hung in semicircle from stage curtain rod. Manila rope, 2 bales of pink plastic foam, 2 silver planks, floor lights. Floor covering: plastic sheeting over silver foil. 4 contact microphones under stage floor. 30 contact microphones placed randomly under theatre seats. 5 films, 3 16mm film projectors, 3 sound tapes, 5 speakers, SCR switching system', *Imaging*, p. 82.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 77.

live performers in a dynamic power struggle that highlighted and then subverted the dominance inherent in traditional gender hierarchies and in the encounters between soldiers and victims of war. This mix of projection and performance reflects a similar interest between Schneemann and Rainer to juxtapose the bodies on screen and in the performance space in order to foreground the intersubjective relations between art, performer, and audience.

Schneemann and Rainer's paths crossed early through their mutual involvement and sometimes collaboration³⁷ within the Judson Dance Theatre, which played a central role in each artist's aesthetic development.³⁸ Both produced early forms of performance art through their work at Judson, including Rainer's *Ordinary Dance* (1962) and Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964). Both also began working with the film medium in the mid-1960s, most often as part of their performances and live events. Rainer moved towards film because: 'I wasn't so interested in narrative as a dancer, although at first I told stories while I danced but one of the reasons I began to think about making films was that narrative via Hollywood had been under-utilized in avant-garde film...'.³⁹ Schneemann notes that she was drawn to film because '[p]ainting was too slow... I needed the implicit energy of abstract expressionism to become more materialized, more dimensional... Film became another way to paint in time...'.⁴⁰ It was in this way that her film *Fuses* thus 'developed after my first performance works. My sense of time is now pushing the frames of painting through the exigencies and energies of my body into a lived circumstance...'.⁴¹ In both instances, Rainer and Schneemann were pushing against the media they identified with in their early training and incorporated film as a means of doing so. It is not to say that dance or painting ever stopped being central to their work but that film became a space for greater explorations of the limits of different media in conjunction with one another. Importantly, it is at this point of Schneemann exploring the potential of film that Amelia Jones locates her greatest interventions into modernist formalism. As Jones notes, Schneemann's work here is 'dramatically intersubjective' utterly tied to a relationship with the audience.⁴² For Jones, it is the emphasis on bodies that poses the key challenge to masculinist imperatives of modernist formalism which from criticism to structuralism is tied to notions of disembodied/disinterestedness of spectator and artist. Instead Schneemann successfully underscores 'the intersubjectivity of all artistic production and reception'.⁴³ Likewise, one of the

³⁷ Erika Levin, 'Dissent and the Aesthetics of Control: On Carolee Schneemann's *Snows*', *World Picture Journal*, 8 (2013), <http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_8/Levin.html> [accessed 20 February 2020], (para. 4 of 26).

³⁸ For an extensive overview of Rainer and Schneemann's histories at this time see Archias, *The Concrete Body*.

³⁹ Iles.

⁴⁰ Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 69.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 70.

⁴² Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 3.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 5.

intellectual interventions Carrie Lambert-Beatty makes in *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* is assert spectatorship as ‘a basic medium of Rainer’s work’.⁴⁴ I would argue that what Lambert-Beatty define at Rainer’s ‘phenomenological investigation of subject-object relations in minimalism’ offer an echo of what Jones outlines as Schneemann’s exploration of intersubjectivity above, albeit in entirely distinct ways.⁴⁵ These intersubjective modes of address directed to the audience are central to their film works, and places them at the early part of what I have outlined elsewhere as a significant contribution by women filmmakers who occupy an artistic place between film and performance, to experimental and avant-garde cinema.⁴⁶

Schneemann is overtly critical of society and in particular conservative social constraints that work against women’s freedoms. Rainer is too also critical of society and social conventions but is equally critical of herself and notions of stable forms of subjectivity more broadly. Whereas Schneemann’s enemy is 3000 years of patriarchal, colonial, militaristic and national forms of violence and suppression,⁴⁷ Rainer pushes back in her work against the belief in a coherent self and the coherency of narrative and artistic expression tied to it.⁴⁸ Thus, they offer meta-critiques of the 1960s milieu they worked within in different ways. With Schneemann the focus often centered on the patriarchal hatred of women’s bodies and how that was tied into the dehumanization of other marginalized bodies via war. Rainer’s work offered a focus on critiques of representational structures, as well as later on explicit power dynamics of race, class, sexuality of which her earlier concerns with meta-narratives and dominant forms of cultural discourse provided the groundwork for. For Schneemann the consideration of gendered language and cultural taboos against women centered on re-valuing Eros as a means of pushing back against violence and war. And within this, she embedded a critique of aesthetic structures of framing as correlates to such cultural forms of containment for both the viewers and representational bodies as static or en-framed images. Rainer’s concern with language explored questions of affect and emotion, more specifically cultural taboos against emotion.⁴⁹ This emerges within her critique of narrative structures and more specifically the genre of melodrama as it unfolds in both modern dance and then later in her investigation of classical Hollywood, she

⁴⁴ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 9.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Shana MacDonald, ‘Modes of Intersubjective Address in the *Central Character* (1977) and *Our Marilyn* (1987)’, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 25.1 (2016), 111–34.

⁴⁷ M.M. Serra and Kathryn Ramey, ‘Eye/Body: The Cinematic Paintings of Carolee Schneemann’, in *Women’s Experimental Cinema*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), p. 116.

⁴⁸ B. Ruby Rich, ‘Yvonne Rainer. An Introduction’, in *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, ed. by Yvonne Rainer and others (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 4; E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2002), p. 118; Archias, ‘The Body as an Everyday Material’, p. 4.

⁴⁹ For more a brief discussion of emotion see Rainer, *Works*, p. 108.

counters these constraints with a turn to, and emphasis on autobiography and the everyday as a means of formally refusing the totalizing myths of subjectivity.⁵⁰

In works such as those outlined above, Schneemann and Rainer equally challenged medium purist notions of dance, painting, sculpture, performance, and film, and worked tirelessly against the often masculinist-informed principles of critics, curators, teachers during that time. They individually confronted the limitations they faced as women artists through formal experimentation; this effectively transformed their critiques of their working environments into comprehensive counter-aesthetic practices. Their early work reveals different reactions to a set of aesthetic, epistemological, and cultural problems faced by women artists in the 1960s. Schneemann and Rainer's aesthetic responses to this period of art offer insights into the history of feminist experimental film and media and point to how they continue to manifest in the present. This differently realized set of aesthetic principles in both artists work perhaps finds its clearest expression in their film works from the later 1960s and early 1970s.

Intermedial Aesthetics in Plumb Line and Lives of Performers

In what follows, I offer a close analysis of Schneemann's *Plumb Line* and Rainer's *Lives of Performers* in order to extend the arguments made above around their intermedial feminist aesthetic, specifically within the realm of cinematic texts. *Plumb Line*, made between 1967 and 1971, is the second film in Schneemann's *Autobiographical Trilogy*. In the fifteen-minute film, Schneemann relentlessly manipulates and distorts images of herself and a former lover in order to examine more closely the relationship's demise. Completed in 1972, *Lives of Performers* is Rainer's first feature-length film. The film is composed of different sections including rich black and white images from a dance rehearsal; photographic stills documenting a performance; scenarios enacted on a theatrical stage without synchronized audio. These segments are intercut with a soundtrack of different voice-overs that, at times, describe the images while, at other times, narrate the intimate experiences of the performers. The narrative is based on a script that was part of Rainer's live work *Performance* (1972).

In considering both Rainer and Schneemann's films together I draw attention to how they both express an interest in the everyday, in the breaking of painterly and cinematic frames, and an emphasis on the embodiment of both the artist and the audience in order to advance their very distinct formal politics. This is most clearly seen in how Schneemann and Rainer present two very different notions of bodies and the everyday. Rainer's represented bodies are unadorned, stripped down, in motion, and located within the banality of the quotidian. Her interest in minimalism places an emphasis on the viewing environment

⁵⁰ Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, pp. 59–60.

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and a corporeal sense of immanence rather than the transcendence sought by high modernism. This can be clearly traced back to her move away from modern dance in her early encounters with Dunn and Cage as noted above. In an entirely different way Schneemann's work viscerally explores the tactility, sensuality, and pleasure of physical experience through a maximalist bricolage aesthetic. Schneemann's abiding emphasis on the human figure as an expressive material directly confronts the loss of figuration in abstract expressionism. This engagement with abstract painting 'actions' is something Elise Archias notes is taken up by Rainer and Schneemann alike.⁵¹ Both films considered here expand the intermedial possibilities of dance, performance, sculpture, photography, and film. Equally the two films encourage sustained interactions between the bodies of the performer, the spectator and the different art media evoked within the *mise en scène*. Through this they both challenge existing cultural and aesthetic codes and develop very different but lasting images of the artists body as a site of resistance on screen.

Plumb Line is a deeply personal account of Schneemann negotiating the end of a romantic relationship. It is comprised of photographic stills and film sequences of Schneemann and her lover (both alone and together), as well as shots of buildings, European plazas, beaches, and roadways. These images are edited into densely collaged sequences that are often split into framed quadrants onscreen. The images are reprinted on high-contrast film stock using deeply saturated color filters, giving the images a vibrant, textured quality. The images are counter-posed by an equally dense soundtrack of sirens, psychedelic rock, a cat meowing, unidentified moaning, and a recording of Schneemann speaking while under emotional duress. Schneemann is a key player within the *mise en scène* as the central character of the film. However, as the filmmaker and editor of the images she equally exists as an external observer retrospectively engaging with a past image of herself. This meta-authorial aspect of the film reveals Schneemann's important critique of how cinematic images collapse history, memories, and personal relations into the flatness of the representational frame.

Plumb Line begins and ends with a plumb line⁵² swinging pendulum-like in front of an image of Schneemann's former male lover.⁵³ The image becomes consumed by flames and burns on-screen. Schneemann's hand then enters the frame and inscribes the title of the film and then her name on the space where the burned image of the man formerly was. This first image of a photographic still frozen on screen is not just an entry point into the film, but is also an indexical

⁵¹ See Archias, *The Concrete Body*; Emily Liebert, 'Elise Archias's *The Concrete Body*', *Artforum*, February 2018, <<https://www.artforum.com/print/201802/elise-archias-s-the-concrete-body-73658>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

⁵² A tool that suspends a weighted object from a line in order to measure depth or verticality.

⁵³ The lover was a carpenter and thus the choice of a plumb line as a signifying object in the film corresponds with it being traditionally a tool of his trade.

framing of the film frame itself. The photographic still documents the mechanics of the cinema — still images running twenty-four frames per second through a projector and onto a screen. When this image is then completely destroyed, disappearing as it is being burned it offers a comment by Schneemann on the instability of the (projected) image. The viewers process of ‘consuming’ the photographic image is refused as it is consumed by flames instead. There is a violence to this act that forces the viewer to contemplate the meaning of the man’s image burning on the screen within the film. Schneemann’s inclusion of her own hand painting the title and signing her name offers an equally important visual intervention as it leads viewers to think about authorship and intention. Schneemann’s gesture of signing her name and title, filmed in real time, exhibits a claiming of the film and the space it occupies both on screen and in the site of exhibition. This sequence establishes a main theme of the film; woman’s inscription of herself (and her subjectivity) over the trace of the male image. This is strengthened by her inclusion of her body, a woman’s body, as the agent claiming this space. The gesture is both unremarkable as artists have been signing their work for centuries, and powerful as it documents a woman’s body functioning as the maker and not just the bearer of an image.⁵⁴ Throughout *Plumb Line* Schneemann reflexively counters the on-screen image of herself through the tactile formal process she enacts on the filmstrip. This builds on earlier experiments Schneemann undertook in *Fuses* (1967), the first film of her *Autobiographical Trilogy*. Of *Fuses*, Schneemann notes ‘as a painter I was free to examine the celluloid itself: burning, baking, cutting, painting, dipping my footage in acid, building dense layers of collage [...]’.⁵⁵ What is important to point out here is that for Schneemann the fact that she is painter and not filmmaker is what frees her to experiment cinematically. This echoes the intermedial approach she takes in *Eye/Body*, which equally builds a densely layered collage within the sculptural-photographic environment.

Her hand-manipulated gestures produce an aggressive, formally excessive intervention into her role as a represented object. Indexing the tensions between lived experience and social ideals, the film reveals an uncomfortable dynamic between cultural fantasy and lived bodies. As Rebecca Schneider notes, Schneemann’s aesthetic reveals how ‘woman has existence relative only to her representation,’ and explores the ways ‘woman stands beside herself [...] as a successful or failed, compliant or belligerent copy’.⁵⁶ A key example of this is found in Schneemann’s critical analysis of her image within the film’s *mise en scène*. A central image in the film is of Schneemann walking in a bright, colour-saturated Italian *piazza*. She repeats this shot as a way of launching a sharp critique of representation and viewing pleasure. In this sequence, Schneemann

⁵⁴ For a more extensive discussion of women as the bearer rather than the maker of the image see Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6–18.

⁵⁵ Schneemann, *Cezanne*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Schneider, p. 51.

walks towards the camera, directly engaging the viewer's gaze. The framing, lighting, and angle of the shot make the action quite striking to behold — there is undeniable visual pleasure in watching Schneemann walking. This gesture is both an act of self-presentation and recognition of the everyday gendered performance of walking in public space. Foregrounding this within the film reveals her awareness that she is always already on visual display. In this scene, Schneemann mimetically re-enacts the traditional framing of woman as spectacle in classical Hollywood cinema.⁵⁷ In the reverse shot she frames a group of well-dressed men turning to stare as she passes by. The male gaze is indexed through Schneemann's editing of the footage. Catching the men in the act of looking, Schneemann reveals two long-standing forms of voyeurism that operate in cinematic framing and in men looking at women in public space. This sequence successfully interrogates the syntax of the female body through the specificity of the film medium.⁵⁸ Schneemann's camera appropriates and performs dominant forms of looking in order to reveal their visual excess. She blurs the distinction between the male gaze and the female spectacle by citing and enacting both in the film frame. By placing herself wittingly as the spectacle on-view, she is pushing an otherwise repetitive visual stereotype to a place of critique.

In *Lives of Performers*, like Schneemann's position in *Plumb Line*, Rainer's presence as both performer and director engages the audience from a position both inside and outside the diegesis. Rainer situates herself early in this film as a choreographer directing the actions of the performers of the title. Like Schneemann, Rainer establishes herself as the author of the film through both the image and the audio.⁵⁹ The first image of the film shows Rainer directing a group of dancers in a rehearsal. Rainer is heard throughout this sequence on a separate, non-synchronized audio track, giving the dancers directions. Her voice is very clear, engaged, and passionate while explaining certain moves and phrases to the dancers. It is a commanding voice that matches the strength of the choreography and the concentration of the group in the rehearsal space. Similar to Schneemann's signature at the beginning of *Plumb Line*, Rainer's directorial presence in this early scene places her in a position of authority over the images we encounter; it is her choreography and her direction that we are watching. The film was made ten years into Rainer's career as a pivotal figure in the dance world. As such, there is a certain degree of gravity to her presence in the film as well as a voyeuristic thrill in seeing Rainer-the-choreographer at work. This thrill is extended in a shot of Rainer and the group of dancers laughing together during a break. In this sequence

⁵⁷ Similar to the presentation of Rita Hayworth's performance of *Put the Blame on Mame* in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) or Marlena Dietrich's initial entrance on stage in *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), Schneemann is filmed as the central figure walking towards a purposefully positioned camera.

⁵⁸ Mary Ann Doane, 'Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body', *October*, 17 (1981), 23–36.

⁵⁹ Here the audio and image are placed in juxtaposition to one another, and are rarely, if ever in sync.

the viewer is a privileged witness to Rainer's process as an artist and the particular way she engages with others in the rehearsal space. This opening scene establishes Rainer's strong directorial presence, but also allows us to see her at work within her creative process. Together, this mix of authority and intimacy in the same instance brokers a familiarity between Rainer and the audience. As performer (Rainer the choreographer on screen) and author (Rainer in the voice-over), she does not stand beside her image within the frame but instead positions herself beside the viewer through the voice-over audio and takes them into her confidence as they view the image on screen with her. This move places the audience in a discursive exchange with Rainer as she speaks to/about herself as an image. Here the double gesture of Rainer both inside the film and outside the film, viewing it alongside the audience, garners the trust of the viewer by allowing them to see the quotidian experiences of the dance rehearsal. I would add that even if this 'behind-the-scenes' view of the dance experience is itself a choreographed performance, it encourages the viewer to identify with the voice over character of the 'real' Rainer. It establishes Rainer as both performer and observer standing alongside the viewer, commenting to us on her own artistic process. This experimental mode of address can be seen in various forms throughout the film.

In a later section of the film Rainer participates in a read-through of a script for her work *Performers*, revealing the intimate and idiosyncratic way that she positions herself as a vulnerable rather than impervious author. During the read-through Rainer reads a long quote by Carl Jung that was used in the documented performance she is describing. In response, Shirley, one of the performers in the piece, critiques Rainer and the quote as being overly righteous. Rainer defends the quote as being quite the opposite, however Shirley critiques both Rainer's delivery and her taking the quote out of context. Rainer responds, 'Well you know Shirley that I have always had a weakness for the sweeping revelations of great men'. At this point we hear an audience responding with laughter over top of Rainer's final statement: 'That's why I'm going at this concert so differently'. Rainer here refers to her attempt at a different form of storytelling. This final dialogue sequence is a clear example of Rainer's attempt to establish a dialogue both inside the film (as performer) and outside the film (as commentator standing alongside the viewer). She includes other voices on the audio to interact and contradict her position as author. Additionally, she allows those other voices to critique her position, thus allowing herself to be a flawed character both within the film and the author. Acknowledging 'her weakness for the sweeping revelations of great men' suggests a perceived weakness on her part and reveals her as a conflicted author engaged in an auto-critique. Again, this invites the viewer to see up close the self-conscious reflexivity that informs her process. Finally, her inclusion of the audience laughing over her work is an important example of Rainer's reflexive use of audio to reconfirm the viewer's position as part of the dialogue. In this instance our position as extra-diegetic viewers is mirrored (and brought into closer proximity) by the diegetic sound of the audience in the film. Through this audio Rainer creates a space for the viewer, acknowledging the extra-diegetic audio as an integral and interactive part of the film.

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In *Plumb Line* and *Lives of Performers* Schneemann and Rainer employ a double gesture enacted by each artists' inclusion of themselves in the dual role of onscreen image and off-screen narrator. Rebecca Schneider defines the double gesture as that which embraces both the essence and social construction of women's bodies, situating it as a useful formal device for revealing what is often masked or hidden by dominant representation.⁶⁰ By acknowledging women's bodies as both a construct and as materially specific, the double gesture unravels the gendered illusion required or maintained by dominant culture, and I would argue dominant representational codes in film and media. Schneemann and Rainer present themselves as participants within the films and as authors who externally determine the film's form. As such, they gesture towards themselves as representations while also as material bodies beyond their status as images. This gesture to their roles as authors outside the film frame is a common trope in modernist art cinema, often used to establish the filmmaker as an omnipotent commentator of the film. Notably, Schneemann and Rainer use this reflexive trope not to establish a position of dominance or omnipotence, but to comment on their status as images and to reveal intimate insights into their personal faults and vulnerabilities. This undermines the traditional assertion of the director's authority established by such a gesture in both modernist and classical cinema.

Double Gestures of the Artists as On and Offscreen

My comparative reading of *Plumb Line* and *Lives of Performers* indexes Schneemann and Rainer's formal explorations of what Schneider calls the 'explicit body'⁶¹ in three distinct ways. The first is Schneemann and Rainer's positioning of their own bodies in the dual roles of performer and author within their films. The second is their exploration of gendered representation. In Schneemann's film we see this in women's everyday experiences of objectification and in Rainer's through the vulnerability of self-representation and self-critique. Both films offer highly self-reflexive performative sequences that undermine or call into question the certainty of the male gaze and the heroism associated with the male auteur. Finally, Rainer and Schneemann in different ways manage to pose a challenge to cinema specificity through foregrounding the material practices of the body that pushes against the film frame. In my analysis, these three areas employ different types of bodies including that of the artist/performer, the represented bodies onscreen and the embodied spectator the films address. One reason I would suggest the everyday is taken up by both is perhaps as Schneider points out women are the 'public private', being both 'emblematic of the private sphere' of domesticity while being 'simultaneously the prime terrain of the given to be seen, the obsessional hub of *public display*'.⁶² Examining the lived everyday, from a personal perspective in both these films thus suggests both artists seek to interrogate this particular paradox.

⁶⁰ Schneider, chapter 1.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 71.

⁶² Ivi, p. 72 (emphasis in original).

Both Schneemann and Rainer's inclusion of themselves in this dual position of image and author reveals a central illusion masked by the cinematic apparatus — that of the separation between author and viewer. Schneemann and Rainer simultaneously embrace themselves as both performing image and embodied author, reflecting a shared interest in reconciling their presence as a body on screen and also as a voice off screen. The result is that the artists somehow stand beside the projected image and beside the viewer watching. This in turn requires the viewer to recognize, through the intimacy of their encounter with the author's address, their position as spectators. This shared formal approach reflects a broader concern in the 1960s avant-garde to promote a direct engagement between spectator, art object and artist. Unlike the more dominant reflexive authorial position in 1960s films, like those of Jean-Luc Godard, that speak *at* rather than *with* an audience (often from a place of physical and moral remove), Rainer and Schneemann seek an intimate dialogue that is based on mutual vulnerability of artist and audience. The viewer can no longer maintain a position of distance and voyeuristic superiority when being addressed by a speaker who acknowledges her own internal conflicts and challenges. This double position within the films provides a complex and affective expression of authorial reflexivity. Rainer and Schneemann's dual presence as image and voice, performer and external director, guide the viewers' engagement with the images on screen. Schneemann and Rainer address the audience, standing beside them, requiring the audience to participate in a dialogue with them. This dialectic form of address seeks to break the divide between audience and screen, viewer, filmmaker and text as well as the on and off-screen space that structures the viewing environment. It is in this way that both artists successfully assert the body, in differing forms, as a key element in formally refiguring the spatial relations between image on screen and spectator in the viewing space.

Schneemann and Rainer's separate artistic responses to their shared milieu has had a profound impact on the direction of feminist avant-garde film, media, dance and performance art over the ensuing five decades. In singling out Rainer and Schneemann in this article, I seek to reconfirm their importance as early figures in the history of feminist experimental film and media. As many of the crucial early feminist connections between both artists have been rendered invisible within the history of feminist art, film, and performance criticism it is necessary to point out these overlaps whether intentional on the part of the artists or not. What I hope future scholarship on feminist experimental media directs its attention to is how feminist artists have further expanded these explorations into quotidian, intermedial, and embodied modes of representation across media as forms of feminist interventions into dominant and reigning aesthetic demands placed upon women and other marginalized artists.

After Nature: The Expanded Landscapes of Ana Mendieta and Ana Vaz

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Abstract

The article explores women's interventions into landscape through the experimental practices of Cuban American multimedia artist Ana Mendieta and contemporary Brazilian visual artist and filmmaker Ana Vaz. Interested in the material and metaphorical intersections among film, landscape, and geology, I focus on the geological imagination of landscape partaking in Mendieta's and Vaz's art while asking what sorts of aesthetic regimes and formal strategies they choose to express it. Mendieta's comprehension of earth as matter, medium, and a deep surface for inscription of traces comments on the materiality of film as a recording medium from the point of view of geologically oriented art. Vaz's landscape, inflected with human interventions, emerges as an enormous living medium of memory, linking its exploration to a geological approach and the work of excavation while transforming deep time into what the artist calls 'cinematographic multiperspectivism'. The article argues that it is the attention to the geological that unites these two artists in their critique of the position of exteriority and of landscape as an object of contemplation. Mendieta and Vaz depart from traditional aesthetics of landscape as a view by moving toward landscape as a network of relations among humans, memories, and times.

Landscape Transformations: From Frame to Geology

'Landscape as a way of seeing from a distance is incompatible with the heightened sense of our relationship to Nature as living (or dying) environment. As a phase in the cultural life of the West, landscape may already be over'. (Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*)¹

In his seminal article on landscape in cinema and experimental film, P. Adams Sitney refers to only one female director, Marie Menken, when mentioning the artists from whom Stan Brakhage learnt the elements of cinematic landscape.²

¹ Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 22.

² P. Adams Sitney, 'Landscape in the Cinema: The Rhythms of the World and the Camera', in

Nonetheless, women artists' responses to landscape in different media have a long history, especially in experimental filmmaking, which has long served as an arena for women's artistic preeminence.³ From Margaret Tait to Babette Mangolte to Ute Aurand, landscape fascinates, remaining one of the privileged, as well as one of the most challenging, subjects for the camera.⁴ Women artists' interventions into landscape have recently intensify at a time when landscape — in light of our shifting relationship to the natural environment and expansion of geographical and cultural borders — resurfaces, as Erika Balsom suggests, as a 'distinctly contemporary concern'.⁵ This article focuses on Cuban American multimedia artist Ana Mendieta's experimentations with Super 8mm film during the 1970s and contemporary Brazilian visual artist and filmmaker Ana Vaz's assemblages of 16mm filmed materials, found footage, and digital moving images. Their natural, social, and personal histories all intertwine in Mendieta's and Vaz's very different practices to blur a system of boundaries through which the genre operates in its experiences of place or land. These two artists represent a break in the monopoly of traditional European landscape, turning their cameras to Cuban, Mexican, and Brazilian locations. But they also break the monopoly in a greater sense — bringing forward the ambiguity and elusiveness of landscape as an idea and experience, the artists contribute to the transformation of our ways of thinking critically about the very notion of landscape and its aesthetic paradigms, especially at the intersection of landscape with the issues of time, depth, and memory.

Sanctified by the authority of art history, landscape has long been understood in terms of the visible, as a view inside the frame — the imposition of the frame mediates land as landscape. The concurrent emergence in the seventeenth century of Cartesian philosophy and of landscape paintings supports landscape as an issue of frames and grids, detached representation, and observation of nature from a position of culture. A hierarchical arrangement of components within a view, landscape became a complex assemblage of visual and imaginative constituents subordinated to a thematic motif that unifies a setting into totality. *Field Beach*, painted in 1850 by Mary Blood Mellen, one of a number of women painters associated with the Hudson River School, exposes landscape as a set of relations — not merely among water, land, and sky, all embraced by a curve of a picturesque New England gulf — but those that are essentially anthropocentric (fig. 1). A group of people in the middle ground is pictorially

Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts, ed. by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge (UK) and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 103–26.

³ See recent anthologies: *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, ed. by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005) and *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁴ *Landscape and Film*, ed. by Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge, 2007); *Film Landscapes: Cinema, Environment and Visual Culture*, ed. by Jonathan Rayner and Graham Harper (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

⁵ Erika Balsom, 'Why are artist filmmakers turning to landscape?', *Freeze Magazine*, <<https://frieze.com/article/why-are-artist-filmmakers-turning-landscape>> [accessed 6 November 2019].



Fig. 1: Mary Blood Mellen. *Field Beach*. Circa 1850. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Cape Ann Museum.

included, enveloped by the seashore line and the coulisse of trees while the entire composition points to the landscape's implications of a human perception, thus a viewer and a viewpoint, that is often external to the landscape. Landscape always dramatizes the human presence — even without figures inhabiting the field of vision, the viewing position points to the human control over representation. Landscape, as Malcolm Andrews notes, is always figured: formed, inhabited, and interpreted.⁶ The soft yellow tone in capturing the sunset lights in Mellen's tableau saturates the entire image, and emanating the sense of the pastoral calm and harmony with nature, it expresses another constituent of landscape that Georg Simmel pointed to in his 1913 essay 'The Philosophy of Landscape' — atmosphere or mood as a primary carrier of a landscape, a universal unifier that permeates all of its different material elements together.⁷ Recent critical insights on landscape see it more as culturescape, a cultural instrument, and a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other.

⁶ Malcolm Andrews, 'Impressing the Landscape: Place and Human Presence in the Recent Work of British Moving Image Artists', in *Figuring Landscapes*, ed. by Catherine Elwes, Eu Jin Chua and Steven Ball (London: International Centre for Fine Arts Research and Camberwell College of Arts, 2008, pp. 12–48).

⁷ George Simmel, 'The Philosophy of Landscape', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24.7-8 (2007), 20–29.

Excavating the German term *Landschaft*, historian Simon Schama describes it as having a strong connection with aspects of 'jurisdiction', suggesting that the very term 'landscape' came to be associated with loyalty not only to a particular geography but to a particular set of ideals.⁸ For Schama, landscape is based on the principles of belonging, of connection between people and place, rather than being exclusively evocative of the pleasure of pure aesthetic contemplation.

The intervention of the moving image into landscape shatters its normative conventions and surpasses all previous restrictions, especially the enforcement of immobile enframing as the unifying principle. As Eu Jin Chua notes, the moving image

is probably the medium or aesthetic site in which we see, most powerfully, the wrestling away and reclaiming of the landscape tradition from its bourgeois-Romantic roots. Film and video art is very good at activating the dialectics — or rather, the multifariousness — of landscape, because, in the moving image, everything that was excised and excluded from traditional landscape rushes back into the picture with a vengeance, not least, movement and sound [...].⁹

This inclusion of the excluded informs my exploration of the juncture between the women artists' experimental film practice and landscape, particularly the inclusion of time 'in' and 'of' landscape that forces the artists to point their cameras to land and to the relations between surface and depth. Mapping the landscape's range of meanings, I am interested in the material and metaphorical intersections of film, landscape, and geology — changing over time as well as fossilizing in time, landscape emerges as a medium of time, mirroring cinema as another time machine. This calls for reconsideration of landscape in the context of the recent 'geologic turn' in the humanities and film and media studies and to rely, for example, on the concept of deep time, *Tiefenzeit*, by which a media theorist Siegfried Zielinski connects time with earth and with its depth.¹⁰

I focus on the geological imagination of landscape in Mendieta's and Vaz's art while investigating the aesthetic regimes and formal strategies they choose to express it. The attention to earth as a raw material for landscape is foregrounded in Mendieta's experimental films, for whom the geographical and material conditions of landscape and the elements of land, fire, and water are always imbued with a sense of embodiment. Mendieta's comprehension of earth as matter, medium, and a deep surface for inscription of traces comments on the materiality of film as a recording medium from the point of view of geologically oriented art. Vaz's landscape, inflected with human interventions, emerges as an enormous living medium of memory, linking its exploration to a geological

⁸ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 10.

⁹ Eu Jin Chua, 'Untethering Landscape', in *Figuring Landscapes*, pp. 99–102.

¹⁰ Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). On geological turn, see Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

After Nature: The Expanded Landscapes of Ana Mendieta and Ana Vaz

approach and the work of excavation while transforming deep time into what Vaz calls ‘cinematographic multiperspectivism’.¹¹ I argue that it is the attention to the geological that unites these two artists in their exceeding of landscape as an object of contemplation with a critique of the position of exteriority and a departure from traditional aesthetics of landscape as a view toward landscape as a network of relations among humans, memories, and times. The geological perspective allows us to recognise landscape as the site at which the human subject is present albeit no longer central.

