fusion journal

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Issue 14
Intersections in Film and Media Studies

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Editorial: Intersections in film and media studies

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This special issue was inspired by film theorist B. Ruby Rich's Fall 2014 editorial for *Film Quarterly*, where in a piece titled "Film, Digitality, and Cultural Divides" Rich wrote,

> *Cinema itself is in a state of immense transition, yet it's hard not to notice that attention is lavished disproportionately on technology and auteurist style, with the question of theme, focus, and subject matter repeatedly sidelined. What, though, is 'filmable' today? And what is 'theorizable' in response? (5)*

Film and media studies have shifted, merged, and evolved in response to the various industrial and technological changes in the media landscape. When and in what ways are the distinctions between different screen media forms important for discerning how screen texts circulate? What kinds of discussions – and what kinds of work – are valued and possible in this shifting terrain? And when, how and why do questions around technology and the future of cinema displace or overshadow questions around what can claim a place on the various kinds of screens that populate the contemporary media landscape? As Rich puts it, "What, though, is 'filmable' today? And what is 'theorizable' in response?"

In 2017, the Sydney Screen Studies Network held a program of seminars on the topic "Intersections in Film and Media." The program of 14 seminars, held at universities across the Sydney region, aimed to bring together the disparate research backgrounds of screen studies scholars to interrogate how they navigate the rapidly changing media environment in which they work. As well as presenting their own research, each presenter responded to the B. Ruby Rich quote that forms the stimulus for this *fusion* issue. A follow up symposium and roundtable panel were also held on the same topic at the end of 2017. What emerged from this year-long program was a diverse body of work grappling with similar core issues. Seminars covered topics such as piracy and distribution, spectatorship, fan culture, gender and sexuality, and arts policy. Such disparate topics stimulated by one short passage evidenced the fact that

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one core issue faces all screen studies researchers: it is becoming increasingly difficult to define screen media. It demonstrated that researchers working across the spectrum of screen studies increasingly question how to define (and at times argue for) their research object, given the rapid changes to our media environment as a result of new technologies, viewing practices, distribution patterns and potentials for interactivity. The conversations emerging from the symposium and roundtable at the end of the year triggered a discussion amongst the editors to further pursue this topic in a special journal issue.

Several of the papers presented at the 2017 seminar and symposium program were developed into articles for this issue, including those by Tara McLennan, Adam Daniel and Jessica Ford. Alongside these articles developed from work presented in this seminar program we have also included a number of other pieces that examine what cinema's state of "immense transition" means on "the ground" – for independent filmmakers, for film festivals and their organisers and audiences, and for the place and future of the disciplinary field of film studies. These include an edited transcript of a public forum on "Women, Film and Independence" that drew together filmmakers, academics, film programmers and curators to discuss what independence means for women filmmakers working in Australia today. In her piece "Across and in-between: transcending disciplinary borders in film festival studies" Kirsten Stevens grapples with how we can understand film festival studies within the contemporary interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary academic landscape. Stevens proposes that film festival studies offers the opportunity to move well beyond the traditional concerns of texts, nations and industry. Film festival research offers an approach to the study of screen environments that privileges understanding film through its social and cultural construction. Reflecting on what this period of "immense transition" in cinema means for the disciplinary field of film studies and how its concerns are understood and explored in the academy, Melanie Robson argues that a "key issue is that film students access all media—cinema, television, YouTube videos, podcasts, video essays—on the same devices via the same means; this means that not only are the platforms converged, but the experience of engaging with them are, too. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between different forms of visual screen media in the classroom."

Fittingly, this issue opens with Adam Daniel's evocative article on how Virtual Reality (VR) filmmakers can produce an experience of spectatorship that is less dependent on narrative linearity. Daniel's essay offers a deep analysis of and engagement with Australian VR artist Lynette Wallworth's *Collisions VR,* which "tells the story of Nyarri Morgan's firsthand encounter with the effects of nuclear testing in the South Australia desert in the 1950s." Daniel contends that VR opens the possibility for manifold subjective experiences of space and time and brings together a number of key concerns for this issue. Also engaging with large scale work (and questions of scale), Wendy Haslem explores how the work of artist Pipilotti Rist renews cinema. Through a rich and detailed discussion of Rist's exhibition *Sip My Ocean* Haslem argues that "Rist's moving image work steps outside of the traditional exhibition space to reframe the history of the cinema and to imagine it anew for the future." Working on the smaller scale of networked data set photographs, in her essay "Memories in the networked

assemblage: how algorithms shape personal photographs" Tara McLennan explores the ways that "The memory work of curating and storytelling with personal photographs is increasingly undertaken in digital internet-enabled spaces, and yet the desire to shape and craft narrative from a vast personal archive endures."

Two of the articles in this issue turn to the intersections between film and television. Jessica Ford and Daniel Binns explore the increasing convergence between film and television spaces and the lack of frameworks available to adequately conceptualise these changes. In her essay "Feminist cinematic television: Authorship, aesthetics and gender in Pamela Adlon's *Better Things*" Ford argues that, "feminist filmmakers and television creators are increasingly asserting themselves, their storytelling, and their politics on television and while television distributors and audiences seem to have made room for them, evaluative and interpretive frameworks also need to be reformulated accordingly." In his piece "The Netflix Documentary House Style: Streaming TV & Slow Media" Binns writes that "documentary is dialectical, certainly, and it is discursive. To watch any on-demand content, though, is to engage in a discourse of platforms and infrastructure, of algorithms and aesthetics."

In different ways and on different fronts the articles that make up this special issue of *fusion* engage with Rich's provocation. They do so by exploring how and when the distinctions between different screen media are given value, for instance in terms of the criteria for film funding, in terms of which bodies or legacies of screen work are recognised and valued, or in terms of the place of film studies in the academy. In Rich's 2014 editorial that served as the prompt for much of the work included here Rich asked, "Is it possible that a committed digital cinema could arise from the ashes of celluloid and resume the medium's traditional relevance to popular events, historical movements and questions of inequality?" (5). The work gathered in this issue offers rich ground from which to continue these discussions.

Reference

Rich, B. Ruby. "Film, Digitality and Cultural Divides", *Film Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2014, 5-8.

Inhabiting the image of *Collisions*: Virtual reality cinema as a medium of ethical experience

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Abstract

Many early cinematic virtual reality projects were dominated by a "demo-aesthetic," focusing primarily on the expressive potential of the medium as opposed to an interventional purpose as an ideologically charged artwork. However, recent films by artists such as Lynette Wallworth, Chris Milk, Gabo Arora, and Felix & Paul have utilised the unique expressive and immersive properties of virtual reality to capitalise on the political and ethical capabilities of this new mode. This article seeks to examine virtual reality's potential as a medium of ethical experience, through a critical examination of Australian virtual reality artist Lynette Wallworth's *Collisions* (2015). *Collisions* tells the story of Nyarri Morgan's firsthand encounter with the effects of nuclear testing in the South Australia desert in the 1950s. As a virtual reality experience, the film utilises aspects of presence to engage the spectator in an ethical understanding of the consequences of Morgan's witnessing, and the effects of the nuclear testing in relation to the Martu people's stewardship of the land. This ethical inhabitation is assisted by the altered spatial and temporal dynamics in the experience of the virtual reality spectator.

Keywords

Virtual Reality; Cine-ethics; Documentary; Presence

In recent years, film theory has undergone related affective and ethical turns. The affective turn correlates to the increasing focus on affect, emotion, subjectivity and the body, while the ethical turn sees theorists considering how the cinema may constitute an aesthetic encounter that can forge a variety of ethically significant experiences. To examine the relation of the affective and the ethical, theorists such as Robert Sinnerbrink have attempted to build connections between phenomenological and cognitivist approaches, while also acknowledging the importance of contributions to the field of cine-ethics from philosophy, empirical psychology, neuroscience, and

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evolutionary biology (82). This article seeks to further this consideration of the interrelation between cinema's affective and ethical capacities by turning to the burgeoning new field of cinematic virtual reality; specifically, Lynette Wallworth's 2015 virtual reality short film *Collisions* as an exemplar for how the medium of virtual reality may reconfigure some of the existing conceptions around the ethico-aesthetics of cinema. This consideration of cinema as a "medium of ethical experience" is informed by what Sinnerbrink identifies as its "transformative potential to sharpen our moral perception, challenge our beliefs through experiential means, and thus enhance our understanding of moral-social complexity" (17).

The relatively primitive space of cinematic virtual reality has found many virtual reality artists wrestling with how much this new mode can draw from established cinematic paradigms, such as linear narrative progression, techniques of montage, and emotional engagement via identification with diegetic characters. There is, in many of these early creative works, a reductive move back to the concept of the frame, as filmmakers attempt to manipulate and control the viewer's attention. What appears to be common to the more successful conceptualisations of this new mode is the abandonment of the cinematic frame in favour of rethinking the spectator's experience in terms of enhancing a sense of presence, defined by virtual reality scholars as:

> *[A] psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part of all of an individual's current experience is generated by and or filtered through human-made technology, part of all of the individual's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of the technology in the experience. (The Concept of Presence)*

By emphasising the role of presence, virtual reality filmmakers can produce an experience of spectatorship that is less dependent on narrative linearity and instead opens the possibility for manifold subjective experiences of space and time. These experiences manifest uniquely for each viewer, dependent on where they choose to look and when; thus, it is evident that the spatial and temporal dimensions of these experiences will be different to conventional cinema.

This reconfiguration of experience has inevitable consequences for the ethical possibilities of virtual reality. This facility to situate a viewer within a constructed three-dimensional world, as in the case of "room-scale" productions that allow the viewer to move freely through space, or within the spatio-temporal matrix of a previously recorded moment, such is the case with 360-degree video, introduces new dimensions of spectatorship. This is especially evident when comparing how documentary operates in virtual reality in comparison to traditional non-virtual reality documentary. Virtual reality documentaries may use all the tools of conventional documentary, such as interviews, historical footage, and re-enactments, yet they also create a facility for the viewer to be situated inside a particular space-time configuration; in the case of 360-degree video, one that has previously been recorded, but one that nonetheless indexically corresponds to the space-time inhabited by the recording camera. This leads the viewer to a form of subjective witnessing that differs from the kind of witnessing produced either by rewatching historical footage or by first-hand accounts. Documentary theorist Bill Nichols, for example, argues that the choices

of camera placement and editing necessarily results in the framing of reality, and therefore the historical record (Representing 78-79). While this mediation still comes into play in virtual reality, it is to some degree ameliorated. This article seeks to contrast the ethical dimensions of virtual reality with traditional documentary cinema and explore how the altered dynamics of the viewer's spatial and temporal interface with the image contributes to this construction of a new ethical experience.

The problem of the "empathy machine"

The production of an ethical engagement is at the foundation of the work of contemporary virtual reality filmmakers such as Wallworth, Chris Milk, Gabo Arora, Nonny De La Peña, and Felix & Paul, who each have recognised that the aesthetic capacities of virtual reality allow for a new relation between viewer and film. Many of these filmmakers see the dynamics of the viewer's emotional engagement as concomitant with the heightened corporeal interface with the image; as Milk says, referring to the "window" of traditional cinema and television, "I don't want you in the window, I want you through the window, I want you on the other side, in the world, inhabiting the world". However, this consideration of the ethical capacities of virtual reality by creators is relatively recent, and much of the early history of the form has, in the words of Erkki Huhtamo "concentrated on exploring the expressive potential of the medium, instead of using it for ideologically charged critical purposes" (471-472). This "demo-aesthetic," as he calls it, is often the default state for a fledgling artistic domain, given that many of its practitioners are still learning the boundaries of its "expressive potential."

The recent move towards utilising the "expressive potential" of the medium as a means of exploring ethical questions has seen many theorists examining virtual reality's attempt to legitimate itself as an "empathy machine." This term was popularised by Milk's 2015 TED Talk, in which he discussed developing virtual reality works in collaboration with the United Nations with the explicit purpose of producing stories that could facilitate greater human connection and perhaps bridge the subjective divide between humans. One example of these kind of projects is the short film *Clouds Over Sidra* (2017), which places the viewer in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan to attempt to help them understand the subjective experience of a refugee child.

Sam Gregory highlights the potential for virtual reality experiences like *Clouds Over Sidra* to act as a type of "poverty tourism" and argues that filmmakers like Milk are confusing immersion with empathy (cited in Bello *Of Virtual Reality and Vérité*). Furthermore, the implications of the "empathy machine" concept have also been critiqued by media theorists such as Janet H. Murray and Grant Bollmer. Murray contends that empathy emerges not from the technology of the headset itself but from "well-chosen and highly specific stories, insightful interpretation, and strong compositional skills within a mature medium of communication," and argues that early virtual reality is far from a "mature medium." Bollmer, however, questions the entire notion of an empathy machine by claiming that empathy itself is a problematic concept to use for political or ethical purposes. He contends that technologies that are designed to foster empathy, like virtual reality, "*presume* to acknowledge the experience of

another, but inherently cannot" (64; original emphasis). What occurs instead, he argues, is that the user "hastily *absorbs* the other's experience into their own experience." In this model, empathy is better understood as an "aesthetic and empirical directive about sensation and knowledge" as opposed to a "psychological or ethical construct" (64; original emphasis). In place of empathy, Bollmer posits the alternative conception of "radical compassion" as a more valid means of examining the capacities of virtual reality, where the "sensation and direct experiential knowledge" produced by the experience is necessarily "bracketed" from its ethical and political implications (65).

The possibility of transcending our own body and inhabiting another, and therefore understanding another's experience, has been an enduring promise of virtual reality (Bolter and Grusin 22-23). The idea of subjective witnessing described above may seem to lead toward this promise, however, like Bollmer, I find it far too simplistic to propose that because virtual reality can place the viewer in the virtual position of another, they will somehow comprehend their existence, their past and their experience. Rather than positing virtual reality as an "empathy machine," it is perhaps more valuable to reframe virtual reality's capacity for transformation and affectivity as an outcome of an intensified ethical engagement.

Collisions and the "charge of the real"

Lynette Wallworth's *Collisions* provides an ideal location to explore these concepts. *Collisions* tells the story of Martu man, Nyarri Nyarri Morgan. Walking an Aboriginal trade route through Maralinga, South Australia in the 1950s, Morgan witnessed firsthand the devastating effects of an atomic detonation test. Nici Cumpston and Una Rey observe the urgency to archive these stories, given there are so few living witnesses who can offer these types of accounts, and *Collisions* does this powerfully through Morgan's retelling (66). The integration of this story with the aesthetic capacities of cinematic virtual reality is key to its compelling affect. The film takes the viewer to Martu country in the present day, and, while Morgan retells his story, then places the viewer as a virtual witness to the atomic bomb blast. In doing so, the film implicitly stages a consideration of the manifold ethical questions that emerge from what is arguably modernity's most heinous invention; among them, an examination of the legacy of the physical, environmental and spiritual damage done by the nuclear testing, and a consideration of the contemporary issues around mining and indigenous land rights.

In *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film*, Sinnerbrink proposes that cinema has often been a location for where cultures "find imaginative narrative ways to address, reflect upon, question, and explore some of the most important moral-ethical and cultural-political issues of our times" (16). Importantly, however, this concept of cinematic ethics is not constrained to how films thematise moral or ethical questions through the narrative content alone. Sinnerbrink is expansive in his conception of how traditional cinema can provoke or engage spectators to engage in diverse forms of ethical experience. This diversity emerges not only through "an intellectual or abstract reflection on moral problems or ethical dilemmas but [...] through a situated, emotionally engaged, aesthetically receptive response to

images that work on us in a multimodal manner, engaging our senses, emotions, and powers of reasoning" (20).

Sinnerbrink posits that there have traditionally been three interrelated aspects of cinema as a medium of ethical experience: firstly, that it can depict ethical content or experience through narrative, in the form of morally or ethically charged situations that the protagonists must negotiate; secondly, through the reflexive presentation of ethical experience in the filmmaking process itself, both from the perspectives of filmmaker and spectator; and thirdly, the ethics of cinema in terms of its broader cultural, social and ideological concerns. To these he adds a fourth: the relation between ethics and "the aesthetic dimensions of cinema" (17). Here he draws our attention to the way the aesthetic form can intensify our experience and focus our attention in a way that more fully expresses the complexity of that which is being considered.

In this understanding, aesthetics and ethics are intimately and expressively related; ethical experience is not constrained to an intellectual consideration of moral or ethical dilemmas but extends out to how the images affect the viewer in a multimodal sense: cognitively, but also emotionally, corporeally, and sensorially. The corporeal and sensorial aspects of this consideration are crucial. In her book *Carnal Thoughts* (2004), Vivian Sobchack argues for a dynamic understanding of a bodily engagement with images that is not entirely predicated on semantic content. She contends that the way in which fictional film content intersects with documentary may arouse a "documentary consciousness" in the viewer, which she defines as "a particular mode of embodied and ethical spectatorship that informs and transforms the space of the irreal into the space of the real" (261). While Sobchack is referring specifically to the use of actual documentary footage within a fictional diegesis here, the notion I wish to draw on is what she calls "the charge of the real" (284): the way our consciousness of an image as fictional moves to documentary consciousness, which is then infused with "an ethical charge" (284). Sobchack points out that our engagement with cinematic representations is "more labile and dynamic" than that which formal or generic conventions would seek to preclude: for example, the disparate elements of fiction and documentary, when integrated in a single film, can be experienced by the viewer in a manner that vacillates between the different types of consciousness each generates (268).

This conception provides a productive way to examine the fictionalised re-enactment of Morgan's encounter with the nuclear fall-out cloud in *Collisions*, which manifested for him as the spirit of his Gods; he says, in translated voice over, in the moments after the viewer witnesses the detonation in the desert, "I thought I saw the spirit of my Gods, rising to speak with me." In *Collisions*, a clearly anthropomorphic shape rises out of the ensuing mushroom cloud, including two shafts of light that may represent a set of eyes looking down at the viewer. In this segment the film shifts from the vérité documentary form to a subjective construction of Nyarri's recollections, yet it is freighted with an intensity that belies its status as a computer-generated construction. Imbued with our knowledge of the catastrophic environmental and health consequences that arise from this testing, there is a form of affective surplus that infuses the image, despite its irreal nature. This is an example of Sobchack's "charge of the real," occurring as the sudden

(or, in some cases, subtle) experience of the emergence of our extracinematic and extratextual knowledge of the world, permeated with an ethical charge, in the space where previously we may have been engaged through a fictional consciousness that is arguably more resistant to this thought.

This documentary consciousness certainly applies to non-virtual reality cinema, but what the virtual reality experience intensifies is the palpable aspect of the appearance of the God-like shape in the sky. In conventional documentary, this re-enactment may be read by the viewer as metaphor: the God-like form in the cloud as a representation of Morgan's experience of the spirit, despite the literalness with which he is describing it. In virtual reality, this literal quality manifests through our experience of witnessing the event in much the same way that Morgan did.

Aspects of presence in virtual reality

Conventional cinema traditionally aims to make transparent the cinematic apparatus so that the viewer becomes imbricated with the sound and image. In virtual reality this effacement of the cinematic apparatus is, in a sense, replaced by the notion of "presence" described earlier: the partial reality of that which is being perceived by the spectator. Virtual reality deemphasises the mediating role of certain aesthetic techniques that make clear that the viewer is experiencing a film: the traditional use of montage, camera angle and focal length, and sound, for example. Instead, it produces for the spectator a time and space which they can inhabit with relative perceptual freedom.

Kent Bye builds on this notion of presence by delineating it into four aspects: active presence, embodied presence, emotional presence, and mental/social presence. He labels this breakdown of the qualitative aspects of experience the "elemental theory of presence" (Bye). Bye contends that different modes of virtual reality constrain or amplify these various aspects of presence, however they are all active in experience. Active presence refers to the agency of the viewer, and the capacities for interactivity and exploration. Embodied presence refers to the sensory-perception of virtual reality and the different mode of embodied cognition it promotes. Emotional presence describes how virtual reality utilises story, character, music and rhythm, among other aspects, to facilitate greater emotional connection. Finally, mental/social presence covers virtual reality's communicative quality, its use as a space for social interactions, and its facility for mental abstractions.

While each of these aspects contributes to the more unified dimension of presence, it is important to not draw a simplistic equivalence between presence and the construction of empathy; like those who question the notion of an "empathy machine" above, I am sceptical that empathy emerges from presence alone. However, Bye's presences may provide a means to understand how virtual reality can provoke an intensified ethical engagement. In *Collisions,* for example, embodied and active presence come to the fore in ways that transcend conventional documentary. Not only does the narrative perform a meditative and compassionate reflection on the devastating clash of indigenous culture and modern technology, but the film also uses the medium of virtual reality in a

way that reflects upon the responsibilities between documentary filmmaker and subject. Wallworth has expressed in interviews that she sees this technology as extending the immersive properties of cinema, and that this immersion is intimately tied to how Morgan, and the Martu, tell their stories. As Wallworth told *Mashable* in 2016, the Martu:

> *care most about giving people a sense of what it feels like to be in their country. There is no better way to have that sensation than with virtual reality. You don't just land there, you are travelled there. We follow the kind of protocols of meeting that apply to me when I visit, so you are given context and understanding about why you are there. (Mandybur)*

What this metaphorical transportation of the viewer allows for is an expression of twin desires by Wallworth: that she can tell the story as the Martu would, and that she can place the viewer as a witness to the event in a way that carries with it "presence." This witnessing is, for Wallworth, a way of overcoming the possibility of spectatorial detachment that she sees as more present in other forms. In her words, *Collisions* makes the viewer stand where Morgan stood and see what he saw: "it makes you present" and therefore "it makes it personal" (Mandybur).

Kit MacFarlane contends that the film establishes what he describes as "the sense of an outsider's gaze" (he notes that the narration stresses that the bomb test was "the day our world collided with [Morgan's]") that leads the viewer "into a sense of a different space, and with it, the possibility of another outlook" (80), which would cohere with the kind of experience Wallworth seeks to build.

A fold in time and space

Nichols, in a consideration of the recreation of prior events in conventional documentary cinema, contends that re-enactments "effect a fold in time. [They] vivify the sense of the lived experience, the vécu of others. They take past time and make it present. They take present time and fold it over what has already come to pass." In addition, they also make "what it feels like" to occupy a situation or perform an action "visible and more vivid" (*Documentary* 88). This contention is arguably even more relevant to the re-enactment in virtual reality, such as that of the atomic blast in *Collisions*, which enables the viewer to more literally occupy a situation.

Nichols has also written extensively on the ethical space in documentary film, asking questions of the filmmaker's relation to the historical world. He coins the term "axiographics" as a way of describing "the implantation of values in the configuration of space, in the constitution of a gaze, and in the relation of observer to observed" (*Representing* 77-78). The axiographics of *Collisions*, its ethical drive, plays out in the Wallworth's use of virtual reality's capacities in relation to these three elements. *Collisions* attempts to open the viewer's eyes to the contradictory drives behind two worldviews: on one side, the short-term thinking of the proponents of nuclear testing, and by extension, the short-term thinking of the modern economic imperatives driving the mining industry; on the other side, the notion of indigenous stewardship of land, of

multi-generational understandings of the environment, of how the connection between the Martu people and their country goes beyond considerations of its utility. Wallworth calls this a story "about the unintended consequences of technology" in alignment with the "extreme cultural interruption that occurred to Nyarri" (Taylor). She balances these two perspectives through collaboratively sharing the resources and capacities of this type of filmmaking, by allowing Morgan and the Martu to be the co-authors of this story and to share in their voices how knowledge is passed down in indigenous society. By placing these different worldviews in dialogue, Wallworth demonstrates that the negative consequences of technology are not limited to the material or economic: they can tear at the very heart of a culture.

Conclusion

The 360-degree camera, and the freedom of gaze that it provides, deliberately draws the viewer into sharing an ecological perspective of the relationship between country and people: where a 360-degree pan of the range may have supplied us with the same content visually, the presence of negotiating this space through our own perceptual choices acts to tie us more fully to this space, in a way that may reflect the Martu's philosophy of place. In her study of the Martu people's use and knowledge of their country, research scientist Fiona J. Walsh uses the triadic conjunction of "Country-People-Dreaming" to describe the interconnectedness of these aspects of the Martu culture (17). However, she also acknowledges that this triad underestimates the depth and complexity of the connectivity between these aspects and others: for the Martu, elements such as "plants/animals," "spirit," "children," "country," and Jukurrpa "travel routes" are inextricably linked together (357). Walsh contends that to describe the complexity of the connectivity, "the biological concept of symbiosis seems analogous. These inter-relations were necessary for the functioning of the whole system" (383).

Virtual reality becomes an effective vehicle for expressing this worldview: through presence, the viewer come to more fully understand the interconnectedness of the Martu people and their land through a mutual, albeit temporary, inhabitation. This is not land as property for ownership, but land as that which sustains its people. In *Collisions*, the Martu people's stewardship of the land, through fire management, is placed in stark counterpoint to the exploitation of the land through both nuclear testing and encroaching mining projects. This fire management is a technology also, one that the uninitiated viewer may not fully understand but will nonetheless grasp as vital to the Martu people's ecological philosophy.

The viewer's ethical relationship with a film may not be entirely dependent on their contemplation of the ethical content of the narrative, but also in how the film is productive of a capacity to think new meanings. Sinnerbrink describes how traditional cinema "enables an experientially 'thick' exploration of subjectivity, memory and historical experience" which contributes to the "ethical responsiveness and philosophical reflection" of the viewer (17). Virtual reality achieves this in a different manner to conventional cinema because of the altered dynamics of the viewer's spatial and temporal relationship to the image, where the experiential "thickness" Sinnerbrink refers to comes to include a different form of embodied relationship to the image. The

unique corporeality and sensorial dimensions of virtual reality combine with a cognitive and emotionally charged consideration of the image to evoke an encounter that can challenge, provoke, and inspire reflection from the spectator. *Collisions* unites perceptual, affective and cognitive engagement with experiential immersion, which not only enables the audience to witness a recreation of the atomic bomb test, but to more fully grasp the cultural trauma it enacted for Morgan and others. Through the presence it brings to the fore, and the skilful use of virtual reality cinema's spatial and temporal dimensions, the viewer may be drawn into an ethical inhabitation of the image, which can transform their understandings of others, of the world, and of themselves.

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Feminist cinematic television: Authorship, aesthetics and gender in Pamela Adlon's *Better Things*

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Abstract

In the past decade there has been a sharp increase in woman-authored, woman-directed, and woman-centred scripted primetime television produced for the US market. This recent cycle includes series by feminist filmmakers, such as Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake* (2013, 2017), Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-2017), Lisa Cholodenko's *Olive Kitteridge* (2014), Jill Soloway's *Transparent* (2013-present), and Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar* (2016-present). As well as television series by creative and authorial teams, such as Tig Notaro and Diablo Cody's *One Mississippi* (2015-2017) and Issa Rae and Melina Matsoukas' *Insecure* (2016-present). These series are created, written, and directed by women with a strong authorial vision and they are performing a kind of "cinematic television" that is in conversation with indie, art, and exploitation cinemas. This essay will map how current articulations and theorisations of "cinematic television" do not account for these women-centric feminist series. In this essay, I argue that the "cinematic-ness" of these recent series is indebted to their feminist sensibility and their women-centric authorship. This argument will be developed through a close textual analysis of Pamela Adlon's dramedy *Better Things* (2016-present).

Keywords

Feminism; Television; Authorship; Women; Cinema

In the past decade there has been a sharp increase in woman-authored, woman-directed, and woman-centred scripted primetime television produced for the US market. This recent cycle includes series by feminist filmmakers, such as Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake* (2013) and *Top of the Lake: China Girl* (2017), Lisa Cholodenko's *Olive Kitteridge* (2014), Jill Soloway's *Transparent* (2013-present), and Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar* (2016-present). It also includes television series authored by creative and authorial team, such as Issa Rae and Melina Matsoukas' *Insecure* (2016-present) and Tig Notaro and Diablo Cody's *One Mississippi* (2016-present). As

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well as series that centre on an author-star, such as Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-2017), Pamela Adlon's *Better Things* (2016-present), and Frankie Shaw's *SMILF* (2017-present), and prestige big budget screen adaptations of best-selling women-centric novels, such as *Big Little Lies* (2017-present)*, Sharp Objects* (2018), and *Dietland* (2018). Each of these series articulate and/or engage with contemporary popular feminisms.

These series constitute a cycle, which I call "feminist cinematic television." They are largely written and directed by women with a strong authorial vision. They employ a range of aesthetics that draw on or reference cinema. These women-centric series operate across genres, distribution platforms, styles, formats, and race and class lines. Yet the series are united in their engagement with feminist ideas and issues, and how they play with the dissolving boundaries between television and cinema. This cycle is defined by the cinematic tendency of each series, their authorship, and their feminist sensibility.

Feminist sensibility refers to how series negotiate and explore feminist politics, ideology, and issues in deliberate and distinct ways. By using the phrase "feminist sensibility," I deliberately move away from binary understandings of cultural objects as pro-feminist or anti-feminist. Feminist sensibility is not a recent phenomenon; it is evident in a wide range of television series from *I Love Lucy* (1950-1955) to *Roseanne* (1988-1998, 2018) to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2004). This article will explore how the series that make up feminist cinematic television affirm their feminist sensibility through their authorship and engagement with distinctly women-centric and feminist cinematic aesthetics and storytelling.

Each of the series within this cycle also operate as part of other television genres, cycles, and categories. *Olive Kitteridge*, *Top of the Lake*, and *Queen Sugar* continue the strong history of women-centric melodramas, TV movies, and miniseries. While *Girls*, *One Mississippi*, *Better Things*, and *Insecure* function within a woman-centric comedic tradition that includes *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *Maude* (1972-1978), and *Roseanne*. Many recent women-centric US television series, including but not limited to *Girls*, *Transparent*, *Better Things*, *Queen Sugar*, *SMILF, Sharp Objects*, and *Dietland*, are at once televisual, feminist, and cinematic, but they do not always circulate as such.

In her seminal essay "The World and the Soup: Historicizing Media Feminisms in Transnational Contexts," Kathleen A. McHugh looks at film feminisms as part of a larger feminist cultural landscape and examines the difficulty of theorising and exploring feminisms' impact on film production (113). McHugh considers how different theoretical frameworks and film categories, including auteur theory, national cinemas, and genre, often erase the "feminism" of feminist films and filmmaking (115). The reception of feminist cinematic television series reveals a similar dynamic at play, whereby the series are either recognised as "feminist" or "cinematic" but rarely as both. *Girls* and *Transparent* highlight how gender politics can overshadow a series' aesthetic achievements. Both *Girls* and *Transparent* have been widely examined, both in academic publications and by popular media outlets, in terms of their contributions to

and engagement with popular feminisms, however, they are rarely situated within discussions of filmic aesthetics on television.

In this article I focus on a subset of feminist cinematic television that draws on an American indie cinema aesthetic, relies on a lack of bombast, and complicates narratives of authorship drawn from auteurism. This article examines series that deal with the everyday lives of women, which depend on a certain amount of verisimilitude, and employ a low-key style of filmmaking, including *Girls, Transparent, Better Things, Queen Sugar,* and *SMILF*. I contend that these series represent a distinctly feminist woman-centric kind of "cinematic" television, insofar as they are telling women's stories using visual storytelling methods. I argue that the "cinematic-ness" of these series is indebted to their feminist sensibility and their women-centric authorship. However, as I go on to discuss, the loosely defined category of "cinematic television" has largely been formulated around male-centric series that draw on hi-fi film aesthetics and style (See Newman and Levine 5, Imre 392, Bignell 158, Geraghty 30). Feminist cinematic television is at once enabled by the conditions of the "peak TV" era and lacking the adequate interpretive and evaluative frameworks. Although not within the scope of this article, further examination is needed of the industrial conditions that enabled the cycle.

Feminist cinematic television troubles the existing parameters and definitions of cinematic television, and in doing so, it poses specific questions about authorship, aesthetics, and politics. This article uses the work of contemporary feminist film scholars to rethink the relationship between cinematic television as an interpretive and evaluative framework, feminist television as a specialised politicised category, and authorship as a concept that anchors both. First, I will outline how cinematic television has been conceptualised within television scholarship and the limits of these theorisations. Second, I will examine the relationship between cinematic television and discourses on authorship on television and the problem with importing conceptualisations of authorship from film studies. Finally, the relationship between feminism, authorship, and "cinematic-ness" on television will be explored through a close textual analysis of Adlon's *Better Things*.

What is cinematic television?

Cinematic television is a category and framework that is inherently gendered, raced, and classed; and yet it persists as a key framework for evaluating contemporary US scripted narrative primetime television series. Both academic and journalistic publications use the concept of cinematic television to describe the aesthetic, tone, and mode of storytelling performed by so-called "quality" television series (See Thurm; Carroll Harris). Discussions of "cinematic" television often use US quality television dramas, such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), as exemplars. Dramas are often described as "cinematic," but comedies or dramedies are rarely featured in this conversation. For instance, *Vulture* television critics Matt Zoller Seitz and Chris Wade produced a 15-minute video essay entitled "What does 'Cinematic TV' really mean?" (2015) where they draw on a wide range of contemporary drama series to explain that there is no singular understanding of

cinematic television. In his narration Zoller Seitz notes that cinematic television often "feels big" and "looks expensive."