Tracing landscape: The Prehistory and Deep Time of Ana Mendieta

‘I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools’. (Ana Mendieta)¹²

‘I really feel that it’s important in my work that I use dirt and sand because these [...] speak about the history of the world or of the earth, of nature, too’. (Ana Mendieta)¹³

If landscape has been understood as an intrinsically detached view, Land Art — which Ana Mendieta practiced with her post-Minimalist works on locations in Iowa, Mexico, and Cuba — dissolves the distance between the subject and the object. As an artist experimenting during the 1960s and 1970s with the emerging genres of conceptual, body, performance, and Land art, she contributed to these varied dialogues, while the heterogeneity of her art does not allow to confine the artist within any of the definition used to describe her praxis. Embracing feminism, Mendieta subverted the monumental gestures of male Land artists such as Robert Smithson by imposing the human scale onto the landscape. And while accentuating embodiment of landscape, she was particularly attentive to the meeting of her land-body art with the act of filming that grew into an inextricable constituent of the hybrid form she created with sculptural interventions in the landscape in the *Siluetas Series*.

Following the mid-twentieth century turn to making art in and of the landscape, Mendieta’s work expresses an attitude toward the natural environment as a pliable medium, a tool for art, or a studio, while her ‘earth-body sculptures’, made during the 1970s, offer vital convergences between Land Art and film. When working directly on the landscape and with the earth as a raw material, Mendieta became intimately familiar with and liked Iowa’s soil containing

¹¹ Stefan Salomon, ‘A Cinema That Could Explode or Implode: Ana Vaz Discusses *Occidente*’, *Mubi Notebook*, 1 June 2016, <<https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/a-cinema-that-could-explode-or-implode-ana-vaz-discusses-occidente>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

¹² Ana Mendieta, proposal for the New York State Council on the Arts, 17 March 1982, reproduced in *Ana Mendieta: Traces*, ed. by Stephanie Rosenthal (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), p. 216.

¹³ *Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta*, ed. by Howard Oransky and Laura Wertheim Joseph (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), p. 128.

clay, which made it easier to mould. The artist described her *Silueta Series* — for which she cast numerous anthropomorphic shapes and silhouettes onto the earth by carving them into rocks, sculpting bodily forms out of sand and gunpowder, submerging them into water, or lighting fire to create outlines — as an ongoing dialogue between the landscape and her body. When either placing her body directly on land or constructing an avatar form of herself impressed and integrated into various natural environments, she thematized a contact with the earth that rendered the earth as a living thing. Testing the body's capacity for identification with earth, *Genesis (Buried in Mud)*, 1975) slowly reveals Mendieta, appearing with arms outstretched, breathing below a layer of mud — thus, the soil, breathing in resonance with her, emerges as animated living matter.

The images, documented via Super 8 film, slides, and photographs, registered Mendieta's experimentation with the material substructure of art objects and communication with landscape in relentless attempts to leave an imprint on its surface. Articulated through an ontology of loss and disappearance, such photographs or video moving images that documented Land Art have often been interpreted as secondary to the original work and experience.¹⁴ I argue that Mendieta's silent shorts, filmed in black and white or colour, constitute a kind of single film, or as John Perreault suggests, a cinematic mural.¹⁵ They point to a consistent filmic practice of landscape united by a specific set of themes — geological elements of landscape, the earth as canvas, time inscribed on the surface — in reciprocity with the time-base medium of film. Mendieta's interest in time, history, and memory imprinted into surfaces of landscape is inseparable from the gesture of filmic recording. If a phenomenological framing of Land Art places accents the embodied experience of landscape in resonance with the corporeal experience of art work,¹⁶ Mendieta's art equally foregrounds the meeting of earth with technology through the relations between a temporary and ephemeral earthwork and its filmic documents and records.

As an art student at the University of Iowa, Mendieta studied Pre-Columbian culture, primitive art, and archaeology. In 1971, she accompanied the anthropologist Thomas Charlton on archaeological digs in Mexico. Prehistoric cave art permeates the filmic representations of Mendieta. The caves she entered with her tools and the camera are one of the intermediates of the earth depth in Mendieta's landscape — a womb of nature, a prehistorical site of ritual, and a place that accepts images. The cave determines one of her art's essential preoccupations — inaugurating the process that separated humans from the surrounding world, the cave frames art as both a symbolic action and a tactile

¹⁴ Kathy O'Dell, 'Displacing the Haptic: Performance Art, the Photographic Document, and the 1970s', *Performance Research*, 2.1 (1997), pp. 73–81.

¹⁵ John Perreault, 'Ana Mendieta: The Politics of Spirituality', in *Covered in Time and History*, pp. 24–51 (p. 25).

¹⁶ Guy Brett, 'One Energy', in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performances 1972–1985*, ed. by Olga M. Viso (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 1992), pp. 181–202; Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

intervention with representations such as handprints on stone surfaces, implying the need of the prehistoric artist to project her mark outside of herself through immediate contact with the material. Mendieta's art works linger on the memory of these earliest handprints as a media of fixation of sensory phenomena. In the cave, prehistory and deep time merge in the idea of imprint that inspired Mendieta's *Siluetas*. Returning to Cuba in 1981, Mendieta made a series of 'Rupestrian sculptures': small, shallow-relief carvings modeled on Neolithic representations of female bodies. Shot in the historic caves in Jaruco State Park near Havana, the multi-shot and more cinematically complex film, *Rupestrian Sculptures* (no. 98, 1981), reveals these sculptures installed in a semi-subterranean grotto or carved by Mendieta, following the structure of geological formations into the location. Mendieta's camera persistently gestures toward landscape by panning, tilting, and zooming, and these camera's movements surface as the filmic equivalents of her hand movements — drawing or gouging, digging with small implements, or carving into cave walls or land. Like the outline she draws in the earth that is a production of her hand, resulting from the direct contact of her body with the material surface, the film insists on being made by hands in unmediated contact with material. With the camera 'gesturing' and 'touching' landscape, acting as an extension of the artist's arm and an intermediary between the body and environment, the film manifests itself as a tactile intervention into landscape.

The geological imaginary of Mendieta's landscape poetics determines a set of cinematic strategies — a camera's gaze that partakes in earth as matter without shape or form, beginning or end. Her work with Super 8mm — a medium suitable for recording a performance while also infested with nostalgia, fading colours, and scratches that inscribe time on the film's surface, evocative of other artists such as Peggy Ahwesh and Nina Fonoroff — gestures toward a prehistory of film medium. The short single-take film made with the static, slightly panning and tilting camera is reminiscent of early films. Using a Super 8mm camera, the frame of which approximates a rectangle rather than a square and is just enough to contain the *Silueta*, Mendieta refrains from long shots in favour of closer framing that secures the disappearance of the horizon, turning land into a flat canvas and landscape into a neutral territory with little alliance to a particular place or time. By decontextualizing the earth's surface from other common landscape concerns with the sky, horizon, and expanses of land, Mendieta refocuses the vision to the earth as deep matter and as surface. From a single fixed position, the camera gazes obliquely, usually from above — this verticality of the camera direction fosters the gaze as ready to plunge into the depth of the landscape. In *Volcan* (no. 71, 1979), such a gaze is directed toward a miniature artificial mountain with a *Silueta* at the centre that is filled with white gunpowder. The staged volcanic activity releases flowing white smoke, the movement of which animates the inanimate matter of earth itself — another theme that unifies Mendieta's films is the relation between the inanimate matter of earth and its animations. The earth, burning and erupting, reveals what seems to be a dark hole into the limitless

depth of geological infinity. Here, Mendieta's films try to reach the geological substructure that seethes under the ground — the term 'deep time' suddenly evokes the darker realm looming beneath the earth's surface. Mendieta's earth simultaneously appears as an agreeable material and a disturbing depth resonating with Gaston Bachelard's works on poetics of the elements — earth, for Bachelard, has hidden depth that is not accessible to the eye but only to the imagination: 'the depth of that imaginary mine where so many suffer [...] infernal nightmares'.¹⁷ The void of the earth is an example of the prehistoric that also partakes in the aesthetic paradigm of the sublime, for which the void functions as a model of the unrepresentable. Mendieta engages in this with scale — the volcano, a topos of the sublime, is miniaturized to the human scale, rendering the intimate geological sublime.

For Mendieta, earth's depth is temporal, and a temporal inflection that the artist capitalizes on is the time of the trace, often recorded in the process of its making or disappearance. *Untitled: Silueta Series* (no. 66, 1978), shows an earth-body sculpture — a figure with truncated arms modelled on a Neolithic statuette or akin to a mummy-like effigy enveloped in a shroud drawn in a thick white outline of gunpowder (fig. 2). Gunpowder burns leaving a black *Silueta*, forcibly imprinting onto earth a memory of the body in a negative counter-relief. Five handprints visible on the earth near the *Silueta* confirm the gesture of imprinting. A cloud of white smoke from burning, blown by the wind to the right edge of the image, casts a brief shadow on the earth. This layering of simulacra within the frame — for Oransky, 'the shadow represents the smoke, which represents the *Silueta*, which represents Mendieta'¹⁸ — merges with landscape's geological layers, which for the artist also include what lies on top: mud, grass, water. Each layer possesses its own temporality: the time of earth, time of gunpowder burning, time of smoke dissipating, time of the film itself. As Rachel Weiss notes, time in Mendieta's films 'is not sequential; things don't occur consecutively'.¹⁹ Rather, the time is layered within the singular frame. With the removal of directorial intentions, the camera finds its own dialogue with the geology of the earth, while the single-shot-film format appears the most consistent with showing the palimpsest of temporalities and the geological structure of stratified time by eschewing the sequential logic of film editing.

To speak about the history of the earth and different temporalities of landscape, Mendieta chooses materials and elements — sand, pigment, waves, mud, flowers, gunpowder — that are ephemeral and temporary. In *Silueta de Arena* (no. 65, 1978), the *Silueta* from sand and on sand is emplaced in banks of

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams* (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2011), p. 15. See also Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground. An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Howard Oransky, 'Covered in Time and History: The Films of Ana Mendieta', in *Covered in Time and History*, pp. 80–167 (p. 130).

¹⁹ Rachel Weiss, 'Difficult Times: Watching Mendieta's Films', in *Covered in Time and History*, pp. 52–63 (p. 53).

a sandy creek — thus, the slowly running water, rendering the flow of time, covers the *Silueta* with a glimmering veil. Mendieta locates the *Silueta* in the liminal area between the layers of earth and of water, between their different temporalities. Left to dissolve, subjected to the smoothing and erosive movement of water, the longevity of the sand *Silueta* is a function of natural processes and the material from which it is made. The self-transforming, metamorphosing earth is ever changing, transgressing all fixed forms, subjecting them to the gradual decomposition of geological temporalities that preceded and exceed human time. For Scottish geologist and naturalist James Hutton, whose *Theory of the Earth* (1778) informed the contemporary theories of deep time, the earth is a machine that, while recording time in fossils, is continuously going through the processes of erosion and reconstruction.²⁰ Reconceived as a dynamic and living entity, earth constantly restores itself, often by erasing traces of humans, and then it itself is outside historical change. As soon as Mendieta situated her sculpture in landscape, a circle of erosion and earth restoration was initiated. On a micro and human scale, Mendieta films Hutton's earth-machine at work. Even encountering resistance from the landscape, the ephemeral fossilizations of her artworks also encounter the film apparatus — long disappearing from landscape, the trace continues to exist on film, fossilized by light on the film emulsion.

Either a voluminous human-like shape or an empty outline filled with soil and grass, the silhouette, as a technique of visualizing the body, is based on an ultimate reduction. The *Silueta Series* renders the decorporealization of the artist's body in the process of its absorption by the landscape — some films record Mendieta's body immersed into lands, while in others, the *Siluetas* become more and more abstracted, transmuting into a trace of the contour. In Mendieta's practice, the body progressively undergoes transformation, reduction, and ruination in its merging with landscape, and the subject gradually vanishes, becoming part of the geological fabric. This movement toward disappearance recalls the logic of the film image: in the process of imprinting on the celluloid, the body decorporealizes. In her interest in inscribing a trace, however mutable and fleeting, the ontology of Mendieta's *Silueta* resonates with the ontology of film image — earth acts as film emulsion, flexible and absorbent, as a medium of recording. In the search for deeper layers of landscape, Mendieta exposes a deep layer of cinema, its ontology as an imprint on the surface, its prehistory as an authentic and ephemeral trace. As André Bazin claims, cinematic ontology stems from the impulse of preservation and recording and then is indicative of the transcendence of death.²¹ While film has an ability to capture a temporal moment, it is not able to capture the grand time of earth — the geological perspective reveals the phenomenological limits of cinematic recording. Mendieta's indexical

²⁰ James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth* (Reprint) (CreateSpace, 2012).

²¹ André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. by Hugh Gray, 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), i, pp. 9–16.

and tactile imprints are always a corporeal gesture alluding to a visceral impact of art that exceeds the function of mere recording and preserving.

Of mines and clouds: Ana Vaz's geology of memory

A Idad da Pedra stems from the idea that everything that exists thinks, everything has a mode of thinking and seeing. In that sense, it is a film that takes Gilles Deleuze's idea 'who does the earth think it is' from *A Thousand Plateaus* almost as a cinematographic instruction. The film departs to this landscape that has a particular history while trying to read strata, animals, vegetable, and mineral matter as speaking, seeing, alive things... Cinema is an art, par excellence, of the Anthropocene. (Ana Vaz)²²

Ana Vaz works within the global field of expanded cinema and artists' moving image that, among its many preoccupations, explores the meeting points among the environment, memory, and colonialism, epitomized, for example, by multi-layered installations of the visual artists John Akomfrah. Perhaps, more than other artists, Vaz is concerned with the entanglement of the post-colonial discourse and that of the Anthropocene: with her *America: Bay of Arrows* (*Amérika: Bahía de las Flechas*, 2016) she makes a radical claim by locating the Anthropocene's beginning in the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas. And more than other artists, she engages with the question of how the post-Anthropocene cinema might look like, what kind of a visual regime might partake in this new imagination.

From a postcolonial perspective, Ana Vaz traces cultural and ecological changes in landscape, blending ethnographic study with attentive reading and hearing a landscape's mnemonic language. Similar to Mendieta, who associated the domination of nature with the project of colonization,²³ Vaz links an ecological sensibility with an anticolonial stance. Taking the ontological turn of the Anthropocene as her most profound philosophical and aesthetic concern, Vaz drives us to reconsider the very existence of the fundamental divide between the natural and the artificial. In *Atomic Garden* (2018), nature, flowers, insects, and the human artifice of fireworks compete for the screen surface, yet through the shared optical phenomenon of flickering, they emerge as non-contradictory forces. Vaz seeks to redefine the frame that constitutes landscape by establishing its outer boundaries, often framing something that is uncontainable, for which the frame appears too small. Intersecting narratives of colonial past and prehistory, mining and land use, sky and clouds, Vaz employs a cinematographic language of spontaneous

²² Ana Vaz's talk 'I Prefer Not to Be But to Tupi: The Age of the Earth', 26-28 February 2016, De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam, Sonic Acts Academy.

²³ Susan Best, 'The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta', *Art History*, 30.1 (2007), 57-82 (p. 67).

camera movements, sweeping panning, zooming in and out, and unusual framings to portray a landscape that loosens the binaries between human and geological, animals and people, macro and micro, planetary and atomic. The ideas of landscape memory and historical loss in Vaz's artworks are intertwined with the extractive practices of mining. *Look Closely at the Mountains* (2018), directly devoted to mining activities, engages in the comparative research of the effect induced on landscape by over three centuries of mineral extraction in two regions — the state of Minas Gerais in the Southwest of Brazil and the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region in France. Vaz's perspective on mining as the transformation of the environment by humans, destroying and yet attempting to alleviate damage already done, intersects with mining as the excavation of memory, resonating with Walter Benjamin's idea in 'Excavation and Memory' that memory can be considered to be 'the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried', so that 'he who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging'.²⁴ For Vaz, the earth's depth is a temporal one, the earth is a recording medium that inscribes time in geological strata — the mountains and caves of Minas Gerais become the repositories of memories, prehistoric images, and inscriptions, whereas landscape appears as a palimpsest of different archaeological, geological, and mnemonic layers.

The Age of Stone (*A Idade da Pedra*, 2013) interferes with the geology of landscape in the most explicit way, as Vaz's approaches landscape as a terrain for excavating and reimagining the past — the geological foundations of Brasília, a planned city designed by modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer in the central, vast and arid plateau of Brazil, the *sertão*, a simultaneously physical and mental place. The surrounding territory has been historically marked by the excessive mining of minerals and precious stones. For Vaz, the project of Brazil's modernization is intertwined with the idea of Brasília as a ruin of the future. The city 'denied the prehistory that was consistently there, and the films tries to find its prehistory in this geological deep time that confounds past and future'.²⁵ As the film plays, quite deliberately, with the tradition of ethnographic cinema and its idea of collecting remote landscapes and histories, the image of Brasília is rendered indirectly, composed from two landscapes, filmed on locations distant from each other and remote from the city itself — Chapada dos Veadeiros, north of the capital, and Perenópolis to the west. In Chapada dos Veadeiros, the camera explores flora, fauna, and geological formations of yellow rocks, captivating in their variety of forms, textures, and colours of stones. These natural formations of rocks are

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Ibizan Sequence', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, (1931-1934), ed. by Marcus Paul Bullock and others, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), ii, p. 576.

²⁵ Ana Vaz, *I Prefer Not to Be to Tupi: The Age of the Earth*, Sonic Acts Academy, Amsterdam 2016.

juxtaposed by a montage with an enormous quartzite mine, a landscape made by years of excavation, human digging, and carving inside the earth.

While the natural rocky landscape of Chapada dos Veadeiros is filmed by the peripatetic corporeal camera walking among the rocks and the body's corporeal reactions to landscape, its pedestrian rhythm, and even its breathing, are transcribed into landscape images — the mining canyon in the vicinity of Perenópolis becomes aligned with another formal technique. After the camera frames the mountains covered with green vegetation, it follows a man descending a pass into the mine's depths. The horizon gradually rises, moving closer to the top edge of the frame until it disappears from view. Reaching the bottom, the camera investigates the earth's interiority, a monumental human-made landscape of the pit with a panoramic sweep, slowly revealing the landscape at the depth — hills made of stones alternating with flatlands, water reservoirs, winding roads, workers miniaturized to *staffage* figures in the far background, and the stratified geological structure of earth walls. Engaging with the depth of the ruins and geological traces, Vaz's camera glides circularly, partaking in the aesthetic regime of Panorama that since the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries existed as an imperial global medium of landscape in the form of an enormous round painting, supplemented with *faux terrain*, and whose 360-degree embrace offered a seamless horizon and a utopian possibility to see everything from any point of the viewing platform.²⁶ The privileged position of the central and elevated



Fig. 2: The caption: Ana Vaz. *A Idade da Pedra (The Age of Stone)*. 2013. 16mm/HD.
Courtesy of Ana Vaz and Le Fresnoy Studio National.

²⁶ On Panorama, see Stephan Oettermann and Deborah Lucas Schneider, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1997); Jonathan Crary, 'Géricault, the panorama, and sites of reality in the early nineteenth century', *Grey Room*, 9 (2002), 5–25; Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); *On the Viewing Platform: Perspectives on the Panorama*, ed. by Tim Barringer and Katie Trumpener (Forthcoming, Yale University Press, 2020).

platform expressed Panorama's fantasy of conquering and controlling space. Panorama traditionally embraced exotic and global, historical and idealized landscapes — mines and mining constituted a subject of the displays — saturating them with the all-inclusive, indiscriminating consciousness. Panorama's logic of endless horizontality superseded painting, known since the Renaissance as the image in the frame seen from a single viewpoint, a 'view through a window', with the dispersed, seemingly infinite, point of view — a democratic perspective that abolished hierarchy and guidance. Experimental cinema has approached panorama in a number of films, with one of the most compelling examples being a structural film of Michael Snow: the 190' *La Région Centrale* (1971) features a pre-programmed camera set on a remote northern Quebec mountaintop. Snow's camera pans and rotates around itself, exploring the geology of the Canadian wilderness, exceeding the human scale, while exposing the camera's anxiety over the film's largely invisible centre.²⁷

A Idade da Pedra culminates in a two-minute-long take with a full-circle panorama from the centre of the mine, steadily revealing how the white shiny layers of quartzite are seamlessly continued by pillars of some bizarre and petrified monumental structure that imposes its presence as if growing directly out of the geological strata (fig. 3). The structure simultaneously looks like a construction in the making and a ruin being excavated — one of the many ambiguities the film plays upon. The derelict architecture that creates an epistemic uncertainty about the nature of this image itself, its real or hyperreal status, is in fact CGI developed by French multimedia artist Anna-Charlotte Yver to supplement the actual landscape, shot on 16mm. Here, the non-discriminatory vision of the panorama works together with the CGI to erase the distinction between natural and artificial, contemporary and prehistory, the opacity of the geological layers and the porosity of the ruin. The ruin is an object whose presence inevitably suggests absence and whose melancholy, as suggested by Jean Starobinski, resides in the fact that the ruin has become a monument of lost significance.²⁸ A fabricated structure and a copy without the original, the digital ruin, while generating the illusion of a historical encounter, articulates the absence of an actual historical referent or past. A constellation of contrasting materials, Vaz's composite image partakes in the paradigm of *capriccio* — an invented landscape composed of disparate elements, a fantastic collage of actual and fictive elements typically including stylized ruin fragments blended into the natural landscape, an

²⁷ Also see *Too Early/Too Late* by Daniëlle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub (*Trop tôt, trop tard*, France/Egypt, 1981). On Panorama in installation art, see Katie Trumpener's essay 'Moving pictures: panorama film, photography, phoroma, installation', in *On the Viewing Platform* (book forthcoming).

²⁸ Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty, 1700-1789* (New York: Rizzoli; Genova: Skira, 1987), p. 180.

artificial composition with apparent verisimilitude. Since its heyday in the eighteenth century, the imagination of *capriccio* has been grounded in archeology, ruins, and excavation. Figuring spatial compression and iteration, able to stitch past, present, and future together, capriccio has always been, according to Lucien Steil, ‘a catalyst of collective memory and imaginary’.²⁹ The ontology of the digital image, its incomplete and composite nature and constructedness as an object, works here to compress or expand historical duration, to transcend the teleology of history, removing Brasília from ‘a pre-given regime of historicity to truly develop another one’ by rearranging layers of time.³⁰ While the digital *capriccio* testifies to a temporal binding, the image itself emerges not as a Bazinian image that attempts to embalm geological duration in Mendieta’s works but as a postcinematic layering and simultaneity as a different articulation of time and space, as a ruinous edifice that visualizes otherwise incomprehensible deep time of Brasília.

Vaz works toward something she calls ‘cinematographic multiperspectivism’, or ‘a collagist impulse to approximate that which has been disassociated through power, logic and reason, enlightenment praxis to account for a history in which things are smoothed out, and linearly organized’.³¹ She is more interested in the relations wherein the elements of the work are spliced together as non-hierarchically ordered parts of a new whole. Vaz’s relation between the different elements of the landscape in a non-hierarchical, multiperspectival manner might be closer to what Sergej Ėjzenštejn has, in a somewhat different context, described through his contradictory notion of the ‘monistic ensemble’. In film, for Ėjzenštejn, space, motion, and sound ‘do not accompany (nor even parallel) each other, but function as *elements of equal significance*’ in the production of a unified aesthetic totality.³² Vaz employs the panoramic movement, digitally assembled landscape, and soundscapes to produce a similarly ‘unified’ visual and aural impression of intense dynamism, a ‘cinematographic multiperspectivism’, related for her also to different modes of conversing with the landscape and to the question of how the post-Anthropocene cinema would look. We might reconsider this early observation of Ėjzenštejn in an approach to digital film practice and to time-based art in the gallery. *A Idade da Pedra* became a part of Vaz’s installation, *Depth of Field*, at the Matadero Madrid in 2019, which united four films displayed

²⁹ Lucien Steil, ‘Preface’, in *The Architectural Capriccio: Memory, Fantasy and Invention*, ed. by Lucien Steil (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2014), p. liii.

³⁰ Guilherme Carréra, ‘Brasília entre ruínas: os documentários de ficção científica de Adirley Queirós and Ana Vaz’, *Aniki: Revista Portuguesa da Imagem em Movimento*, 5.2 (2018), 351–377 (p. 358).

³¹ Salomon, ‘A Cinema That Could Explode or Implode: Ana Vaz Discusses *Occidente*’, Mubi Notebook, <<https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/a-cinema-that-could-explode-or-implode-ana-vaz-discusses-occidente>> [accessed 6 November 2019].

³² Sergej Ėjzenštejn, *Film Form*, ed. and trans. by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p. 20 (Italic is Ėjzenštejn’s).

on four large screens inside a dark space.³³ The screens render the gallery as a multiperspectival space, a postdigital picturesque garden that, meant to be walked through, dares the linearity of conventional audiovisual practices. Within the assemblage of installation, each screen is discrete and exists independently but completes each other within a sensible ensemble. In the gallery, the idea of landscape as a more restrictive concept because of its focus on the visual, becomes superseded with the idea of environment as a totality of surrounding forces, implied by its etymology of ‘to encircle’ and ‘to enclose’, suggestive of the replacement of the single linear vector with a spherical space, a visual-sonic envelop in which the distance and viewpoint associated with landscape are no longer valid.

The concept of deep time appears as a strategy of resistance to teleological linearity, as Parikka states in relation to Zielinski, for whom earth times become a theoretical strategy of resistance against the linear progression of media evolution based on progress of technological devices.³⁴ For Vaz, such a resistance culminates in the spatialized gallery cinema that renders a geological concept of stratification while emerging as another form of deep time. Another consequence of experiencing Mendieta’s and Vaz’s artworks is for the anthropocentrism of landscape. Landscape filmmaking definitively places the human subject as the central point of focus, yet contemporary experimental practices that test the limits of perception and representation use landscape as an instrument of thinking and making images at scales that exceed the human. ‘Look closely at the mountains’ from Vaz’s eponymous film is not merely an eco-protest slogan, but an optics — a mode of vision toward landscape to look closely at the immense that itself contains a reevaluation of the landscape through the erasure of a visual hierarchy, such as looking from a distance and from the outside. Mendieta’s images are gathered around the body yet figure in a simultaneous encounter and profound distance between humans and land. While Mendieta transforms the vast scale associated with geology to intimate connections with earth, indeed looking closely at the immense, Vaz renders landscape as an immeasurable palimpsest. Yet even if the human subject becomes less and less the central focus, the artist never erases the human presence, epitomized in the act of creating an artifice — a digital insertion of the imaginary ruin into the natural landscape. Even when considered from a geological perspective, the landscape does not require a total renunciation of human subject — Vaz’s cinematic geology warrants the human as a telluric force.

³³ *The Age of Stone* (2013); *Occidente* (2014); *Há Terra! (There is Land!)* (2016); *Atomic Garden* (2018).

³⁴ Parikka, p. 37.



Marguerite Duras, Experimental Filmmaker

Between Antinarration and Iconoclasm

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C'est aussi à partir d'une manque à voir ma
mère, que j'ai écrit l'histoire d'une mère.
(Marguerite Duras, *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, 96, 1977)

Abstract

The essay is focused on how Duras' film writing is a visual expression of the central themes of her literature (love and desire) and how certain practices of aesthetic aniconism – and their theoretical reading – refer to the manifestation of emotional and sentimental control. End of love, end of representation. The essay will also analyze how the field of feeling in Duras' cinema is characterized by a double process of taking the loved object off the frame, from the early films to the iconoclast *L'Homme atlantique* (1980), the French writer's cinematic testament.

The process is accomplished in this film, the most radical and experimental of Duras' film works, in which thirty minutes out of the forty are characterized by a black screen. The process of rarefaction of the constituent components of cinema has been achieved by denying the image itself. The anti-narrative begins to approach the idea of an iconoclastic cinema, devoid at the same time of narrative and images. This essay intends to deepen precisely this path towards the annihilation of cinema as an act of provocation.

Moriremo guardati: *Duras, Or of the Affective Iconoclasm*

The aim of the essay is to show how the literary universe of Marguerite Duras manifests itself in an aesthetically innovative way in her film productions. Duras' cinema is a cinema that reworks themes already expressed in other forms and that in cinematic form finds a totally new and authentically modern expressive capacity. Duras' cinema draws from life, transforming life into an aesthetic experience and thus depriving it of the narrative realism that is more present in its literary production, to bring it to a symbolic universe full of evocative references.

*Moriremo guardati*¹ is the title of a collection of poetry by a great poet who has been overlooked by critics, Mario Benedetti. The title evokes the literary and cinematic universe of Marguerite Duras in two verbs — *to die* and *to watch* /

¹ Mario Benedetti, *Moriremo guardati* (Forlì: Forum Poesia, 1982).

to look — which seem to collide and explode the dimension of the future and the idea of a literary posterity. The latter is collected under the auspices of a transitory dimension of human fragility and a past participle (*guardati*), the gaze of the other on us which seamlessly extends to an undefined time from the past to the future. Past and future are dominated by the gaze, a gaze imposed upon us even before death, when perhaps we do not wish to be looked upon, we do not wish to be the object of glances but perhaps the subject; or rather, we would prefer to be a black screen, a mirror which reflects no image. All the cinema of Marguerite Duras revolves around the problematic question of the gaze, which is doubled, deferred, betrayed, annulled, or reflected. Nevertheless, the reflection of the gaze does not arise from Duras' interest in the cinematic system, according to a meta-textual approach like that of the historical avant-garde (at least from Vertov to Buñuel), but rather from the understanding that the cinematic gaze is an extension of the true gaze, a declination of feeling through a screen which is also a mirror. Gazing and feeling.