Cinematic television is typified by a large-scale production, a glossy style, and complicated camera set-ups. Deborah L. Jaramillo writes that, "'Cinematic' [in relation to television] connotes artistry mixed with a sense of grandeur" (69). It is perhaps this grandeur that audiences and critics most clearly identify as a marker of "cinematic-ness" on US television. Series most often identified as "cinematic" are big in scope and theme, such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-present), *True Detective* (2014-present), and *Fargo* (2014-present). These series take on big issues, such as mortality, masculinity, fate, violence, morality, and death. While verisimilitude is valued in these series, it is often coupled with high production values, large scale sets, costumes, and stunts, that create a sense of scope and scale. For example, *Breaking Bad* uses colour, the Albuquerque landscape, and costumes to create its vast world of criminality in suburbia. Television series that are labelled "cinematic" by critics often use complicated set ups and ostentatious camera work, such as the six-minute long take in the Cary Fukunaga directed season one of *True Detective*. In a similar vein, *Fargo* uses heightened absurdist violence reminiscent of feature films by the Coen Brothers and Quentin Tarantino. Furthermore, much is made of the scale of production and storytelling in *Game of Thrones*, which is often cited the largest and most expensive television series ever made. These large-scale productions have become synonymous with the idea of cinematic television (Zoller Seitz and Wade; Carroll Harris).

Cinematic television does not only incorporate discourses on aesthetics and production conditions, but it also operates as an evaluative category that is used to deem some television series more culturally and critically valuable than others. As Brett Mills explains, "It's clear that the term 'cinematic' is one associated with hierarchical ideas of quality, and is perceived to be a compliment" (63). Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue that the most "ubiquitous legitimating strategy [in US television] is cinematization: certain kinds of television and certain modes of experiencing television content are aligned with movies and the experience of movies" (5). "Cinematization" is a gendered strategy that legitimises certain kinds of male-centred scripted narrative television series by isolating them from television's domestic feminine roots. This places women filmmakers and creators on US television within a double bind, whereby discourses of "cinematization" work to erase television's woman-centred history, while at the same time what is recognised as "cinematic" draws on kinds of cinema and authorship that women have historically been alienated from. Therefore, recognisable feminist filmmakers and creators on television are a disruptive force by their very existence.

I contend that the current formulation cinematic television work to erase the feminist politics of some series and, therefore, there needs to be a reconfiguration of what it means to call television "cinematic" and what forms of authorship are recognised as part of this framework. Series like *Girls, Transparent,* and *Better Things* are quiet, slow, low-key, and meditative, but equally as "cinematic" as larger-scale series. They are small in their scale of production and their thematic content. For example, unlike the continent-spanning production of *Game of Thrones, Girls* is filmed in Brooklyn

inside apartments and cafés. The visual language of *Girls* is unobtrusive and inconspicuous, using a lot of wide medium-long shots that push in very slowly, in a way that is almost imperceptible. Intimate and emotional scenes between friends or lovers are often shot through door or window frames, creating a sense of voyeurism that draws attention to the staging of the scene for the camera. *Girls* uses what David Bordwell calls planimetric frame composition (167-168), as well as tableau presentation and slow push ins and pull outs. The camera is still and the action in the frame often seems to operate like a play, with characters moving in and out of frame without the camera following them. This is, of course, an over simplification of *Girls'* low-key style of filmmaking, but it is clear that there is a lack on bombast in the series' aesthetic style.

A number of the series that make up feminist cinematic television draw on indie or smart film aesthetics, including *Girls, Transparent, Better Things*, *One Mississippi,* and *SMILF*. These dramedies focus on the everyday lives of white urban middle-class protagonists. In this instance what makes these series "cinematic" is not scale, scope, or high production values, but their use of a low-key style that echoes particular kinds of American indie films. For instance, the treatment of death and dying in *One Mississippi* resonates with Holofcener's film work, in particular *Please Give* (2010)*,* which deals with similar issues around guilt and death. There are also stark similarities between Soloway's *Transparent* and Tamara Jenkins' *The Savages* (2007) and Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012) in terms of their examination of family dynamics and emphasis on dialogue and tone over narrative and story. In contrast, while *True Detective* also delivers emotional scenes that revel in discomfort, this is not what marks the series as cinematic, rather it is the scope, scale and grandeur of the series' aesthetic and its use of movie stars that marks it as "cinematic."

The concept of cinematic television extends beyond aesthetics to incorporate storytelling and authorship. Conventional or "regular" television is always moving the plot forward toward the episode and/or season's ultimate conclusion. What differentiates series like *Better Things, Girls,* and *Queen Sugar* from "regular" television is their willingness to sit in moments of discomfort and emotion, whether mundane or momentous. The "cinematic-ness'" of *Better Things*, *Girls*, and *One Mississippi* is found in the quiet understated moments of reflection where the characters' faces and emotions are central. This is the opposite of the bombast that marks male-centric series, like *Game of Thrones* or *Fargo*, as "cinematic."

Defining cinematic television authorship

Cinematic television is inextricably tied to particular kinds of authorship, which are tied to filmic notions of auteurism. However, the cinematic concept of auteurism does not operate in the same way on television, which is generally understood as a writer's medium, unlike cinema which is a director's medium. In discourses on television, "author" can refer to either the writer or the director, and sometimes both. Television writers and directors who are linked to "cinematic" television make television that is distinct and identifiable. Unlike "regular" television which is often called generic and predictable, cinematic television is specific and unpredictable. However, authorship is more than aesthetics and style, it is also about marketing or what Jason Mittell calls

"authorial branding" (97). This is a relatively new phenomenon, which works to establish television as a creative medium worthy of serious critical attention, and in doing so draws the authors of particular television series into conversation with film and literature (Mittell 97-98). For example, *The Sopranos* creator-showrunner David Chase is often discussed as the "auteur" or "genius" behind the series (Biskind). This perpetuates the assumption that in order for a television series to be "quality" it must have a singular artistic vision.

Auteurist discourses rely on ownership and singularity (White 43), which is antithetical to the realities of television production. However, television writer-creator-showrunners such as Chase, David Simon, Matthew Weiner, Aaron Sorkin, and Vince Gilligan are positioned as the singular "authors" of their respective series. These television authors (often creator-showrunners) have become brands themselves and with their names come an expectation of "quality" (DeFino 8-9). It is not that the celebritisation of showrunners is inherently gendered, but rather the branding of them is gendered, because the marketing image of the showrunner is drawn from the idea of the "genius male auteur" (Newman and Levine 38-39). In the "peak TV" era, authorship has become a key way that television series are marketed as "cinematic" as series are advertised as 'from the writer/director of...' Authorship on television is still strongly associated with male creator-showrunners including Chase, Weiner, and Gilligan, and filmmakers, such as Fukunaga, David Fincher, and Martin Scorsese.

The gendering of authorship goes beyond marginalising women directors and their creative outputs, as both Christina Lane and Claire Perkins outline in their work on American indie cinema and woman filmmakers. Quoting filmmaker Allison Anders, Lane cites the idea of a "boy wonder myth" as a way of understanding the kind of prestige or allure that young male filmmakers are imbued with when their first feature film succeeds commercially and/or critically (199). Similarly, Perkins identifies the "maverick myth" as a historical and contemporary trend whereby discourses on indie cinema effectively cultivate male "star auteurs" (139). Filmmakers such as Tarantino and Steven Soderbergh, are labelled as "geniuses" for their early film work and praised as leading their respective generations of filmmakers (Lane 200, Perkins 140). The very public and excessive lauding of young male filmmakers reinforces an established cultural hierarchy that associates cinematic authorship with male directors.

US television contains and perpetuates many different kinds of authorship and authorial branding, including the author-star, the writer-director, the creator-showrunner, and the authorial team. Each of these can be found in the cycle that I am calling feminist cinematic television. It is crucial, however, not to employ gender essentialism when addressing the inequity experienced by women filmmakers and discussing the disproportionate ways their films and television series are valued and categorised. Precisely what constitutes female authorship as opposed to male authorship is highly contested, as Perkins notes in her examination of women filmmakers in American independent cinema and the lack of critical attention paid to women directors working in that section of the US film industry (141). Gesturing to what Judith Mayne called the "'dreaded epithet' of essentialism," Perkins highlights the difficulty of assuming that "there is a connection between a writer's gender, her

personhood, and her texts" (141). Despite the justified wariness of gender essentialism in conversations around female authorship, it is evident that woman-authored films and television series tend to highlight women's stories, lives, and experiences. It is also clear that women filmmakers, in both cinema and television, experience materially different working conditions to their male counterparts and these manifests in their work.

Even in the era of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, where there is intense scrutiny on women's working conditions in the film and television industries, the concepts of "cinema" and "authorship" are still deeply tied to individual white men. In her recent monograph *Women's Cinema, World Cinema* (2015)*,* Patricia White offers an alternative conceptualisation of female authorship that she calls "elite auteurism," whereby some women directors "have cannily negotiated discourses of female exceptionality both in their personae and their films" (22). For instance, both DuVernay and Campion's series are marketed as "from the acclaimed director…" and both series feature protagonists who are themselves exceptional women. Both Campion and DuVernay are recognisable women-centric brands and they are marketed as such; however, they are still operating within an understanding of cinematic television that overlooks their work. These authors and their work are positioned as "exceptional," meaning that they have surpassed the limits of their gender and the industrial conditions that marginalise their work. To absorb women directors into a discourse of autuerism is to ignore the embedded problems with this discourse. Furthermore, what of the women writers and directors who are not marked as "elite" or "exceptional?" As White notes, to focus too closely on "exceptional anomalies" is to attend to the discourses that render the work of many women-directors invisible (41).

Instead, following White's lead, I look to how feminist cinematic television makes the work of women creators, writers, and directors visible. On *Queen Sugar*, DuVernay made the unprecedented decision to only hire women directors and primarily women of colour. Episode directors include indie filmmakers Julie Dash, Cheryl Dunye, So Yong Kim, Tanya Hamilton, Victoria Mahoney, and Kat Candler, and sitcom director Neema Barnette. The effect of this decision can be seen in the series' aesthetics, tone, and style. *Queen Sugar* tells the story of the African-American Bordelon siblings who inherit their father's sugar cane farm after his death. The story is small and intimate in its address, yet set against the vast landscape of the Louisiana farmland. The series' aesthetic is informed by its politics, the characters are lit to emphasise their beauty and power. The frame composition often finds the characters clustered around the edges of the frame and intimate moments are held within the frame as to emphasise the emotion. For instance, the camera regularly holds on Charley Bordelon's (Dawn-Lyen Gardner) face after a difficult discussion with her siblings, ex-husband, or son. The camera ensures that audience sits with her in those moments of reflection, whether they are fueled by frustration, joy, anger, exhaustion, or any other combination of feelings. DuVernay's feminist and racial politics inform her decision to employ predominantly women directors of colour and the aesthetic, stylistic, and tonal work of the series bear this evident.

Case Study: *Better Things*

Better Things is a recent women-centric television series with a feminist sensibility created by frequent collaborators Pamela Adlon and Louis C.K. The series began airing in 2016 on basic cable channel FX, which has built a reputation in recent years for producing and distributing provocative programming with strong identifiable authors. The basic cable network's flagship series include the Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk-produced anthology series *American Horror Story* (2011-present) and *American Crime Story* (2016-present), Joe Weisberg's period spy drama *The Americans* (2013-2018), Noah Hawley's anthology drama *Fargo* (based on the Coen Brothers film of the same name), and Donald Glover's genre-defying half-hour series *Atlanta* (2016-present). Each of these series have a specific style, tone, and aesthetic that is closely associated with their writer-creators and/or producers. While *Better Things* does not have the same media profile as these series, it does employ a particular aesthetic, an identifiable tone, and a specific mode of storytelling that is closely tied to author-star Adlon.

Unlike Dunham's *Girls* or Shaw's *SMILF,* the authorship of *Better Things* is contested. Adlon and C.K. are credited as co-creators and co-writers on the majority of series' 20 episodes. Despite this, it is Adlon who I situate as the primary author of *Better Things*. The series is based on Adlon's life; the protagonist Sam Fox (played by Adlon) is a working actress, voice-over artist, and single-parent to three daughters – Max (Mikey Madison), Franky (Hannah Alligood), and Duke (Olivia Edward) – living in Los Angeles, California. Sam's biographical details are taken directly from Adlon's life, including that Sam (like Adlon) was a child-actress and that her mother (like Adlon's) lives across the street from Sam and her daughters (Ifeanyi). It is Adlon's perspective and authorial voice that drives the series and she is the credited director on a number of episodes from the first season and the whole of the second season.

C.K.'s claim to authorship of the feminist-leaning *Better Things* is further complicated by recent allegations by a former employee, who claims that he masturbated in front of her. The allegations surfaced after production on the second season of *Better Things* had wrapped. Since then Adlon has distanced herself from C.K., and FX has severed ties with the once renowned comic. Adlon was a credited writer on C.K.'s series *Louie* (2010-2015), yet that series very much circulates as "his show." As such, I suggest that the same is true of *Better Things*, despite C.K.'s now-contentious involvement as a co-writer and co-creator, *Better Things* is best understood as Adlon's work and to credit C.K. or to taint Adlon's series with C.K.'s name is to undermine the achievements of this woman-centric series. Ultimately, I contend it is Adlon's authorial vision rendered on screen in *Better Things*, not C.K.'s.

The textual work of *Better Things*, Adlon's authorship, and the series' paratexts are indelibly intertwined. The first episode of the series ends with Sam standing in the centre of a stark empty white room. She has just told the director she is working with that she does not want to perform a sexually explicit "funny" scene and he has responded unsympathetically, instructing her that she needs to perform the unspecified lewd act. Sam expresses her resistance to simulating sexually explicit acts for the

camera, because she does not want to embarrass her daughters. As Sam stands alone in the centre of the room in a full face of makeup and a tight dress, pulling at her Spanx, Adlon's dedication "for my daughters" appears in the bottom righthand corner of the frame. The irony is literally writ large as Sam and Adlon embrace the overt and inherent contradictions in this performance of motherhood and authorship. Moreover, this scene positions both Sam and Adlon in contrast to discourses that construct female authorship as elite and exceptional. *Better Things* overtly underlines the mundanity of Sam's life, and the series' low-key aesthetic style and meandering storytelling do not call attention to themselves or Adlon's authorship.

The distinction between author, actor, and character are further blurred in the paratextual credit sequence, which is constructed as a glimpse into Sam and her (fictional) daughter's lives through home videos. The credit sequence uses personal videos of the actors during their earlier years to create a sense of intimacy and shared history. The credit sequence, like the series, centres on motherhood. Unlike most depictions of maternity and mothering on US television, *Better Things* does not present an idealised version of motherhood, rather Sam is flawed and angry, and perhaps most importantly unexceptional. This resonates with depictions of motherhood from recent American indie films *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Tully* (2018). Sam's style of parenting could be described as combative, as there are many instances when it seems as though she is engaging in an ongoing war with her daughters. In response, Max and Franky are shown to enjoy provoking their mother into a rage. Through Sam, motherhood is depicted as love and frustration in equal measures.

Over the course of two seasons, *Better Things* cultivates a specific aesthetic, narrative, and tonal style that I contend is "cinematic." This is developed through an emphasis on visual storytelling. There is very little expositional dialogue and the characters rarely explain their relationships to one another or outline why they are in a particular setting. There is also often a lack of explicit causality between scenes. This is unusual for US television which uses expository dialogue to engage casual viewers. Like *Girls*, *Better Things* uses a low-key style of filmmaking whereby the camera work does not make itself overly apparent through framing, editing, or movement. Occasionally the series does use flashbacks; though, these are momentary glimpses into past events that cast the present in a new light.

Better Things prioritises the emotional lives of its central characters over everything else, including, plot cohesion and clarity. The episodes are structured around themes and ideas rather than plot. As such there is a lack of solid narrative structure within each episode or across seasons, which is atypical of contemporary television. This is especially rare in a US television landscape dominated by what Mittell calls "complex serial poetics" (18-19), where complex television is highly valued, both critically and culturally. This lack of causality results in a somewhat disjointed experience both within episodes and across seasons, as the characters move seemingly without cause or consequence across spaces and situations. For example, in the second episode of the first season, a sombre scene of Sam discussing the failing marriage of a friend cuts directly to a scene within a scene, in which Sam is filming a traditional family sitcom. The tonal shift between to two scenes is stark and it is made more so by the lack of

establishing shot or segue into the subsequent scene. This is reminiscent of the short vignettes typical of "smart" films, as explored by Perkins in her book *American Smart Cinema* (62-63).

Much of *Better Things* takes place in interstitial spaces, such as cars, beds, kitchens, and waiting rooms, rather than in traditional televisual spaces where things "happen," such as work, school, and social gatherings. The audience seldom sees Sam and her daughters when they are "doing" things. Sam is rarely depicted as "working," instead she is in the makeup chair talking to others in the trailer or goofing off with a co-star between takes. The audience is not privy to Franky's soccer games, but rather it is in the car ride to and from the game that the camera lingers. There is an emphasis on the mundane and the lack of excitement. As seen in the second season when an intense emotional moment between Sam and an old flame occurs while she is shopping for a generator. This mundane moment becomes charged with history and emotional resonance.

Sam is often located in waiting rooms (for doctors, teachers, auditions), she is almost always just outside of the spaces where things are "happening." It is in these in-between spaces that the emotional lives of the characters and the series dwell. These spaces are at once private and public, they are intimate yet exposed. The interstitial spaces are rendered in ways that are distinctly woman-focused, feminist, and Sam-centric. The camera sits with Sam as she waits for Franky to finish soccer practice or Max to finish dance class. The camera takes on Sam's gaze as she watches her kids through windows and doors. It is in these moments that the series centres the emotional and maternal labour undertaken by Sam and the continued displacement of her needs, in favour of her children's wants, needs, and desires. While Sam's priority is often her daughters, the series' priority is Sam. In the series' second episode, a tracking shot follows Sam from the car to her daughters' school. The camera holds Sam in the centre of the frame, even as other action begs for attention from Sam, the camera, and the audience. Franky and Duke move in and out of the frame, the camera does not follow them, but stays on Sam, while their voices dominate the soundscape. This is a visual motif that reoccurs throughout the series. While other characters speak, react, cry, yell, laugh – they are always peripheral to Sam's experience of a situation and the frame composition makes this literal.

Better Things is reminiscent of the filmic work of Kelly Reichardt, Holofcener, and Polley, whose films are invested in the everyday minutiae and emotions of women's lives. The series is invested in Sam's life and the lives of the women around her. Even if Sam is not always interested in the everyday minutiae of those around her, the series is. For instance, Sam's mother Phil (Celia Imre) is largely presented as a peripheral presence within the series. Sam is often frustrated with Phil, in particular her hoarding tendencies, but the series takes the time to appreciate her world. Season two features a Phil-centric episode, where the audience spends the day with her as she volunteers at a museum, gets asked to leave after attempting to steal an ancient artefact, and then deliberately injures herself at an unattended worksite. The audience has access to aspects of Phil's life that those within the diegesis do not. The camera holds on her face for comedic and emotional affect, emphasising her disappointment and showing how

her daughter often dismisses her feelings. For this episode, Phil's feelings and perspective are at the centre of the story and the frame.

The final episode of season two depicts the high school graduation of Sam's eldest daughter Max. The mise-en-scène is cluttered both with people and with things, as family members and friends descend on Sam's house to celebrate Max. *Better Things* moves across literal and emotional terrain in a way that appears effortless and seamless yet loaded with meaning and history. While the series shows Sam and Max negotiating how her graduation party will proceed, what alcohol will be allowed, and whether Sam will be present, we do not see the party itself. The same can be said of the graduation ceremony, the series shows Max getting ready and the logistical negotiations of who is going to take Max to the graduation rehearsal, but we do not witness the ceremony. It is the minutiae, the tension and emotions between Sam and Max on this important day, that are given pride of place within the episode, rather than the pageantry and performativity of the ceremony itself. The "cinematic-ness" of *Better Things* is in its mundanity. Adlon's authorship is evident in every frame of *Better Things* and the series uses cinematic forms of storytelling drawn from smart cinema and American indie cinema to tell its women-centric story.

Conclusion

Better Things highlights how some feminist cinematic television series are aesthetically, tonally, and narratively in conversation with feminist indie cinema. However, the use of indie and smart styles of filmmaking and aesthetics are not limited to feminist television creators, writers, and directors. This tendency can also be seen in Neil LaBute's *Billy & Billie* (2015), Judd Apatow's *Love* (2016-2018), Joe Swanberg's *Easy* (2016-present) and the Duplass Brothers' *Togetherness* (2015-2016), which all work rather seamlessly within each filmmakers' cinematic body of work. So why focus on women-centric, feminist-authored television series? Because the aesthetic and cinematic work of male filmmakers on television is rarely marginalised and erased in the same way the work of women is.

Using the work of McHugh, Lane, White, and Perkins as a way into women-centric television makes apparent their cinematic-ness and their feminist sensibility. Current constructions and articulations of "cinematic" television do not account for the ways that feminist television is cinematic and cinematic television is feminist. This lack of adequate evaluative and interpretive frameworks, means that these series cannot be accurately categorised as operating within particular filmic or television traditions. Feminist filmmakers and television creators are increasingly asserting themselves, their storytelling, and their politics on television and while television distributors and audiences seem to have made room for them, evaluative and interpretive frameworks also need to be reformulated accordingly. Better yet, perhaps we should abandon the frameworks that ignore and marginalise women's work and employ those that recognise it, which in this instance is those found in contemporary feminist film studies.

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Memories in the networked assemblage: How algorithms shape personal photographs

Tara McLennan[1]

Abstract

The vernacular photograph becomes a meaningful memory object when an affective exchange transpires between the image, the beholder and the assemblage of human and non-human forces in a photographic collection. The archival and material conditions of photography have increasingly shifted from the physicality of Kodak envelopes, and analogue albums, to the twenty-four-hour cycles of cyberspace. The curation of vernacular images is often delegated to algorithmic slideshows, such as Facebook's "Your Year in Review," which propel mathematically generated stories into the beholder's feed. In an exchange between computer and human memory, the viewer is exposed to the co-existence of the stored past within the live present, or what Henri Bergson termed "duration." This article self-reflexively explores memory acts with photographs both in a family's analogue collection, and in a social media timeline. From the situated perspective of a "digital wayfarer," I query the affect of photographic assemblages that call for curatorial arrangement, seeking out socio-historical continuities and ruptures in the photographic medium. Where new memory studies suggest networked immediacy has transformed photography into a continually reiterated "now," this article posits that the medium has not lost its relationship with remembrance: photography haunts the live feed with an algorithmically returned past.

Keywords

Networked Photography; Memory; Archive; Algorithmic Culture; Duration

Two archival collections have informed my understanding of the photographic encounter as an interaction between memory, the image and the snapshot's spatial and material configurations. The closed physical space of my parents' musty attic, and the fluid, networked ecology of social media sites are distinct environments that draw the act of remembrance into the photograph's context of storage and retrieval. Socio-

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historical ruptures and continuities emerge between the photographic practices and rituals of these spaces, wherein the analogue period of the medium provides a springboard and point of departure for the design and functions of networked infrastructures. Photographs that once presented themselves through encounters with paper, shoeboxes and Kodak envelopes, are now part of an assemblage of digital forms, codes and platform mechanisms. The memory work of curating and storytelling with personal photographs is increasingly undertaken in digital internet-enabled spaces, and yet the desire to shape and craft narrative from a vast personal archive endures. Today, the non-human workings of algorithms are a key component that informs this desire, and their agential force in the photographic assemblage is particularly apparent in the workings of automated slideshows.

This article focuses predominantly on Facebook's unsolicited photographic sequences, which first appeared in 2014 with the feature "A Look Back," and have since continued with slideshows such as "Happy Friends' Day" or *"Year in Review."* Since that time, regular algorithmically arranged montages have appeared on social media profiles, pulling photographs from networkers' timelines in sequences that suggest narrative chronology and nostalgic reminiscence. Other companies such as Google and Apple have followed suit, creating their own algorithmic arrangements of personal images with the advanced technological affordances of new devices and operating systems. Each manifestation of these features is part of a growing trend: to delegate the process of photographic curation to non-human forces in a time when photographic records exist in the billions. The creative process of assembling and curating personal images is now bound up with the affordances of networked computer technologies; human remembrances and photographic memory acts are becoming more than human. In the interplay between non-human displays and the imaginative process of human remembrance, an opportunity emerges for reimagining the photograph as a memory object with particular temporal dynamics. Records of the past are propelled into the live feed of internet time in unexpected ways, forming strange correspondences between the present moment of looking, and the departed experience captured photographically. This article adopts Henri Bergson's notion of duration to underscore the ways these photographic assemblages pierce the mediated present with the past, exposing the beholder to time as the co-existence of what has been, with what is. As such, these algorithmic arrangements illuminate the ways in which photography has historically grappled with a paradox: a departed moment is experienced with present immediacy, as though the captured instant were both alive and dead in the one shot.

As a situated media researcher, I use an experiential mode of writing to explore the interstices between a Kodak childhood of twenty-four-hour photo shops, and a networked adulthood of photos in twenty-four-hour streams. I trace the ways my father and I engage with the physical images stored in the upstairs room of my parents' apartment, and acknowledge my position as a digital user participating in the photographic production of live social media posts. To articulate the ways photographs are entangled in the distinct ecologies of these archival spaces, I borrow the Deleuzian concept of the assemblage, to "refer to the dynamic collection or arrangement of heterogeneous elements (structures, practices, materials, affects, and enunciations) that expresses a character or identity and asserts a territory" (Slack 152). This

phenomenological account of interactions with everyday photographs explores the gestures, rituals and affective responses to different photographic collections that inform a sense of memory and identity.

My parents keep the photographs of our lives in the family attic, where dust falls swiftly, and now and again possums find their way onto the awnings. Somewhere among an accumulation of large plastic boxes: a toddler dances with a straw-haired rag doll; a nine-year-old girl leaps barefoot across the soft floor of a springtime park; a baby clutches at green grapes, cross-eyed with the anticipation of their sweet juice. I move about the space, drawn to different images of the past according to the correspondences I sense between disparate moments in time. The paper prints are glossy and they slide smoothly when shuffled in the hands, clinging ever so slightly to one another. My engagement with these images is rhythmic, subject to stops and starts. My pace is guided by impulse, impression and touch. I collate, select, prioritise and arrange, according to the ways memory guides me in the moment of photographic encounter.

This process stands in marked contrast to the algorithmically driven stories produced from my online archives. In 2013, Facebook released their first slideshow feature, entitled "A Look Back." The social media site's home page was littered with frozen photo collages, each one stamped with the invitation to "Press Play." I followed the prompt and the screen panned over shots from get-togethers with friends; pictures of my cat rolling ecstatically on sheepskin; a tea pot filled with flowers; a party snap where my mouth twists awkwardly in mid speech; and yet more cat pictures. It arranged the sequence in categories that suggested a narrative order derived from quantitative data: "Your First Moments," "Your Most Liked Posts." The algorithms designated what matters most to me according to a mathematical logic.

Image 1. Facebook promotes its slideshow feature, "A Look Back" (Facebook).

From both these photographic ecologies emerges an understanding of how photographs and algorithms have the capacity to affect their beholder as non-human objects with agency all their own. These elements of the networked photographic assemblage are "nonhuman actors whose agencies help shape the interactive process, a process characterized by contingency and interpretive flexibility" (van Dijck 27). Despite efforts of narrativisation and sequencing, photographs often break out of the intended structures, practices and enunciations to which they are assigned; an algorithm can push a photograph into the live feed that does not soothe the beholder with a sense of nostalgia, but instead pierces the subject with a depiction of time that has passed. When this transpires, the dynamics of the photographic assemblage shifts the process of remembrance that the beholder experiences.

The agential force of photographs has struck me from my wanderings amongst the disordered attic collection, and in my screen-based encounters with pictures sequenced by non-human code. I am affected by an array of images that traverse virtual and physical ecologies. I write from this position as a "digital wayfarer," which Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink describe as a networked user whose "trajectory entangles online and offline as they move through the weather and the air, with the ground underfoot and surrounded by people and things, while also traversing digital maps, social networking sites, and other online elements" (Hjorth and Pink 45). These things and spaces include not only the screen-based encounters with photographs online, but also my shuffling and digital scanning of pictures stored in my parents' apartment. The process of using photographs in acts of remembrance is composed of overlapping "ecologies of place," or locative experiences of photographs which involve "creative touches enabled by devices, manipulations of spatial orientations in materiality, corporeal positioning of the self and others, and the language of Web 2.0 content" (Hess 1632). As a digital wayfarer, I observe how the resonance of personal images is produced through assemblages of human and non-human forces, be they made of dust and paper, or algorithms and glass screens.

The internet's non-human collocations of my memories are becoming far more frequent than my own narrative processes with the Kodaks of the attic. The accumulation of printed family photos has also steadily slowed since Facebook first arrived on the scene in 2004. Since that time, photographs that were once confined to the private circles of close friends and relatives have become part of a shared digital space with strangers' and acquaintances' images. The speed at which new technological affordances and social practices develop suggests that the "new" of new media may be outstripping the "old." However, as a digital wayfarer, I cannot escape how practices from the analogue era of photography intersect and influence the ways the medium is structured in networked mobile forms. Many analogue genres, such as the slideshow, are now incorporated into mobile media in ways that reflect enduring understandings of personal images as memory objects that can be sequenced into stories. Shifts in photographic practice cannot be easily divided into a new/old binary. As Wendy Chun states:

> *...rather than asking, What is new media? we might want to ask what seem to be the more important questions: what was new media? and what will it be? To some extent the phenomenon stems from the modifier new: to call something new is to ensure that it will one day be old...Neither the aging nor the speed of the digital, however, explains how or why it has become the new or why the yesterday and tomorrow of new media are often the same thing. (Chun 148)*

Despite rapid techno-social changes, vernacular photography continues to be a way of mediating the unfolding of lived time. Often seemingly banal in content, vernacular images form intimate archives of the lives people have led, and the people they have loved. I need to be connected with both online and offline photographic collections: these images are talismanic connections to my past. The collection in our attic is where photography has secreted its traces of our family illnesses, deaths, births, joys and mundane habits.

My father shares this understanding of our analogue photographs. "They're all to do with family hopes and family losses," he says (Anderson). The attic may be a relatively private space, but it is still one of relational exchange between family members and photographic rituals. This shared ceremonial process is particularly meaningful at this moment, when we are all coming to terms with my father's diagnoses with several degenerative conditions. For many years now he has battled a slow-burning form of lymphoma, which has since been complicated by another cancer, and a recent diagnosis of early onset of Alzheimer's disease. "I'm decaying," he says. "And I've been decaying since 2000" (Anderson).

I have watched him assemble tentative narratives in his encounters with photographs in the attic: images weighted with intensive affect pull him in certain trajectories. There are moments of pause, laughter, and occasional non-sequiturs. He skims over the pictures that do not resonate with his present moment of looking, and instead draws closer to photographs that beckon. He scans certain meaningful shots into his computer for safe keeping. This is memory work in motion; through gestures with the photographic assemblage there emerges a strange coalescence between present and past. In this photographic ecology, time begins to be experienced as Bergson's notion of duration, wherein all "states melt into each other," fusing past, present and future (Bergson 243). Disparate moments in time begin to hum with non-chronological resonance. There is a picture of my old man as a baby boy. In this shot he is a soft-cheeked toddler, plonked in front of a soft grey canvas backdrop at a portrait studio. His round baby thigh protrudes from under the outfit. Soft new skin. I look at Dad's wrinkled face, smiling at the returned image of this young, new self, before illness or aching bones.

This experience of overlapping temporalities chimes with Roland Barthes' description of photography. He sensed a tension in a portrait of Lewis Payne, a young man on death row: "I read at the same time: this will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe" (Barthes 96). This duality of absence and presence is the poignancy of the medium, which in its stillness appears to

keep departed moments alive as unchanged images, and yet serves as a reminder that time has continued to enfold everything in time as becoming.

Recent scholarly work on networked photography suggests that such encounters with personal images are no longer available (Villi, Sandbye, Kember, Zylinska). The practices and rituals of photography are predominantly emphasised in relation to the transience of live internet time. For Mikko Villi, the twenty-four-hour stream of personal images is one of spatial rather than temporal dialectics: photographs "form a connection between there-now and here-now, instead of mediating the there-then to here-now" (9). In the real-time of cyberspace, photography's memento more ontology has also been reassessed. Mette Sandbye revises Barthes' statement that every photograph posits "this-has-been," and suggests the live stream of images is a constant replenishment of "this-is-now." Joanna Zylinksa seeks "to wrest photography away from its long-standing association with mummification and death, and to show its multifarious and all-encompassing activity," or its liveness (16). The potentiality of photographic data as stored information is neglected in these accounts, as the agency of algorithms is not considered; automated slideshows offer the possibility for the stored past to pierce the live stream with the return of personal history. The networked ecology returns stored records through "constant repetition, tied to an inhumanly precise and unrelenting clock," (Chun 148) forming part of what Chun describes as the "enduring ephemeral" of internet time: both transient and stored. The contradictory temporality of the web grants the memento-mori ontology of photography an afterlife, when algorithms push images of departed time into the live-streamed present.