The creative corpus of Duras' work represents a unicum which is difficult to disentangle, in which literature, memoirs, theatre, cinema, and journalism intermingle through a thematic reiteration which is, under many aspects, enveloping: many texts are born on the written page only to be transformed into cinematic or theatrical scripts. The childhood in Indochina, the dazzling encounters with several female figures of legendary stature (e.g., Anne-Marie Stretter, Lol V. Stein),² love in all its declinations (from filial to maternal love, from sensual young love to bitter senile love) become the interwoven themes from one film to the next, from one novel to the next in a complex corpus in which cinema is only one facet among many. The relation between the written page and the cinematic image is complex, which Duras as a writer has often simplified, declaring to have chosen the cinema because she was dissatisfied with the film adaptations of her novels (dissatisfaction which begins with René Clément's *Barrage contre le Pacifique* and extends to Jean Jacques Annaud's *L'Amant*, for which Duras went so far as to rewrite a new screenplay, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*). Nevertheless, the cinema offers Duras an additional possibility, namely, to materialize memory and elaborate a meaningful image, as Youssef Ishaghpour writes: 'Duras resorts to images for a lack of words, and returns to words for the lack of images[...]'.³ This semantic coming and going exhausts the possibility of separation between cinema and literature, bringing the latter into the cinema while categorically refusing the illustrative approach and destroying the cinema from within, through its own images. Ishaghpour continues:

² Jacques Lacan's intense essay on Lol V. Stein should be noted: Jacques Lacan, 'Homage fait à Marguerite Duras, du ravissement de Lol V. Stein', *Ornicar? Revue du Champ freudien*, 34 (1985), 7–13. On Duras' reading of Lacan see Daniela Angelucci, 'Il fantasma di Anne-Marie. Duras e il cinema dell'immaginario', *Fata Morgana*, 36 (2019), 161–68.

³ Youssef Ishaghpour, *D'une image à l'autre. La nouvelle modernité du cinéma* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1982) p. 226. My translation.

'Duras and Saturday night cinema have something in common: the mythology of mortal passion which leads to death and madness but, in Duras, this resemblance is written in the negative'.⁴ Nothing more so than the cinema is capable of recounting passion; where words are not enough, are not sufficient, the materialization of the gaze intervenes. The Sicilian poets of the thirteenth century had already identified the profound bond between vision and revelation, the consciousness of the image as a source of pleasure and privileged means for falling in love.⁵ Passion originates in the sense of sight; thus, the end of love, the tomb of passion, can only coincide with the absence of image, with the black screen, with the impossibility of all vision. Pleasure is transformed into pain; revelation is transformed into concealment. In *L'Homme atlantique* (1982), through a progressive journey, Duras brings the denial of the image which coincides with the end of the love between the aged author and the young Yann Andréa to the extreme consequence: 'You have moved out of the movie camera's angle. You are absent. With your departure, your absence has come into being, it will be photographed in the same way your presence was. Your life has been removed'.⁶ A bit further in the script: 'This time, you will die before your eyes'.⁷ We can annotate love at the time of its technical reproducibility. The cinema, therefore, becomes an instrument which gives the image, the form of romantic passion.

Consequently Duras' aesthetic is manifested as an affective aesthetic in which the form, the modernity of the language, and the rupture of cinematic grammar assume not only an affective value but a metalinguistic one. Ironically paraphrasing the famous maxim of cinematic modernity, 'the track is a question of morality',⁸ we can say that for Duras, the track is a question of heart. It matters less to Duras to reveal the artifice of the cinema to expose its mechanisms than to use the cinema to reveal the internal mechanisms for the retrieval of memory, emotion, absence, and return. Duras plays with the image like the Freudian child plays with a yo-yo:⁹ vision and concealment, proximity and distance, presence and phantasmatic evocation. Images and the absence of an image correspond to

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ See Jacopo Da Lentini, 'Amore è uno desio che ven da core', in *Dal testo alla storia, dalla storia al testo*, ed. by Guido Baldi and others (Torino: Paravia, 1993).

⁶ Marguerite Duras, *L'Homme atlantique* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1982), p. 15.

⁷ Ivi, p. 25.

⁸ This concept emerges in Luc Moulet, 'Sam Fuller: sur le brisées de Marlowe', *Cahiers du cinema*, 93 (1959), 11–14 and is then taken up by Jean-Luc Godard in Jean Domarchi, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Jean-Luc Godard, Pierre Kast, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, 'Hiroshima, notre amour', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 97 (1959), 1–18.

⁹ In his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud describes the behaviour of his nephew Ernst. This child, at the age of 18 months, had among his favourite games a kind of yo-yo that threw over the bed, making it disappear; later, pulling it to himself, the yo-yo reappeared, accompanied by expressions of happiness on the part of the child. According to the Austrian doctor, the game was repeated with great frequency because of the function it performed for the child. This function is associated with repeating compulsion. With this formulation, Freud intends the tendency to propose, through daily actions, a sort of scheme present in the internal world of the child, which in the past would have generated a suffering.

the tremors of the heart and to the evocative journeys of memory. The aesthetic of a writer, only momentarily lent to the cinema, as she loved to say, is an aesthetic of subtraction and refusal, of illustrative cinema in favour of an evocative cinema: 'Duras multiplies the procedure of distancing the performance: muteness and the absence of actors, fixed frames, use of voice over and off-screen'.¹⁰ The voice-overs, in particular, which are central to her cinema, beginning with *La Femme du Gange* (1972-73), take on the role of giving expression to off-screen scenes. There remain ghostly traces on screen which are often no longer human; for instance, the ruins of aristocratic palaces in *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert* or the statues of the Parisian gardens in *Césarée*. Evoked by absent voices, whatever is off-screen assumes a presence that only literacy writing is able to offer. Off-screen scenes are paradoxically more vivid than the profilmic on screen.

Situated, for the critics, within the context of modern cinematography in that which Truffaut defines as the Editions de Minuit tendency (also evidenced by Agnès Varda, Chris Marker, Henri Colpi, Frederic Rossif and Jean Rouch), Duras overturns the assumption of modernity which 'seeks destruction in the form', whereas she 'gives form to absence'.¹¹ Duras manages to separate the two essential moments of cinema, the image and the narration. As Ishaghpour notes: 'The world finds itself in front of the movie camera and fiction is found in the narration'.¹² The word, in this way, is banished, the fictitious is relegated to the off-screen scenes, the existence of the story has its last possibility in the absence of the image.

Duras' films are strewn with mirrors: 'the image is only the reflection of the thing, it is not the thing itself. The windows, like all the reflective surfaces in the film, are there to plant the doubt of the ontological presence, to remind us that every image is not the presence of something but the inalienable trace of an absence'.¹³ Nevertheless, this absence does not represent the alienation of the individual in a capitalistic society, as it does for instance in the cinema of Antonioni, but rather it represents the marginality of woman as opposed to the dominating presence of man. The fact of her being off-screen, and above all, represented in an autobiographical manner, suggests the absence of the fundamental female figures in the life of Duras. The absence of her mother and of the other female archetypes in Duras' formative years, the phantasmatic Lol V. Stein, Anne-Marie Stretter and the other face of the mirror, namely the beggar, the black soul of the Orient is the personification of the colonizers' sense of guilt towards colonized women. In Duras' experience, in fact, the father's role is weak (he dies in France when she is still quite young) while it is the mother who embodies the male behaviour of oppression (it is she

¹⁰ Najet Limam-Tnani, 'L'Autobiographie dans le cinéma de Marguerite Duras. Une expérience des limites', *La Revue des lettres modernes*, 73 (special issue *Marguerite Duras: le cinéma*, ed. by Jean Cléder, 2014), 55–69 (p. 59).

¹¹ Youssef Yshaghpour, *Cinéma contemporain. De ce côté du miroir* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1986), p. 273. On the relationship among Duras, modern cinema and narration's fragility: Pascal Bonitzer, *Système des émotions*, in *Le champ aveugle. Essais sur le cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

¹² Ivi, p. 280.

¹³ Roberto Zemignan, *Introduzione al cinema di Marguerite Duras* (Padova: Unipress, 1994), p. 35.

who dominates, decides, commands) and of the sentimental egoism (excluding the young Marguerite from her affective realm, blatantly preferring her older brother).

After outlining these aspects, it seems important to show how in the cinema of Duras there are two large hidden presences that turn into absences for the spectator: the mother and the lover (declined in its various forms depending on the periods of the writer's life). In particular, there are many screenplays centred around maternal absence in Duras' cinema; one of the most interesting interpretation of this is the one proposed by Madeline Borgomano. According to the French scholar, Duras' cinema is a cinema of destruction (*Détruire dit-elle*, 1969, is one of her most famous titles and one of the anthems of revolt for the most intense and radical protestors of 1968) which draws upon its own iconoclastic roots in the contentious relationship with the writer's mother, the cinema: 'like the mother, an instrument of destruction: the mother plunders, devastates, the cinema mutilates, beheads, undoes'.¹⁴ The cinema-mother bond is original, almost a founding myth. In *Une Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1950) Duras' first literary success and later mainstream cinematic adaption of René Clément (1957), the writer evokes a movie theatre, the Éden Cinéma, where her young mother worked as a pianist to make ends meet and maintain her children who had suddenly lost their father. Duras' mother, playing the piano with her back to the movie screen, could not see the images but could hear only the murmuring of the audience and the voices in the hall; her position in relation to the movie screen remains unseeing in a diachronic position. The mother does not see the images but hears the voices. The experience that Duras later presents to the spectator will be the progressive reproduction of this inadequate condition: listening to voices of a film without seeing the images or seeing images which do not correspond to the voices one hears. Filial love, the frustrated love of a daughter who feels unloved, reproduces the desire to: 'allow the spectator to relive the pain of the mother, her vertigo in front of the image and her desire of the image'.¹⁵ The mother's space is a sonorous one defined by the absence of vision. But the mother's cinematic universe is that of the Saturday night cinema, her sentimental expressions are recurrent in Duras' memory of her mother, cinematic in the most common sense that is given to this adjective (creating cinema, namely, assuming melodramatic behaviour, caricatures). The cinema is a place of deception, a cinema-illusion which dazes, deludes with false promises in which only the bewitching music of Duras' universe lingers. As modern spectators we have certainly questioned the origins of the poignant harmony of Carlos D'Alessio's compositions in Duras' cinema, a strident contrast between the Jansenism of the production and the exasperated romanticism of the music (the melodies of *India Song* or *Valse de l'Éden Cinéma*).¹⁶ The contrast resides within the

¹⁴ Madeleine Borgomano, *L'écriture filmique de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Albatros, 1985), p. 23.

¹⁵ Najet Tnani-Limam, 'Duras cinéfilles: le cinéma comme quête de la mère', in *Duras, femme du siècle*, ed. by Stella Harvey and Kate Ince (Amsterdam- New York: Rodopi, 2001), pp. 127–43 (p. 140).

¹⁶ An interesting reading of the Durassian musical universe can be found in the collective volume *L'écriture désirante: Marguerite Duras*, ed. by Anne-Marie Reboul and Esther Sánchez-Pardo (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016).

condition of the maternal vision and the sound of the sentimental music which she played on the piano of the Éden Cinéma. And so Duras reproduces through cinema what the cinema represented for her mother: a black screen, because behind her is heart-breaking music. It is sufficient to recall the musical motif of *Baxter, Vera Baxter* (1973) which seamlessly accompanies the entire film, a gentle, exotic motif which reflects, with frivolous levity, the idea of Indies which a provincial French woman at the start of the century might have had. The cinema which Duras refuses is, therefore, the bewitching cinema which seduced her mother with false promises and false myths; in the end, the same theme touched by Luchino Visconti in *Bellissima* (1951); however in Visconti's film the point of departure was scepticism, an ethical stance before the cinematic image, in Duras, the point of departure is the black screen, an aesthetic approach, an ecology of the image in the name of its despoliation, of its absence: 'With this unadorned cinema [Duras] creates an art which conforms to her life and films which contain the "leanness" of the children of the plain'.¹⁷ In Duras' universe, the feminine figures pursue each other with the clear intent of creating the feminist figure par excellence, the missing piece, namely, the mother: 'Because of their attachment to their experience and of their contiguity with the mother in the familial novel, Anne-Marie Stretter, the beggar, Indochina, the sea (feminine in French) music, become metonyms of childhood and a symbolic reference of this character'.¹⁸ Linguistic modernity does not have, in Duras, the Nouvelle Vague cinephilic connotation so much as the autobiographical connotations, attributed to a constant self-analysis of her past.

The themes of Duras' cinema are the same as those of her novels, plays, and nonfiction and journalistic writing. It is not difficult to identify three distinct periods in her cinema: from *La Musica* (1966) to *Nathalie Granger* (1972), it is a cinema of modernity under the influence of Alain Resnais (with whom Duras successfully collaborated on the screenplay of *Hiroshima, mon amour*); from *La Femme du Gange* (1972-1973) to *Le Navire Night* (1979), it is a cinema of the voices in which images and sounds are no longer synchronous but a journey in distant and often inaccessible time frames, the film and the text travel on parallel tracks, the voices are in dialogue with the images; and finally from *Césarée* (1979) to *L'Homme atlantique* (1982), it is a cinema of a single voice — Duras' voice alone accompanies the images. Aesthetically anomalous but in line with the author's themes is *Des journées entières dans les arbres* (1976), in which the tale and the image happily unite in a domestic *kammerspiel* in which the great theatre actress Madeleine Renaud embodies the author's mother in both voice and gesture. In all the forms which Duras' cinema takes, there is the constant of an absence, of an obsessive search for the maternal figure and for the extension of this figure in sensual love, mother-lover, male-female.

In this sense, *Nathalie Granger* is an interesting work of transition; a film on maternal love, it is also a powerful and effective metaphor for the role of women in cinema and in society:

¹⁷ Najet Tnani-Limam, p. 142.

¹⁸ Ivi p.137.

Marguerite Duras, Experimental Filmmaker Between Antinarration and Iconoclasm

The two women [Lucia Bosè and Jeanne Moreau] live in a house (Duras' house), the last inhabitable house of her cinema, which becomes the extension of their femininity, a house-uterus [...] the space of the house assumes the security, intimacy, warmth and safety of the nest, it belongs to the women and to their ways of being, they have control over their space as far as possible, it is a space of refuge, possibly even of cure.¹⁹

The space of the house is also exclusionary, a voluntary prison, compared to the exterior where men live, where men distance themselves and see themselves disappear, swallowed in the world of work and language. Silence reigns in the house: the music (oppositional when compared to the verbalization of sentiments) the slow, repetitive gestures of domestic care (cleaning up, ironing, sewing), a mother's silent misgivings for the excesses of a young daughter, Nathalie, who appears on the screen only to look and to play. From outside come the menacing voices of a diffused violence and a travelling salesman who tries unsuccessfully to sell the two women a revolutionary washing machine, without attaining any answers, if not the veiled insinuation of the uselessness of his role in society, of the desire to give a name to every object. Naming things is similar to representing them, to giving them an image. The film *Nathalie Granger* is the last act of illustrative cinema; subsequently, the disappearance of bodies and the rupture of the bond between voice and image gradually become more radical and the feminine idea expressed in this film becomes the form of the feminine through the disappearance of the actions and the valorization of the tale (external to the image). It is, as Roberto Zemignan observes, 'a process which effectively begins with this film, [*Nathalie Granger*] even if some traces were already present in *Jaune le soleil* and becomes continually more meaningful in the film which follows arriving at the total disappearance of bodies in the short films and to the black image in *L'Homme atlantique*'.²⁰ Duras comes to the awareness that the image takes away strength to the imaginary, so creating images without imagination.

On L'Homme atlantique or the lover as absence

I love going to the cinema,
what I hate are the images on the screen.
(T.W. Adorno, *Transparencies on Film*, 1966)

L'Homme atlantique is Duras' most difficult film. The writer herself would invite the public, often puzzled during the screening, to abandon the viewing of the film which played for two weeks in the Parisian theatre L'Escurial with a single showing at 6:00 pm. Duras' invitation is for a solitary viewing: the film

¹⁹ E. Ann Kaplan, *Women & Film. Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 99. On *Nathalie Granger*: William F. van Werth, 'The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Sound and Voice in Closed Room', *Film Quarterly*, 33.1 (1979), 22–29.

²⁰ Zemignan, p. 92.

must always and in any case be projected even for a single spectator. The film lasts a total of 42' and more than half of the scenes consist of a black screen. Initially the colour black alternates with several unedited shots of *Agatha ou les lectures illimitées* (1981). The frames are interior scenes: an old, poorly lit hotel, a window, Yann Andréa, Duras' last lover, shot in front of a window, immersed in the contemplation of the sea. The light is weak, the nocturnal shadows prevail, and Duras' off-screen voice envelops the spectator in a hypnotic state. We first see the images, then the images alternate with black and then, only black. The love of Yann Andréa has come to an end, the arguments between the two are a daily occurrence and *L'Homme atlantique* is nothing if not the invisible trace of the end of a love. From the title we detect the sense of a man who, like the powerful waves of the Atlantic Ocean, appears and disappears (the mother, love, the sea, three terms which in French have the same profound assonance: *la mère, l'amour, la mer*). If love draws its sustenance from the eyes, as Jacopo Da Lentini has written, then the absence of the lover foresees the destruction of the lover's image, his nullification, by a profoundly iconoclastic act. In *Césarée* (1979), Duras tells the story of Berenice, the queen of Palestine and lover of the Roman Emperor Tito who refutes her for political reasons. The queen, devastated by pain and rejection reacts with destructive fury. The tale is told by Duras, in a seductive voice, though nothing is seen except statues corroded by mould in the Tuileries Gardens and Place de La Concorde. Berenice or her personification is absent: 'The absence of Berenice highlights the emotional and physical devastation which, for many of Duras' heroines, is equivalent to the destruction of identity'.²¹ In *L'Homme atlantique*, Yann Andréa resembles the emperor Tito, the lover's living body, documented in his process of disappearance, by means of a destructive and omnipotent fury capable of playing with the image of the lover in the appearance and disappearance of his face to the point of total nullification. The act which Duras performs in this film is authentically iconoclastic and not aniconic²² as the imposition of the black image is provoked by a sadistic sentiment directed toward the visual simulacrum of the lover which revolves around the film maker's omnipotent conception and is able to give form as well as to remove form from the profilmic: 'No one, no other person in the world could do what you are about to do now: commanded only by me, before God'.²³ In the moment in which Yann Andréa disappears and the black image seamlessly affirms itself, then, Andréa has passed to the other side of the movie camera, he has become an anonymous, faceless spectator who mutely assists his own death, a death which lasts 20' with the spectator in front of a black screen,

²¹ Renate Günther, *Marguerite Duras* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 46.

²² On the subtle difference between iconoclasm and aniconism: Marion Poirson-Dechonne, *Le cinéma est-il iconoclaste?* (Paris: Cerf-Corlet, 2011).

²³ Duras, *L'Homme atlantique*, p. 24. An interesting reading of Duras' film by Sylvie Loignon, 'Archiver l'oubli: *L'Homme atlantique*' in *Les archives de Marguerite Duras*, ed. by Sylvie Loignon (Grenoble: UGA Editions, 2012).

predisposed to abandonment, with his unconscious dilated from nothingness. 'A man, among others, immersed in the time of a projection of black and who lives the vision of his intimate memory reflected in that which the film proposes to him'.²⁴ A spectator, a man, the lover he once was. In *L'Homme atlantique*, as in *Le camion* (1977), the woman speaks and the man listens; neither appears on the streets in the film. Yann disappears but Duras continues to speak and recount the disappearance, turning the impossibility of communication between male and female to black, the natural point of departure in Duras' films: 'In *L'Homme atlantique* the divorce between male and female lapses into an impossible, failed dialogue between voice and image. All communion between the sexes, as between text and screen is found to be desperately lacking or wanting'.²⁵

In *Nathalie Granger* the flaws of this fracture had already become evident. The point of departure could not be anything but the black screen. The central gap between the literary and cinematic medium lies in the final stage. Writing permits the encounter between one's own mental images and those of the writer. In cinema the obliteration of subjective images is absorbed by those of the director, who destroys them at the very moment he displays them. Think of the famous photograph which is meticulously described in the first pages of Duras' cult novel, *L'Amant* (1984): the image of the adolescent on a boat crossing the river, a photograph described in its every detail, but an image which does not exist, which was never photographed: 'Elle a été omise. Elle a été oubliée. Elle n'a pas été détachée, enlevée à la somme. C'est à ce manque d'avoir été faite qu'elle doit sa vertue, celle de représenter un absolu, d'en être justement l'auteur'.²⁶ The cinema belittles and impoverishes the imagination; in fact, in the film that Jean-Jacques Annaud draws from Duras' novel *The Lover* (1992), the missing image becomes invasive presence, recurrent motif, an image which absorbs the infinite potentiality of the unrepresentable through a process of explicit voyeurism. The image would impoverish the imagination, reducing it to a single possibility. The photograph of the lover is missing in the novel *L'Amant*; accordingly, the lover and every possibility of his representation, according to the same theoretic assumption, is missing in the film *L'Homme atlantique* in order to shift the self-narration from an external gaze to an internal one. In this way, the central point of view remains the author's, without concessions to the reader/spectator: 'it is essential to her representational strategy that she contradicts specific accounts in one text with those in another and that she represents visual images that elude the

²⁴ Raymond Bellour, *Le Corps du cinéma, hypnoses, émotions, animalités* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009), p. 16. On the same theme, namely the transformation of the actor in spectator: Arnau Vilaró Moncasí, 'El impoder del cine. Un análisis sobre *L'Homme atlantique*', *L'Atalante-Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 24 (2017), 137–48.

²⁵ Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras. Apocalyptic Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 144. On the question of gender in the cinema of Duras: *Revisioning Duras: Film, Race, Sex*, ed. by James S. Williams (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

²⁶ Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984), p. 10.

voyeuristic gaze'.²⁷ For this reason Duras could certainly not tolerate Annaud's affected and illustrative depiction in a film in which the cinematic extension is the young actress, Jane March, who became the object of men's gazes and incarnation of desire. The fact that Duras and her heroines regularly remove themselves from the gaze of men, in an increasingly evident manner, transforming themselves into an extension of a literary image which is the constant disjunction of the image and the word, ratifies their own alterity. Duras always affirmed that she was the subject, never the object of the gaze: 'This identity, self portrait of a female filmmaker is materialized through the absence of her image and the presence of her voice, to develop in this way the duality-identification between the author and her female characters, in what is borderline experience, never surpassed, as far as relations between literature and cinema are concerned'.²⁸ For this reason Duras' aesthetic choices, which she pursued with increasing radicalism, became part of a sentimental project in which the maternal and the male become the nerve centres of an absence to which the author is unable to reconcile. As Detassis writes in an interesting letter on Duras' first cinema: 'The feminine remains closed in her diversity, it conserves an intact and inexplicable place which is sufficiently far from the ideological operation of a cinema which knows how to recuperate the new femininity almost exclusively under the form of a new genre'.²⁹ The centrality of the affective dimensions of Duras' universe therefore leads to the constantly growing emergence of an intimate relationship between the lack of love and the absence of vision (consider the black images of *Baxter*, *Vera Baxter* or the continuous dislocation of vision in *La Navire Night*), to the point of revealing what can be considered a total form of emotional iconoclasm.³⁰ Duras' iconoclasm develops around the question of having a relationship with two privileged forms of the feminine gaze: the mother and the lover, the two pole of affective discourse which constitute figures of absence in Duras' cinema. The absence of the body produces an aesthetic of separation, and the cinema becomes tolerable only by cancelling it. 'When we read, we encounter ourselves.

²⁷ Erica L. Johnson, 'Reclaiming the Void: the Cinematographic Aesthetic of Marguerite Duras's Autobiographical Novels', in *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, ed. by Natalie Edwards (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), pp. 115–138 (p.119).

²⁸ Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez, 'Identity Self-portraits of a Filmic Gaze. From Absence to (multi) presence: Duras, Akerman, Varda', *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*, IV.8 (2016), 63–73 (p. 67). On the theme of feminine gaze: *In the Dark Room. Marguerite Duras and Cinema*, ed. by Rosanna Maule and Julie Beaulieu (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2009).

²⁹ Piera Detassis, 'A proposito di Marguerite Duras', in *Il cinema di Marguerite Duras*, ed. by Giorgio Gosetti (Torino: La Biennale Cinema, ERI-Edizioni RAI, 1981), p.32. Among the Italian publications, the following monographic issues should be noted: *Duras mon amour*, ed. by Edda Melon and Ermanno Pea (Milano: Marcos y Marcos, 1992); *Duras. Mon Amour 2*, ed. by Edda Melon (Torino: Lindau, 2001); *Duras. Mon Amour 3*, ed. by Edda Melon and Ermanno Pea (Torino: Lindau, 2003).

³⁰ The iconoclasm in Duras is very different from other forms of cinematic iconoclasm such as the iconoclasm embodied by the Lettrist and Situationist movement or the selective iconoclasm of Claude Lanzmann or the biological iconoclasm of Derek Jarman.

When we go to the cinema, we lose ourselves. When we go to the cinema, we lose ourselves and in the blackness we meet ourselves once more'.³¹ In the black image conjurer of chasms, black hole of the spectators, unconscious, we meet ourselves again in a double reflective movement, we meet with ourselves and with the author who prepares us for this encounter through the use of blackness.

To sum up, Duras' film writing is a visual expression of the central themes of her literature (love and desire) and how some practices of aesthetical aniconism in Duras and the theoretical reading made of it are linked to the manifestation of an emotional and sentimental defeat. End of love, end of representation. The field of feeling in Duras' cinema is characterized by a double process of eliminating the object loved by the frame, first the maternal and then the male, from the first films up to the iconoclastic *L'Homme atlantique*, cinematographic testament of the French writer. Despite the personal characteristics of her aesthetic, Duras' anti-cinema offers inspiration for considering new studies on mirror-neurons: 'In this way, as much as the spectators of Duras' film are not carried away by the story, nevertheless, they are not totally detached from the film: on the contrary the sensitive body is constantly stimulated beyond the threshold of consciousness through continuous reference to their intimate memory'.³² Duras' cinema is a radical form of expanded cinema in which image, text, written and recited word syncretically give form to a complex, non-never self-referential, but rather fertile point of departure for the contemporary filmmaker, a coherent corpus in which the aesthetic choices become a means for giving a feminine voice to the cinema, refusing the male form of the gaze where the presence, the action, and the need to act and the need to be, overwhelmed and predominate through a baroque vision of the image. Duras' cinema is a cinema which gives expression to women, where absence is prevalent, as well as silence, oral narrative, inaction, empty space, servants, internal spaces inhabited by ghostly presences, the blackness of the image, the loss of memory, the absence of women in the action and her narrative presence always situated in the off-screen of the narration. Telling all this through the cinema, transforming an idea into an aesthetic is already an important contribution which has yet to be fully embraced.

³¹ Marguerite Duras, 'Les yeux verts', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 312–313 (numéro spécial, 1980), p. 93. My translation.

³² Michelle Royer, 'Le spectateur face au bruissement sonore des films de Marguerite Duras et à ses images', in *Marguerite Duras: le cinéma*, ed. by Jean Cléder, (Paris: Lettres modernes Minard, 2014), 43–54 (p. 53). An important essay by Michelle Royer on Duras' cinema, 'L'expérience spectatorielle à l'aune des neurosciences. Les films de Marguerite Duras' is also housed in the important collective volume *Marguerite Duras Passages, croisements, rencontres* ed. by Olivier Ammour-Mayeur and others (Paris: Classique Garnier, 2019) published on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Marguerite Duras and the publication of her work omnia in the Pléiade.



Rediscovering Caroline Avery: Submerged Narrative, Affect, and the Legacy of Minor Cinema

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Abstract

This article makes a case for Caroline Avery as one of the most compelling experimental filmmakers of the ‘minor cinema’ generation through a close analysis of her magnum opus, *Midweekend* (1986). In 2018, I conducted the first interviews with Avery since she began making films in 1982. Based on those interviews, this essay offers an historical and theoretical perspective on Avery’s work, situating her within the context of the 1980s-era avant-garde, investigating her memory-based poetics of cinema, and demonstrating her relevance to contemporary experimental media culture. More specifically, this article examines Avery’s contributions to what I call, following Tom Gunning, ‘submerged narrative’, an attenuated approach to narrative construction that privileges sense impressions, affective environments, and haptic surfaces over characters and causality — or, cultivating the ambiance of a story without providing an actual story. In the second half of the essay, I turn to the work of two contemporary artists, Michael Robinson and Mary Helena Clark, to argue that their similar ideas about affective narrative environments demonstrates the degree to which the ‘minor cinema’ has contributed to the establishment of a shared language within the avant-garde that younger artists can borrow from, revise, and extend.

This article rediscovers the work of Caroline Avery, a significant but neglected experimental filmmaker. Born and raised in Long Island, New York, Avery enrolled at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 1977 to study painting. Her interest in the dynamics of movement in the European avant-gardes of the 1920s prompted a shift to filmmaking, where she combined an artisanal approach to the filmstrip with a found footage collage aesthetic in films such as *Sonntag Platz* (1982) and *Big Brother* (1983). Upon relocating to New York City, Avery expanded her recycling of twentieth century cultural iconography into a more thoroughly deconstructive vein, painting and scratching directly onto found footage to explore memory, allegory, and affect in films such as *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1985) and *Midweekend* (1986). Her affinity for and interaction with filmmakers such as Phil Solomon and Cécile Fontaine, who also used found footage and handmade processes to create evocative, enigmatic films, aligned Avery with the cohort of filmmakers that Tom Gunning identified as forging a ‘minor cinema’

in the 1980s, although Avery never became as prominent as other members of that generation.¹ Disillusioned with internal competition for funding and grants, Avery withdrew from experimental filmmaking in 1989 and moved to Hawaii, where she continues to work as a painter.

In this essay, I have two goals. The first is to make a case for Caroline Avery as one of the most compelling filmmakers of the period through a close analysis of her magnum opus, *Midweekend*. Like many women artists, Avery's work has been difficult to access, and there have been no scholarly articles or book chapters devoted to her work.² In 2018, I conducted the first interviews with Avery since she began making films in 1982.³ Based on those interviews, this article will offer an historical and theoretical perspective on Avery's work, situating her within the context of the 1980s-era avant-garde, investigating her memory-based poetics of cinema, and demonstrating her relevance to contemporary experimental media culture. The second is to examine Avery's contributions to what I call, following Gunning, submerged narrative, an attenuated approach to narrative construction that privileges sense impressions, affective environments, and haptic surfaces over characters and causality — or, cultivating the ambiance of a story without providing an actual story.⁴ For Avery, submerged narrative is also a strategy for replicating the processes of memory in cinema. In contrast to a model that aims to recreate or allude to personal memories, Avery's approach constitutes a set of techniques and working methods grounded in an intuitive theory of memory's sensual effects. *Midweekend* will serve as my central example, but in the second half of the essay, I turn to the work of two contemporary artists, Michael Robinson and Mary Helena Clark, to argue that Avery's ideas about narrative have endured for twenty-first century experimental image-makers.

The Smell of a Rose, But the Rose Is Gone

Before examining Avery's approach to submerged narrative, I will provide a detailed description of *Midweekend*, as well as some production background, to

¹ Tom Gunning, 'Towards a Minor Cinema: Fonoroff, Herwitz, Ahwesh, Lapore, Klahr, and Solomon,' *Motion Picture 3.1/2* (Winter 1989-90), 2-5. See also *A Passage Illuminated: The American Avant-Garde Film 1980-1990*, ed. by Nelly Voorhuis (Amsterdam: Stichting Mecano, 1991).