Both analogue and networked ecologies enable the possibility of encountering photographs from departed time in ways that present a synthesis of death within life. My father engages with photos that return boyhood, birth, family funerals and fatherhood, all in a time when he is confronting his own mortality. He started making his first photo album in 2000, when he was being treated for lymphoma. I leaf through his album now and see how time unfolds from page to page: his mother as a young woman, clowning around on a sandy beach; my grandfather holding her tight as she deliberately goes limp in his arms; the birth of two brothers; the family dog Ginger. This is his process of crafting fixed stories out of fragments of time captured by cameras. As media historian Geoffrey Batchen observes, "something creative has to be done to a photograph, some addition has to be made to its form, if it's to function as an effective memory object" (48). In this creative ritual, the past and the present are laid out in ways that suggest linearity and form. The curation of an album is practiced to express his sense of identity at a time when he feels he is "decaying." "I like the album because *I* made it," he laughs. "I kind of like my makings. The things that I make" (Anderson; emphasis added).

Such a curatorial process is logistically difficult to achieve with the vast numbers of images in networkers' stored timelines. Platform corporations have sought technologically assisted means for users to structure and order the billions of images accumulated through networked exchange. Auto-slideshows are one way of simulating or artificially enacting the process of photographic storytelling in the context of such visual abundance. Their role and effects resonate with Ted Striphas' account of

algorithmic culture, which is programmed "to sort, classify, and hierarchise people, places, objects, and ideas, and the habits of thought, conduct and expression that arise in relationship to those processes" (cited in Hallinan and Striphas 119). These curated arrangements do not follow the same processes my father enjoys when he sorts and classifies photos for his "makings." But the algorithmic logic is designed to speak to the same desires and habits of thought that Dad experiences when he transforms scattered images of his photographic collection into stories. Storytelling and montage are a response to the sense of excess produced by large bodies of images which seem to resist contained, linear structure.

The family attic may be a small space, and yet the photographic collection that lives there is a challenge to order and arrange. My father looks upon the gathered array of things and images and feels somewhat overwhelmed. "I've actually accumulated too much to be able to apprehend it all," he says (Anderson). A tide of disordered images gather in the disarray of fallible human recollection. Kodak envelopes are placed together according to guessed dates. Some coincide with events that resonate with the same emotional frequency, while others focus on the physical spaces in which happenings unfolded. Then there are connections I cannot explain, moments that have been placed side-by-side haphazardly. Time is scattered, not arranged or ordered but folded in strange ways.

Here is a photograph of my mother holding her full pregnant belly, just one month before my birth. Here, a shot of me at sixteen, confined to bed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. The now has become subsumed with images of past lived experiences which will not disentangle themselves from this current moment. Things entwine: childhood, adolescence, parents as children, grandparents in their youth. In the picture of my parents' clasped and freckled hands I read the pictures of them as young partners in a pas-de-deux class; in the image of myself as a smiling little girl is the hidden trace of another photograph when I was grieving at the age of fourteen. Time is dripping and I have no clear story with which to pin it down and order it. This collection of images is exposing me to time as "a becoming that endures" (Deleuze 37) wherein the liquid movements of change weave their way through this disarray of captured instants. Photographic assemblages such as my family's disordered attic collection challenge any "apparent order of time and space and the logic of this order," instead revealing "the pure change of the world and, most importantly, our attempts to understand it" (Sutton 44). I seek to understand how my world has changed by looking for ways photographed moments of note can be stored to transform the experience of duration into one of fixity.

Up until 2011, Facebook created a similar sense of time as becoming, and thus evoked this same desire for narrative fixity. Facebook's first interface concentrated exclusively on the twenty-four-hour feed in which photographs appeared fleetingly and depart. In the words of Sam Lessin, Vice President of Product Management, "the more important stuff slips off the page. The photos of your graduation get replaced by updates about what you had for breakfast." CEO and founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, described this continual movement of the live page as information and personal records "falling off a cliff." As an antidote to this sense of continual dissipation the platform

designed the Timeline, which first appeared in 2011. The company refashioned what the material photo album once promised: a way to "collect all your best moments in a single place" (Johnson).

However, my first interaction with Facebook's timeline did not cure my sense of time falling off a precipice. I started at the top of my page with the most recent shot: a glaringly lit plate of oily chicken dumplings next to a plastic cup of white wine. A night out with friends in Chinatown. At the bottom of the image a pixelated thin blue line started to course down the webpage, down to the next captured instant of my networked life, and the next. I spiralled down with this blue thread from one image to another. I slid down the scroll bar until I reached what looked like the end of the page. A myriad of stored photos sprung out of nothingness and the scroll marker darted back to the top, as though I had not moved at all. I felt pulled into a sense of endless motion in a story without clear boundaries; vertiginous from a visual experience which disrupted hopes of being able to hold onto the past.

This photographic stream heralded what Victor Burgin identified as a revolutionary shift in the medium, which transforms "every photograph on the Web into a potential frame in a boundless film" (Burgin 186). This photographic reel keeps on reeling. To counter the impression that time is both ceaselessly accumulating and disappearing, the narrative form of the auto-slideshow emerged, designed to make the "enduring ephemerality" of personal photographs more easily graspable. Confined to a fixed selection of images, these displays can be replayed from beginning to end at any time; in other words, the narrative appears as a closed loop. Structurally, these algorithmic creations act much like the covers of a material photo album, or the wheel of an analogue carousel projector: they seal a photographed past in a structured, enclosed space.

The concept of securely containing the past was materialised in the analogue carousel wheel. The loop of this slideshow device met a desire for a contained narrative enfolded in circular form. This shaping of mediated experience is poignantly illustrated in the popular television series *Mad Men* (2007-2015), which is set in New York in the 1960s. At the end of the first season, the main character Don Draper (Jon Hamm) makes an advertising pitch for Kodak's first carousel. As he cycles through photographs of his wedding, and glowing pictures of his children playing in a suburban garden, he describes the device as "a time machine. It goes backwards, forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's called the Carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels. Around and around and back home again, to a place where we know we are loved" ("The Wheel" 1.13). The montage implies time is a linear thread that can be rewound to a preserved past, beautifully cut off from change. This is nostalgia, a romanticised image of time fixed in place, untouched by the forces of duration and awaiting the viewer's return.

My father sought such a fixed form of the past shortly after the first MRI scans of his body arrived from the hospital. From within a claustrophobic white tunnel, penetrating cameras looked beneath his skin, making hundreds of slices of internal organs and bones. Visual laser cuts formed an animation of muscles and ligaments, the totality of his body summed up like an organic machine. He called me in to his study to look at the

results onscreen. Mercurial white shapes emerged from black, like dead coral, hidden and revealed by a dark moving ocean. And nestled in his groin, two misty round strangers that had no name, that didn't belong. Would they shrink, or grow?

This strange Rorschach footage of his physical form seemed to evoke his desire to create a contained body of memories. The photo album which seals images between its covers is one way to manage and understand how time simultaneously builds up and departs. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the album's linearity confirms the unified present from a structured past, and "has all the clarity of a faithfully visited gravestone" (30). The human form dissipates, but some seemingly solid structure remains as testament to what once was.
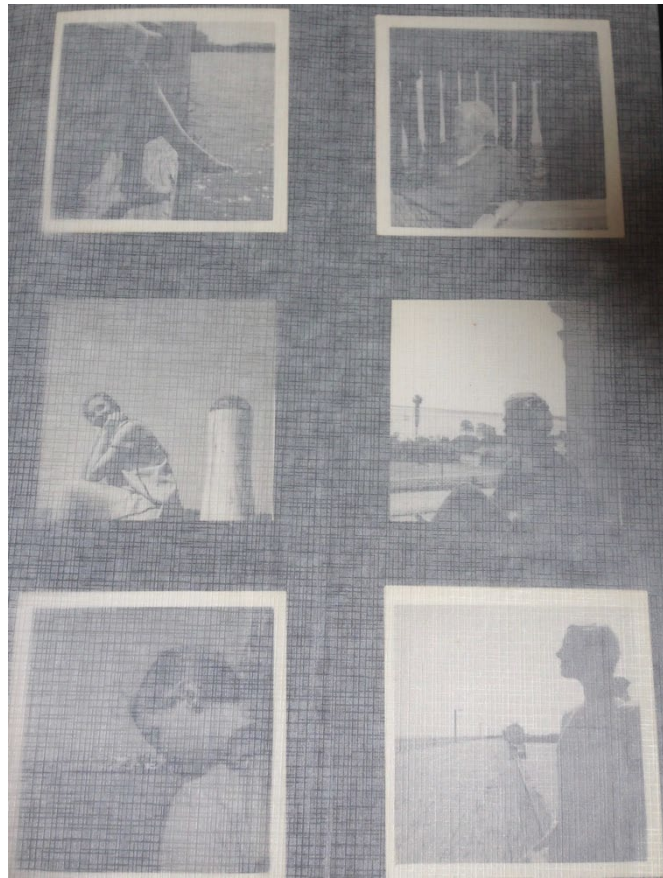

Image 2. A page from my father's album.

However, the linear thread of time implied by these chronological photo-texts is broken apart as material, human and non-human forces in photographic assemblages continue to interact in unanticipated ways. Photographic collections are no longer confined to small attics and the interactions of family relatives. Auto-slideshows draw from material far beyond the bounds of home or selfhood: images are sourced from the billions of networkers producing photographic content, and from the pinned location of photographs read by satellites circulating the Earth.

The multiplicity of the networked assemblage became visible one day in 2017, when a video entitled "Happy Friends' Day" presented a strange computerised figure made of

broken pieces. It danced joyfully about an empty white space, its body made of floating round discs imprinted with emoticons and portraits of friends in my social media network. These photographic cells pooled together and dispersed in the automated arrangement of a human shape that strained and broke at the seams, sometimes losing form and becoming nothing but a series of moving parts. The whirlwind figure both embodied and disassembled the desire for a cohesive body of memories to emerge through photographic arrangement. Neither living nor dead, it broke apart and reformed, caught between appearance and dissipation, drawing closer for me to see the portraits of loved ones, then pulling back, becoming a series of abstract dots.
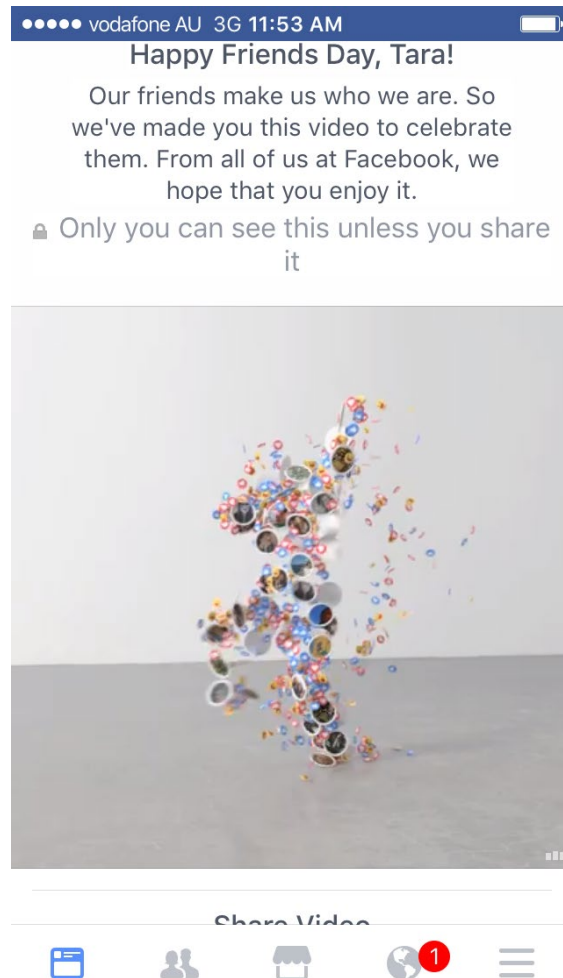

Image 3. The dancing body of "Happy Friends' Day".

I recall the abstract shapes of my father's body in MRI footage; the black and white kaleidoscope of shapes that slowly emerged into recognisable forms, like "fingertip", "rib cage" "brain," "eye socket" "lungs." Then the body of memories that he put together in with elephant grip glue and a heavy photo album with black pages. And yet he has accidentally stuck this storied sequence back-to-front and upside-down, so it reads backwards. Unstuck photos sit loose between some of the pages and sometimes slip out of the book. It seems that any venture into creating a unified photographic tale returns to duration, as forces in the assemblage begin to rupture the sense of something

complete and fixed. From these ruptures to narrative, duration is intuited as the indivisibility of moments which resolve themselves "into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and travelling in every direction like shivers through an immense body" (Bergson 208). The immense body of data in the networked ecology dances to the logic of algorithms, which choreograph personal memories according to non-human understandings of time.

These unsolicited stories are told by a computer that does not remember imaginatively. A photograph taken at a particular date is prioritised, or an image with more likes is pushed forward. In this respect, these features operate through Bergson's notion of artificial time, where temporal flux is wrested into containable, pin-pointed units of the clock. He writes that "instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside of them in order to recompose their becoming artificially" (Bergson, *Creative Evolution* 322). Time is cut into socially manageable, self-contained units that situate any given moment as a singular entity, cut off from its past and future. According to an algorithm's calculations, a photograph of my now departed cat on a moonlit balcony is no longer a memory of a creature I called Charlie: it is data from 7.15pm on 26 October 2009. An artificial and quantified understanding of memory is founded on the idea that returned photographs will deliver the same sensations and emotions as when they were first uploaded. Here is the

> *…conflation of memory and storage that both underlies and undermines digital media's archival promise. Memory, with its constant degeneration, does not equal storage; although artificial memory has historically combined the transitory with the permanent, the passing with the stable, digital media complicates this relationship by making the permanent into an enduring ephemeral, creating unforeseen degenerative links between humans and machines. (Chun 148)*

The algorithm cannot possibly know that in the photograph of Charlie at 7.15pm on 26 October 2009, I am also remembering his playful youth as a kitten, and his last moments on the vet's table, with my face reflected in his dying eyes. Unanticipated meanings are produced in the degenerative links between humans and computers, as auto-slideshows reveal that memories are not so easily slotted into predictable forms.
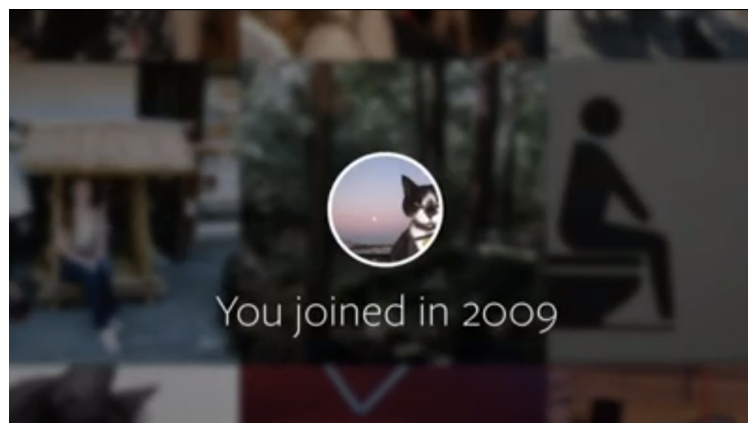

Image 4. Screenshot from my slideshow on "A Look Back" (Facebook).

A photographic encounter is an exposure to duration, where the image is overlaid with the beholder's knowledge of experiences that have transpired since this moment's visual capture. Sometimes these exposures to duration open old wounds. When the slideshow transitions between nostalgic familiarities to the sharp punctures of trauma, loss or grief, time is experienced as a multiplicitous and untameable force. This happens in "Your Year in Review," when moments of mourning and shock arise, and some networkers experience a past that pierces the present. One user is delivered a photo of their apartment ablaze in flames. The destruction of their home is framed by a cheery confetti style design: "James, here's what your year looked like!" (Dzieza). Another networker receives a photograph of the urn carrying his father's ashes (Hern). This ceremony of grief is bordered by colourful dancing stick-figures, and accompanying words: "See your year." These same clip-art party goers dance around the portrait of another networker's little girl, who died at the age of six from an aggressive brain cancer (Meyer). Data based photographs arise unbidden and unsolicited, at moments when the beholder is not prepared for their re-apparition. An image of a home caught in flames may be uploaded to the live feed in an instant electrified with shock and loss; this is not to say that the photographer is prepared to experience the return of this photograph at a later moment in time, when they are not in the frame of mind for commemoration or remembrance.

Image 5. James' "Year in Review" (Dzieza).