² Avery's films are currently in a state of transition. She is aiming to have them restored and back in circulation in the near future. In the meantime, the Paris-based distributor Light Cone has a near-complete set of 16mm prints, which can be viewed on their website in low-resolution digital reproductions. Avery also appears in Saul Levine's film *Raps & Chants 2 with Caroline Avery* (1981-82).

³ The interview with Avery that I quote throughout this article was conducted via Skype on 28 February 2018.

⁴ Gunning, p. 4. The term is Gunning's, although I elaborate on and extrapolate from his conception by identifying and developing additional components.

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situate the film within Avery's oeuvre and convey a sense of its moment-by-moment effects on the viewer. *Midweekend* was the third film (following *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Mr. Speaker*, 1985 and 1986) that Avery made after leaving MassArt for New York, where she worked as a layout artist at the *Village Voice*. It was facilitated by several fortuitous developments. First, the New York Public Library unloaded a cache of educational films (mostly from Coronet Films, a leading producer of shorts for public schools) at the Collective for Living Cinema, which became an important resource for Avery.⁵ Second, the painter Ellen Rothenberg made a lightbox to Avery's specifications by fitting a piece of sandblasted glass to a wooden box, allowing her to work more intensively with cameraless filmmaking methods.⁶ Third, Avery secured a Jerome Foundation grant to purchase a JK optical printer, which she used to blow up 8mm and Super 8 to 16mm, increasing the variety of found footage that she could appropriate.⁷

The statement that Avery provided to distributors with *Midweekend* is resolutely descriptive: 'Great Society Era, social services, "how to" films from the 1960s and other footage from travel, education, documentary, and unsplit 8mm film edited with densely painted film leader in rapid sequences of one-to-three frame splices'.⁸ More recently, Avery explained that the film was inspired by the desperation she sensed in the lives of New Yorkers as they approached the end of the working week:

There was a desperate happiness to the weekends in New York. It was like people had a very short window to lead this totally other life and were trying to get as much in as they could. By Sunday afternoon or evening, a lot of people were, in spite of themselves, looking forward to the routine of going back to work, because [on the weekends] they were left to find themselves on their own without the definition of where they worked.⁹

Apart from its title, the thematics of *Midweekend* are never made overt in the film itself, but intimated through a melancholy undertone, the source of which can be difficult to identify. The majority of the silent, 7'30" film is handpainted, with brief interjections (Avery's indication of one to three frames is generally accurate) of found footage, some of which appears in color, some in black-and-white. Avery's artisanal techniques — using Dr. Ph. Martin's paint, solvents, nail polish, bleach, and a #11 Exacto blade — result in resplendently detailed images, anticipating the intricate surges of rapid color that characterize Stan Brakhage's well-known

⁵ Caroline Avery, interview with the author, 28 February 2018.

⁶ Ellen Rothenberg is married to filmmaker Daniel Eisenberg, who was in Avery's cohort at MassArt.

⁷ All information about the making of *Midweekend* comes from Caroline Avery, interview with the author, 28 February 2018. On the history of the JK optical printer, see John Powers, 'A DIY Come-On: A History of Optical Printing in Avant-Garde Cinema,' *Cinema Journal*, 57.4 (Summer 2018), pp. 71–95.

⁸ *Canyon Cinema Film/Video Catalog 7* (San Francisco: Canyon Cinema, 1992), p. 19.

⁹ Caroline Avery, interview with the author, 28 February 2018.

handpainted films of the late 1980s and 1990s, albeit more rough-hewn, with an abundance of visible splices, dirt particles, and other pockmarks that lend the painting a fibrous texture. Entirely abstract, Avery's painting simultaneously evokes biology and astronomy, suggesting both the reticular, packed networks of microbes and the celestial webs of constellations in space.

The first thirty seconds of the film alternate rapidly between cellular splotches of orange and white against a bluish black interstellar background and dense arrays of orange, white, black, and purple speckles before the first briefly glimpsed images appear: a band of horseback riders on a pink horizon cut into a horizontal strip and pasted onto the 4x3 frame, a woman with a bouffant in a car, and most prominently, an adolescent boy playing with a pinwheel on a school bus. This sequence initiates a patterning that remains consistent over the film's duration: a cluster of five or six images (painted or photographic) will rise to prominence through breakneck alternation before gradually giving way to others, creating a transient flow out of which images assert themselves for a period and then quietly disappear. Soon, the painting becomes more varied: green, purple, and pink appear more frequently, and Avery adopts more diverse approaches to line, shape, and texture without abandoning her global commitment to a mottled, rapidly evolving surface. New images materialize; some of the more conspicuous include a nurse attending to a small boy at a table, an insert of hands cracking an egg into a bowl, and schoolchildren lined up in single formation, presenting themselves for inspection to a female teacher, who seems to be adjusting their postures.

By the film's midpoint, the barrage of the painting, constantly interrupted by half-glimpsed fragments of found footage — as well as the introduction of a strobe-like yellow and black flicker — induces the palpable sensation that the screen is pulsating, an unrelenting fusillade of haptic sensations. These thousands of congested, painted universes frustrate our ability to fully absorb the referential images, which now include an overhead shot of a cowboy riding a bucking bronco, cavalry officers in white, various shots of assembly line factory work, and a four-quadrant image (from a reel of unsplit 8mm) bathed in blue, which is employed regularly enough to impose a gridlike aspect onto the film. Ethnographic images of an African dancer's legs appear in conjunction with a more rigid painting schema of yellow and green cellular blotches on a black background.

The film's climax is dominated by a ratcheting up of the intensity, as the film threatens to spin out of control. Against a throbbing flicker appear a series of shots of children at windows. In a perspectival image that sets itself off from the two-dimensionality of the painted image stream, schoolchildren pour out of school. A race car driver pulls his helmet over his head and a man moves a piece of furniture, all glimpsed in jagged, flashing bursts. The nurse and boy return, joined by new images of race cars barreling down the track and a bandana-clad woman dusting a shelf. In a final diptych, a child washing his hands turns to the camera to convey a haunted look, and a man in a car covers his face before

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an impending crash. The film ends as it began, with an extended passage of painting, this time a colorful explosion of confetti on a clear background.

As this description intends to convey, in *Midweekend*, fairly inscrutable images materialize out of the exquisite tumult of the paint, which renders the film obscure and dynamic in equal measure. In a statement worth quoting at length, Avery explains that her ambition for the film was to provide the hint of a narrative thread through fleeting sense-impressions, a structure she finds analogous to the processes of memory:

I was really interested in creating an evocative environment in which a narrative might exist, but not actually having the story unfold. It's kind of like the way memory works. You remember having read a story years ago, but you can't remember the details. You can remember how it felt: maybe a detail will surface, like one of those 8-balls where the answer is revealed for a moment. As you remember events, there's a palimpsest of other events superimposed over them. Maybe you're having a cup of tea or an argument, and all of a sudden, a memory will come from another event, and things get scrambled. You end up with a memory of a memory; you remember having done a thing, but the raw direct emotion of having that event happen is long gone. And when we construct narratives for ourselves, we're drawing from memory, and those memories color the narrative that we're creating. So *Midweekend* takes the storyline away but keeps the feel of a story: like the smell of a rose, but the rose is gone.¹⁰

In this statement, Avery links narrative with memory through their shared emotional, associative, and sensual qualities. By instantiating these qualities in the film's form, the filmmaker can conjure a narrative atmosphere without limiting its range of meanings through denotative specificity or a causal chain. For Avery, memory is predominantly affective, preserving not the details of an event, but the emotional states that it aroused. The intensity of emotion fades, but residual traces remain, buried under a patina of time, mediation, and contingency. This would seem to be an unlikely model for narrative structure insofar as the erasure of specificity threatens to invalidate the sources commonly identified by film theorists as facilitating the emotional engagement of viewers, such as allegiances and alliances with characters and what Barthes called the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, the large and small-scale questions and tensions that generate narrative momentum.¹¹ How, then, does *Midweekend* retain 'the feel of a story' without including a story's typical components?

In the absence of causal linkage, individual images bear the weight of developing narrative atmosphere. Thus, each image is effectively promoted to the level of the symbolic, retaining an affective charge that derives from its codified meanings. In *Midweekend*, images of children are heavily allegorized, resonating beyond their

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 18–20. On allegiance and alignment, see Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 142–227.

denotative capacities. Midway through the film, Avery incorporates a black-and-white shot of a girl in plaid dress and boy in striped shirt peering out a window, their backs to the camera. Absent the expectation that the film will provide answers to basic narrational questions about the children's identities, relationship to one another, or the object of their gaze, the image simply registers as a concept — 'children looking' — that invokes emotional associations: intimacy between siblings, childhood as an interminable waiting period for adulthood, and the longing to be released into a world that offers more possibilities than the present one. Similarly, a wide-angle shot of children streaming out of school, lunchboxes in hand, represents the sudden release of pent-up energy, freedom from institutional constraints and pressures, and the exuberance of sharing a collective experience. *Midweekend* does not cue the viewer to draw causal inferences between these images, but to experience them as affective evocations of events whose contexts have long faded from memory.

How is this different from simply asserting that 'childhood' is one of *Midweekend*'s themes? After all, a film need not have 'narrative atmosphere' to make meaning, and *Midweekend*'s images can be readily organized into thematic clusters: childhood, especially as regulated by routine, surveillance, and hygiene (the children by the window, the boy washing his hands, the nurse inspecting the children); gendered domestic routines (hands cracking eggs, the woman dusting the shelf, the assembly line); western imagery (the horse taming, cavalry, and cowboys); and cars, racing, and accidents (the race car driver with visor, the car crashes). These categories, in turn, suggest readings. One could follow Avery in claiming that *Midweekend* is about the ambivalent dialectic of routine and release, or interpret the film as an ideological critique of 1950s-era conformity.

But *Midweekend* resists such tidy meanings. The ambiguity of the film suggests not a transparent set of themes, but an affective environment, a diegesis constructed entirely from icons and symbols. Instead of an internal storyworld that characters experience and encounter, *Midweekend*'s diegesis is posited as a collection of sense impressions, recollections, and associations that seem to occupy the same conceptual space. Conceiving of *Midweekend* as a diegesis clarifies Avery's analogy with memory: the relationships between images are akin to the relationships between thoughts, both of which are enclosed within a figurative space. The actions depicted in the images could be understood to point to specific events that transpired within the diegesis, but it seems more apposite to consider them as symbols working together to produce an emotional valence. That is, *Midweekend*'s storyworld is not necessarily one in which a child washed his hands after school let out, but one of adolescence circumscribed by rigidity and routine, a pronounced emphasis on hygiene that is mirrored at home and at school, and a yearning for emancipation inflected with the threat of a destructive abandon. Thus, images relate to each other not solely at the level of formal or thematic correspondences, but as a storehouse of affect-producing sense-impressions that share a kind of mental landscape.

In Avery's remarks on *Midweekend*, her Proustian reference to a cup of tea as a trigger for involuntary memory alludes to a conception of memory as an associative

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chain of linkages. In this way, *Midweekend's* images could be understood as a series of emotional impressions, each inspired by its predecessor. Of course, associative editing is a fairly straightforward way of conceptualizing relationships among images, but of particular interest is the rapidity and repetition of *Midweekend's* associations. Only a few frames each, Avery's images appear in short bursts that the viewer barely has time to assimilate, flashing onscreen in repetitive cycles. This is an effect of Avery's working process. After gathering a batch of handpainted and found footage, Avery would intuitively select images that evoked the emotional state she was trying to cultivate for a film. Each filmstrip would be assigned a number. Avery would then use 'a Cagean process' to write a 'score' for the film on graph paper composed of patterns of repeating numbers (e.g., two, three, five, two, five, three, seven), representing the order in which the strips would be edited. Below each number, Avery would make dots corresponding to the number of frames to be included from each strip. When she performed the actual cement splicing, she allowed herself to deviate from her score, adjusting the order of strips or number of frames intuitively in a process that she describes as 'editing with a flourish'.¹²

This method represents a unique fusion of intuitive editing, metrical editing, and chance operations, but it also instantiates a working process that is itself structured according to memory, translating Avery's central analogy from the film's content to the artist's practice. Unlike many of her found footage peers, Avery does not embrace a juxtapositional approach to editing, avoiding deliberate connections between edits on the basis of formal or conceptual similarities and differences. Instead, she composes her scores abstractly with irregular numbering patterns, lending a randomness to the order in which the images appear. This process resembles the inherent unpredictability of memory — the sudden appearance of an involuntary memory, materializing abruptly to make further connections with other memories. On the other hand, by allowing herself to repeat patterns and improvise intuitively, Avery suggests that one can 'follow' memories, using an involuntary memory as the spark for more directed voluntary recall. In exploring the tension between randomization, patterning, and improvisation, Avery's practice itself becomes an analogue for memory.

That said, *Midweekend's* representational images are often eclipsed by the astounding intricacy of the handpainting, which comprises the majority of the film. In fact, Avery's painting is so elaborate and labored that it became the focal point of a laudatory letter from Stan Brakhage, who used phrases such as 'exhausting,' 'painstaking care,' and, after his initial viewing, 'the work of a compulsive neurotic' to describe her films.¹³ Avery's coarsely textured surfaces convey a palpable sensuality, encouraging the touch-based mode of looking that Laura U. Marks has proposed as constituting 'haptic cinema'.¹⁴ As Marks notes,

¹² Caroline Avery, interview with the author, 28 February 2018.

¹³ Stan Brakhage to Caroline Avery, 23 May 1985, James Stanley Brakhage Collection, box 2, folder 9, Special Collections and Archives, University of Colorado Boulder Archives.

¹⁴ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*

physically working with film's emulsion is a frequent method for producing haptic images, which share with *Midweekend* an emphasis on the striated surface.¹⁵ More specifically, Marks ties cinema's appeal to touch to an embodied knowledge that seeks to recover memories. As she explains, 'senses that are closer to the body, like the sense of touch, are capable of storing powerful memories that are lost to the visual'.¹⁶ That is, haptic cinema is a means of representing unrepresentable memories through an appeal to the senses.

Although Marks's work appeared over a decade after Avery made her last film, there are striking convergences between their articulations of the interconnections between cinema, memory, and sensuality. In Avery's account, memories are triggered by sensual experiences, such as drinking tea or smelling a rose. These experiences function as catalysts for memories to arise and recede out of the streaming substrate of organic unconscious processes, where they become conflated with other memories, superimposed over each other like a 'palimpsest'. In *Midweekend*, then, the painting serves as an analogue for this primordial state of consciousness, a swirling skein out of which sense-impressions emerge and intermix. As much as Avery's painting seems to give rise to the images, it also conceals them, functioning as a thick veil that mediates between image and viewer; our ability to perceive the images is thwarted by the cloak of paint, within which the images seem to be enfolded. This encourages the viewer to adopt a haptic visuality, a mode of viewing that, as Marks explains, 'tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture'.¹⁷ Thus, the handpainted sections of *Midweekend* are not detached from Avery's memory-based narrative structure, but integral components of its realization.

Collecting Clues and Abstracting Emotions

Although Avery's work has not been widely seen, the submerged narrative model that she helped to develop has continued to resonate for experimental filmmakers. In the second section of this essay, I want to chart Avery's indirect influence on contemporary artists by demonstrating the degree to which the ideas and methods instantiated in her filmmaking have become significant points of reference for the avant-garde. To be clear, the relative obscurity of Avery's work prohibits the tracing of a direct line of influence — in fact, the filmmakers I discuss below are unfamiliar with Avery's films. Instead, I argue that Avery's contributions to ideas that were circulating more broadly among the minor cinema generation have been overlooked, and these ideas in turn bequeathed a

(Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 162–82.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 173.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 130.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 162.

shared conception of experimental narrative that contemporary filmmakers can draw from to contextualize their own practice.

This argument may seem counterintuitive inasmuch as experimental cinema is often considered to be a non-narrative filmmaking mode. Many scholars have countered this mischaracterization by investigating periods of more sustained avant-garde engagement with narrative form (e.g., the trance film of the 1940s and 1950s, the Baudelarian cinema of the 1960s, the New Narrative of the late 1970s). By the late 1980s, a new approach to narrative had emerged, identified by Tom Gunning in 'Towards a Minor Cinema,' a short, incisive piece of film criticism that framed the post-Structural generation of experimental filmmakers as renouncing the 'aspiration to mastery' of their forebears and celebrating their marginal identity.¹⁸ While this aspect of his argument is well-known, less acknowledged is Gunning's concomitant suggestion that the minor cinema generation returned to narrative, albeit in a radically attenuated form. For Gunning, their 'submerged narratives' hovered 'just below the threshold of perceptibility'. He continued: 'The sea swells of these subliminal stories align images into meaningful but often indecipherable configurations. The films invite the reader/detective to pursue the thread of narrative, but no closure is promised, no final answer lies behind the veil'.¹⁹

Although Gunning does not mention Avery specifically — he focuses on similarly minded filmmakers, such as Lewis Klahr, Nina Fonoroff, Phil Solomon, and Mark LaPore (some of whom studied with Avery at MassArt) — his observations are remarkably congruent with her own conception of narrative. Drawing from and expanding on Gunning's formulation, we can posit a loose approach to narrative shared by Avery and her peers that includes some configuration of the following elements: sense impressions over causal linkage; affective environments; allegorized or hieroglyphic images; memory-based structures; intuitive editing; haptic surfaces; and an emphasis on childhood and formative experiences. These concerns paralleled contemporaneous intellectual currents — Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis (cf. Freud's notion of the 'screen memory,' a distorted visual memory arising from childhood), semiotics (see Barthes's exploration of the photographic image in terms of *studium* and *punctum*), and the expanded interest in cultural

¹⁸ Gunning, p. 2.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 4. Although there has not been a single book-length study on the avant-garde of the 1980s, sustained discussions of this period appear in *Radical Light: Alternative Film & Video in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-2000*, ed. by Steve Anker, Kathy Geritz, and Steve Seid (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2010); Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005); Scott MacDonald's interviews with filmmakers in his *A Critical Cinema* series; Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993); and Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), among many others.

memory (cf. Huyssen's remarks on the postmodern historical shift from 'present futures' to 'present pasts'), to name a few — that reinforced a more general interest in the sensuality of memory and the iconicity of images.²⁰ But this does not mean that these interests were confined to the minor cinema generation that embraced them.

As evidenced by contemporary experimental practice, the subsequent generation of filmmakers has productively expanded on the submerged narratives of Avery and her peers, now the elder statesmen of the avant-garde. To cite two prominent examples, in their films, videos, and discursive performances, Michael Robinson and Mary Helena Clark develop similar ideas about the possibilities experimental film offers in exploring affective narrative environments, demonstrating the degree to which the 'minor cinema' has contributed to the establishment of a shared language within the avant-garde that younger artists can borrow from, revise, and extend.

In interviews, Robinson has characterized his films as 'narratives created through non-narrative materials,' to indicate a process that, like Avery's, entails constructing submerged narratives that resonate affectively within a diegesis composed of symbols and associations.²¹ He elaborates: 'I like the idea of having the semblance of a narrative without actual characters or plot that carves out the feeling and the emotional thrust of the storytelling'.²² Similarly, Clark describes her approach to narrative as 'filmic shorthand,' 'collecting clues' and 'world-building,' phrases that evoke a spatial form of narration that refigures the filmmaker as an investigator intent on making meaning out of traces of actions and objects.²³ Moreover, both filmmakers place a premium on conjuring uncanny and ominous affective atmospheres, attempting to inspire emotional responses in viewers that are usually associated with plot development and attachment to characters. Robinson admits, 'If I can really scare the audience or really break their heart, that's what I ultimately want to do',²⁴ while Clark suggests that 'many of the emotions in my work include portent, which requires a pause or suspense in story'.²⁵

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. III, ed. by James Strachey (New York: Vintage, 1999), pp. 303–22; Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Andreas Huyssen, 'The Search for Tradition' and 'Mapping the Postmodern', in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 160–78, 179–221.

²¹ Cat Tyc, 'Interview with Michael Robinson', *Incite!*, 2 (2010) <<http://www.incite-online.net/robinson.html>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

²² 'Michael Robinson with Z.W. Lewis,' *The Brooklyn Rail* (December 17, 2017–January 18, 2018), <<https://brooklynrail.org/2017/12/film/IN-CONVERSATION-Michael-Robinson-with-Z-W-Lewis>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

²³ Dan Browne, 'Outside the Text: An Interview with Mary Helena Clark', *Incite!* (October 10, 2016) <<http://www.incite-online.net/clark.html>> [accessed 29 September 2019].

²⁴ Ananda Pellerin, 'Michael Robinson: The Experimental Filmmaker Who Will Steal Your Heart,' *Wheel Me Out* (May 2010) <http://poisonberries.net/wheel_me_out.pdf>, p. 4 [accessed 29 September 2019].

²⁵ Mary Helena Clark, interview with the author, 9 October 2019.

As we have seen, Avery cultivated narrative atmosphere through the signifying power of the symbolic image, an editing procedure based on memory processes, and a haptic approach to handpainting. Clark and Robinson, however, expand the range of techniques available to experimental filmmakers for submerging their narratives. In *The Dragon Is the Frame* (2014), Clark employs strategies that embolden viewers to attribute logic and motivation to abstract images and situations, or, as Clark puts it, ‘playing with an implied narrative to footage that [is] just “of the world”’.²⁶ Throughout *Dragon*, Clark provides a series of relatively conventional establishing shots to which she insistently returns — street corners, a blooming red tree, Muir Woods, Mission Viejo, and San Francisco Bay (the film is an homage to *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)) — as though to imply that significant events have occurred (or are to occur) there, but these events never materialize. People recur, as well, most conspicuously Mark Aguhar, the late multidisciplinary artist to whom the film is dedicated, who performs for the camera. Familiar musical cues (Bernard Herrmann’s score for *Vertigo*) suggest rising action and climax, as if to lend emotional heft to situations left undramatized. Like Avery in *Midweekend*, Clark fashions an emotionally charged hermetic world of indirect impressions, albeit by different means.

In Robinson’s films and videos, submerged narrative is constructed through an ‘atmospheric web of associations,’ often via the dense interweaving of found materials.²⁷ Echoing Avery’s language in describing memory, Robinson ‘trust[s] that the signifiers or triggers in the film — whether they are pop cultural, or mythological, or whatever — hold both obvious, surface-level connotations, and more residual, subconscious ones’.²⁸ In *Mad Ladders* (2015), many of the surface-level connotations are provided by a fairly direct narrative, presented in voice-over by a YouTube prophet named Sister Donna, who tells a passionate, surreal story about the coming rapture as revealed to her in visions, complete with euphoric violence and hallucinogenic shapeshifting. More residual connotations appear in heavily processed images of American Music Award (AMA) telecasts, as stagecraft by Whitney Houston and Janet Jackson is transformed into a swirling storm of rising curtains and spinning geometric set pieces. Only occasionally recognizable as such, the AMA stage serves as a kind of storyworld, an occult space within which artifactual mythologies rub shoulders with each other. At the end of the film, an overhead shot of women waving to the camera on a beach, arranged in a Busby Berkeley-esque circle and rephotographed from a television set, is strangely moving, as it suggests that these televisual models have ascended to the higher spiritual plane described by Sister Donna. For Robinson, then, ‘memory’ is specifically ‘cultural memory,’ a collective phenomenon rooted in

²⁶ Browne.

²⁷ Luke Goodsell, ‘Familiar Spirit – An Interview with Michael Robinson’, 4:3 (10 January 2019), <<https://fourthreefilm.com/2016/01/familiar-spirit-an-interview-with-michael-robinson>> [accessed 30 September 2019].

²⁸ Ibidem.

shared experience and nostalgia, preserved in the low resolution of the virtual online archive.

In *Midweekend*, Avery reoriented the well-established experimental film traditions of handpainting and metrical editing toward narrative objectives, forging a haptic cinematic surface and working process, respectively, that tapped into the sensuality of memory. Similarly, Robinson repurposes entrenched avant-garde techniques such as image layering and flicker to heighten the affective intensity of his narratives. In *Line Describing Your Mom* (2011), an aggressive black-and-neon-green flicker abstracts blurry footage of liturgical choreography while a woman recounts a nightmarish story in voice-over about a disturbed neighbor who committed suicide after threatening his baby with a handgun. The red-and-blue flicker of *Light Is Waiting* (2007) is even narratively motivated, introduced as the result of a dropped television set, which suggests that the rest of the video takes place inside this broken analogue relic. In experimental film history, flicker has served as an ontological inquiry into the fundamental properties of the medium, but Robinson's flicker — which, in its bright uniformity, announces its digital provenance — becomes a strategy simply for escalating the physiological intensity of his films, imbuing otherwise ambiguous imagery with elevated narrative significance. According to Robinson, 'I never want the effects and manipulations in my films to feel purely formal — they all play specific emotional or psychological roles, and are meant to be experienced as parts of an abstract narrative'.²⁹

Clark, on the other hand, merges the first-person camera, theorized within the avant-garde tradition as an imprimatur of the filmmaker's subjectivity, with the more functional use of the point-of-view shot in commercial filmmaking to frustrate our ability to align with the subjectivity of the protagonist.³⁰ In her self-described 'spy film' *The Plant* (2012), Clark surreptitiously films a man in a trench coat as he peers inside doorways, crosses the street, and walks along the city sidewalks of downtown Chicago.³¹ The handheld camera, often looking down from a high vantage point, lurches from object to object, as though the filmmaker is searching for a clue, but the focus of her attention is usually unclear or obstructed by passing cars. Moreover, her images are emphatically amateurish, even clumsy, as she struggles to follow her protagonist, zooms erratically, and loses focus for long stretches. In its formal particulars, the shots evoke the subjectivity

²⁹ Forrest Muelrath, 'Medium of Sand', *Bomb* (27 November 2012) <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/medium-of-sand>> [accessed 8 October 2019].

³⁰ The argument that the first-person camera aligns viewers with the subjectivity of the filmmaker has been discussed extensively. For its application to Brakhage's filmmaking, for example, see P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*, 3rd edn. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1974]), p. 160, 166–68, 205–06; and Annette Michelson, 'Film and the radical aspiration,' *Film Culture*, 42 (Fall 1966), pp. 40–42. James Peterson discusses this as a heuristic for evaluating poetic films in Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), pp. 34–40.

³¹ Browne.

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of the Brakhagean handheld camera, but in this quasi-narrative context, our attempts to align voyeuristically with the filmmaker prove futile, as we have no access to the investigative objectives that motivate her movements. According to Clark, 'the inquisitive zoom lens carries story with it, mostly broadly the desire to decode'.³² Thus, Clark draws upon one of the avant-garde's most codified techniques to establish a narrative environment without an actual narrative at its center — a detective film without the mystery.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued for the vitality of Caroline Avery's cinema with the express intention of encouraging experimental filmmakers, viewers, and scholars to rediscover her films. Due to limitations of space, I have been able to examine only one of her contributions to experimental filmmaking: a model for 'submerged narrative', an idea pursued in tandem with other filmmakers of her generation, that holds currency within the contemporary avant-garde. But Avery is not the only woman filmmaker of the 'minor cinema' cohort who demands renewed critical and curatorial attention. While important artists such as Marie Menken, Carolee Schneemann, and Barbara Rubin have seen an exciting surge in scholarship devoted to their work, there remain dozens of filmmakers from Avery's era whose films deserve to be seen and discussed. A very partial list could include: Diana Barrie, Ericka Beckman, Betzy Bromberg, Renata Breth, Sharon Couzin, Sandra Davis, JoAnn Elam, Mary Filippo, Michele Fleming, Amy Halpern, Lynn Marie Kirby, Janis Crystal Lipzin, Pelle Lowe, Vivian Ostrovsky, Dana Plays, Esther Shatavsky, Jean Sousa, and Jacalyn White. Although they have failed to receive the critical attention of some of their contemporaries, these filmmakers contributed films, ideas, and cultural interventions that continue to resonate within experimental film culture — even for a generation of artists who may not yet be familiar with their pioneering work.

³² Mary Helena Clark, interview with the author, 9 October 2019.



Gazes Upon the World of Italian Contemporary Women Filmmakers

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Abstract

The essay aims at offering a journey within the documentary heritage of contemporary Italian women filmmakers, a survey drawing a varied map of approaches to the film medium, which take part in the redefinition process of cinema and its paradigms. The movies of these female directors deploy an exemplary commitment to (audio)visually exploring places, both central and peripheral, pointing out their nomadic vision and an itinerant gaze upon the world that is able to capture the current challenges and complexities with passion and rigour. Their works modulate in an original way the relationship between authorial intervention and social, cultural, historiographical investigation. Moreover, they propose a viewing on the most opaque and elusive sides of the contemporary realities, an observation that overall constitutes an innovation in the field of cinema as well as a change in the image of women, who are fully subjects of history, culture, and agency.

For Lorenza Mazzetti
and Agnès Varda

We are sealed vessels afloat upon
what it is convenient to call reality;
at some moments, without a reason,
without an effort, the sealing matter cracks;
in flood reality.
(Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*)¹

The current presence of female film directors in Italy amounts to about 15% of all filmmakers; within the national film industry the contingent of women engaged in the documentary practice is even higher. A good number of these filmmakers modulate in an original way their own relationship between authorial

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 142.

intervention and social, cultural, historiographical investigation, with regard both to national history and international current events.²

The documentary is not only a visual testimony but also the true lifeblood of a contemporary audiovisual context, despite being punished by distribution that does not equal that of fictional movies. Without any pretense of being exhaustive, what follows provides some traces for the recognition of this documentary heritage for Italian women filmmakers. Their works draw a varied map of approaches to the film medium, which take part in the redefinition process of cinema and its paradigms. Moreover, they propose a viewing on the most opaque and elusive sides of the present world, an observation that overall constitutes an innovation in the field of cinema as well as a change in the image of women, who are fully subjects of history, culture, and agency. As Marco Bertozzi underlines, this cinema, the result of a ‘documentary passion’ that detaches itself from the dominant system — is ‘practised with obstinacy and with ridiculous production facilities’. Furthermore, Bertozzi adds that ‘whereas the film industry regulates the relations in legal-economic terms, the best female documentary introduces an immeasurable “freeness”. An ethic of gift, an exchange, that involves both the individual and the community in an emotional tam-tam far from the totem of commodification’.³

My essay aims at offering a journey within the documentary heritage of contemporary Italian women filmmakers by illustrating a range of films primarily featured in the prominent international film festivals, beginning with the Venice Film Festival. These filmmakers deploy an exemplary commitment to (audio) visually exploring places, both central and peripheral, pointing out their nomadic vision and an itinerant gaze upon the world that is able to capture the current challenges and complexities with passion and rigor.⁴

² The articulation of the Italian female film production, from 2008 to 2018, is the following: 9% feature films, 21% documentaries, 17% short films (source: *Seminar on Gender Equality and Inclusivity in the Film Industry*, Venice Film Festival, 2 September 2019).

³ Marco Bertozzi, *Storia del documentario italiano. Immagini e culture dell'altro cinema* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2008), pp. 295–97. See also the interviews with women documentarians collected in *Il miraggio del reale: per una mappa del cinema documentario italiano*, ed. by Marco Bertozzi, *Quaderni del CSCI*, 4 (2008). A stimulating dialogue, long avoided or marginalized, between documentary and feminist film studies is triggered in the volume *Feminism and Documentarism*, ed. by Diane Waldman and Janet Walker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), which reveals the productivity of a mutually dynamic comparison. On the one hand, there are the challenges posed by feminist elaborations to theory, history and documentary practices; on the other hand, there is the enrichment that the production of documentaries has brought to the feminist theories themselves, especially with regard to the reflections on gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, class and nation.

⁴ The richness and variety of contributions of Italian women filmmakers to past and present audiovisual production are the core of the following collective volumes recently published in Italy: *Storie in divenire. Le donne nel cinema italiano*, ed. by Lucia Cardone, Cristina Jandelli and Chiara Tognolotti, *Quaderni del CSCI (annual review of Italian cinema)*, 11 (2015), and *We want cinema. Sguardi di donne nel cinema italiano*, ed. by Laura Buffoni (Venezia: Marsilio, 2018). As a mere in-progress list it is worthwhile to mention a few names of contemporary female directors

Gazes Upon the World of Italian Contemporary Women Filmmakers

The starting point of this voyage has a conceptual and cultural inspiration: that is the notion of *flânerie*, related to the notion of nomadism, a key idea pertinent for investigating the experiential and experimental declination exercised in the work of Italian female directors. *Flânerie* is rooted in both motion and vision: it combines looking (as well as being looked at) with moving — through spaces, places, environments, and landscapes. It is an esthetic trope, which also indicates a visual strategy connected to the idea of cinema itself, as a means of making ‘visible the invisible’, thanks to a gaze that is mobile and in flux.

Neglected or completely ignored by the historians, the *flâneuse* asserts herself in a different form than the *flâneur*: her *flânerie* differs from the male counterpart both for her use of public sphere, and for her resolute proximity to the object of attention. Moreover, it is useful to stress at the outset the conceptual evolution of the female *flânerie*, whose starting point, it has been argued, was the discovery of the department stores — with the industrial revolution and the concomitant development of cities — and then gradually, as we will see, it moved on to the discovery of the world.⁵

On the other hand, the practice of *flâneuse*-filmmakers, and particularly of these female documentarians, breaks a double cardinal rule of patriarchy related to the spaces assigned to women as well as to their predetermined areas of pertinence. On one side, the patriarchal tradition relegates women to the domestic sphere

whose works are not examined in my essay: Elisa Amoruso, Giulia Amati, Donatella Baglivo, Eva Baratta, Juliane Biasi Hendel, Laura Bispuri, Cecilia Calvi, Morena Campani, Carlotta Cerquetti, Giada Colagrande, Paola Columba, Enrica Colusso, Francesca Comencini, Cristina Comencini, Aurora Deiana, Antonietta De Lillo, Giulia Di Battista, Nunzia Di Stefano, Alexandra D’Onofrio, Margherita Ferri, Ilaria Freccia, Annamaria Gallone, Valeria Golino, Maria Iovine, Anna Kauber, Wilma Labate, Letizia Lamartire, Maria Martinelli, Cristina Mazza, Francesca Mazzoleni, Daria Menozzi, Elisa Mereghetti, Giulia Merenda, Laura Muscardin, Anna Negri, Michela Occhipinti, Elisabetta Pandimiglio, Martina Parenti, Valentina Pedicini, Katia Pedrotti, Silvia Perra, Rosalia Polizzi, Sara Pozzoli, Silvana Profeta, Paola Randi, Lorella Reale, Angela Ricci Lucchi, Alice Rohrwacher, Emma Rossi Landi, Fabiana Sargentini, Lilian Sassanelli, Stella Savino, Rossella Schillaci, Elisabetta Sgarbi, Carola Spadoni, Veronica Spedicati, Giovanna Taviani, Tekla Taidelli, Valeria Testagrossa, Maria Tilli, Maria Sole Tognazzi, Roberta Torre, Cinzia Th. Torrini, Claudia Tosi, Adele Tulli, Marisa Vallone, Cristina Vuolo. Some of these filmmakers are interviewed in the debut movie of Diana Dell’Erba, *Female Directors (Registe)*, 2014), taken from her dissertation in sociology, while the *leitmotif* of the film investigation starts from the pioneer Elvira Notari (personified by Maria De Medeiros). Twenty years ago, only Elvira Notari, Liliana Cavani, Lina Wertmüller and Suso Cecchi D’Amico represented Italy in the volume *Women Filmmakers Encyclopedia. Women on the Other Side*, ed. by Amy Unterburger (Michigan, USA: Visible Ink Press, 1999). And, again, Notari and Wertmüller are the Italian women filmmakers mentioned in the *Cahiers du Cinema*, 757 (Juillet-Août 2019) (dossier *Une histoire des réalisatrices*).

⁵ On film, *flânerie*, and the modern city, see the following pivotal works: Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1992); Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. by Leo Charney and Vanesha R. Schwartz (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995). A focal study on female *flânerie* in relation to literature is the chapter, ‘The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity’, in *Feminine Sentences*, by Janet Wolff (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1990).

as a privileged *milieu* for the fulfilment of the roles of wife and mother. On the other side, it identifies the feminine with Nature, i.e. women as a repository for what cities have cancelled or neglected, and thus as a site which confirms, under another guise, the female function of nurturing and welcoming-care. This 'natural' framework is also included in the figure of 'the woman as a muse', which is opposed by the *flâneuse*, who is instead characterized by her active role, corresponding to her *badaud* (curious, eager) spirit and her desire for exploration.

As a practice that strengthens female subjectivity, the *flânerie* of the female directors is thereby a transgressive act, since it goes beyond the spatial and environmental boundaries reserved for women, suggesting that overcoming geographical frontiers is also a prerequisite for change.

These motifs are related to the idea of nomadism, one to which I will shortly return, since it permeates the documentary practice of these Italian filmmakers in the new millennium. Their movies point out, in fact, both the possibility and the necessity of 'seeing closely' and, at the same time and consequently, the need for motion and the impulse to travel through different spaces and times. Thus their exploration becomes the practice of a gaze upon the world that is capable of capturing the complexities of our time, often without urging radical positions or agenda, but with a nonetheless vigorous testimonial commitment.

In regard to the notion of nomadism, I will outline Rosi Braidotti's argument, as an original rethinking of Deleuze and Guattari's elaboration of this topic.⁶ For Braidotti, nomadism 'is an intellectual form; it is therefore not so much being homeless, as rather the ability to recreate one's home anywhere'.⁷ And 'the nomadic consciousness', she adds, is 'also an epistemological position'; it is 'a form of political opposition to a vision of subjectivity based on hegemony and exclusion'.⁸ The conquering of this space within an industry that is traditionally male chauvinist is indeed a meaningful development; it is an ideal metaphor of the recent Italian *flânerie* of women filmmakers, despite the phenomenon of the 'autrici interrotte'⁹ (interrupted film *auteuses*), the scant numbers of their movies as well as the scarce circulation and critical attention.

⁶ See Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Edipe. Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972); Gilles Deleuze, 'Pensée nomade', in *Nietzsche aujourd'hui?*, ed. by Gilles Deleuze and others (Paris: Union Générale d'Édition, 1973); Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, 'Traité de nomadologie: la machine de guerre', in *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *Soggetto nomade. Femminismo e crisi della modernità*, ed. by Anna Maria Crispino (Roma: Donzelli, 1995), p. 21.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 28.

⁹ This expression is by Barbara Maio, *Attrici e autrici. Per una mappa al femminile del cinema italiano*, in *Gli invisibili. Esordi italiani del nuovo millennio*, ed. by Vito Zagarrò (Torino: Lindau, 2009). In her essay Maio stresses the number of Italian female directors who, after struggling for their debut, did not go beyond the first work, or had to wait many years before being able to make another film. As for the term *auteuse* see Rosanna Maule, *Her Blog: Women's Cinema in the Digital Age*, in *Contemporary Women's Cinema, Global Scenarios and Transnational Context*, ed. by Veronica Pravadelli (Milano, Udine: Mimesis International, 2017), pp. 238–39.

My analysis opens with the pioneer Cecilia Mangini (born in 1927), who has been active as a filmmaker and screenwriter since the 1950s. In 1965 she shot *Being Women* (*Essere donne*, 1965), a film-inquest on Italian women workers, which denounced their conditions in the labor world in Italy during the economic boom (it was made amongst the factories of the North and in the rural areas of the South). At that time, the movie was censored, whereas today it has fully found a place in the history of Italian documentarism.¹⁰

In 2013 Mangini filmed with her colleague and fellow citizen Mariangela Barbanente (they were both born in Mola di Bari, Apulia) *My Travels with Cecilia* (*In viaggio con Cecilia*, 2013), a documentary that explores *en route* the contemporary Apulia region and its changes after industrialization. The movie intertwines contemporary footage with documentary excerpts from the 1960s taken by Mangini herself, portraying two women documentarians from different generations at the same time. The trip reaches Taranto immediately after the seizure of the largest steel plant in Europe, ILVA, and the filmmakers show what is happening nearby in the Apulian industry, an inquiry which is also a current overview of the nation.

In line with Mangini's civil commitment are recent works by Sabina Guzzanti and Fiorella Infascelli, with their movies *Sympathy for the Lobster* (*Le ragioni dell'aragosta*, 2007) and *Closed Fists* (*Pugni chiusi*, 2011) respectively. These two documentaries, shot in Sardinia, are exemplary of the political quality that belongs to the *nomadic consciousness* discussed by Rosi Braidotti.

In *Sympathy for the Lobster* Sabina Guzzanti focuses her gaze on the severe lobster depopulation in Sardinia that compromised the local sea economy. The 'pre-text' of a show aimed at defending the Sardinian fishermen acts as a diegetic frame, a simulated backstage scene conceived, written and performed by the filmmaker herself, effectively combining creativity and information. In the form of a fake reality show, which also functions as a critique of contemporary television, Guzzanti's movie promotes new ways of collective participation and mobilization. This practice was already present in her previous film *Viva Zapatero!* (Sabina Guzzanti, 2005) and the apex of this tendency is her docu-drama *The State-Mafia Pact* (*La trattativa*, 2014), which will be described later.

Fiorella Infascelli's *Closed Fists* narrates the protests of laid off workers from the Vinyls factory located in Porto Torres, which was recognised as an industrial pillar of excellence because it produced PVC without toxic vinyl chloride. The filmmaker 'shadows' (to use Zavattini's term) a group of workers who mobilised

¹⁰ In 2007 the restored documentary was released on DVD (ed. by Davide Orecchio and Carlo Ruggero, Rome: Edit. Coop.), with an additional interview with the director and an update of her inquest, entitled *Being a Woman Today* (*Essere donne oggi*). Moreover, Cecilia Mangini is one of the fifteen female voices collected by Concita De Gregorio and Esmeralda Calabria for their documentary film *Mother Yeast. The Girls of the Past Century* (*Lievito madre. Le ragazze del secolo scorso*, 2017), a passionate and vital testimonial excursus offered by the protagonists on politics, sex, work and dreams. The film includes, among others, Luciana Castellina, Natalia Aspesi, Adele Cambria, Piera Degli Esposti.

in a unique way against the company's dismantling of the labor force by occupying the former super prison of Asinara, a highly symbolic place in recent Italian history. In August 1985, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, who had received death threats, withdrew there with their families to prepare the Maxi-trial against 460 *mafiosi* (held in Palermo from 1986 to 1992), whose final sentence was of 19 life sentences and penalties of a total of 2,665 years of imprisonment for the 346 convicts.¹¹ Moreover, in that 'maximum security prison' notorious bosses like Totò Riina were convicted. The workers' 'self-imprisonment' lasted over a year, starting from February 2009, and gained unexpected resonance on the media via press, TV and social media.

Itinerancy is iconic of four documentaries on the Italian 21st century, in which the existential plane is conjugated with the historical one: *Simply Beautiful* (*Bellissime* I, 2004; *Bellissime* II, 2006) by Giovanna Gagliardo, *We Want Roses Too* (*Vogliamo anche le rose*, 2007) by Alina Marazzi, *Girls... Life Is Trembling* (*Ragazze... la vita trema*, 2009) by Paola Sangiovanni, and *Mad Earth* (*Terramatta*, 2013) by Costanza Quatriglio. Gagliardo, Marazzi, and Sangiovanni retrace the history of women in light of consciousness about female roles both in the cinema and in the history of Italy. Thus, their documentaries act on the one hand as reenactments of the Italian women's liberation movement, and on the other as a reminder of the disseminating function carried out precisely by documentary practice in order to increase women's awareness.¹² Gagliardo in *Simply Beautiful* favours a 'classic' documentation testimony that reconstructs Italian history from a feminist point of view using archival footage and material from various sources. On the other hand, Marazzi with *We Want Roses Too* is committed to articulating a search of forms, shaping a cross-media play that is densely poetic. The third of these directors, Sangiovanni, in *Girls... Life Is Trembling*, cultivates an existential-experiential aspect, which consists of a direct confrontation of the documentary material with the lives of the female protagonists.¹³ In all three movies, female experience is central: women are posited as the subjects, and the viewer catches the process of this affirmation and the films' willingness to consolidate memory as opening, as Luisa Passerini writes, to 'new ways to conceive the relationship between the political and the cultural, and specifically the link between politics and daily life'.¹⁴

¹¹ Six years later Fiorella Infascelli returned to these locations to narrate in her movie *Once in Summer* (*Era d'estate*, 2015) the stay of the two Sicilian magistrates in the Asinara.

¹² On this specific point see Bernadette Luciano, Susanna Scarparo, 'Tra storia e memoria. Il movimento femminista nel nuovo documentario femminile', in *Filmare il femminismo. Studi sulle donne nel cinema e nei media*, ed. by Lucia Cardone and Sara Filippelli (Pisa: ETS, 2015). On the history of the Italian feminist movement see also Lorella Reale's movie *History of Feminist Movement in Italy* (*La storia del movimento femminista in Italia*, 2006), made with the exclusive use of archival materials.

¹³ In her last documentary, *The Sea of Our History* (*Il mare della nostra storia*, 2018), Gagliardo explores the relationship between Italy and its former Libian colony, retracing the turbulent history of the Mediterranean Country through archival footage and current testimonials and images.

¹⁴ Luisa Passerini, 'Afterword', in *Memory. Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. by Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 460. Gender and cinema

This theme also innervates *Mad Earth: The Italian Twentieth Century of Vincenzo Rabito Sicilian Illiterate* (*Terramatta: Il Novecento italiano di Vincenzo Rabito analfabeta siciliano*, Nastro d'argento2013/Silver Ribbon Award 2013 for Best Documentary) by Costanza Quatriglio, taken from Vincenzo Rabito's autobiographical novel, which has been called a 'popular *Gattopardo*' (the famous novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1956-1958). Vincenzo Rabito (Chiaramonte Gulfi, Sicily, 1899-ivi 1981) defined himself as '*inalfabeto*' ('illiterate'). He obtained his primary school license at the age of 35, and for 7 years secretly wrote his life story, full of tribulations and adventures, but also rich with rewarding achievements, such as his writing, through which he reworks the Italian history in the 20th century from poverty through the economic boom, using the unprecedented viewpoint of a wretch. His language is a private *argot*, neither dialect nor Italian, 'a made-up language' born out of listening, hence out of an oral tradition — Quatriglio explains — which dates back to the work of Sicilian puppets and of the *cunto*. Much like the three previous documentaries, *Mad Earth* intermingles multi-media materials (Rabito's typewritten pages, photographs, TV images, archival and musical material, and so on), passing through the personal journey of the 'ballad-singer' Rabito, as well as through the salient parts of the Italian twentieth century: the century that ferried Italy out of poverty and into the economic boom.

Within Quatriglio's strong documentary background (she is also the artistic director of the Sicilian branch of the Experimental Center of Cinematography dedicated to documentary cinema), at least another three of her documentaries should be mentioned: *The World on Their Shoulders* (*Il mondo addosso*, 2006), *87 Hours. The Last Days of Francesco Mastrogiovanni*, (*87 ore. Gli ultimi giorni di Francesco Mastrogiovanni*, 2015) and *Triangle* (2014), in addition to her medium-length docudrama *Bated Breath* (*Con il fiato sospeso*, 2013). *The World on Their Shoulders* describes the stories of four young Afghan refugees, who arrive in Italy to escape war and persecution (they are of Hazara origin, an ethnic group that has been subject to genocide for more than a hundred years in Afghanistan).¹⁵ *87 Hours. The Last Days of Francesco Mastrogiovanni* recounts an absurd and tragic experience of medical malpractice, occurred in 2009, which was still under trial when the film was released (the final verdict was issued in 2018). *Triangle* (which won the Nastro d'argento 2015/Silver Ribbon Award 2015 for

studies have propulsively pushed the surveys on memory (memory studies), a field of inquiry with a complex genealogy emerged in the 1970s, which poses strong historical questions, such as the role of the Holocaust in the 20th century and in the present. For updated reference studies see Alice Cati, *Gli strumenti del ricordo. I media e la memoria* (Milano: Editrice La Scuola, 2016), and *The Past in Visual Culture. Essays on Memory, Nostalgia and the Media*, ed. by Jilly Byoce Kay, Vathy Mahoney and Caitlin Shaw (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017).

¹⁵ This documentary inspired Costanza Quatriglio's docudrama *Just Like My Son* (*Sembra mio figlio*, 2018), which reconstructs the events of one of the four young immigrants, Mohammad Jan Azad (played by the Hazara poet and journalist Basir Ahang), who was co-writer of the film along with Doriana Leoneff and the director herself.

Best Documentary) juxtaposes two tragedies involving women workers: the first being the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in NYC in 1913, which caused the death of 150 women, mostly immigrant workers; and the second, a century later, in Barletta (Apulia), in 2011, in which another group of female textile workers were crushed when their illegal factory collapsed. *Bated Breath* is instead inspired by the diary of Emanuele Patanè, who received his doctorate in Pharmacy at the University of Catania and who died of lung cancer in 2003, five years before the chemistry labs were closed due to their pollution. Quatriglio inserted in her reconstruction of these events both Emanuele's father's testimony and the accusations of the young man himself (voice over by Michele Riondino) regarding the lack of oversight and precautions in his workplace.

A similar docudrama vein is characterized in the works of Marina Spada, Serena Nono, Federica Di Giacomo, and once again Sabrina Guzzanti. Marina Spada dedicates *Poetry That Looks at Me* (*Poesia che mi guardi*, 2009) to the Milanese poet Antonia Pozzi, who belonged to a prestigious family from Lombardy (her father was a lawyer appreciated by the Mussolini regime, her mother a highly cultivated countess), and who committed suicide in 1938, at the age of twenty-six. The movie's title is borrowed from her verses, and following the writings and the places frequented by her protagonist, the filmmaker amalgamates current images and images from the past (found footage, family home movies, photos with and of Antonia Pozzi herself), composing a fascinating portrait of a young woman who was both vital and talented, however unsuited to her time and environment. After her suicide, her parents censored her poetic works, but they were rediscovered many years later.

The Venetian painter Serena Nono, Luigi Nono's daughter and Arnold Schönberg's grandchild, stages in her movie *The Way of the Cross* (*Via della Croce*, 2009) an original Passion of Christ with the homeless people of La Casa dell'Ospitalità di Sant'Alvise in Venice. Shot in the alleys of a scarcely known area of Venice, the movie blends christological *tableaux vivants* with the protagonists' declarations about the Gospels and their own hardships. With this choral *happening* of a marginalized humanity, the filmmaker celebrates 'hospitality as a cultural value'.¹⁶

Rich in humanity and anthropological tension is *Set Me Free* (*Liberami*, 2016, Orizzonti Award for Best Film at the Venice Film Festival) by Federica Di Giacomo, a documentary dealing with the phenomenon of exorcism, which indirectly shows the film as a *work in progress*. During the filming of *Set Me Free*, the filmmaker approached the world of possession and exorcism, gradually shedding her prejudices on the subject, and penetrating it with a rigorous *participant observation*. The movie promotes critical thinking about and a real

¹⁶ An ulterior multi-ethnic and multi-lingual work by Serena Nono, again from a workshop made with La Casa dell'Ospitalità is her costume drama *Venice Saved* (*Venezia salva*, 2013), on the failed sacking of Venice in 1618 by the Spanish Crown, following the tragedy after the same title of Simone Weil (1943).

knowledge of the explored situations. The phenomenon under investigation, which we tend loosely to associate with the Middle Ages, has recently made a comeback in quite a number of Western countries, a return which a few years ago would have been regarded as highly unlikely, and that forced the Vatican into multiplying the recruitment of exorcists by their bishops. In Italy the regions that have the highest number of recruits are Lombardy and Sicily, where Di Giacomo carried out her research for the film for three years. There is indeed a church school for the priests willing to dedicate themselves to this kind of activity, a school in which they also study the various fields of psychology. In the selection process that characterized the filmmaker's research, the inadequacy of any discourse that was not based on the lived experience of the characters became evident through the observational use of the camera.

On the other hand, Sabina Guzzanti took four years to make *The State-Mafia Pact*, a vehement cinematic pamphlet on the deal between State and Mafia, which has recently (re)emerged on the Italian judicial stage, casting many shadows on the leading personalities of the current political landscape. The movie mixes cabaret, journalistic fiction and investigative-film as well as archival footage and ad hoc interviews, effectively combining the fictional component with documentary elements.

Memory is once again the explicit core theme of another quartet of documentaries made by Italian women filmmakers in 2001, within the series *The Sacher Diaries* (*I diari della Sacher*), promoted by Nanni Moretti in collaboration with the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (National Diary Archive). Two of them are tales of existential redemption: this is the case for the ex-convict protagonist of *In the Name of the Italian People* (*Nel nome del popolo italiano*, 2001) by Valia Santella, as well as for the story of the female protagonist of *Luisa's Notebooks* (*I quaderni di Luisa*, 2001) by Isabella Sandri, who confesses her marital unhappiness and her resistance for 'the good of the children and the family' only in her diary.

The other two film directors dealing with the memory theme, Mara Chiaretti and Susanna Nicchiarelli, concentrate instead on the experiences of war with their respective documentaries, *Davai Bistré!-Forward! Quick March* (*Davai Bistré!-Avanti! Presto!* by Mara Chiaretti) and *Cra Cri Do Bo* (by Susanna Nicchiarelli). *Davai Bistré!* does so through the indelible memories of a survivor of Mussolini Russian Campaign, while *Cra Cri Do Bo* considers war through the softened memories of three *bourgeoise* young girls, alert and intelligent but still protected from war's horrors.¹⁷

In addition to focusing on themes of voyage and itinerancy, recent documentaries by women offer a valuable observatory of excruciating contemporary issues and global emergencies. Thus, Giuliana Gamba travels across Iraq and Armenia to talk about the Kurds' plight in her *Hard Life in Kurdistan* (*In Kurdistan è*

¹⁷ Another documentary by Susanna Nicchiarelli, *For Life* (*Per tutta la vita*, 2014), made of archival footage and home movies, focuses on the definitive introduction of divorce in Italy (1974) and on the significance of this conquest in the process of women's self-awareness.

difficile, 2004); Laura Angiulli explores the Bosnian territory battered by the war in what was formerly Yugoslavia, working with the mothers of Srebrenica in her *Towards East (Verso est*, 2008); and Barbara Cupisti describes in *Mothers (Madri*, 2007, David of Donatello Award in 2008) the experience of some Israeli and Palestinian mothers who lost their children in the endless war between the two peoples. These mothers further reacted to their pain by founding the association Parents Circle, which helps families to contend with their mourning, starting with the recognition of a common suffering and continuing by advancing new paths for dialogue and mutual understanding.

These movies are excellent examples of the manifold 'nomadic' view that inspires them, visions testifying to the 'epistemological positions' of these *auteuses* counterpoised against forms of hegemony and exclusion. Moreover, they represent the voyage, often through uneasy and unsafe places, as the essential prerogative for exploring the chosen subject matter, together with the anthropological tension of *participant observation* of these filmmakers.

Following the methodological work of *Mothers*, Cupisti shot *Womanity* (2018), which relates vigorous female stories. First there is the Egyptian Sisa, awarded as 'ideal mother' (in her twenties, widowed and pregnant, she has been disguising herself as a man for over forty years to be able to work as a shoeshine and so raise her daughter); next are Geeta and Ritu from India, at the forefront in defence of women (against the outrage of feminicides, of attacks with acids, of killings of baby girls and female fetuses); and finally there is the American Jonnie, a truck driver in an oil area of North Dakota mostly inhabited by men and suffering a high rate of violence and prostitution (she strives to overcome her complexes as an overweight woman and form a friendship with her few female peers there).

Barbara Cupisti also authors of *I am. Stories of Slavery (Io sono. Storie di schiavitù*, 2011) on the burning issue of migrants, in particular of those who came to Italy to seek refuge from wars and misery. In order to pay back stratospheric debts (from 4 to 12 thousand euros) to crime organizations, these people undergo exploitation with the black market for labor as well as prostitution, sinking into an invisible 'underworld' bereft of rights. They are modern-day slaves, victims of human trafficking, which is a violation of fundamental Human Rights. The profit of this silent 'underworld' is gigantic: migrant smuggling is the third large source of income for organised crime, second only to arms and drugs. In 2015 Cupisti deals again with this epochal issue of immigration from countries at war, making *Exiles (Esuli)*, a three-part documentary filmed in refugee camps in Kenya, Jordan and Turkey, as well as among Tibetan exiles in India and climate refugees from Brazil and California.

The aftermath of war is the core of *Ward 54* (2010), directed by Monica Maggioni, an international war reporter and former president of RAI (the Italian State Television). *Ward 54* deals with the post-traumatic stress syndrome that affects 20% of American veterans from Iraq. As the only Italian journalist embedded in the US military campaign during the second war in Iraq, Maggioni had the opportunity to closely follow the Iraqi Freedom mission and subsequently

its side effects on the soldiers' lives after returning home. In *Ward 54*, these young soldiers (all born in the early 1980s), haunted from 'survivor's guilt', live on the brink of the abyss without being adequately assisted, while their families are powerless and abandoned to themselves. According to data from the *Army Times*, the US military magazine, 18 veterans commit suicide every month, for a total number that (just until 2009) exceeded that of those killed in the war.¹⁸

The Iraqi war through children's eyes has been recounted by the freelance documentarian and reporter Francesca Mannocchi in her film *Isis, Tomorrow. The Lost Souls of Mosul* (2018). Mannocchi, who collaborates with Italian broadcasters (RAI 3, La7, Sky TG24) as well as with Italian and international magazines (*L'Espresso*, *Al Jazeera*, *Middle East Eye*, and *Focus*), deals with migration (see her reports from Tunisia, Calais, the Balkans and Libya), and was awarded the Giustolisi Prize for her inquest *Missione impossibile* (*Mission impossible*), on migrant smuggling and Libyan prisons. The children in her *Isis, Tomorrow* are the children of the Isis militants, educated and trained for violence.

Another Italian journalist, Paola Piacenza, conveys a similar professional intensity in her documentary *Shadows from the Deep* (*Ombre dal fondo*, 2016), centering on the work of her colleague Domenico Quirico, a correspondent for the newspaper *La Stampa*, who was kidnapped in Syria on April 8 2013 and freed after 152 days of captivity. That ordeal was indeed explicitly the base of the conception of the movie highlighting Quirico's professional ethics and his methods of investigative journalism ('an investigator of the human condition', as Piacenza defines him). The journalist's reflections are accompanied by images of his return to the area where he was kidnapped, together with his passage through the Russian-Ukrainian front and his patient waiting for the authorities' permission to enter Syria. 'The return is not to home, the return is to here', Quirico says at the end, showing how much the work of the correspondent can be profound, complex, questioning and extremely human: far from the glamour that all too often is associated with the journalist profession.

And after these journalist-filmmakers, it is worthwhile to mention other Italian women reporters who were, and some of them still are, in the forefront of international war scenarios: from veteran Lilli Gruber to Tiziana Ferrario, Giovanna Botteri, Maria Cuffaro, Lucia Goracci, Liliana Mistretta, to name a few. Above all, I would like to commemorate two young Italian journalists killed while carrying out their nomadic work with passion and competence: Ilaria Alpi,

¹⁸ Maggioni filmed also *Out of Tebran (four stories)* (2011), on the stories of four Iranian expatriates, opposing the Teheran regime, who faced the vicissitudes of clandestine escapes. Conceived during a trip between Asia and Europe that lasted one year, her second documentary shadows 'some Iranian exiles, forced to flee their homeland, then under the regime of Ahmadinejad, where 'those who think are in danger'. Their stories are linked by the voice of a young woman, whose silhouette in half-light is sometimes seen. In the end the audience discovers that she is the daughter of a close collaborator of Ahmadinejad, and that she is herself a filmmaker, who had to leave Iran for having made a documentary on torture and human rights.

a RAI reporter killed in Somalia in 1994 with her cameraman Miran Hrovatin because she had discovered an international traffic in weapons and toxic waste in this African Country; and Maria Grazia Cutuli, *Corriere della sera* reporter, killed in Afghanistan in 2001 together with three other non-Italian journalists. Her last article in the newspaper, published the same day of her killing, is titled *A gas depot nervine in Osama's base*. These are unforgettable, beautiful minds curious about the life and the world: with a passion 'vigilant and disarmed', to put it in Cesare Zavattini's words, to witness and document the complexities of the present — and with a brilliant and rigorous gaze, which celebrates an irreducibly civil and humanistic audiovisual practice.

As a conclusion, I would also highlight two significant experiences of female protagonists within the current Italian audiovisual scenario, MAUDE and ADA, which were presented in 2011 in the program *The Strenght of Truth (La forza del vero)* by the Laboratorio Immagine Donna (Laboratory Image Woman), the historic international Women's Film Festival of Florence, born in 1975, the oldest festival devoted to female directors in Europe.¹⁹ MAUDE, based in Rome, is formed by media activists and cinema professionals in all film roles, and in Florence it proposed an example of flash-movies for discussing female issues and activism campaigning. ADA is formed by a group of women documentarians from Tuscany — ADA stands for Associazione Documentaristi Anonimi (Anonymous Documentarians Society) — which is committed to disseminating documentary culture through educational workshops, documentary screenings, and so forth, as well as being committed to serving as a reference point for those who work or want to work in the documentary field, as a place for the exchange of ideas and for structural support.

Far from directionless wandering, these audiovisual works aim at a clear goal: to be at once part of a place and to be on the outside, in order to find a proper observational range. Their essential characteristic is their rootedness in the present. This filmmaking has 'the courage to be anchored to our present' and 'in the world', to quote Giona Nazzaro: '(it) is able to think the present in order to imagine the future'.²⁰ These films are 'the result of situations that saw them coming alive. They come from specific places that go towards the world'.²¹

Ultimately, the audiovisual survey considered here deploys the conceptual duet *flânerie* — *nomadism* with which this essay began. Far more than a purely academic formula, this dyad summarizes the core points of the documentary practice of numerous contemporary Italian women filmmakers: liberation from the confinement traditionally assigned to women combined with a militant civil

¹⁹ Excerpts from the ADA manifesto are provided by the website of the Laboratorio Immagine Donna di Firenze.