In the disordered collection of the family attic there are images that slice open painful experiences. I open myself willingly to this each time I open one of the boxes in the attic; it is my choice to be drawn into such photographs and memories. Auto-slideshows operate through a different form of affective force, a push modality. Memories are fed to the viewer in real time, as an uninvited array of images is springs open. Much like the opening of Pandora's box, anything could come out with a burst of animated confetti.

Sometimes the jarringly impersonal spills out, framed as an intimate story. On Facebook's slideshows, networkers have been presented with a series of non-sequitur

"memories." Online bloggers document the appearance of unexpected images in Facebook's "Your Year in Review." The algorithm inserts their photo stories with peculiar interruptions, such as an inexplicable rock (Kumparak), a slimy unidentified fish (Gayomali), and a close-up of food (TMNsam [pseud.] in Hamburger). The artificial rendering of time as data becomes markedly apparent in these unexpected shots, as does the agency of algorithms in the act of remembrance.

Auto-slideshows are becoming more sophisticated now, and non-sequiturs may become less frequent with improvements to the technological apparatus. Even so, these algorithmic memories sustain the capacity to expose the viewer to photography as the poignant coalescence of life within death. Ryan Gantz, director of User Experience at Vox Media, writes of the ways Google Assistant combined his images "in a way that no reasonable person would attempt. Ever. The result is surreal, random, creepy, sad, and oddly funny" (Gantz). Google Assistant generates auto-slideshows whenever someone returns home from a trip, and so the algorithms compiled a slideshow upon Gantz' return home from his grandmother's funeral in Massachusetts. The montage showed images of her coffin, side by side with energetic shots of his children running in a school race in Portland that same day. "The film itself is a new kind of uncanny valley for digital artifacts," writes Gantz. And this strange exchange between computerised data and his own memories left him with a strong impression, that "death and loss are a part of life, and we all have to keep running, around and around, forward through the sun" (Gantz).

His reference to the fluidity of networked lives on Earth recalls a strange slideshow I received from Facebook's second "Year In Review." Amidst a montage of sentimental familiarities appeared planet Earth seen from the distant reaches of the galaxy. Known as "The Pale Blue Dot," this well-known photograph was taken in 1990 from a NASA satellite floating through deep space. It shows Earth as a speck of dust suspended in a celestial swarm of deep purple and sea green. I remember when I uploaded it, one afternoon when trivial anxieties were invading my thoughts and I felt the need for renewed perspective. In the context of a coded carousel, Earth has re-emerged in the computer's prescriptive category of "my memory." A small laugh escapes my throat; this "Pale Blue Dot" is not my memory. Or is it? Somewhere between the picture of a planetary speck called Earth and more personal images, this data-based arrangement has de-familiarised my relationship with photographs as memory objects. My pictures of cats, tea pots, parties and friends become strange forms taken up by a computerised pattern, wherein all photographs are equivalent as data in a fast-growing personal profile. Do these photographs belong more to the coded system of algorithms than they belong to me?

Image 6. A memory of Earth (Facebook).

Somewhere in that pixelated cell of the "Pale Blue Dot" is my father's attic full of analogue memories. Photography has transcended the bounds of such small family spaces; the possibility of creating a contained body of memories is complicated by multiple technological affordances that have converged with the medium. The Earth is circulated by satellites that geo-locate personal images taken by a population of digital wayfarers, all of whom can be artificially recognised through ever-improving facial recognition software. A developing techno-social assemblage is changing the ways that memories are categorised and re-experienced from their existence in a networked assemblage. Under what conditions will my photographs be algorithmically arranged in the future, and who will be moved by their strange apparition onscreen? This cannot be calculated through codes or computerised operations because photography affects memory in ways that constantly shift. Algorithms will continue to reveal the "enduring ephemeral" through their tension between storage and liveness; photographs will remain paradoxical in their expression of the past within the present. In the co-existence of storage with the live, and of death within life, networked photography invites creative memory acts that seek fixity from an assemblage that will not be held still. Technology promises a site of a return to the vast terrain of a photographically stored past; and yet these more than human memories capture nothing but the movement of time that ceaselessly accumulates as it slips away.

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About the author

Tara McLennan completed a PhD in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. She adopts creative practices to explore visual culture and poetics of the past, and her work draws on a life-long fascination with the relationship between images, memory and creative acts. Tara has worked as a sessional academic tutor for the past five years, teaching primarily in media studies and cultural studies. She is the secretary of the Sydney Screen Studies Network, which is a scholarly community that explores all thing screen based, from cinema to networked image ecologies.

Across and in-between: Transcending disciplinary borders in film festival studies

Kirsten Stevens[1]

Abstract

Since the mid-2000s film festivals have emerged as a distinct area of critical academic inquiry. While originating within a film studies framework, the study of film festivals has developed its own character as a sub-field that moves well beyond the traditional boundaries of screen and media studies. The study of film festivals is inherently transnational, transmedia and interdisciplinary in its approach. Borrowing from cultural studies, anthropology, business and technology studies, event management and curatorship studies, alongside media studies, screen studies and the emergent area of media industry studies, film festival research transcends traditional disciplinary frameworks. This article traces the emergence of film festivals as a critical area of study and its evolution towards its status as a distinct sub-field. In exploring how the study of festivals and screen events connects with and extends traditional film and media studies frameworks, this article also makes a case for what is gained (and what is lost) through the intersections and interrelations of these two areas of study.

Keywords

Film Festivals: Film Studies; Transnational; Interdisciplinary; Transmedia; Field of Study

Introduction

In 1997 Daniel Dayan attended the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. As a media anthropologist, Dayan's visit to Sundance was not a simple cinephile quest for the latest offerings of American independent film production. Rather, it was intended as an interrogation of dispersed media spectators and the social phenomena of events of temporary duration (41-42). While Dayan sought out the experiences of spectators within the confines of what he imagined to be the "harmonious coordination" of the festival (42), his account reveals the many participants, occasions, agendas, diversions,

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temporalities and texts which form the festival. As he explains, "the very nature of the Festival pulls its story in different directions, makes it the centre of divergent and sometimes competing scripts" (42). The festival that Dayan discovered was not a simple, coherent object of study; "rather, it was a repeated victory over entropy" (42).

Writing close to twenty years later, Marijke de Valck similarly observes the complexity of the film festival. She explains, "there are distinct images that come to mind when the term "film festival" is used: red carpets, open-air screenings, paparazzi, a bustling crowd that fills the theaters and dominates the public spaces that are temporarily taken over by the festival event" ("Introduction" 1). As the accounts of both Dayan and de Valck reveal, at their core film festivals are complex events. While their proclaimed interest lies in focusing attention on cinema – they are after all *film* festivals – the reality of their status as an event often means that the specific films screened become secondary and even tertiary concerns in understanding the festival as a whole. As Dina Iordanova observes: within the film festival space the importance of the film text to an understanding of film culture is transposed, "the films remain intrinsic, but they can be any films" (xii). Instead, as both Dayan and de Valck observe, other aspects of the festival emerge as increasingly central concerns in understanding how films fit within festivals and how festivals fit within larger networks of film. As the centrality of specific film texts recedes, the importance of the social, cultural, industrial, symbolic, economic and material aspects of cinema come to the fore. It is unsurprising then that film festivals beget in their study an ever-widening array of methodologies, disciplinary concerns and theoretical frameworks that are employed to understand their role and functionality beyond the cinematic. Yet, despite this divergence of approach, film festival studies remains closely tied to film studies at an institutional level, with the latter providing the conditions from which the former emerged.

This essay takes up a discussion of the ways in which the study of film festivals introduces key points of extension and rupture within the discipline of film studies. It considers how the development of film festival studies as a subfield of film studies offers the latter a point of extension that enables a more wholistic approach to conceiving of screen texts as located within broader socio-cultural relationships. Beginning with an examination of how film festival scholarship has evolved and the efforts to define this area as a distinct discipline, this essay then works to interrogate how focusing attention on festivals as sites of exchange and cinematic encounters pushes against the traditional limitations of film studies.

In particular, this essay presents an examination of film festivals along three axes of extension. Firstly, exploring the inherent transnationality of film festivals, this essay posits that film festivals move beyond the current formulations of transnationalism within film studies to connect cinema and screen texts to broader traditions of transnationalism located within cultural studies, political science, cultural geography and migration studies. Secondly, it works to extend theories of transmediality and transmedia storytelling, positing these frameworks as a means for describing and understanding the nature of film festival programming and participation. Through a transmedia framework, this essay demonstrates how the multi-faceted festival experience, when theorised collectively as part of a "franchise" or larger text, offers an

extension of existing understandings of transmediality to consider a socially and culturally situated experience of cinema. Thirdly, this essay explores the many cross-disciplinary transgressions that inform film festival scholarship and consider what place film studies holds in the ever-widening mix of approaches and methodologies festival research employs. Ultimately, this article argues for thinking of film festivals as sites that enable an extension of film studies through positive intersections with interdisciplinary approaches and the conception of cinema within an embodied culture. Yet it also considers the extent to which the relationship between film studies and film festival studies might be limiting the direction and form that film festival studies can take in its quest for recognition as a discipline in its own right.

The rise of film festival studies

Academic interest in film festivals is a relatively recent phenomenon. Aside from a few key works, systematic analysis of film festivals did not emerge in any real way until the twenty-first century, close to seventy years after what is widely recognised as the first reoccurring film festival took form in Venice in 1932. Despite the status of film festival studies as a nascent area of academic enquiry, there is no paucity of research on the topic. Over the past decade, film festivals have received significant academic attention with an expanding tally of works emerging to examine these events both individually through case studies of specific celebrations, as well as in terms of the phenomenon as a whole. As such, film festival studies has been hailed as not simply constituting an important evolution in film or media studies approaches, but rather as revealing itself as "a new academic field in which knowledge of festivals is considered essential for our understanding of cinema and media cultures" (de Valck and Loist 179).

The subfield of film festival studies developed within a film studies context. Its emergence as an area for serious academic study can in many ways be traced to shifts in the conception of film historicism that occurred during the 1980s through the work of figures such as Douglas Gomery, Robert Allen, Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, Janet Staiger and Thomas Elsaesser, to name only a few.[2] Emerging in place of the existing conceptualisation of film history, which focused on the linear progression of cinematic technology and the achievements of individual "masters" and their "masterworks," new film historicism emphasised the importance that institutional, economic and social factors had on the development and progression of the cinema. It called for, as Philip Beck observed, "the need for new ways to study film – not simply new techniques, new methods of research and argument, but new 'approaches,' new conceptualizations of interrelations between film style, technology, economic and social history, and ideology, as they illuminate the historical development of the cinema" (5). New film historicism was then marked by an increased reliance on the use of alternative sources of information, including archival documents relating to the internal operations of institutions, contemporaneous reviews and commentary, as well as ephemera

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[2] See Allen and Gomery's *Film History: Theory and Practice* for a comprehensive overview of the New Film Historicism. See also work by Gunning, Hansen and Staiger on early American cinema, as well as Elsaesser's *New German Cinema: A History* for further examples of this revised approach to the study of film history.

surrounding processes of film production, distribution, exhibition and consumption. This move away from a focus on the film text as the primary object of study championed by new film historicism set a template for film festival studies to build on. While the arrival of film festival studies would not be immediate – as de Valck explains, systematic and sustained attention to film festivals did not arise until the late 1990s (*Film* 21) – this turn within what was then still the relatively young field of film studies nevertheless paved the way for the methodologies and approaches that would mark the arrival of sustained film festival analysis some two decades later.

Three broad phases of scholarly writing on film festivals are discernible. The first of these emerged through the 1990s,[3] with a small but growing number of articles and book chapters that moved away from the consumer-guides, popular histories and journalistic reports that had previously characterised festival writing to incorporate more academically rigorous discussions.[4] However, it was not until the 2000s that the study of film festivals grew substantially. This second phase of scholarship began with a concerted effort to draw attention to the importance of film festivals as an area for serious debate and analysis. Studies examining festivals as institutions (Stringer *Regarding*), as parts of interconnected networks (Turan, Elsaesser "Film"), issues of their reception (de Valck "Drowning"), as well as their spatial, temporal, political and cultural aspects (Stringer "Global", Harbord, Czach, Mazdon), began to emerge with greater frequency. The culmination of the second phase of festival scholarship was the publication of de Valck's *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* in 2007. De Valck's monograph offered film festival studies its first book-length treatment and identified film festivals as complex phenomena that were "hard to describe using mono-disciplinary approaches" (*Film* 32). Representing a consolidation and extension of the various theories on international film festivals that had been advanced to that point, de Valck's work also utilised a variety of approaches to explain and gain insight into film festival operation. Borrowing primarily from cultural studies, sociology and anthropology, de Valck's study of film festivals in Europe emphasised the

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[3] While written accounts of film festivals have accompanied events since the 1930s, the vast majority of this writing has taken the form of journalistic appraisals of specific festivals and the films they screen. Through the 1990s, however, these annual reports were increasingly joined by a number of popular histories of particular events – including Forsythe Hardy's history of the Edinburgh Film Festival (1992) and multiple publications on the history of Cannes (see for example Cari Beauchamp and Henri Béhar's *Hollywood on the Riviera* (1992) or Peter Bart's *Cannes: 50 Years of Sun, Sex and Celluloid* (1997) – as well as a range of consumer 'survival' and 'insider' guides – such as Steven Gaydos' edited *The Variety Guide to Film Festivals* (1998), Adam Langer's *The Film Festival Guide* (1998) and Chris Gore's *The Ultimate Film Festival Survival Guide* (1999).

[4] Most notably, two articles by film critic and theorist Bill Nichols published in 1994 emphasised the importance of recognising the role contemporary film festivals played in mediating encounters with 'new cinemas' and the function of the festival circuit in translating the local/global dynamics of world cinema ("Global"; "Discovering"). Over the remainder of the decade, Nichols work was joined infrequently by a smattering of other articles and book chapters that sought to engage with festivals at a critical level, often with a focus on specific festivals (Sundance) or specialised events (queer film festivals) – see work by Chin, Dayan, Lutkehaus, Gamson or Seale as examples. Despite these early contributions, serious commentary on the nature of film festivals, their role within the wider film industry as well as their contributions to ideas such as film culture, 'the auteur' and 'art cinema,' did not eventuate in any substantial form until the start of the twenty-first century.

need for film festival research to reach beyond its film studies roots for theoretical frameworks to explain the interactions encountered and engendered within the festival space.

In December 2008, Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist published online an annotated bibliography that gathered together existing film festival publications in an accessible, searchable form. The list, already substantive, was then printed the following year in *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit,* alongside a discussion of the several axes along which film festival studies was developing. The publication of the bibliography, as well as the arrival of what would be the first of many *Film Festival Yearbooks* (2009), signalled the transition to the most recent phase of film festival scholarship. Despite a growing cross-disciplinary appeal of film festivals through this period, however, film festival studies maintained its close association with film and media studies.

The majority of film festival studies publications – especially those that have held a field-defining role – have emerged from film and media studies researchers and within film and media studies-oriented publications. Notably two key multi-book series on film festivals – the *Film Festival Yearbook* anthology series (2009-2014) and the Framing Film Festivals book series (2015 -) – are overseen by series editors (and key film festival theorists) who are themselves housed within film and media studies departments: Dina Iordanova as Professor of film studies at St Andrews University and Marijke de Valck and Tamara Falicov as Associate Professor of media studies, Universiteit Utrect, and Professor of film studies, University of Kansas respectively.[5] Likewise, to date film studies journals such as *Film International, Screen*, *Scope*, *Synoptique* and *New Review of Film and Television Studies* have provided the main outlet for the special film festival issues and dossiers that have marked the evolution of the field. The publication in 2016 of *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice* (de Valck et al), a volume that worked to provide the clearest overview yet of film festival studies as a coherent area of research, furthered this trend. The edited collection marked out specific understandings of how to *do* festival research, working to consolidate the area of film festival research and chart a structured and systematic approach for its continued evolution through mapping the key methods and theories involved in their analysis. Yet in bringing together the luminaries of the field, each of whom currently work within film and media studies departments or achieved their doctoral qualifications through film, media and communication programs, the book also ultimately confirms the connection between film festival research and film studies sensibilities.