²⁰ Giona A. Nazzaro, *For a Cinema of Today*, Catalogo della 34. Settimana internazionale della critica, 76. Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica, la Biennale di Venezia 2019 – SNCCI, p. 11.

²¹ Ibidem.

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commitment, understood in its deepest meaning as fostering an active citizenship, one which fully participates in the construction of the common good.

These key points are achieved through the exploration of what we do not yet know, thanks to a gaze focused on unknown realities, a gesture that affirms — through cinema — our ethical curiosity as fully human beings. Therefore, these audiovisual practices bear witness to the professional advancement of women in a notoriously male-dominated field. They make publicly visible both the cultural and political status of the female agency. In so doing, they experiment with a variety of unexplored narrative possibilities, outside of the ones offered by established fictional or non-fictional structures and formats.



On Visual Walking-Remembering *Warmipura* – Among Women

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Abstract

The present essay is an extended conversation between the authors, on the critical literature of the experimental women's cinema and video and documentaries of Colombian female artists. The meaning of self, womanhood, and female artistic practices is in the focus of the conversation. Methodologically we approach this essay as *warmipura*, a female circle, or rather, as we propose, maternal space of kin and alliance-making with multiple others around and within us. It is the space of porous openness to the world, the community, co-working and co-knowing, all together the process of co-creating with multiple others both human and non-human. Openness to the other in self while seeing self in the other allows making new alliance, that in their turn open up the new worlds to explore, their potentialities. Experimental practice is seen as such maternal space, an *assemblage* using Deleuze-Guattarian term, of *bits of life*, adopting Smelik and Lykke's words. Largely informed by the feminist new materialism and posthumanism, the essay explores the alliances, intentionally, intuitively, and organically happening in the maternal space of *warmipura*. The present essay focuses on the vitality of fragments and allies in the process of disassembling self through and with the video practice.

Introduction: We

In Quechua *warmipura* means 'among women', the female community, togetherness of exchanging stories, the everyday knowledge and skills, the knowledge of generations about the world, family or crafts, passing them on. It is used here to name the experimental maternal space and practice — not as an isolating and isolated territory of conservation of traditions, but the porous openness to the world, the community, co-working and co-knowing, of 'bits of life'.¹ Life, as Smelik & Lykke unfold, is not a homogenous harmonious whole,

¹ Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke, 'Bits of Life: An Introduction', in *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology*, ed. by Anneke Smelik and Nina Lykke (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), pp. ix–xix.

but an ongoing dis-assemblage of different discourses and practices, the biological and technological, their manifestations across disciplines, while making alliances along the way.² These *bits of life*, Deleuze-Guattarian *disassemblages*, and Minh-ha's *fragmentations* are our methodology, our subject, partners in conversation, our kin. *Warmipura* is a support group, kin and alliance-making with multiple others around and within us. The present essay focuses on the vitality of fragments and allies in the process of disassembling self through and with the video practice.

Audio-visual is the object of study, subject for reflection but also the language of expression for each of the three authors of this essay. We want to share our artistic and technical experiences and expertise employing a collaborative duo (tri/multi)ethnographic methodology³ to discuss how visual forms and technics are part of our knowing the world, how different senses complement each other on this path and how they transform the visual expression. What unites us is our interest in memory and walking. We understand walking as artistic and research practice that enables *staying with the trouble*, in *crisis*, on the margins and in the minority, crucial for further deterritorialization and mutual transformation in and with the world.⁴

Our dialogue partners include theoretical works we turn to in the next section and works by Colombian female documentalists Marta Hincapié, Josephine Landertinger Forero, Andrea Said, Melisa Sánchez Hincapié, Luisa Sossa, and Clare Weiskopf.⁵ Their works share intimacy, explore different senses without limiting oneself to the canon. Using light and closeups, they aim at sharing the emotion, exploring their interplay with memory on the way of creating the fluid constantly changing knowledge. Without moralization or judgement, they explore relations between generations, family members, the victim and the

² Smelik and Lykke, ix.

³ Richard Sawyer and Joe Norris, *Duoethnography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).

⁴ Gill Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 105–106, 371; Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), p. 3; Trinh Minh-ha and Jean-Paul Bourdier, *L'Autre marche (The Other Walk)*, *Installation*. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France, 19 June 2006–2009 (2012), <<http://trinhminh-ha.com/lautre-marche-the-other-walk/>> [accessed 10 November 2019]; Simon O'Sullivan, 'From Stuttering and Stammering to the Diagram: Towards a Minor Art Practice?', in *Minor Photography Connecting Deleuze and Guattari to Photography Theory*, ed. by Mieke Bleyen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), pp. 3–16; Cornel West, 'The New Cultural Politics of Difference', in *Out There. Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by Russell Ferguson (New York: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 19–38 (p. 20).

⁵ Marta Hincapié, director, *Piel*, Documentary, Colombia (2006); Marta Hincapié, director, *Los demonios sueltos*, Documentary, Colombia (2010); Josephine Landertinger Forero, director, *Home – El país de la ilusión*, Documentary, Colombia, Portugal (2016); Andrea Said Camargo, director, *Looking for*, Documentary, Colombia (2012); Melisa Sánchez Hincapié, director, *Warmipura*, Documentary, Colombia (2014), *Elemental*, Fiction, Colombia (2015), <https://vimeo.com/116188301> [accessed 10 November 2019], *Carpe Diem*, Documentary, Colombia (2016), <https://vimeo.com/171328705> [accessed 10 November 2019], *Kairós*, Documentary, Colombia (2018), <https://vimeo.com/207853415>, [accessed 10 November 2019]; Luisa Sossa, director, *Inés. Recuerdos de una vida*, Documentary, Colombia (2013); Clare Weiskopf & N. van Hemelryck, directors, *Amazona*, Documentary, Colombia (2016).

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murderer, the role of women in the conflict, the meaning of the conventional truths, motherhood. Using a wide range of sources such as diaries, writings, conversations, observations, thoughts and again, emotions, they walk, fly, dance, run, float throughout their movies and invite the viewer to share the walk towards each one's Self as equal rather than as the led one. Documentaries explore the thin line between fiction and fact, imaginaries, and truth regimes.

Throughout this essay we revisit our own visual material directly in case of Bridget and behind the scenes as we discuss the women's experimental audio-visual practices in each-other's context, in women's circle. The essay is a memory walk that helps to understand and so to (co)-create⁶ the theory, practice and thought of the other and those of ours. We keep the narrative poetic language of conversation, intimately random as a resistance and deconstruction of the pre-established order in exploration of the multiplicities and potentialities. The essay is an explorative interplay of memories, experiences, thoughts and reflections, of 'I's in the entangled wholeness of 'We'.

... *women*...

Proverbs of different people reveal prejudice against women, both acceptance and denial of their wisdom and loyalty. They reflect the traditional place of a woman in the society, relations within female community but what is more important they speak about the socially conventional separation of the community to male and female, which is justified by the pre-given difference in the way of thinking, feeling, saying and seeing things. They also speak about the community and ties within it. Russian proverbs, for instance, underline the marginality of women, the general hardship and under-appreciation of women's work in the patriarchal society: 'Women's work is unseen' (*Бабыю работу не видно*), 'Women's happiness is like Indian summer — it is either short or not happening' (*Бабые счастье, что бабые лето — то коротко, то вовсе нету*), 'The women regret about it while the girls long for marriage' (*Бабы каются — девки замуж собираются*).

As we discuss the social imaginations on gender, Polina remembers:

I walk up the stairs. My hand is on the rails. I suddenly notice my hand. I am 24. I enjoy what I see: long, slender fingers. A silver ring is slightly big. Have I lost weight or is it a cold day? The thought jumps to sadness: I do not have a man to admire my slim hands while they are. I am wasted. — Fifteen years later, I still remember that thought and it strikes me: the fear of change, the fear of being alone, the fear of being alone without a man, the fear, fear, fear; the fear of the presence of self.

⁶ Trinh Minh-ha, 'The World as Foreign Land', in *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Minh-Ha (New York: Routledge, 1991b), pp. 185–200 (p. 194).

It echoes the idea of the social educational and performative origin of the gender relations, often discussed in the critical feminism literature, its profound rootedness in the social order.⁷ Postmodern feminist thought emphasizes transcendence of the binary approach throughout the dominated Western thought and its inadequacy altogether.⁸ Alaimo & Heckman summarize, ‘that it is imperative [...] to deconstruct the dichotomy itself, to move to an understanding that does not rest on oppositions’.⁹ In its deconstruction of the binary world view and practices of looking as a tool of oppression, discrimination and violence, feminist thought¹⁰ is seen as a source of sensitivity to any form of oppression, as a space of ‘in-between-ness and flows’,¹¹ of ‘shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc. that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy — ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition’,¹² making kin or alliances with multiple others, which includes the materiality of the entangled and intra-active or mutually constitutive world,¹³ a space of vitality and *a mode of becoming*, ‘becoming-woman/other/animal/earth, under the impact of emergence of “Life” as a subject of political and ethical concern’,¹⁴ of alterity and fragmentation as ‘a way of living with differences without turning them into opposites, nor trying to assimilate them out of insecurity. [...] A way of living at the borders’.¹⁵

Female/women’s/feminist space then is understood here rather as a maternal space. We do not speak of the psychoanalytical all devouring mother compensating for her castration and Freudian binary principal of *either devour or being devoured* principle,¹⁶ of either with or without penis. Nor do we speak

⁷ Judith Butler, *Undoing gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 198–99; bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), pp. 5–6; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 15; Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), pp. 833–44 (p. 834).

⁸ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, ‘Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory’, in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 1–19; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 59–66; Iris van der Tuin, *Generational Feminism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

⁹ Alaimo & Hekman, ‘Introduction’, p. 2.

¹⁰ Marita Sturken & Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006), p. 78.

¹² bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 57.

¹³ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, p. 2; Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, p. 33.

¹⁴ Braidotti, p. 42.

¹⁵ Pratibha Parmar & Trinh Minh-ha, ‘Woman, Native, Other’, *Feminist Review*, 36 (1990), 65–74 (pp. 71–72).

¹⁶ Kristyn Gorton, *Theorising Desire: From Freud to Feminism to Film* (New York: Palgrave, 2008); Ulrike May, *Freud at Work: On the History of Psychoanalytic Theory and Practice, with an Analysis of Freud’s Patient Record Books* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror. Theories of Representation and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988).

about a mother ‘capable of super-human feats of altruism, putting aside her own grievances, doubts and worries for the sake of the child and all with a sunshine smile’,¹⁷ when the choice is either a masochistic self-sacrifice or be punished by the society and fate.¹⁸ Together with other feminist new materialist thinkers, Braidotti also warns against the neo-liberal feminist version of patriarchy — the *syndrome of the exceptional woman*, which only ‘fosters a new sense of isolation among women and hence new forms of vulnerability’.¹⁹ In her summary of the feminist cinematic ethics based on her profound revision of philosophy of Claire Denis, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, Hole proposes that maternal pregnant body could be rather the metaphor of the on-going alterity, ‘an ongoing process of sharing out’, a space of mutual becoming, porous openness and dependence, ‘an opening and extension, rather than a boundary and enclosure’,²⁰ the space for the new sensorial possibilities: of listening rather than speaking, touching and feeling rather than watching and seeing. It challenges the dominant patriarchal narratives while being a materiality situated in the relations of power. It is the space of queerness that explores the alternatives in seeing, feeling, thinking from within the margins.²¹

From the feminist new materialist perspective, the world is seen as ‘a dynamic web of interconnections or hybrid contaminations, as a principle of radical non-purity’.²² It was well summarized in *Avengers: Infinity War* by Bruce Banner, the character impersonated by Marc Ruffalo: ‘Your mind is made up of a complex construct of overlays: J.a.R.V.I.S., Ultron, Tony, me, the Stone — all of them mixed together, all of them learning from one another’.²³ This is ‘the entanglement of material, bio-cultural and symbolic forces in the making of the subject’,²⁴ which goes beyond mere discourse and semantics in the binary when one is active and the other is passive, a repository, representation of someone’s desires, will or consciousness.²⁵ The proposed alternative to the above-mentioned binaries is a co-creating maternal force that operates on the premise of the ‘more egalitarian principles of interconnection, solidarity and teamwork’.²⁶ The maternal force focuses on presence rather than on lacking, of being self, ‘an

¹⁷ Emily White, ‘Hollywood’s Obsession with the Devouring Mother’, *Movie Metropolis*, blog entry, 22 July 2018, <<https://moviemetropolis.net/2018/07/22/hollywoods-obsession-with-the-devouring-mother>>, par. 6 [accessed 10 November 2019].

¹⁸ Frigga Haug, *Beyond Female Masochism. Memory-Work and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1992), p. 77; Smelik, pp. 13–14.

¹⁹ Braidotti, p. 45.

²⁰ Kristin L. Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics. Claire Denis, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 127.

²¹ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema. From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

²² Braidotti, p. 57.

²³ *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony Russo, 2018).

²⁴ Braidotti, p. 37.

²⁵ Silverman, p. 133; Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked*, p. 10.

²⁶ Braidotti, p. 45.

active, signifying force; an agent in its own terms'.²⁷ It is the Deleuze-Guattarian space of possibility, potentiality, hope and alliance in the journey of the ever-becoming-other subjectivity.

Experimental: Assembling 'Bits of Life'

As an alternative art field, experimental together with avant-garde and counter-cinema and video becomes women's natural ally, and, as various scholars mention, women excel in this art form.²⁸ In her detailed analysis of the feminist cinema, Malone speaks of various tendencies, strategies or voices of the female cinema, which concern both the plot as the form and media in the deconstruction of the power relations: social and cultural commentary, revealing stereotypes and hierarchies, transforming routine to art, intimate and caring view, an exploring instead of voyeuristic camera, no judging, reflection on one's own identity without the necessity of being validated by a male character. While Malone suggests that the best support to women in film is to watch movies made by women,²⁹ it is clear for all the authors writing about 'the female gaze' that it is never based on 'the narrow view of gender'³⁰ without considering the complex structure of the world we live in and the patriarchal order that forms its truth regimes. Referring to Braidotti, Smelik stresses that "the female subject" is by no means a monolithic category'.³¹ Neither are the cinema, filming techniques nor a spectator, emphasizes Bolton.³² Video itself is symbolic, cultural and a material category, as feminist cinema theorists argue.³³ It requires consideration of multiple complex relations and affects towards deconstruction of the form and media, beyond representational and binary based psychoanalysis, beyond the opposition of *the gazing* and *the gazed* towards further inclusion of media, spectator, the author herself,³⁴ towards multiple new alliances, whether with

²⁷ Alaimo and Hekman, 'Introduction', p. 12.

²⁸ *Women's Experimental Cinema. Critical Frameworks*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke UP, 2007); Alicia Malone, *The Female Gaze. Essential Movies Made by Women* (Coral Gables, FL: Mango Publishers, 2018); Janet McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies. Writing the Woman Into the Cinema* (London: Wallflower, 2004); Patricia White, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015).

²⁹ Malone, p. 13.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 12.

³¹ Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked*, p. 32.

³² Lucy Bolton, *Film and Female Consciousness: Irigaray, Cinema and Thinking Women* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), p. 8.

³³ Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

³⁴ Anneke Smelik, 'Feminist Film Theory', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 2007), pp. 491–505; Nancy N. Chen & Trinh Minh-ha, "Speaking Nearby": A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 8.1 (1992), 82–91; Trinh Minh-ha, 'All-Owning Spectatorship', *Quar. Rev. of Film & Video*, 13.1–3 (1991), 189–204; Trinh Minh-ha, 'Painting with Music: A Performance Across Cultures', *Discourse*, 18.3 (1996), 3–19.

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nature, a colleague or a family member, body, objects around us, camera, sound, archives or the found footage.

Various scholars spoke of ‘the paradox of the unrepresentability of the feminine’.³⁵ It is not enough for a woman ‘to become who they are’³⁶ but to rather deconstruct the meaning of a woman, critically revise it to prevent further inequalities and discrimination from taking place, to become the Deleuze-Guattarian minority. White characterizes minor cinema as practice of ‘resistance to totalizing narratives of the world system’.³⁷ Colombian female filmmaker Catalina Mesa said in an interview, ‘I can’t speak from the position of gender. I would invent things’.³⁸ Yet, she does speak here about certain ‘female energy’ that circles her body together with the male one and is responsible for ‘the receptivity, dialogue and cocreation, considering the other in the moment of creating’. Another Colombian filmmaker, Natalia Orozco, in the same interview sharing her experience of directing a movie, spoke of dialogue, not trying to demonstrate you have it all figured out but co-creating. From this perspective, we speak of experimental as a space of exploring, the practice of critical revision, deconstruction, deterritorialization, queering and co-creation or the maternal space.

Walking

Bridget: I define myself as a walking artist — while moving my body becomes a means of creating art. As I move through space, my senses interact with the environment; touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste, all contribute to designing my walk experience.

I put walking first. I walk through the city and the urban landscape searching for new passageways and unknown paths, focusing on architectural elements, signs, noises and spaces. I like to explore and reveal the urban landscape in a way that reconnects us with the ground. Urban landscapes obliterate the horizon, creating an effect of constant immediacy and sudden surprise, cutting us off from a deeper sense of belonging and memory. The concrete surface that the urban walker glides over, suffocates the earth underneath. In the city, we are often deprived of a sensual connection with the soil. I have made artwork in urban areas. Yet, the main core of my art practice deals with the interrelationship between nature, memory and walking and cannot thrive in the urban landscape.

³⁵ McCabe, p. 68.

³⁶ Bolton, p. 38.

³⁷ White, *Women’s Cinema*, p. 13.

³⁸ María Antonia Giraldo Rojas, ‘Las mujeres en el cine colombiano’, *El Colombiano* (2018) <<https://www.elcolombiano.com/cultura/cine/las-mujeres-en-el-cine-colombiano-GE9251899>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

Polina: For me walking is not something prior to art, but art itself. It is breathing and touching the invisible matter. I admire people who walk as if dancing and speak as if singing. As I wrote once, walking makes you 'feel your inner breeze of the morning air, listen to your inner talk of the birds and trees and explore this forest of thoughts and images'.³⁹ There is a lot of imagination in walking. It wakes you up and leads you through the multiverse — the multitude of the parallel and intersecting worlds. It is not the melancholic memory of a lonely walker, walking is a constant co-creation of the memories-essences of those worlds with everything and everyone you touch, see, move with, breathe in and with.

Bridget:

It is a bodily connection. The cycle of my own body influences the way I perceive the natural revolution of various elements surrounding me. The rhythm of the seasons and of the sun, the pull, the flow, the strength, the rhythm of the moon and the tides, have all inspired the way my body moves along the paths in my walking art.

My works have taken place along the coastal path, as I photograph and film various images of the sea's pulling motion. I articulate images of vast empty beaches with close-ups of the remnants of high tides, pieces of fishing nets, seaweed, and lines of gravel. In the video *D'une plage l'autre* (*From One Beach, to Another*), whilst walking, I convey memories of the daytime play along the shoreline. The video is full of nostalgia, perhaps that of a young mother, who was once a child and who questions precious time, simple moments that slip away just like the tide clears the beach, returning whatever it desires.

Polina: Walking whilst aking memories is the practice of making the in-between space of dismantling and becoming. It is rhythmic like the tides. Those rhythms rather than divide mark the lines of disassemblage.

Bridget: In *D'une plage l'autre*, we are caught in between: two beaches at two separate moments — day and night —, two tides — high and low —, two realities — child and adult. My pico-projector implies a strong bright light and surrounding darkness —, a mysterious and unusual lighting on an ocean beach which evokes a dreamy surrealistic ambiance, a definite interval in space and time.

³⁹ Polina Golovátina-Mora, *Photography and Notes*, <<http://www.golovatinamora.info/>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

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Polina:

Walking along the seashore I silently talk to the sea. When my admiration reaches a certain point, I feel the sea's speech: I encounter a shell of the most interesting shape or colour, a piece of amber, or a piece of ceramics with borders and ornaments transformed by the time-movement of the water-sand-air-salt-something else and the material of ceramics-enamel-paint inter/intra-action. Am I part of this now? What do I share? I wonder what material could better evoke empathy to the sea: the sound, the drum rhythm, a flow dance, classic or modern then? a piece of purl-wise knitting, painting or a stone panel? What image would be more appropriate for the sea as a living being?

Bridget:

As I walk, my whole being is attuned to the meshwork of nature. Each footstep resonates throughout my whole body, the touch of my soles interacting with my sight and my hearing. Colours, forms, light, sound, temperature evolve as I make my way through nature. I question. How can I show the everchanging landscape around my moving body in a work of art? What do I search for when I make art as I move along? What do we learn from our wayfaring practices? And how is my camera employed as a tool to unveil the landscape's secrets? I am filled with awe whilst I wander. I feel my belonging to the universal interplay that takes place around and throughout my walking body. I feel that this same landscape acts as a receptacle.

Photographic interface punctuates my walk, each individual image belonging to the whole like a series of strides along the path. Moving image, whether it be an experimental video practice, projecting images whilst walking or recreating a space for ambulation via installation-projection⁴⁰ help me tell the story of our common with nature, to share our collective memory.

Polina:

The artwork that walking inspires is not the mere repetition or the reproduction of the walk. It is the other bodily experience, the other walk. As Trinh Minh-ha and Jean-Paul Bourdier argued with their installation *L'Autre marche* (The Other Walk), it is a learning practice 'how to walk anew'⁴¹ in the multispecies assemblage of multiple selves and multiple others.

Bridget:

During the art residency in the French Pyrenees, I met eight individuals who were willing to walk with me for the artwork *Drift with Me* I had in mind. I

⁴⁰ Bridget Sheridan, Installations-Projections, *Marcher Créer* <<https://www.bridgetsheridan.com/>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

⁴¹ Minh-ha & Bourdier, *L'Autre marche*, Phase III.

would move through my 'fixed spatial field', using the words of Guy Debord,⁴² in order to understand the psychogeographical articulations of the place.

Each walk was unique and meant something different for each of my participants. For the projection, I invited them to choose a manual activity that they could link to their walk and perform it while I was projecting our filmed walk on their hands. I wanted to show the mesh of the hands and the feet, following the Tim Ingold's idea of the strong relationship between the movement of the hands, that of the mind and that of the feet whilst walking.

During the projection, my eight walkers began to drift within their own walk. Projecting the video of the walk on their hands created a special relationship between the landscape and their manual work. One woman, the potter, found herself creating bowls which seemed more magically organic. Trees would pop into her bowls whilst the video of the walk would accompany the sensual movement of her fingers on the clay. Bright green grass would highlight the wheel and her skin as she gave life to the bowls. The other participant, whose hand ran along the paper while she wrote a tale, had the impression she was walking in water.

The projection on the hands was re-materializing the walk as I filmed and projected, then re-filmed and re-projected in the exhibition room. The installation was an immersive experience for the viewer-'sensor' as Weber suggests.⁴³ The smell of the earth, the swaying movement of the eight videos, the sounds would all work together recollecting the movement of bodies walking. The uncanny interplay of light, colours and shadows transports *the sensor* into a different spacetime.

Polina:

As in Deleuzian image-movement and image-time,⁴⁴ where every body, every surface produce ever new and different event in a constantly evolving multidimensional film.

Bridget:

I had another open-air installation in the same village. I chose part of the path that led up to the fields. In a space resembling a tunnel, I installed eight felt tents. In each shelter, I projected a video walk. I attached the structures to the lowest branches, pegged the material into the earth and then hung eight pico-projectors from the top of the tents so that the video image was cast on the surface of the path. I noticed that the children were particularly curious to look into each tent and

⁴² Guy Debord, *Theory of the Dérive* (UBUWeb papers, 1956), <<http://tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/derivededebord.pdf>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

⁴³ Pascale Weber, *Le corps à l'épreuve de l'installation-projection* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

⁴⁴ Gill Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Gill Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

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discover what was inside. Each child would make their way along the path, crouch down and peer into each tent for a substantial amount of time. Was it the small illuminations inside the tent, the magic lanterns that would arouse their curiosity? I do believe the *Drift with Me* den-like space of this dark path and the choice of these small felt structures both created a small haven space along the path.

Random as intimate

Melisa Sánchez, *Elemental*: the sound of the jackhammer is overwhelming. Close up: a person opens their eyes. Next shot: their necklace, back to the eyes, the face looks tense. Asphalt, pavement tiles, pavement tiles with grass. Is it the resilience of life or the destruction for the sterile order of the concrete? A side camera, the person looks aside. Workers are repairing the road. Camera shows yellow sign on the engine: danger. Person's hands in the form of the cradle hold a little green plant with some soil. Water drips through their hands on asphalt. Camera jumps from one image to another creating the sense of irritation and panic. A wall with the Pachamama stencil graffiti. A person closes their eyes and opens them slower as if in disbelief of awakening. Forest. Camera shows more of the person and creates the sensation of breathing. The person looks around wondering where to plant the little sapling. Water is dripping but now to the different fertile soil. Camera shows leaves. The person is lying on the soil in the foetus position, which produces the sensation of peace and recharging. The sapling is planted; the person lies naked around it as if in mutual rebirth. Their hair is entangled with the pine needles and grass, camera shows their skin with its imperfections, fingers and toes and then as if expanding, switches to the tree bark, lichen and moss. A person lies on the bottom of the forest. Camera retreats showing more of the forest with the person being its part.

The nature appears in *Elemental* not as an escape or as all devouring monster but as a nourish mother, a space of mutual growth and co-creation, a space of birth of Self-in. Melisa's experimental videos share the philosophy of the collective K-minantes (*Walkers*), she belonged to: filming while walking.⁴⁵ They explore the intra-action of everyday details, thoughts, memories, sounds, light and colours as the video proceeds as if questioning *how can one show* such dynamic entities as memory and identity of *the moving body in a work of art*? Melisa creates the in-between space with her focus on the details of the swirling elements, bodies and things. Two videos, *Kairós* and *Carpe Diem* complement each other. Description to *Kairós* says: 'New change of colour; it is a space open to randomness. A trip directly to the centre, being a passenger (her) of the rain (deluge) which is just starting. The river of colours warns its contents against its flow'. Kairos is another concept of time, that unlike a sequential chronology

⁴⁵ K-minantes colectivo, Official web-page, *Inicio* (2012) <<https://kaminantesfilms.wixsite.com/k-minantescolectivo>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

means a propitious, opportune moment for action; a significant cut, a prevalent importance of a fragment over the oppressing hierarchy of the invented whole: 'A strange mystification: a book all the more total for being fragmented'.⁴⁶ The description to video *Carpe diem* invites to 'love, recover, fly, live, travel, be the light, be reborn'.

Both videos are a dance of light, colour, smoke, hands and feet. This dance is fluid, plastic, random, yet enough to make sense and provoke thought. Melisa explores the possibility of matter, of filming. It is not a voyeuristic but curious and sincere gaze. Not the gaze at the other with no voice, but at one's self — at the other within self as Trinh Minh-ha suggests — with an intention to find the unknown in the allegedly all known. Fragments are not the background or a substitute, but forces of *the found footage*, an invitation, the incentive to deconstruct. Fragments seem random, they dance, introduce, frame, facilitate, explore and accompany the artist in their quest in the films by Marta Hincapié, Josephine Landertinger Forero, Andrea Said, Melisa Sánchez Hincapié, Luisa Sossa, and Clare Weiskopf. Nature is an active participant in the selected films and often becomes the found footage for the memory as in *Los demonios* by Marta Hincapié, *Home* by Josephine Landertinger Forero and *Inés* by Luisa Sossa. It is the natural ally of a woman⁴⁷ as a queer space of queerness.

Camera is another ally and companion. In Marta Hincapié's video *Piel* (*Skin*), three participants share the 'treasures' of their bodies. With increasing confidence, they use a small camera and extreme closeups to explore their bodies. They are the stories of pain. One man shares the story of the pain of bodybuilding, the other man shares the pain of tattoo-making, the female modelling for an artist shares the pain of a scar in her lower abdomen. In a strong and provocative way, Marta Hincapié draws attention to the silent suffering of the fragile female body and multiple faces of violence against woman: 'This scar brought me back my life. In exchange, I can't give life to anyone else. [She frowns in pain of reliving the memory or maybe of sharing her thoughts]. It is a weight of a mountain. It grows with going up until you find the strength to climb it'. She hides her face in her naked knees. She cries silently. The bodybuilder triumphantly poses in a spiky costume of a gladiator warrior. The tattoo man thanks his tattoo artist with a brotherly handshake. A woman continues posing naked for a male artist. The growing voice of a female singing an opera aria increases the effect of the three stories of pain and strength.

Making kins is simultaneously the process and the result. Found footage is an essentially intimate process as it requires opening-up to the unknown. So is the sound-image desynchronization, which is recognized as a strategy for deconstructing the male gaze in the female cinema.⁴⁸ It is not a scopophilic

⁴⁶ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Alaimo & Hekman, 'Introduction', p. 12.

⁴⁸ Silverman, pp. 141-142, 163-168; Trinh Minh-ha, 'Documentary Is/Not a Name', *October* 52

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exhibitionism⁴⁹ between the artist and the spectator, but the invitation to co-create, think together, an initiation of a conversation between multiple 'I's in *We*.

In *Amazona*, Clare asks her mother why she thinks Clare does this video. Her mother answers: 'To win a prize'. Clare chuckles. It sounds cynical, it also reveals love and confidence despite the years of separation and absence of the conventional mother-daughter self-sacrifice and masochism. Clare deletes the scenes of her mom's concert, which redirects the potential reading of the film as such masochism to the journey of searching for the other in self, finding strength in making alliances, learning to walk anew. She finishes the film showing her new-born. Her voice over comments the importance of making this film: to be able to continue with her life on the brink of becoming a mother, with her life as an artist.

Similar comments-clarifications are made in Landertinger Forero's *Home*, Said Camargo's *Looking for* and Sossa's *Inés*. Mother as the most intimate other appears in these movies. She is not idealized. For example, in *Amazona*, a mother assists the labour of her cat, her only intimate companion as she calls it. Then she takes the newborn kittens to a herpetarium and watches the python eats them. A moment in passing has a powerful symbolic reference as if questioning is it that devouring mother-monster?

The videos are mostly shot in the women's circle and about women. They explore their past, try to understand their actions. They are full of love and compassion. This exploration reveals social stereotypes and prejudices against women, that mothers themselves are not free of. By the end of the film, the artists and their mothers or other female relatives become closer and develop the necessary separation distance, together yet separate in their mutual and individual entangled complexity. The genre of documentary emphasizes the open-ended nature of this quest. The closure is a fragment in the lives of the authors, their participants, and the spectators. There are other forms of seeing the film, as the present meaning has been made in the assemblage of the postproduction.