Alongside the evolution of a clear body of film studies-inflected publications, film festival studies has also developed other close institutional ties. Film festival courses have emerged as part of film and media studies degrees (see Zielinski), while several research groups and associations have also developed within existing film and media

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[5] The imprints through which these book series are published also highlight institutional connections to film and media studies, emerging from the St Andrews Film Studies Publishing House (*Film Festival Yearbook*) and via the Cultural, Media, and Communication Studies program at Palgrave Macmillan (Framing Film Studies).

studies frameworks. The Film Festival Research Network, initiated in 2008 by Skadi Loist and Marijke de Valck, has facilitated the emergence of two dedicated workgroups: the Film Festival Research work group within the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS) and the Film and Media Festivals Scholarly Interest Group within the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) (see http://www.filmfestivalresearch.org/). The location of these groups within film and media studies networks, with their annual gatherings located within the respective NECS and SCMS conferences, highlights the priorities for the evolving discipline. The institutional affiliations that support the research and teaching of film festival studies ultimately define the shape and form that the evolving field takes. Moreover, this relationship helps us understand the position that film festival studies still holds as subfield rather than as a fully realised discipline.

The designation of film festival studies as a subfield that sits below and between the fields of film and media studies is significant. This understanding of how film festival studies has emerged in relation to, and remains largely indebted to, these disciplines has influenced not only how the study of festivals has evolved but also conditions how we might understand the continued development of the areas of film and media studies themselves. Film festival studies' subfield status rests on its relative lack of disciplinary coherence. While the afore-mentioned scholarly research groups, publications, book series and pedagogical approaches have worked towards articulating film festivals as a recognisable and distinct area of study, there remains considerable divergence and heterogeneity in the methods and perspectives pursued through film festival research. As Paul McDonald cautions (145-46), the overuse of the term "studies" and commensurate labelling of new "fields" often overlooks the understanding that such terms denote a level of coherence in methodologies, principles and purposes that an area such as film festival studies has not yet achieved.

Film festival studies then, while not yet a fully realised field of study, does exist as a subfield that, although indebted to a film studies base, nonetheless moves characteristically beyond the traditional frames of film studies. Stressing the social and cultural aspects of film across the levels of production, circulation, presentation and reception, film festival studies produces an extension of the broader film and media fields, offering an approach that is inherently transnational in scope, transmedia in articulation and interdisciplinary in conception. By thinking through the place of film festival studies as a subfield of film studies, we can nevertheless see how the evolution of the former reveals an expansion and extension of the latter.

Film festivals as transnational events

As sites of international exchange, film festivals are inherently transnational. Through the films they screen, the dealings of the global film business they facilitate, and the flows of international audiences, filmmakers, journalists and industry personnel they condition, film festivals produce links and interactions that transgress the boundaries of national categorisations and sensibilities. Indeed, as Iordanova explains, "the film festival has always been the site where the inherently transnational character of cinematic art reveals itself most glaringly" (xiv). However, it is not only that the film

festival offers a particularly clear example of cinema's transnationalism that holds significance. Rather, it is that the transnational qualities of the festival as an embodied site of screen culture also opens opportunities to expand an understanding and application of transnationalism within film studies.

As Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, via Bergfelder (9), and more recently Deborah Shaw have observed, transnationalism as a critical concept infiltrated film studies somewhat more slowly than other disciplines within the humanities, establishing itself through a clear transnational turn since 2005 (Shaw 290). While film studies was relatively slow to move beyond its strong conceptual ties to national cinema frameworks, since the mid-2000s the body of work taking note of cinema's transnational qualities has grown considerably. However, within this turn, textual and industrial approaches have dominated understandings of cinema's transnationalism. Higbee and Lim highlight this (9), identifying three main approaches taken up within film studies to theorise cinema's transnationalism. These approaches – to the national/transnational binary, regional and supra-national considerations, and diasporic and cross-cultural filmmaking – place clear emphasis on the examination of what Iordanova identifies as the dominant disciplinary strands of film studies: textual analysis, national frameworks and industry studies (xi). Yet as Iordanova contends, film festivals as sites that crucially bring cinematic texts together while simultaneously straddling the three key lines of enquiry in industrial analyses – production, distribution and exhibition – remain poorly understood as sites that not only speak to each of these approaches but also to a more inherent and consuming "transnational essence" of film culture (xi).

The nature of film festivals as cinematic events works to consolidate and intensify the disparate ways in which the transnational quality of cinema can be understood. Not only sites where, as Berry and Robinson observe, the programmed films offer "a window on the world translating 'foreign' cultures into 'our' culture via the cinema, and vice versa" (1), film festivals also offer a space that, according to Shaw (292), "is transnational at its core... wherein global arts cinema and business intersect." Film festivals, as temporary events with clear industrial as well as aesthetic concerns, condense the transnational workings of cinema, bringing them into confluence within a limited spatial and temporal setting. Yet even more than this, through such confluence festivals also work to expose a wider understanding of cinema's transnationalism. Indeed, looking to the six distinct conceptual premises highlighted by Steven Vertovec as being of particular importance to understanding how transnationalism has been applied differently in a variety of disciplines – as social morphology, type of consciousness, mode of cultural reproduction, avenue of capital, site of political engagement, and (re)construction of "place" or locality (449-57) – a case can be made for film festivals encompassing the lot.

Where film studies, with its interest in texts and industry, aligns most closely with Vertovec's themes of transnational cultural reproduction and, through co-productions and market flows, to avenues of capital, film festivals through their multifaceted nature and interest in cultural exchange offer other avenues of enquiry. Festivals, for example, offer spaces of transnational social morphology, creating shifting "transnational

communities" (Vertovec 449) through the engagement of itinerant industry participants, diasporic audiences and cultural tourists. The well-established role of festivals as sites of cultural diplomacy and soft-power emphasise their relevance to political engagement (see de Valck *Film*). Meanwhile the liminal nature of festivals as sites of spatial and temporal disruption – where everyday conceptions of place and time are replaced with the new morphologies of the event – offer up spaces for the establishment of a temporarily located and socially connected cinephile experience that builds an "awareness of multi-locality" and "stimulates the desire to connect oneself with others, both 'here' and 'there' who share the same 'routes' and 'roots'" (Vertovec 450).

Then there is the international film festival circuit; a descriptor that broadly traces the organic and imagined global networks of exchange (Elsaesser "Film", de Valck *Film*) and global space economy (Stringer "Global") that connects events to one another as well as to international flows of resources, influence and participants. The understanding that individual events do not exist in isolation but rather fit within this global network, conditions an interpretation of film festivals as "inherently transnational…no matter what the intention of the festival is" (Iordanova xiv). The inherent and complex nature of film festivals as transnational events thus produces an avenue by which we can undertake a line of transnational enquiry that at once exceeds, yet continues to align with, the core concerns of film studies.

Film festivals as transmedia experiences

If film festivals are inherently transnational, then they are equally fundamentally transmedia experiences. Like transnationalism, notions of transmediality have gained an increasingly secure foothold within film studies and media studies since the mid-2000s. Transmediality looks beyond inter-textual associations and dependencies to explore the way that contemporary "media" content exceeds the confines (and capacity) of a single medium to extend across and between media types and converge in the multi-platformed, participatory experience of the actively-engaged consumer. The growing interest in such approaches in film studies sits within a turn that has seen the object specificity of "film" diminish in favour of a more inclusive conception of "screen." As such, the interest in and influence of transmedia discourses have largely accompanied the proliferation of new media forms – particularly the rise of digital media and their associated devices. This has facilitated a convergence of modes of production and consumption for formally discrete media types.

The impact of digital media technologies on how films are produced, distributed and consumed has been dramatic and has been the focus of a significant and growing body of scholarship. Dina Iordanova and Stuart Cunningham's aptly titled collection *Digital Disruption* offers one example of the ways in which film studies has traced technological innovation and its transformation of the experience of cinema from a singular experience of "the movies" to a complex engagement across and between media and mediums. Within this context, as several of the collection's chapters note,[6]

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[6] See, for example, chapters in this collection by de Valck, Fischer, Gubbins, Iordanova, or Silver et al.

film festivals too have been transformed. They have undergone significant changes regarding the media and mediums they screen, with events programming TV, VR, webfilm and streaming channels alongside their traditional cinematic fare. The demise of analogue film stock has further seen many events embrace digital projection formats alongside integrating other digital technologies into their presentation (via websites, smart-phone apps, social media, etc.) to increasingly offer up mediated experiences that disrupt their status as "live" and "lived" events (Stevens). However, the fundamental transmediality of festivals is not dependent on their digital entanglements. Rather, the transmedia experience of film festivals rests on their nature as multifaceted events that unfold through a variety of spatial, temporal and perceptual mechanisms.

To understand film festivals' transmediality, it is useful to consider Henry Jenkins definition of transmedia storytelling: "a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (95–96). For Jenkins, the defining quality of transmedia storytelling lies in the confluence of media forms and platforms in pursuit of a single (although not singular) narrative franchise. He explains:

> *In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. (96)*

This understanding of a transmedia narrative that extends beyond a single medium and requires, for its fullest appreciation, an engagement across several media, offers a useful way to conceptualise the interaction with films – or more specifically film culture – offered within the film festival.

As argued at the beginning of this essay, film festivals are complex and multifaceted events. Not just one thing – a showcase of films, for instance – film festivals are made up of a range of planned components, constituents, agendas and contingencies that work together and, at times, against one another to produce the "full" festival. At an organisational level, as Rüling and Pedersen argue (319), film festivals reveal "a nexus of multiple events" which include competitions, award ceremonies, red carpet appearances, press conferences, Q&A sessions, networking opportunities, parties, opening night galas, co-production markets, and, of course, film screenings. Moreover, as Dayan noted about his 1997 visit to Sundance, accompanying such festival "events" there exists another festival – a "written festival" (47). For Dayan, the importance of the written word to the functioning of Sundance was its "most striking" feature (47). He observed: "definition is on the minds of all involved: organizers, jury members, award candidates, audiences, buyers, and story tellers of different sorts – those who create catalogues, those who write reviews, those who script buzz, those who compose wrap-up essays" (47). While Dayan recounted the printed pages that issued from, accompanied and informed the unfolding event, his comments continue to ring true in the digital age, in which festival websites, social media, photo boards, video logs, printed and digital program notes and the ever-present reviews remain an integral part of what makes up a film festival.

Taken together, then, the film festival "narrative" that emerges from this mix is one that reveals its transmedia quality and ultimately the socio-cultural quality of festivals as expressions of film culture. Like the accounts of *The Matrix* film-comic-video game franchise, which informs Jenkins' introduction to notions of transmedia storytelling, film festivals reveal an experience that unfolds across different media (printed word, film screenings, broadcast press conferences, live performance, located experience). From the festival program, to the Q&A sessions, to the festival trailer and the screenings of films, each iteration of the festival contributes to, but does not fully contain, the full "story" of the event. Moreover, like a "good transmedia franchise" film festivals work to appeal to "multiple constituencies by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media" (Jenkins 96). Film markets, gala parties, filmmaker Q&A, award ceremonies, and the many other aspects of the film festival, have as their focus a different constituency – industry, audiences, filmmakers, sponsors, and so on – revealing not only different potential "versions" of the festival but a whole that occurs in relation to the fresh experiences encountered in the cross-overs that occur between the different festivals at play. What the critical conception of film festivals as transmedia experiences offers, then, is a way to understand the inter-relation of the social and cultural as inherent and important qualities in the encounter with films that festivals provide. As with the case of transnationalism, the utilisation of transmediality as a means for theorising festivals thus offers a point of extension in conceptualising the boundaries of film and media studies, emphasising the social contexts – beyond simply media reception – that shape how (media) content is experienced and understood.

Ingrained interdisciplinarity: Mapping the path from subfield to field

The complex nature of film festivals as events that move across and between established conceptual frameworks – of nation, texts, industry – conditions in their study a commitment to interdisciplinarity. Film festival studies routinely borrows from a range of other disciplines. Indeed, as a young subfield, the theoretical and methodological approaches utilised by film festival researchers have, by necessity, been drawn down from more established fields, many of which sit well beyond the limits of what McDonald argues are the "already inter- or multi-disciplinary fields" of film and media studies (145). To date this has seen theories and methodologies borrowed from cultural sociology (in particular the works of Latour, Bourdieu, Habermas), anthropology and ethnography (see Vallejo and Peirano), organisational studies (Rüling and Pederson), urban and cultural industries (Stringer), business studies (Rhyne), and the digital humanities and geo-visualization (Loist), among other sources. The advice from de Valck, then, that "depending on one's interest and particular research question, one may turn to different theoretical traditions to try and explain a specific aspect or dynamics of the fascinating work that film festivals make" ("Introduction" 68), reinforces the sensibility that has grown within film festival studies that the field is only limited by the questions and approaches that researchers can conceive.

For film studies, the ingrained interdisciplinarity of film festival research offers a boon. It opens a space for profitable intersections between an interest in film and a much wider array of concerns and methodologies, extending the understanding of film as tied to specific histories, meanings, and practices of reading outwards into conversations with other areas of analysis. This marks, in many ways, a reversal of what Kristen Warner has observed as the tendency within film studies in the past. She argues:

> *at some point, film and media studies ceded ground to other academic disciplines as well as to the realm of popular criticism… we yielded our expertise in a quest to remain committed to interdisciplinarity and without being offered – or, quite frankly, asking for – reciprocity. (144)*

For Warner, the growing interest in films as pedagogical tools and objects of analysis within other disciplines saw the influence and expertise of film and media scholarship become diminished and sidelined within a growing popular and cross-disciplinary discussion of its texts. Yet, if film and media studies in the past did not seek reciprocity in such an exchange, film festival studies now does; it operates from a film studies base but seeks to colonise for its own ends a more diverse set of methodologies.

If the interdisciplinarity of film festival research offers film studies a chance to consolidate its influence and expand its reach, however, it also ultimately reinforces the status of film festival studies as a subfield. While the disciplinary and methodological borrowing that characterises film festival studies has enabled its evolution and topicality, it also creates a challenge for the field's ability to define its own disciplinary structures. If all disciplines and methodologies offer potential approaches for researching festivals, then what demarcates a coherent methodological framework within film festival studies? Where lies the difference between film festival studies as a critical area of enquiry and simply an interest in film festivals as objects or texts? The task of moving from subfield to a fully realised field of film festival studies thus requires further consideration of how the disciplinary heterogeneity of festival research can be consolidated and more clearly defined. Moreover, any effort at forming such a definition must also begin the work of distancing film festival studies from film studies paradigms. As Iordanova argues, "more and more, one recognizes that the films have become but one of the many elements that make up a festival" (xii). In amongst the parties, red carpets, industry gatherings and other planned and unplanned aspects of the festival event, films offer only a single part of the festival narrative. As such, their importance within festival research must be balanced and matched by an equal level of attention directed towards non-filmic elements of the event. While film festival studies remains linked institutionally and conceptually to film studies, these very ties impose restrictions on the ability for researchers (conditioned by access to funding, the need to report on research outputs, or the need to gain access to film studies-focused publications) to push the boundaries of film festival research and conditions the avenues along which the discipline can and will develop.

Conclusion

As a subfield of film studies, film festival studies opens avenues for positive intersections to emerge. Moving well beyond the traditional concerns of texts, nations and industry, film festival research offers an approach to the study of screen environments that privileges understanding film through its social and cultural construction. As intrinsically multifaceted events, the study of film festivals engages an interdisciplinary approach that enables an extension of how key frameworks, including transnationalism and transmediality, can be taken up within film studies. In so doing, film festival studies offers film studies a means by which a concern with cinema can be moved further past questions of medium specificity towards questions of culture. It enables the field to regain some of the conceptual ground perceived as lost through the appropriation by other fields of screen media as objects of study. Yet, if film festival studies offers film studies a means to extend its disciplinary reach, it does so at the expense of the continued evolution of film festival research. While film studies as an established field helps to offer film festival studies an institutional base for its development, it also imposes certain limitations on how film festivals are conceived and the priorities placed on developing research. Ultimately then, the graduation of film festival studies from subfield to field will require not only a clearer articulation of its conceptual structure but also a level of emancipation from the overarching concerns of its originating discipline. Only once film festival studies moves beyond its reliance on film studies will it achieve its desired place as a fully realised field in its own right.

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The Netflix documentary house style: Streaming TV and slow media

Daniel Binns[1]

Abstract

Streaming services have significantly changed the way that films and TV series are produced and received. The full effects of these changes have yet to be seen, but this article offers an inquiry and critical analysis of some of these changes as they pertain to stand-alone and serial documentaries produced by Netflix. This article contends that there is an emergent "house style" for Netflix original content, particularly documentary, that is in part dictated by platform constraints, but also by an adherence to the principles of Slow Media. To demonstrate, I observe a couple of key moments episodes of *Chef's Table* (2015-) and *Shot in the Dark* (2017-), as well as the feature-length documentary *The Ivory Game* (2016). The findings of the article suggest that the consumption of on-demand content – and more specifically its being chosen by the viewer, rather than observed in the flow of network-era television – affords producers certain concessions around the choices they make. In the examples discussed, there is a clear focus on quality and high production values, bringing Netflix-produced content in line with the tenets of the Slow Media movement.