Conclusions

There are different ways of being a mother. Care and loving attention, Karen Barad speaks about as the basis for our knowledge in, of and with the world,⁵⁰ enable our kin-making with elements, plants, animals, camera, film, people, family, passers-by, colleagues, audience, one's own body, memories, imaginations, own's own children, the other in self, self. In *warmipura*, the extended women's circle,

(1990), 76-98 (p. 80); An van. Dienderen, 'Indirect Flow Through Passages: Trinh T. Minh-ha's Art Practice', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, 23 (2010), 90-97 (pp. 91-92).

⁴⁹ Mulvey, pp. 835-36.

⁵⁰ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. x-xi.

that this text embodies, we explored how women facilitate such knowledge and reach out to multiple allies with their artistic practices.

I (Ana, Bridget, Polina) am a woman. I (Ana, Bridget, Polina) share the experiences, memories, emotions, feelings and thoughts shared and discussed in the essay. They are then of women. I see other women feeling them too. I see some men also do. I recognize other beings reach in similar ways. That is enough of a confirmation for me. Critical and at times deconstructive reflection over our personal artistic, scholarly and life practices in each other's multiple contexts helped understanding those of the others and so co-create.

The alliances contest the idea of authorship. We believe authorship is an echo of the patriarchal system and contemporary critical literature calls for its revision. From the position of feminist new materialism that largely informed this essay, the main concern is not the authorship, but relations, affects that accompany the process of creation and the voices the openness enables.

All the practices discussed or kept in mind are the journey of exploring Self in the world while making alliances on the way with multiple others, whether human or non-human: relatives, friends, random passers-by, animals, plants, air, sound, camera, music, thoughts and memories. It is the journey of deconstructing the memories, social imaginaries of a woman, being a woman, a mother, a daughter, an artist, a female artist, of a film, filming and spectatorship. As a space of alliance, the process of deconstruction was both intentional, intuitive and organic, happening in the maternal space of *warmipura*. Plasticity and fluidity of these practices transform walking into dancing, talking into listening. As in any dancing, sexual gaze is inevitable as we are speaking about the living bodies with hormones and desires. Yet, there is an a-sexual gaze of admiration of the body's beauty and of its possibilities and potentialities that the unity with the matter can provide. Their openness to the other in self while seeing self in the other allows making new alliance, that in their turn open up the new worlds to explore.

Beyond Cinema



Screening Screens: Cinematic Spectatorship in the Desktop Film *Noah*

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Abstract

This article explores the effects of spectatorship in the short film *Noah*, a nearly 18' desktop film created by Patrick Cederberg and Walter Woodman that premiered at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival. My discussion progresses existing theories about the status of text in films and encourages us to rethink how *Noah's* presentation of computer interfaces contributes to novel perspectives regarding the relationship between viewer and screen. Considering the computer screen's remediation and its cinematic effects, specifically focusing on the acts of reading and watching in *Noah*, I propose that the remediated computer screen in *Noah* transforms reading into a viewable activity, thus recharacterizing text as moving image. Altogether, this article posits that, as a desktop film, *Noah* dismantles set connotations of screens across early and contemporary forms of new media and paves the way for contemporary cinema's digital futures.

When *Noah* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2013, film critics lauded the film for its realistic portrayal of contemporary relationships maintained online and for its reinforcement of the idea that social media drives people apart as quickly as they connect them together.¹ A nearly 18' minute film that takes place entirely on a computer screen, *Noah* features an ambiguously-motivated teenage breakup that unfolds online, one that culminates in the protagonist's mystifying heartbreak. From the perspective of Noah, the film's protagonist, the audience views the action solely on his desktop — from which the sub-genre 'desktop film' ('computer screen film' or 'screen capture film' are also commonly used terms) derives its name.² We watch him navigate applications and websites like Facebook, Skype and Chatroulette on a Macintosh interface while his relationship

¹ Tim Hornyak, 'Short Film *Noah* Will Make You Think Twice about Facebook', *CNET*, 18 September 2013, <<https://www.cnet.com/news/short-film-noah-will-make-you-think-twice-about-facebook/>> [accessed 8 July 2020].

² Mark De Valk and Sarah Arnold, 'Post-Film: Technology and the Digital Film', in *The Film Handbook* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 266.

with his girlfriend, Amy, unravels as a consequence of his own insecurity. In addition to this desktop interface, however, viewers also see the interface of Noah's iPhone juxtaposed with the view of his desktop in a few scenes, which shows the protagonist multitasking across various devices throughout the course of his breakup. Directed by Canadian film students Patrick Cederberg and Walter Woodman while enrolled at Ryerson University, *Noah* has yet to receive concerted academic attention, though it has garnered mainstream appreciation as the inspiration for a *Modern Family* episode that also takes place entirely on a computer desktop and was also in some sections filmed on the iPhone 6 and iPad Air.³

As encountering computer interfaces splayed on the silver screen may be an arguably jarring experience for select cinema traditionalists, considering *Noah's* cinematic premiere would bring to the fore reconsiderations of spectatorship, especially in the context of desktop films, as well as forcefully put cinema studies in closer dialogue with contemporary new media studies, advancing film's conventional status as 'the original modern "multimedia"'.⁴ This jarring experience, suggested by the projection of a desktop screen in a cinema, can be noted from the disorientation resulting from each screen's respective and contrasting connotations: the cinematic screen is often considered a shared, public screen in front of which large audiences gather to embark on collective viewing experiences, whereas computer and mobile screens are contestably considered more private and personal — as well as interactive and haptic —, fit for individual and portable viewing offered by its smaller screen size. On the topic of how cinematic spectatorship has evolved and continues to evolve in the age of new media, Francesco Casetti has enthusiastically observed how the contamination of digital culture in traditional cinema — as demonstrated by the newfound flexibility by which films are increasingly projected and viewed beyond their the traditional, 'dark room' cinematic spaces (that is, streamed on mobile devices or even projected as moving image installations within museums) — has transformed the role of the spectator and the general definition of what a cinematic experience may and ought to be.⁵ In considering the myriad possibilities of cinematic spectatorship and its future role in cinema studies, this essay reverses the trajectory of Casetti's enquiry, in that it aims to consider how portable devices and the communicative codes associated with such devices fare when re-integrated into traditional cinematic viewing contexts — as exemplified by the projection of the desktop film in traditional cinematic venues — and how this integration may diversify existing ideas about cinematic spectatorship and its future evolution. The core of the argument thus prioritizes the cinematic premiere of *Noah* at the Toronto International Film Festival, where the short film was screened in a public cinema.⁶

³ Maya Kosoff, 'Modern Family Episode Shot Entirely on iPhones and iPads – Business Insider', *Business Insider*, 18 February 2015, <<https://www.businessinsider.com/modern-family-episode-shot-entirely-on-iphones-and-ipads-2015-2?IR=T>> [accessed 21 May 2020].

⁴ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 50.

⁵ Francesco Casetti, *La galassia Lumière: sette parole chiave per il cinema che viene* (Milano: Bompiani, 2015).

⁶ As the filmmakers have uploaded their short film on Vimeo, it is understood that the film will

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It is therefore necessary to clarify the use of the term ‘desktop film’, for its usage has remained relatively sporadic in recent film scholarship. The closely adjacent term ‘desktop cinema’ has been coined by Miriam De Rosa to describe Kevin B. Lee’s film, *Transformers: The Premake* (2014), film that, like *Noah*, was filmed on a computer screen with a Macintosh interface and which shows and maps out the various YouTube clips filmed by onlookers documenting the filming of *Transformers 4* in Chicago.⁷ Desktop cinema, as De Rosa and Wanda Strauven write, refers to ‘films that incorporate the desktop environment in the narrative by way of a combination of pre-recorded desktop footage and other sources, including original or found footage, as well as PC-delivered data’.⁸ The presence of the desktop in Lee’s film, which the director himself has labelled as a desktop documentary, precisely, as De Rosa and Strauven have noted, ‘emphasizes the idea of documentation’; it is a film that essentially documents others’ processes of documentation, piecing together various pre-recorded objects like a collage. While Lee’s *Transformers: The Premake* is indicative of some of the functionalities of the desktop film, this essay is more interested in how character identities are formed and communicated in desktop films and how the spectatorial experience of such films may change as a result.

In recent years, feature-length desktop films such as Aneesh Chaganty’s *Searching* (2018) and Timur Bekmambetov’s *Unfriended* (2014) and *Profile* (2018) have reached mainstream recognition, making this enquiry all the more relevant beyond the singular case of *Noah*. In fact, Bekmambetov’s ardent use of the desktop aesthetic has led him to coin the aesthetic into a genre that he has dubbed the ‘screenmovie’ (or ‘a new format of cinema in which all the action takes place on the protagonist’s computer screen’) that reflects

the evolution of communication. The average person spends more and more time in front of the computer screen and looking at their smartphones. Virtual reality is replacing reality proper. Virtual reality has long since become part of various art forms, exemplified, among others, in multimedia and hyperlanguage. Virtual reality has its own laws, which, logically, infiltrate film and other media.⁹

Bekmambetov’s claims here suggest that his films reflect of the way social media and communications on digital devices have changed the way we act and behave

be primarily seen by current and future viewers on mobile devices rather in traditional cinematic contexts. However, this essay is primarily motivated by the interesting juxtaposition of portable and virtual screens in the cinematic context, as offered by *Noah*’s world première at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival’s student showcase.

⁷ Miriam De Rosa and Wanda Strauven, ‘Screenic (Re)orientations: Desktop, Tabletop, Tablet, Booklet, Touchscreen, Etc.’, in *Screen Space Reconfigured*, ed. by Susanne Ø. Sæther and Synne T. Bull (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 231–62 (p. 249).

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Timur Bekmambetov, ‘Rules of the Screenmovie: The Unfriended Manifesto for the Digital Age’, *MovieMaker Magazine* (blog), 22 April 2015, <<https://www.moviemaker.com/archives/moviemaking/directing/unfriended-rules-of-the-screenmovie-a-manifesto-for-the-digital-age/>> [accessed 5 May 2020].

in corporeal reality. Despite the director's choice to solely focus on the desktop aesthetic in his filmmaking, and despite his affirmations that the screenmovie format can accommodate films of all genres (beyond its already popular usage in horror films), the 'screenmovies' that have found commercial and critical success so far all belong to the thriller and horror genres — as Chaganty's *Searching* and Bekmambetov's films demonstrate — which interestingly suggests that the popularity of the desktop aesthetic in contemporary cinema is still largely genre-based and also seemingly the preferred technique for portrayals of secrecy and investigation set in the contemporary period.

This article strives to provoke reformulations of spectatorship theories in application to the narrative desktop film — to distinguish desktop films like *Noah* that tell a fictional narrative from other forms of non-fictional desktop cinema, such as digital audio-visual essays, which are often filmed on a computer with an added voiceover to produce an audio-visual form of film criticism. The effort to be carried out is thus two-fold: first, it shall explore how portrayals and treatments of texts have developed from films of the pre-digital era to desktop films, and, second, it shall analyse the connotations associated with screens of varying devices that evoke theories of remediation introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) in their seminal work, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Conceptualizing the cinematic potential of *Noah* demands analytic attention to *Noah*'s placement and treatment of text with image, and in conjunction with analyses of *Noah*'s remediated properties, this conceptualization of cinema as new media will ultimately affect how we may differently approach cinematic spectatorship in the age of new media. Annette Kuhn, proposing that dominant cinema (her term for mainstream cinema such as Hollywood films) is an economic and social institution by nature, characterizes film viewing as 'a collective and semi-public undertaking: it is also an activity which is, as a rule, paid for by spectators'.¹⁰ Thus, approaching *Noah* within Kuhn's parameters of mainstream film viewing poses salient questions concerning the relationship between spectator and screen that may find renewed prominence in this computer-mediated context of cinematic spectatorship.

In *Noah*, text and non-textual movements within virtual spaces come to substitute elements of character personality that, in the traditional and popular context of live action films, have been conveyed through the characters' physical bodies. Traditionally, spectators glean character traits from facial and corporeal gestures, quirks, speech, and bodily movements enacted within a physical space, and, more often than not, these traits serve as aural and visual indicators that are linked to and reveal the characters' personalities and attitudes, typically amplified to an excess in melodramatic films, for example.¹¹ Within *Noah*, however, ascertaining these cues

¹⁰ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 21.

¹¹ While Peter Brooks does not explicitly discuss the role of melodrama in cinema, he does discuss the connotations of melodrama, which can be applied to an understanding of melodrama as a cinematic genre. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 9–10.

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demands astute and concentrated close readings of how Noah browses his computer — or, more specifically, how the cursor moves across the desktop and how the close-ups of the profilmic event supposedly indicate Noah's eye movements. The corporeal reality from which we, as spectators, are able to understand Noah is substituted by a computer interface, the new context on which his character is presented without explicit verbal or visual cues that would normally register our understanding of the protagonist. The quick and fleeting manner in which Noah frantically highlights comments and other texts on his screen, jumps from tab to tab on his browser, or arranges windows on his desktop might suggest, for example, the protagonist's increasing paranoia caused by his girlfriend having abruptly hung up on him without a follow-up explanation, his lack of trust in her, as well as his own insecurities about their relationship. However, in our attempt to understand (and, perhaps, to even identify with Noah), we are confronted with this additional layer of complexity: the spectator's comprehension of Noah only amounts to an understanding of a virtually-mediated presence of his character because Noah's virtual presence stands in for his entire physical being. Spectatorship thus operates from the viewer's identification with Noah's virtual self via the spectator as a user, formulating a user-to-user — rather than person-to-character — mode of cinematic spectatorship. This observation shows some affinity with Cederberg and Woodman's decision to entitle their film *Noah*, as the correlation between desktop and character prompts viewers to equate Noah's desktop interface as Noah *the character*. Cinematic spectators are not only watching a film about Noah, that is, the way in which he navigates his desktop, but they are also watching *him* as well. The way in which Noah customizes the appearance of his desktop — having chosen to arrange his files in the shape of a heart around his and Amy's faces — is, for example, one such indicator of their relationship status and a portion of his character made visible.

Text as Moving Image

In other instances, viewing Noah's Facebook Messenger chat may also prompt viewers to determine and judge — via varied, personalized experiences with



Fig. 1: Noah writes to his Facebook friend, Kanye East, in speculation that his girlfriend Amy might be leaving him (4'50").

social networking — Noah as a character. This assumes that viewers comprehend Noah based on a subjective relation to the digital medium of the computer, its temporality and affect. Those versed in social media codes and communicative behaviours and lingo adopted in online chat forums, for example, may speculate from Amy's lack of response and her changed profile picture that she might have inexplicitly initiated the breakup with direct confrontation with Noah — an assumption cued without other cinematic elements such as dialogue or music to register that diegetic turning point (fig. 1). Coded signs and mannerisms often used in and pulled from interactive online and social media contexts, such as ellipses that disappear then reappear or the duration of pauses whilst typing, may indicate one person's relationship status with another. In this view, closer friends may tend to type hastily to each other while sending rapid-fire exchanges, more often than not in coded language, whereas two individuals at the start of any relationship (especially one in which one or both parties are eager to impress) may spend more time crafting their messages that will certainly serve as a reflection of one's personality and subsequently be judged by their recipient. Such signs, when presented in a filmic context, begin to carry as much linguistic significance as words, though their capacity as plot points in *Noah* ultimately relies on the spectators' cultural versatility and fluency in online messaging. As such, *Noah* presents a hybridization of social media language that comes into contact with cinematic language, and this hybridization, exemplified by the use of social media and online vernacular in establishing character personality, comes to substitute cinematic language in this extreme case of the desktop film, ultimately redefining how viewers perceive and understand the relationships between characters, as well as reformulating viewers' engagements with the cinematic screen in this particular case of expanded cinema. Key in this exploration are the text we read on the screen.

The usage and presence of texts within films are neither unprecedented nor revolutionized by new media's emergence in recent cinema, though definitions of 'text' have grown and varied as a result of digital technologies that have extended creative flexibility in postproduction editing for contemporary digital films. From a pre-digital standpoint, for example, texts in films are usually defined as words that take on a stationary, inanimate role. In the context of French New Wave films, texts refer to words on objects such as letters, book covers, and newspaper clippings to name a few — objects which, as a matter of fact, play prominent roles both as diegetic and non-diegetic sources. These texts, however, can be but are not always stationary. In François Truffaut's *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* (1975), for example, the act of writing letters, Adèle's narration of her letters (and even the letters themselves) may be interpreted as crucial turning points in the film — moments in which Adèle receives and opens a letter from her famous father, Victor Hugo, or moments in which Truffaut presents a close-up of a newspaper clipping that announces the death of Adèle's mother, for example, further the plot and, in retrospect, become major turning points. As such, texts, in the sense of words on paper, arguably already hold diegetic

significance in this pre-digital period. A different example comes in Michael Snow's literal interpretation of text as moving image in his experimental short film *So Is This* (1982) where the projection of white text against a solid black background animates the still nature of the projected words and encourages viewers to watch the film as though they were reading. Altogether, the notion of 'text as moving image' is offered by the idea that we, as viewers, see the act of writing in real time in these films, an act that make these texts both readable and watchable cinematic engagements.

With the continuous permeation of internet culture in everyday life,¹² treatments of texts in cinema have explored digital forms of representation as filmic texts begin to visually transpose computer and mobile screens wholly into cinematic realms. Consequently, texts have begun to take on new forms and meanings, freed from their once-limited possibilities in the pre-digital context as they begin to appear more frequently as text messages, status updates on social networking sites, website content and computer code, to list a few examples. Irwin Winkler's *The Net* (1995) portrays webpages as moving images by superimposing screenshots of web content over each other to create the effect of swiftly browsing page after page without showing a computer or its screen in the profilmic frame. Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman's anti-utopian thriller, *Nerve* (2016), features a similar aesthetic via its projection of web pages over a character's face, layering virtual presence over corporeal reality to communicate that virtual space is as present as corporeality or that it serves as an extension of one's physical existence. Similar to Winkler's *The Net*, *Nerve* does not feature the physical screen within the profilmic event. Joost and Schulman's placement of a transparent browser window over a character's face effectively provides a comprehensive description of the character in the sense that a superimposition of the character's virtual presence on the physical form conveys the variously mediated identities of a single person. This aesthetic choice, however, is also a diegetic one, as *Nerve*'s plot is about how the obsession for maintaining a virtual identity may threateningly consume and even dominate the corporeal self. In Beau Willimon's television series *House of Cards*, text messages hover around characters' bodies to display their online activities alongside their offline presence. This feature, too, suggests that while the characters exist in physical spaces, their virtual activities are still omnipresent and not secondary to their corporeal actions in the physical dimension.

In light of these varying displays of text from French New Wave cinema to contemporary new media instances, the similarity linking both usages is the visible human figure displayed alongside the writing of these texts. While texts in pre-digital cinema and texts in the new media context differ in that they are respectively written in corporeal and virtual spaces, the source producing these

¹² For a detailed description of how internet culture continues to permeate everyday life, see *The Internet in Everyday Life*, ed. by Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

texts is always present and visible; we typically see the character writing on paper or typing on a mobile device. But in the case of *Noah*, this corporeal source is not always present on screen; Noah himself, portrayed by Sam Kantor, is only visible in certain frames, such as in moments when viewers see his face when he dials his girlfriend Amy on Skype. Viewers see text appearing and being highlighted, as well as windows and applications opening and closing without seeing the corporeal owner of the actions on screen, which provokes further interrogate the functions of texts in *Noah* and their effects on cinematic spectatorship.

Writing on the presence of language within film in her analysis of Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), Ágnes Pethő notes that texts in pre-digital films, uninfluenced by the pervasiveness of new media, parallelize the once distinct acts of reading and viewing:

We anticipate with curiosity what will come next, there is tension and there is release of tension along the experience of reading, there are unexpected turns of 'events,' changes of rhythm, very much in a similar way as in the experience of a traditional narrative film, only this time have a self-reflexive projection of the intellectual and emotional processes involved in the act of reading: the experience of reading shown in the same way as we experience a film.¹³

Here, Pethő compares the experience of reading texts in films with the experience of watching narrative films, and her point is valid in the sense that Snow's film indeed features text against a plain black background and portrays text as moving image. The viewer's engagement with *So Is This* is determined by not only the content of the projected text but also the manner in which it is projected. Pethő notes that viewers are encouraged to read the words as though they would analyse an image, as Snow has already set the pace at which viewers should approach and engage with the text.

Now considering Pethő's point in application to *Noah*, we may argue that reading the messages that Noah writes to his friends, for example, is an engagement with moving images in the same sense, as films featuring writing 'impose their own rhythm and time structure over the reader who is no longer in control over the temporality of reception'.¹⁴ While viewers may approach Noah's written messages in their own manner, this 'temporality of reception' — or the time allotted to viewers to engage with the texts after their appearance on screen — is already pre-determined by Cederberg and Woodman, meaning that the reader's inability to 'independently turn the page', so to speak, characterizes the text as moving image. Thus, Pethő would argue that the appearance and representation of any text, analogue or digital, would nonetheless constitute a moving image in the cinematic realm.

¹³ Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), p. 83.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

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As mentioned previously, the use of texts in *Noah* illustrates a hybridization of social media language merging with cinematic language, and while I have demonstrated how the film's portrayal of text is communicated and expressed via social media language, it is important to also observe how the same text is, first and foremost, portrayed in cinematic language. *Noah* retains cinematic language through its abundant close-ups — specified here as moments in which the 'camera' zooms in rather dramatically then pulls back —, which demand viewer attention by telling viewers where to look on the screen, much like the close-up's conventional purpose in live action cinema. The profilmic image is rarely a static one; in fact, it presents a perspective that navigates across the desktop at a rather fast pace, following the movements of Noah's fleeting cursor as it opens and closes applications, switches between tabs and windows, and executes browser searches. Furthermore, this element of *dynamicity* in movement allows viewers to closely follow Noah's actions figurately and quite literally, as the close-up of a search bar, for example, dramatically and exaggeratedly signals Noah's presence on the screen via an incredibly close, detailed, and nearly microscopic level of interaction that screen users do not have with their personal devices. Additionally, these text-based moments do not provide much opportunity for reading, as the dynamicity of the camera movement in these browsing sequences primarily serve as watchable engagements that may be read, thus further enforcing the view that *Noah's* status as a desktop film has not completely dismantled the typical conventions of a film, and that, in some instances, may be even thought to be extending the tradition of cinematic portrayal of texts as seen in earlier films. However, this last point is valid only for the cinematic projections of *Noah* in cinemas; we must not forget that present and future viewers of this short film have access to the film online, and that the ability to pause and rewind moments in the film allows for a completely different spectatorial experience.

Noah's portrayal of text as moving image progresses similar instances that were already manifested in prior works such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). Scenes featuring Pierrot, Godard's protagonist, writing in his journal from a first-person perspective may be analysed as an instance of how text operates as moving image. The audience's interaction with such text in Godard's film comes in not only reading what he is writing, but in also observing the act of writing with anticipation and attention to its formation in cinematic real-time. Writing on Godard's use of words and images, Pethő argues that text in film is treated as image because they are cut up and displaced like a collage:

Text is always subjected to violent de-contextualization and re-contextualization as it enters the screen: it is torn out of context, and broken down to words and letters, these pieces in turn are often re-arranged and multiplied (we see extractions of words from words, inversions, anagrammatic plays with letters and onomatopoeia). Collage and texture are key notions of both image and text.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ivi, pp. 271–72.

This loss of context, according to Pethő, is critical to understanding text as moving image in these pre-digital films; because the words do not appear on screen as they would in a print medium, for example, we do not associate the words, first and foremost, *as words*, and second, we do not immediately grasp the need to read them. Instead, Pethő suggests, these words appear to viewers as pieces of letters that are often ‘re-arranged and multiplied’ and, thus, revealed to viewers as words to be read: an example of ‘violent de-contextualization and re-contextualization’. In the opening title card sequence in *Pierrot le Fou*, letters appear non-linearly. Viewers must wait for the letters to arrange in a legible order before they may convey meaning. This disruption of reading can be argued as an instance in which the words, altogether, operate as a visual spectacle to be viewed rather than read. In another moment, Godard’s portrayal of the transition cards ‘vie’ and ‘rivière’ are later revealed to come from the same sign; in this example, text functions primarily to establish setting.

Remediated Interfaces

However, we cannot apply Pethő’s understanding of texts to *Noah* because this desktop film does not violently decontextualize then recontextualize words. Words in *Noah* still remain in their original contexts. Spectators are meant to recognize the words’ role as instant messages or emails that do convey meaning and facilitate the communication between two parties, which means that text in *Noah* is not decontextualized then recontextualized like a collage, but is, in fact, remediated, from the computer and mobile screen to the cinematic one.¹⁶

Remediation, following and Bolter and Grusin’s formulations, refers to the placement of one medium into another medium’s context, meaning that all digital media remediate, as digital media fundamentally involve the refashioning and rehabilitating of earlier forms of media into digital spaces in order to make them more accessible and user-friendly.¹⁷ Bolter and Grusin outline three forms of remediation: ‘remediation as the mediation of mediation’, ‘remediation as the inseparability of mediation and reality’, and ‘remediation as reform’.¹⁸ Remediation as reform is perhaps most applicable and visibly felt within *Noah*, as the desktop film *reforms* reality, remediating the interactive interface of the computer and mobile screen into the traditionally non-interactive realm that is the cinema, by presenting to viewers a fictional construction of authenticity and liveness. In other

¹⁶ The specificities as to what truly constitutes a cinematic screen, given the various devices — portable and stationary, on which films may be screened, is a salient point to consider, but as already mentioned earlier, this essay acknowledges though leaves aside such enquiry to focus more stringently on the instance of screening computer and mobile screens in a traditional cinematic context, that is, referring to the projection of desktop films in movie theatres.

¹⁷ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 53.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 55.

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words, the remediated computer screen gives viewers the illusion that the cinematic screen on which the desktop is projected can be manipulated *live*, as viewers follow and engage with the plot — which progresses in a temporally linear fashion — by reading and watching texts and their movements in imaginary real time.

This claim presupposes an agreement with Lev Manovich's argument that traditional cinema conveys a narrative that is recorded from a past moment in time but that movements on a computer interface are always happening live.¹⁹ Even though *Noah* is scripted — directors Woodman and Cederberg are also credited as the screenwriters — the nature of the computer screen as a 'screen of real time' connotatively misleads viewers to believe that all movements taking place on the desktop interface are unfolding as the viewers are watching, as if the content that Noah is browsing and interacting with have all been produced as a result of chance. *Noah* abruptly ends with the protagonist's missed connection on Chatroulette, and the very nature of Chatroulette as a social media platform that assigns conversation partners together at random seemingly poses as a conflict within the confines of the film's fictional universe. This open ending strongly confirms to viewers that, as a medium and an infrastructure, the internet does not have a pre-determined end date, and neither does it take pause for scheduled periods of time. Instead, it is, for the most part, a developing medium constantly evolving and progressing in a linearly forward motion. Therefore, the fictional elements and qualities of this film appear to have been trickier to grasp and control in the filming phases, as simply refreshing a webpage, such as a social media feed, produces modified results: the timestamp on a status update will change with the passing of time, for example, which may complicate the filming process via the necessity of constructing a pre-determined timeframe for the events to occur and of capturing main scenes in a single continuous shot to establish and maintain logical and believable continuity on the interfaces of Noah's computer and mobile.

Despite the film's remediating properties and the immediacy of its construction and presentation, *Noah*'s lack of diegetic finality does not go unnoticed; viewers become aware that the story does not *end* simply because Noah has logged off, and they may start to question whether some of Noah's Chatroulette partners were indeed scripted or if they appeared as a result of chance. In his definition of interface, Alexander Galloway argues that interfaces are not merely objects nor boundary points but instead 'autonomous zones of activity' and 'processes that effect a result of whatever kind'.²⁰ Considering, in this view, the interface not as an object but as a process, we may observe how the computer screen, as one of the principle narrative interfaces in this film, contains many narrative spaces layered onto one image: a representation of Noah looking into his webcam, the applications visible on the desktop screen and the ones browsed by Noah, and a representation of the person with whom he is communicating (both textually and

¹⁹ Lev Manovich, p. 103.

²⁰ Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017), p. vii.

visually), hence labelling the profilmic event as presenting the events portrayed before, on, and beyond the screen. Due this multi-layering of narratives on the computer interface, viewer response and comprehension of Noah's plot may similarly take on multiple readings. The fact that we can read and misinterpret his texts will reveal different interpretations of Noah, such as whether his actions are considered paranoid, overly dramatic, or if they are perfectly reasonable according to the judgments of spectators. To consider messages as dialogue ultimately creates uncertainty for viewers with respect to comprehension of the narrative and Noah's character, such as if they have understood the narrative in a way intended by Woodman and Cederberg.

Noah's form also purposefully disorients viewers, in the sense that the familiarity of the computer screen as a personal screen immediately alerts us to the possibility that because we have access to such a view, we are perhaps trespassing or breaching private space. Michele White theorizes the computer user as seldom more of a spectator than an actual user: 'The person at the computer does not just 'use': he or she also looks (and is surveilled) and, like the film spectator, is structured as a subject of ideology through the ways his or her spectatorial position is defined by the discourses with which he or she engages'.²¹ From White's perspective, it may appear that remediation has not changed the computer screen very much from its initial nature; there is already a cinematic quality attributed to the act of engaging with and using a mobile device, such as a computer, in that the user is also a spectator. The computer screen's remediation might only further underline its pre-existing cinematic elements, as *Noah's* passive audience cannot interact with any element on screen. The remediation creates an illusion of interactivity, as the computer interface gives us the impression and the illusion that we can type texts onto Noah's screen, but the context in which *Noah* is screened ties us back to the passivity of cinematic spectatorship.

We have already established that the role of texts in desktop films such as *Noah* goes beyond the simple transformation of reading into watching; text in *Noah* is not solely an image that has lost the 'transcendence of writing', as phrased by Jean Baudrillard, simply because it is screened in a virtual context.²² While we must not forget that *Noah* demands the viewer to read Noah's messages for narrative comprehension, we may counterargue that the image-value of texts within *Noah*, noted within Noah's typing, for example, reveals diegetic details, builds suspense, and fleshes out the characters' personalities more so than the actual messages of the texts themselves. This is partially an effect of the impression that

²¹ Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2006), p. 8.

²² Baudrillard argues that texts become images in the virtual context: 'This [virtual text] is worked on like a computer-generated image — something which no longer bears any relation to the transcendence of the gaze or of writing. At any rate as soon as you are in front of the screen, you no longer see the text as text, but as image. Now, it is in the strict separation of text and screen, of text and image, that writing is an activity in its own right — never an interaction'. See Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2014), p. 177.

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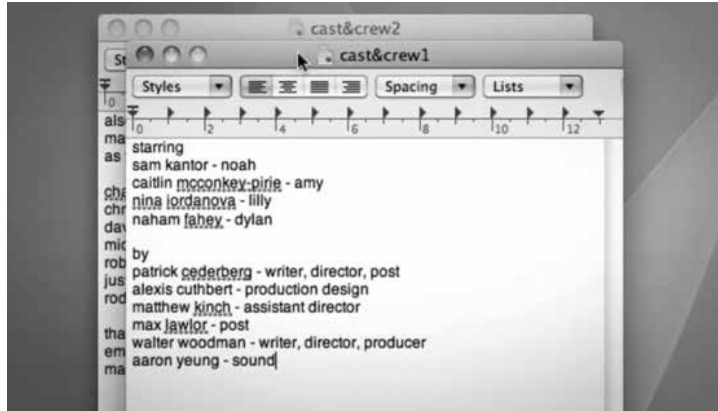


Fig. 2: Credits sequence features the credits typed out on Apple's TextEdit application (17'39").

Noah's messages are written in real time and that the narrative events, due to their portrayal on the computer interface, seem unedited and raw.

Noah ends by remediating the computer interface back to a cinematic one, as the credits appear on the desktop by Noah closing text files with the filmmakers' names already typed in the word documents (fig. 2). *Noah*'s active and constant, back-and-forth remediation — of remediating the computer screen into the cinematic screen and vice-versa — reminds us of the properties of cinema as it reminds us of the properties of social media and the digital. Although we might believe *Noah*'s narrative and character to be unfolding in real time, the active remediation corrects our utopian thinking by confirming that the narrative is, in fact, scripted. Because we are not taken out of the computer interface at the end, the credits deceptively convey diegetic qualities, even though, viewers are aware of the story's ending: the view of his desktop is still present even though the film has ended.

Conclusion: The Screen as a Body

As a film that heavily relies on screens for its content, or rather more precisely, relies on computer and mobile interfaces to deliver the narrative, Noah has demonstrated a novel mode of spectatorship wherein spectators engage not with physical human characters but rather with texts, applications, websites, and a cursor that browses through these pages and applications. In other words, as much as *Noah* provides a screen narrative — in the sense that without the screen, the narrative cannot unfold — the film also additionally unveils a narrative of the screen itself.

The concept of a screen and its definition have undergone several developments by several authors who have approached the subject in varying ways, both as an object and not as one. In his 2006 essay entitled 'Screen Narratives', Jan Baetens writes on the presence of function of screens in earlier films, namely Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), to observe how the presence of a television screen in a particular scene of that film carries with it a double function: not only is

the television a prop in the film (albeit turned off), but its screen is a reflective surface that functions as a mirror that provides a reflection of fleeting actions that would otherwise remain off camera. Through this observation, Baetens argues, in this portion of his essay, how screens may be present in everyday objects, from the reflective properties of windows during night-time scenes that, when juxtaposed, resemble multi-window computer interfaces, to polished floors that add furtive details and perspectives to the main narrative and enhance the spectator's engagement with film as a whole by promoting new sources of looking and seeing.²³ However, Baetens account of screens here merely notes their reflective properties as mirrors and their abilities to renegotiate spatial boundaries in the profilmic; the screen is still primarily treated as an optical device. Mapping a genealogy of the screen that diverts from this understanding of the screen as a mirror or a window comes Giuliana Bruno's theorization of the screen as 'spatial formations that are relational', as an architecture itself that constructs an environment rather than simply being an object or a surface on which image, moving or still, can be projected.²⁴ This proposed identity of a screen as a site of transition and a space of relations detracts from their characterization as objects and emphasizes more so their identities as fluid spaces. Writing on the screen's ability to project immersive environments, Ariel Rogers summarizes succinctly the boundaries of screen presence, reminding us that the screen, as an object, 'supplies means of sheltering, concealing, filtering, dividing, displaying'.²⁵ The material qualities of the screen, she further notes, allow the screen's borders to

enclose, obscure, reveal, or demarcate the spaces within and surrounding its edges, enabling the screen to function as a frame, mask, aperture or connector. [...] The screen's surface enables it to function as a threshold, barrier, reflector, membrane, interface, or vehicle for light and sound, thus joining, separating, or reconfiguring in front and behind it.²⁶

The context in which Rogers situates her definition of screen, namely the context of virtual reality films, also contributes to the diversity of screen presence in contemporary cinema, in which virtual texts and hover over characters' faces on an imaginary z-axis. In virtual reality films, the screen of the film is attached directly to the spectator's face, which allows the screen to move according to the spectator's bodily movements and gestures, resulting in a kind of interactive

²³ Jan Baetens, 'Screen Narratives', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34, 34.1 (2006), 2-8 (p. 3).

²⁴ Giuliana Bruno, 'Surface Tension, Screen Space', in *Screen Space Reconfigured*, ed. by Susanne Ø. Sæther and Synne T. Bull (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 35-54 (pp. 38-39)

²⁵ Ariel Rogers, "'Taking the Plunge": The New Immersive Screens', in *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium*, ed. by Craig Buckley, Rüdiger Campe, and Francesco Casetti (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), p. 139.

²⁶ Ivi, pp. 139-40.

cinematic experience in which perspectives are largely spectator-controlled, or rather, user-controlled.

But how and why are these definitions of screens relevant to understanding *Noah*? The purpose of discussing the cited definitions and possibilities of screens is to highlight how screens, within those contexts, have been understood primarily by their ability to extend or limit the boundaries of diegetic space. Screen in the context of the desktop film, however, does not ascribe perfectly to those definitions, as the boundaries of the protagonist's computer screen are not visible inside the film (excluding the part at the end of the film where viewers see the home screen of Noah's iPhone; the framing of the mobile screen clearly indicates the boundaries of the screen relative to the computer screen). The very concept of 'screening screens', as this article's title has strived to suggest, therefore urges reflection on how the presence of the computer screen, remediated as the cinematic screen in the context of the desktop film, plays a diegetic role not only in the narrative but also in the spectators' understanding of the protagonist's body. In other words, *Noah* contributes to the genealogy of the screen by defining the screen as a body on which identity of the protagonist, Noah, is ascribed and performed through navigating websites and applications on a computer interface. While it is true that Noah does show his face in the film, as evidenced by the scene of his Skype call with Amy, the majority of his character's identity is conveyed and, subsequently, read and watched by spectators through the presence and writing of texts and the navigation of websites and applications.

In tracing the ways in which Noah's identity is conveyed not through bodily, corporeal gestures but through modes of virtual browsing on a computer interface, this article has prioritized the analysis of virtually mediated texts in *Noah* as they pertain to expressions and understandings of his character's identity, and it has also shown how this mode of character storytelling is not without precedent. Recent examples of texts on screen appear as the result of editing, but, as demonstrated in *House of Cards*, they crucially affect the viewer's understanding of the narrative, as texts not only introduce different perspectives from which to understand the plot but also unfasten new storylines that offer introspective views into the characters' private selves. The creation of these storylines is supported by the idea that one's interaction with a mobile device may reveal an aspect of one's life that is not disclosed in face-to-face interaction with other characters. More urgently, it suggests that behaviour online mediates our behaviour in day-to-day corporeal reality, as Sherry Turkle suggests in her notion of living on the screen, and vice versa.²⁷

²⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014), p. 26. For additional literature regarding the identity performance in online spaces, see Erika Pearson, 'All the World Wide Web's a Stage: The Performance of Identity in Online Social Networks', *First Monday*, 25 February 2009, <<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v14i3.2162>>[accessed 24 June 2020].

Lydia Tuan

Words on screen in *Noah* mediate intimacy, as subtle details like typing speed become transcriptions of intimacy by revealing hidden character traits. These transcribed mediations of intimacy are made legible to us via the computer screen's remediation, which plays a major role in viewer reception and, ultimately, the viewer's piecing together of the narrative. Remediation explains why we read text differently in *Noah* than in *Pierrot le Fou*; it is remediation, coupled with the properties of social media and human-computer interaction, that allow texts to be viewable and readable moving images and replacements for dialogue. It is thus important to study the role and effects of text in this regard, as the rising presence of digitally based text in contemporary cinema and television will only make *Noah's* textual experimentation in interactive possibilities for cinematic narratives all the more relevant for viewers of today's films and television.

Reviews / Comptes-rendus



The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History
ed. by Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers
London and New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 409

Are we facing a new school of film historiography? Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, Philippe Meers, and the other authors of this volume, as well as all the contributors to that very productive network that goes by the name of HoMER (History of Moviegoing, Exhibition and Reception) firmly believe in the commitment to examine 'unexplored dimensions of the cinematographic experience' (p. 3). The advanced state of their research is presented here. The volume is divided into two methodological sections and four themes, dedicated to: a) film distribution and trade, b) exhibition and c) programming, as well as d) 'audiences' cinemagoing practices, experiences and memories' (ibidem). It is precious first of all for its methodological clarity and its distinction between different players in the production cycle of film in keeping with their specific roles. Much of the volume's lexicographic work is also of great interest, inviting us to review the usual categories of analysis and standard periodizations: as in the lucid analysis of the 'evergreens and mayflies' of distribution, by Karel Dibbets (to whom the volume pays due posthumous homage), or in its reflection on the notions of seriality and cyclicity proposed by Tim Snelson.

The common thread that intersects the contributions is the inspiration that comes explicitly from the French *École des Annales*; the authors accept its challenge to broaden the historian's horizon of observation through the discovery of new objects and the study of the social sciences, potentially through increasingly sophisticated quantitative methods and online research programs. Indeed, on the one hand, Richard Abel and Eric Hoyt propose using investigative tools to analyse the wealth of data respectively transmitted by the critical reception in newspapers and the role of individual operators on the market. On the other, explicitly or implicitly, Carlo Ginzburg's call to give value to minor, small and singular experiences, which are irreplaceable in their singularity, also returns several times.¹ Within a purposeful view, such a value can take on the meaning of a 'circumstantial' trace (Mariagrazia Fanchi, p. 388), something that effectively happens in many case studies presented here — and in particular those devoted to the history of cinematographic companies and institutions: from the history

¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

of itinerant film exhibitions in the United States, reconstructed starting from the 1904 datebook of the exhibitor W. Frank Brinton (Kathryn Fuller-Sweeley), to the reconstruction of the market panorama of early film exhibition in colonial Indonesia, validated through a comparison with the geography of local transport (Dafna Ruppin); from the clarification of the distribution policies that we often understand only in broad terms, such as the practice of double billing in the 1930s (Richard Maltby), or the 1962 launch of 'showcases' as a 'daring new method of film circulating in New York', by United Artists (Zoë Wallin, p. 173), to system conflicts in international distribution, for example between the Motion Picture Export Association and the Netherlands Cinema Association at the end of World War II (Clara Pafort-Overduin and Douglas Gomery). In this context, a multi-ethnic history of the first movie theatres in Smyrna in the early twentieth century can become a circumstantial feature of the greater history of the 'short' century, with all its dramas and phantoms (Dilek Kaya).

The examples given already indicate, in the selection of themes and approaches, a further merit of the project and the volume. Everything and everyone in these pages push for film studies to go beyond the comfort zone of the English-language culture and market, and the distinctions of colonial and Eurocentric heritage. This is a commitment that we can adopt as a litmus test for the future of HoMERica's undertaking. We know that new historiographies move dangerously close to the crest of two steep slopes: the micro-history of the peasant, with his worm-riddled cheese, and the macro-history of the court of the Inquisition that overwhelms him. The use of the resources offered by new, big data analytics can challenge this difficult balance, for example from the point of view of the collection of data, which today is certainly more widely available and completely digitalized in the English-speaking world, or at any rate with substantial differences between countries even within old Europe. Can the availability of indexed databases be the factor that guides historian's choices? More generally, what is the relationship between the individual case study, even if it is exemplary, and big data, when the horizon becomes that of metadata or the mere application of an algorithmic logic? And again: even if the history itself at work selects the case studies as points of departure — perhaps simply because they are the only surviving possibilities — is it still possible to operate between micro and macro when we shift our gaze to the contemporary, when the data becomes incommensurable? Not surprisingly, on some pages, almost timidly, and despite all the opposing positions expressed by the authors, films themselves finally emerge: the original capital of the discipline.

In short, do we really need another new school of cinema historiography? The answer, as for every *Nouvelle Histoire*, will lie in the project's capacity to produce other useful tools for the scientific community and to impose a paradigm. All that remains is to wish the authors good luck.

[Massimo Locatelli, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan]

Geste filmé, gestes filmiques

Sous la direction de Christa Blümlinger et Mathias Lavin

Milano-Udine: Éditions Mimésis, 2018, pp. 390

Le geste est un objet immense pour les études cinématographiques. C'est d'abord ce que rappelle au lecteur cet ouvrage collectif dirigé par Christa Blümlinger et Mathias Lavin, tous deux chercheurs à l'Université Paris 8, et publié dans la collection dirigée par Antonio Somaini, *Images, médiums*. En effet, la question du geste en cinéma se pose de manière multiple : gestes de ceux qui sont filmés, qu'ils soient construits pas des acteurs ou réalisés dans un cadre documentaire ; gestes aussi de ceux qui filment. Les « gestes filmiques » ne sont pas à entendre seulement comme les mouvements concrets opérés par les techniciens ; au-delà, l'idée de « gestes filmiques » renvoie à l'ensemble des procédures signifiantes mises en place lors du processus de production.

Cette conception délibérément large du corpus, ainsi que de la notion même de « geste », mobilise une grande diversité d'approches. Sans doute, la plupart des chercheuses et chercheurs impliqués partagent un socle commun d'intérêt : l'approche dominante procède d'abord de l'esthétique. L'œuvre, l'art, restent des problématiques centrales, à partir desquelles la question du geste, de son statut, de sa forme et de sa fonction, se trouve posée. Le geste est alors matière signifiante, support formel ou enjeu stylistique. Cela peut s'opérer à l'intérieur même d'un film ou d'une installation vidéo — ainsi pour Mathias Lavin sur *Johnny Belinda* (Jean Negulesco, 1948), Emmanuel Siety sur *Sobibór, 14 octobre 1943, 16 heures* (Claude Lanzmann, 2001) ou François Bovier sur *The Movement of People Working* (Phill Niblock, 1973-2010) — mais aussi, plus souvent, à partir d'une constellation d'œuvres travaillant un motif singulier — l'immobilité du corps prolétarisé pour Karl Sieriek, la suspension du geste au moment de l'approche de la mort pour Olivier Cheval, le geste extatique de la *diva* pour Céline Gailleurd, l'instabilité temporelle du geste burlesque pour Emmanuel Dreux, le corps mobile du filmeur pour Richard Bégin. Parallèlement, quelques autres contributions interrogent les apports des théoriciens du geste qui apparaissent, dans le cadre posé par l'ouvrage, comme nodaux : Marcel Jousse et Jean Epstein (commentés par Barbara Grespi), Giorgio Agamben (souvent cité, et lu plus en détails par Gertrud Koch), ou Gilbert Simondon, qui intervient à plusieurs reprises dans les textes, et est pris comme point de départ par Emmanuelle André pour une étude sur l'instrumentalisation du regard ou Pietro Montani pour une contribution plus programmatique. Enfin, d'autres

textes déploient une approche plus précisément historique, tel Laurent Guido détaillant la manière dont le geste cinématographique a été construit dans les années 1920, au croisement des théories de la danse, de la gymnastique, du jeu théâtral, du tableau vivant, de la science et de l'art. Antonio Somaini, lui, aborde le problème *via* Dziga Vertov en mobilisant les outils méthodologiques établis par la théorie des médias, intégrant d'emblée le geste dans une infrastructure technico-politique locale complexe.

Certainement, la théorie des médias constitue l'un des soubassements de l'ensemble de l'ouvrage. Dès l'introduction des directeurs scientifiques, leur définition du geste comme « lieu de passage », comme « interface » (p. 15), en porte la trace, tout comme la présence persistante de la problématique technique, perçue comme structurante pour la définition même du geste — Christa Blümlinger y revient en ouverture de sa propre contribution. Cela implique par exemple une conception élargie de l'intermédialité, qui inclut le statut du geste dans l'usine, l'armée ou la société — dans le « management scientifique » par exemple. Cela se retrouve aussi dans l'interrogation du geste de la spectatrice des dispositifs numériques contemporains, qui émerge au travers de l'analyse de sa remédiation artistique dans la contribution finale de Martine Beugnet.

La théorie ou l'archéologie des médias n'apparaissent toutefois pas ici comme les méthodes décisives. L'iconologie panofskienne, voire le montage warburgien, semblent plus fondateurs pour la majorité des contributeurs : le geste y est d'abord un *motif*, que l'on isole au sein d'un ensemble pour former une série singulière, où l'on suit les récurrences, échos et variations, dégagant leurs enjeux formels ou thématiques. De manière intéressante, ce principe d'isolement du geste fait émerger dans plusieurs textes la problématique de l'instant, la dialectique de l'immobilité et du flux, de l'image fixe prise dans l'image animée (Guido, Cheval, Siety, Sierek...). La notion de geste semble alors faire retour sur les méthodes d'analyse qu'elle engage, comme si l'attention au geste impliquait un arrêt, une coupure. Siety est sans doute celui qui, par son sujet, pousse au plus loin cette question, puisque le geste de Yehuda Lerner à Sobibor consiste littéralement en une rupture historique.

Mais c'est vers un autre cadre méthodologique que l'ouvrage est orienté par ses directeurs scientifiques. Selon eux en effet, l'un des buts de cette approche par le geste est de rendre compte de « ce qui constitue un tournant anthropologique au sein des études de cinéma » (p. 11). C'est sans doute en effet cette sensibilité anthropologique nouvelle qui explique l'émergence aujourd'hui de cette question du geste, restée jusqu'ici relativement peu étudiée — ainsi, un autre livre est sorti presque simultanément sur le thème, *Gesture and Film : Signalling New Critical Perspectives* (Routledge, London et New York 2016), sous la direction de deux historiens de l'art, Nicolas Chare et Liz Watkins. Blümlinger et Lavin marquent cet intérêt en ouvrant et fermant le livre avec deux personnalités rattachées à une anthropologie du geste, Marcel Jousse (Grespi) et Vilém Flusser (Beugnet), tandis que l'ouvrage est émaillé de références ponctuelles à Marcel Mauss, voire à André Leroi-Gourhan.

Geste filmé, gestes filmiques

En fait, cette conjonction entre l'intérêt pour le geste et celui pour l'anthropologie participe à construire chacune de ces deux notions. Aller chercher le geste dans l'anthropologie permet d'ouvrir la notion à son maximum, et donne à l'ouvrage sa tonalité exploratoire, dont beaucoup de textes du volume gardent d'ailleurs la trace en restant ouverts, préférant le suspens à la conclusion. Mais en retour, l'ouverture entraîne aussi l'émergence de nouveaux questionnements. Qu'est-ce finalement qu'un *geste* ? On en vient à s'interroger sur les limites du concept par rapport aux notions environnantes — mouvement, mais aussi posture, technique, gestuelle, acte, mimique... — mais aussi dans son rapport aux corps. N'y a-t-il de gestes que de la main ? Ou de la tête ? Un tremblement, un geste entravé, est-il un geste ? Ce qui se passe dans le travail tardif de Katharine Hepburn ou de Steven Dwoskin relève-t-il encore du geste, ou l'excède-t-il ? Et y a-t-il des gestes non techniques, des gestes qui échappent au critère de l'« acte traditionnel efficace » de Mauss ?

Ces questions sont aussi esthétiques et politiques. Il est ici frappant de constater qu'une référence est complètement absente de l'ouvrage, alors qu'elle aurait probablement été centrale il y a quelques années encore : le *gestus* théorisé — et mis en œuvre — par Bertolt Brecht, avec les commentaires qu'en fit Benjamin dans ses essais sur le théâtre épique. Bien sûr, les « Notes sur le geste » d'Agamben sont l'un des textes les plus cités du livre et émanent en partie de cette tradition, mais elles semblent en neutraliser le caractère opératoire et réellement problématique — comme le confirme la lecture de Koch. Le changement de paradigme disciplinaire implique ainsi une reconfiguration de l'esthétique et de la politique des gestes, dans laquelle l'anthropologie joue un rôle décisif.

[Benoît Turquety, Université de Lausanne]



Projects & Abstracts



Redefining the Anthology: Forms and Affordances in Digital Culture

Giulia Taurino / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract¹

University of Bologna/University of Montréal

In recent years, television studies intersected with interdisciplinary topics as a consequence of the implementation of digital technologies in the production and circulation of content. In addition to favoring the emergence of a network of infrastructures, the digital has come to stimulate new debates, theories and methodologies among media scholars. A common conversation in the broader field of media studies regards, for instance, the ways technologies operate as drivers for cultural and social change. This perspective collides with a tendency to observe digital transformations through the lenses of hard or soft determinism,² a theoretical framework that advances a debate on the causes and effects of technologies, and how they interact with previous socio-cultural, institutional ecosystems. Among others, streaming platforms invite us to reconsider concepts like platformization,³ digitalization,⁴ algorithmythmics⁵ and other terms that became part of a renewed vocabulary for the humanities.

Reasoning on the complexities and entanglements of digital technologies and the World Wide Web, this dissertation tackles the spreading of Internet-distributed television through the lenses of platform studies. Starting from a genealogy of the anthology model, my research notably explores forms of content organization inherited from pre-digital practices, as they transitioned to digital culture through evolutionary processes and technological disruptions. Digital culture is therefore intended here in its interaction with previous socio-cultural

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² *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*, ed. by Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).

³ Anne Helmond, 'The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready', *Social Media + Society*, 1.2 (2015), <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>> [accessed 14 April 2020]; David B Nieborg and Thomas Poell, 'The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity', *New Media & Society* 20.11 (2018), pp. 4275-92, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>> [accessed 14 April 2020].

⁴ David Tilson, Kalle Lyytinen and Carsten Sørensen, 'Digital Infrastructures: The Missing IS Research Agenda', *Information Systems Research*, 21.4 (2010).

⁵ Shintaro Miyazaki, 'AlgoRHYTHMS Everywhere: A Heuristic Approach to Everyday Technologies', *Off Beat* (2013), pp. 135-48, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401208871_010> [accessed 14 April 2020].

systems. Even more than other disruptions, digital cultures and economies had indeed a pervasive impact on media, superposing themselves to pre-existing social and industrial habits, while creating new ones. As Lev Manovich argues, ‘the computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulation, storage, and distribution; it also affects all types of media — texts, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions’.⁶

This dissertation accounts for such a digital turn⁷ and updates media studies to reconsider how the Internet impacted human communication and activities at all levels of making and spreading culture.⁸ In television, the term ‘digital’ addresses a rather complex intertwining of technological, economic, social dynamics, with consequences on the production (*making*) and distribution of (*spreading*) information, narratives and cultural forms at large. To further explore evolutions in television, I examine the anthological turn,⁹ a phenomenon that requires a discussion on the concept of ‘anthology’ first and foremost as a cultural *form* presenting a set of *affordances*, but also as a practice, a model, a process. Finding themselves at the crossroads between television histories and the digital, contemporary anthology series serve as links to media traditions (i.e. literature, radio), as much as they act as medium-specific entities in the definition of classificatory systems on online platforms. It is therefore important to consider contextual media, economic and social environments, as well as historical evolutions.

Drawing upon a post-modern and post-structuralist perspective, this research project ultimately accounts for the complex relation between the anthology form and its potential functions or uses, industrial and social spheres, temporal continuities/discontinuities, techno-cultural transitions, while contributing to frame the coexistence of linear and non-linear environments in the contemporary mediascape. My research positions itself in this highly interconnected technological, industrial, and cultural context where television content is increasingly fragmented. In this scenario, the anthology form sets itself as a model for grouping otherwise distinct, unrelated snippets of content into a coherent collection. Due to its cross-historical, cross-media relevance, the anthology is my case study to address the distribution of cultural content from pre- to post-digital culture. I am notably interested in observing the connection, in constant redefinition, between form, function and content in television anthology series, where modularity is accentuated by a formal division into discrete narrative modules, subjected to mechanisms of scalability, which make the anthology a highly resilient form.

⁶ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), p. 19.

⁷ *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. by Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).

⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

⁹ Milad Doueihi, *Digital Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Redefining the Anthology: Forms and Affordances in Digital Culture

Overall, this research project answers the following questions: can the concepts of form and affordance be usefully integrated in digital media studies? If so, what is their intersection with anthologization processes? What are the affordances, functions and uses of the anthology form in the digital age? On the one hand, the aim of this project is to investigate the ways certain narrative structures typical of the anthology form emerge in the context of television seriality, starting from specific conditions in the media industry. On the other hand, my dissertation offers a broader reading of the very interaction between anthological editorial practices and algorithmic-driven recommendation systems. By focusing on the evolution (temporal, historical dimension) and on the digital circulation (spatial, geographic dimension) of the anthology form, this thesis inserts itself into a larger conversation on digital-cultural studies. The final purpose is to give an overview of the relation between anthological *forms*, distribution *platforms* and consumption *models*, by outlining the following: (i) structural and narrative-oriented affordances; (ii) industrial affordances; (iii) pragmatic and ecological affordances. By doing so, I propose a comparative approach to the anthology as an interpretationally primitive concept,¹⁰ one that is at the same time cross-cultural, cross-historical, cross-genre and accounts for both pre- and post-digital practices of cultural content organization.

¹⁰ Susan Carey, *The Origin of Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).



Videogames as Visual Art: Tools for Artistic and Historical Analysis of Videogames

Roberto Cappai/ Ph.D. Thesis Abstract¹

Università di Pisa

In 2000, *Newsweek* published an article written by the film critic Jack Kroll, in which the author denied that videogames could be considered as an art form,² giving voice to many other film critics who shared this opinion. Five years later, Henry Jenkins, in his essay *Games, the New Lively Art* argued that:

Games represent a new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as those earlier media were for the machine age. They open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a realm of experimentation and innovation that is broadly accessible. And games have been embraced by a public that otherwise been unimpressed by much of what passes for digital art.³

In 2010 film critic Roger Ebert, in response to designer Kellee Santiago's talk at TED (Technology Entertainment Design) *Are Video Games Art?* claimed on his online journal that videogames can never be art.⁴ This statement provoked strong reactions especially between media scholars, spreading a worldwide debate which had started at least twenty years before, when the founder of the New York Museum of Moving Image, Rochelle Slovin, curated the exhibition *Hot Circuits: a Video Arcade* (1989).

A couple of decades after the debate on the artistic potential of videogames started, today videogames are officially considered an institutionalized art form. Nevertheless, though the twentieth-century avant-garde changed our perception on art, suggesting that 'art doesn't have any sort of stable meaning in contemporary culture',⁵ there is still no methodology for videogame analysis to which we can refer, at least from a visual art studies point of view.

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² Jack Kroll, 'Emotion Engine? I Don't Think So', *Newsweek*, 5 March 2000 <<https://www.newsweek.com/emotion-engine-i-dont-think-so-156675>> [accessed 25 May 2020].

³ Henry Jenkins, 'Games, the New Lively Art', <<http://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/GamesNewLively.html>> [accessed 27 March 2018].

⁴ Roger Ebert, 'Video games can never be art', <<https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-neverbeart>> [accessed 27 March 2018].

⁵ Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 9.

My research develops some theoretical tools for an artistic and historical analysis of videogames, that are considered as audiovisual objects (*video* objects) instead of *games*. Taking into account expanded cinema theories, videogame play experience is, therefore, analyzed as an audiovisual experience, and the term *videoplay* is used in opposition to the most common (although not accurate) term *gameplay*. On the basis of Mary Flanagan's book *Critical Play*,⁶ revolving around the idea of an avant-garde game design which undermines and reworks popular game practices, this part of the project provides a useful framework for the artistic analysis of videogames.

In his foreword to the book *A Game Design Vocabulary*,⁷ the director of the NYU Game Center, Frank Lantz, notes that:

Something is happening in the world of video games, something that is changing the way we think about how they're made, how they're played, and what they mean. The authors of this book are part of a new generation of game creators for whom video games interface fully with all the complex machinery of contemporary culture. For Anna [Anthropy] and Naomi [Clark], video games are not merely sleek consumer appliances dispensing entertaining power fantasies, they are fragments of shattered machines out of which new identities can be constructed; sites where disorderly crowds can assemble for subversive purposes [...] smart machines that allow us to say new things; and, when correctly operated, beautiful machines that kill fascists.⁸

In accordance with Lantz, this research focuses on alternative and underground movements, developers, artists and players using videogame design, videogame modding and videogame play as a means of self and artistic expression. This made possible to detect some groundbreaking milestones in order to develop a videogame art history divided into three periods, following Matteo Bittanti's *Innovazione Tecnoludica*:⁹ the 'Experimentation Age', the 'Variation Age', and the 'Subversion Age'.

The main objective of the second part of the research project is, in effect, to construct a videogame art history conducive at the same time to Videogame History and Art History, taking into account technology, specific artworks, artistic and cultural movements, manifestos, and *personalities*, the latter following the Italian Cinema Studies pioneer Carlo Ludovico Raghianti's writings. A perspective borrowed from media and visual art studies is applied to videogame history, and is argued that videogames could be not only considered in the context of videogame industry, but also positioned under the umbrella-term "video art", according to Michael Z. Newman who wrote that:

⁶ Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

⁷ Anna Anthropy, Naomi Clark, *A Game Design Vocabulary* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2014).

⁸ Frank Lantz, 'Foreword', in Anthropy and Clark, p. xiv.

⁹ Matteo Bittanti, *L'innovazione tecnoludica: l'era dei videogiochi simbolici, 1958-1984* (Milano: Jackson libri, 1999).

Videogames as Visual Art: Tools for Artistic and Historical Analysis of Videogames

As tube, tape, and disc are replaced by file, pixel and cloud, the present moment in media history offers a vantage point for regarding video as an adaptable and enduring term that bridges all of these technologies and the practices they afford. At different times video has been different things for different people, and its history is more than a progression of material formats [...]. It is also a history of ideas about technology and culture, and relations and distinctions among various types of media and the social needs giving rise to their uses.¹⁰

Following Newman, alternative and experimental videogames are seen as a means of artistic video manipulation, just like A. Michael Noll's early computer art or Woody and Steina Vasulka's video art. At the same time, they could be considered a means of artistic game manipulation, on the heels of New Game Movement and Fluxus. Artists like George Brecht and George Maciunas indeed made games that 'break art museum's cardinal rules of no touching and no talking', emphasizing 'joyful absurdity, curiosity, and collective life'.¹¹ Bearing in mind the dual nature of videogames, this project ultimately embeds videogame in Art History.

¹⁰ Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions. On the History of a Medium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 1.

¹¹ The University of Iowa, 'Game' in Fluxus Digital Collection <<https://thestudio.uiowa.edu/fluxus/categories/game>> [accessed March 28, 2018].



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