Keywords

Documentary; Netflix; Streaming Services; Textual Analysis; Television Studies; Internet Television

Streaming services have significantly changed the way that films and TV series are produced and received. The full effects of these changes have yet to be seen, but this article offers an initial inquiry and critical analysis of some of these changes as they pertain to stand-alone and serial documentaries produced by Netflix. The contention of the article is that there is an emergent "house style" for Netflix Original content that is in part dictated by platform constraints, but also by an adherence to the principles of Slow Media. To demonstrate, I observe a couple of key moments in some recent Netflix documentaries. These include an episode from *Chef's Table* (2015-), created by David Gelb and an episode from *Shot in the Dark* (2017-), directed by Jeff Daniels, and the feature-length documentary *The Ivory Game* (2016), directed by Richard Ladkani and

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Kief Davidson. This textual analysis is prefaced by an introduction to Slow Media, a consideration of how far television and its status as an object of study have come, and where Netflix and its users might fit in the post-broadcast and on-demand media landscape.

Slow media

In 2010, Benedikt Köhler, Sabria David and Jörg Blumtritt published their "Slow Media Manifesto," outlining how media makers might resist the increasing speed of development in the mediascape. "Like 'Slow Food,'" they offer, "Slow Media are not about fast consumption but about choosing the ingredients mindfully and preparing them in a concentrated manner (Köhler et al). Among the 14 elements of the manifesto are the following three credos:

6.   Slow Media are discursive and dialogic

13.   Slow Media focus on quality

14.   Slow Media ask for confidence and to take their time to be credible (Köhler et al)

I acknowledge that many of these terms are at best slightly problematic and at worst hotly disputed, particularly regarding television, but the tenets of Slow Media have been picked up in a number of contexts elsewhere, from social media (Karppi 2011) and games studies (Ashton and Newman 2011) to reconceptualisations of cinematic temporality and expression (de Luca and Jorge 2016, Kelly 2015).

The present article is concerned with how Netflix has used these tenets of Slow Media in the production of three of their original documentary products. Further, I contend that resistance to the speed of the mediascape is evident in the texts themselves, and I demonstrate this through a close textual analysis of two episodes of television and one feature-length documentary. Netflix is a platform built on networks, on instantaneous international communication infrastructure, and incredibly sophisticated algorithms. There is an irony, then, that much of Netflix's documentary content would adhere to the principles of Slow Media, which move to resist the unrelenting speed of the internet age. However, this article contends that this is a conscious ploy on the part of the platform to create a distinct brand, via a documentary "house style."

Post-broadcast and on-demand media

The platform of television was defined for many years by two things: its singular position in the home, and the linearity of its broadcast. In 1974, Raymond Williams outlined how television inherited older media formats, such as news, talk shows, sport, advertising, and drama from radio; but also, how the platform created hybrid forms like drama-documentary and variety (39-76). But Williams' greatest contribution to the understanding of television was to consider and theorise how these various forms coalesced during the linear broadcast. "This phenomenon, of planned flow," offers Williams, "is … perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a

technology and as a cultural form" (86). Williams suggests that by considering television as a continuous flow of programming, a new kind of experience results, one where the viewer does not consider discrete media objects: a television program or film, for instance, but rather "a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings" (92). In his final summation of flow – considering the ways that a mid-1970s American newscast cobbles together small news items, seamlessly inter-weaving commercials for cat food and headache pills – Williams writes that "in their essential combination, this is the flow of meanings and values of a specific culture" (120).

Of course, in the contemporary media landscape, broadcast television competes against other media platforms. As Jinna Tay and Graeme Turner note, "we cannot think of television networks in the same way we once did: as merely competing for a slice of the national audience" (8). Furthermore, that national and international audience is no longer conceived by institutions, networks, or by scholars as a homogenous and passive group. Audiences have a greater level of control over what they watch, and when and where they watch that content. Audiences also critique, comment on, mash-up and share content, and in some cases even contribute to its creation. As Henry Jenkins writes, "If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible," then "the new consumers are now noisy and public" (19).

In discussing post-network television, Amanda D. Lotz proffers three categories of television content that help somewhat in delineating medium-specific conversations as regard TV in the twenty-first century. The first category is "prized" content, which is actively sought out and watched as an event; the bleeding of commentary around this content into social circles and online discussion platforms also bolsters the content as a valued piece of culture – even if the spike in hype may not last long. Lotz suggests that the value placed in certain content may not be shared by all audiences: her examples range from *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011) to *Duck Dynasty* (2012-). No matter its perceived value, prized content is considered discretely as artefact – partly removed from the intricacies of its platform, and from the surrounding programs (per Williams above). Lotz's second category is live sports and contests, which "resist all of the ways the technologies and distribution opportunities of the post-network era enable audiences to disrupt prized content from residual viewing norms and economic strategies" (14). This is still sought-after content, but its "exceptional time sensitivity" and, to a degree, unpredictability, keep it at a remove from the prized content described above (14). The third of Lotz's classifications is linear content, where intentionality and focus may be slightly reduced than with prized or contest-based programming. "Linear content is what people watch when they watch 'what is on,'" Lotz offers (14). Very often, it is a sense of shared space – or of mutual boredom – that characterises the viewing of linear content. Lotz presents these three categories as catch-alls that "illustrate the need to speak of particular types of television content and make content-specific claims when postulating coming economic models" (15).

Documentaries are hard to place cleanly within Lotz's categories, particularly in the context of Netflix, where the idea of watching "whatever is on" does not really truck with its on-demand nature. There are contest-like elements to some of Netflix's original non-fiction content, for instance, such as *Ultimate Beastmaster* (2017-) or *Westside*

(2018-), but these remain on-demand products, rather than occurring in-flow. The marketing of Netflix's original content, both within the platform, in real-world settings like billboards or bus stops, and on social media, suggests that Netflix considers its own content much more "prized" than its acquired material: consider the promotion of *Stranger Things* (2016-), for example, or *13 Reasons Why* (2017-), which took precedence over the acquisition of popular properties like *Mad Men* (2007-2015) or *Homeland* (2011-). Netflix places their Original content in a separate category on the main browser interface, privileging this content with larger portrait-oriented thumbnails. Netflix has chosen the nomenclature of "series" and "films," which consciously connects its products with labels from the network era. Furthermore, Netflix largely restricts its content to the run-times and structural conventions of those formats. How, though, do new viewing practices, new modes of production and distribution, become inscribed in the product, the content, itself? What are the similarities and differences between network-era programs and post-broadcast content?

Netflix's documentary content is constitutive of the commercial reality of the platform in that while much of the content is commissioned or produced by Netflix itself, there is something of a balance between original and acquired content. From a user perspective, the platform is structured around the distribution of content according to the viewer's preferences, and the "preference machine" or algorithm is designed and used by a company whose revenue is assured by continued subscription and viewing. It thus behoves Netflix to work within existing documentary sub-genres, and to form hybrids with related styles like reality television, in order to attempt to attract a wide and varied audience. Across the range of content, though, what are the similarities and differences? Can a Netflix Originals "house style" be observed, and what comprises it? I attempt here to delineate just such a style through three case studies, and to contextualise this style within the broader discussions conducted above.

Michelin-starred television: *Chef's Table*

The use of Max Richter's re-working of *Winter* (Concerto No. 4 in F minor, Op. 8, RV 297), from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (1725), as the theme for *Chef's Table*, is somewhat symbolic of the series' status and function. *Chef's Table* premiered in 2015 as Netflix's first original documentary series and has since run for an additional five series – or "volumes" – plus a spin-off featuring France-based chefs. I mention the symbolism of the theme, *Winter*, for three reasons. *Winter* is a singular concerto that has its own discrete tone and characteristics; in the same way, each episode of *Chef's Table* is a standalone story that profiles an internationally-renowned chef. But *Winter* is also one of four concerti that comprise Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, functioning in conjunction with the other three pieces or seasons; *Chef's Table* is a series where stylistic patterns propagate and blend with each other across the episodes. Finally, the version of *Winter* used for the title sequence of *Chef's Table* is a minimalist arrangement and re-composition by the German-British composer Max Richter.

Chef's Table continues a long tradition of food documentaries and television programs, and is not ignorant of this history; but it also leverages the freedom afforded by its

combined producer-distributor in order to play and experiment with the form. In this way the series, too, is a remix or reorientation of a certain type of documentary. Most notable in terms of these more experimental techniques are smooth camera movements, super slow-motion shots, soft-focus or *bokeh* cinematography, the use of computer-controlled camera rigs, and a presentation of food that is comparable to the arrangement of props for still-life painting: the perfect alignment of *mise en place* with *mise en scene*. These techniques are not new, but their combination in an ultra-high definition program to be consumed via streaming tells us a lot about how platform might be inscribed in content within Netflix's oeuvre.

The second volume's third episode focuses on French-born Dominique Crenn, America's first two-Michelin star chef. This episode starts – as many of them do – with a brief prologue hinting at the chef's early life. In Crenn's case, we are told she was adopted by a loving family and spent an idyllic youth in Brittany with her brother and parents; it was her father that took her to restaurants, where she became enamoured with the beauty, the precision, the ritual, the movements of fine dining. The pre-titles prologue is based around a set-up interview: a medium shot of Crenn sitting at a bar, pristine glassware arrayed and gleaming in soft focus behind her. Alongside this interview, we hear from other chefs and critics about the subject's wider influence. Around these interviews, the editor cross-cuts between Crenn sitting meditatively on a train (that we later learn is zipping through the French countryside) and slow-motion shots of dishes being prepared and arranged on plates. Many episodes of the series begin this way, but the variety in dishes, environments, colours, and stories means each prologue unique. The prologue sets the tone for the episode, building to a mini-climax, where often a completed dish is centred before the camera, and we then cut to the opening strings of Richter's arrangement of *Winter*.

Beyond the prologue and titles, the chef's narrative continues to unfold, and we learn about how their personal story or influences manifest themselves in their menus. Like the food presented in the show, the cinematography is precise and constructed. In Crenn's episode, a pivotal emotional moment is the death of her father. Her father is presented visually through photographs and symbolically via his artwork: paintings that are hung in Crenn's home and in her restaurants. After a brief summary of a period of soul-searching that saw her work in Indonesia and Los Angeles, Crenn reaches the point in her narrative where she is about to open her own restaurant. From here, there is a swelling in visuals and sound that takes us through the opening of Atelier Crenn in San Francisco, and gives us tantalising glimpses of various dishes.

In each of the sequences discussed above, a few elements stand out: colour, sound and music, and the way that the sound and visuals are brought together. Colour is a big part of the series, and the footage is clearly graded in post-production to emphasise the variety in and richness of hues. The opening montage of Crenn's episode ends with the chef meticulously arranging multi-coloured flowers and sauces on a plate. The sound design is just as precise, with a balance of classical music, isolated voice, and silence, and environmental sounds. Crenn leaves the chaos of the kitchen at one point in the episode, to visit an orchard in Yountville, California, where she sources some of her ingredients. This sequence echoes similar sections in other episodes, and they tend to

function as a period of respite from the swelling crescendos of the chef at work; further, it is worth considering the parallels between this example of Slow Media, and the principles of the Slow Food movement, which call for the sourcing of local, sustainable ingredients (Honoré 59). Crenn is shown walking around the fields with the owner of the farm, trying the raw ingredients, and the soundtrack comprises their conversation and environmental sounds, primarily crickets, birds chirping and the wind rustling the leaves. The crickets in particular are quite high in the audio mix, and the absence of music is noteworthy. However, I would argue that the layering of natural sounds in this short sequence is its own kind of musical arrangement, a score in itself, or a soundscape to match the overgrown greenery on screen. The final ingredient Crenn tastes is a perfectly ripe fig. From the wider shots of the two wandering the farm, the camera moves in, to get a close-up detail of the fig's interior, and as Crenn lifts the fruit to her lips, a single note of music starts up, signalling a shift away from the outdoors, and back to the kitchen, where the fig will be the star of a dish. The set-up interview with Crenn is also gently re-introduced here, inter-cut with shots and sounds from the farm. We are being softly re-oriented back to the charged atmosphere of the kitchen. It's a fluid movement, rather than a hard cut, and the sound is crucial to that transition.

Each episode is difficult to analyse, not in terms of aesthetics, but more with regard to structure. There is rarely a moment when the flow of imagery and sounds stop, where there is a shift from one "section" or scene to another. The images and sounds rise and fall, they build in intensity, in motion, in fluidity. With the editing alone, there is more a sense of decoupage than montage. More than the individual shots or their alignment with each other or with the soundtrack, there is the sense of an overall gesture. More than sequences or scenes, each individual visual element is layered on top of another to give a rich sense of texture, depth and complexity. In discussing the editor's rhythmic movements, Karen Pearlman uses words like "orchestration" and "conducting" (24-25); the result of this approach is an experience that feels more felt than watched. There is a polish to *Chef's Table* that lends itself to high-definition displays; this is content that is pristine and precise. Time has been taken to achieve this sense of polish, as the producers assume that viewers will seek this content out over other options. The content is treated as prized, with the assumption that the viewer will see it that way: *Chef's Table* is *event* streaming, rather than something designed to stand out in a flow of information.

Soft-focus chaos: *Shot in the Dark*

From the nuanced, balanced, symphonic, high-brow *Chef's Table*, we move to the ostensibly gutter-based world of stringers, with Jeff Daniels' series *Shot in the Dark*. The series follows several stringers – independent cameramen – as they roam the streets of Los Angeles after dark, getting footage of the aftermath of accidents or crimes, or events of interest as they happen. They then bid to sell this footage to news networks for broadcast the following day. Where the ebbs and flows, the movements and arrangements of each episode of *Chef's Table* are distinct and changeable, *Shot In The Dark* is, by contrast, formulaic and connected (albeit tenuously) by an overarching narrative.

The thrust of the show is straightforward: each night, several stringers react to calls they hear on the various police scanners they have rigged up in their cars. They fly across the city to the location, film the incident or its aftermath, then hurriedly edit the footage together to pitch to networks. The overarching narrative is interwoven between each incident, and presents the camaraderie and competition between the media companies and their individual stringers. In terms of structure, the episode begins with an establishing sequence that either sets up the thrust of the episode or is something of a non-sequitur that nevertheless draws the viewer into the action. In the case of the fourth episode of the first series, "Nice Package," stringer Howard Raishbrook (also one of the show's executive producers) arrives at the site of a fatal head-on collision on one of LA's dangerous freeways. Quickly covering the scene, he uploads the footage, believing himself to have the exclusive on the story. Unbeknownst to Howard, though, competitor Scott Lane has snuck up behind a freeway sound barrier to get the high angle, and then packages this footage with other stories to secure more "hits" or purchases. Howard later realises the story was taken out from under him, and identifies Scott's packaging of content as somewhat undermining the nature of the stringing industry. This brief narrative sequence is shot in a variety of ways: some of the cinematography is handheld, some is static, some is shot from a bonnet-mounted camera.

Like much reality TV, *Shot in the Dark* treads an often-blurry line between constructed Kardashian-esque narratives and actions/reactions that are genuine and true to life. Leaving debates of verisimilitude aside, the visual treatment of the content is interesting in and of itself. As noted, the camera work is varied: a mixture of handheld immediacy, cinematic timelapse or static establishing shots, and views from bonnet-mounted cameras that capture the faces of the stringers as they drive to an incident. This is supplemented by aerial drone footage of Los Angeles, and graphic inserts that resemble a GPS navigation system tracking the stringers as they race time and each other to their destinations.

The accidents and events the stringers encounter and film are very real, but elements of the show are very well-produced. The set-up interviews with each of the stringers are shot with multiple cameras, to keep the editing dynamic and fluid; Howard Raishbrook, for example, is usually shown sitting in a booth at a moodily-lit diner. Each of the stringers' car interiors are lit with LED lights corresponding to the colour designated to their media company; this colour is also used to track each stringer in the GPS graphic inserts.

The sound design, too, in *Shot in the Dark* is complex and affecting, showing an attention to detail that would seem strange in other crime/reality shows such as *COPS* (1989-), where rawness and messiness are part of the chosen *cinéma vérité* style. There are no clear breaks in the soundtrack between clips, as would normally occur when cutting: background noise will usually be slightly different in each clip. With no clear breaks, it can be deduced that care has been taken to mask these cuts in the sound design, to give the impression of a continuous flow of images, and distracting the viewer from the jarring nature of any visual cut. Sound design of this kind can be expensive, so is indicative of high production value: a budget that allows for such

attention to detail. In fact, high production value is indicated by all these little touches: the varied shots, well-produced set-up interviews, and the complex sound design, all parts of a clear Netflix slow documentary house style that adheres to Lotz's "prized" content, in the way that the platform markets these in the online interface.

At the end of each "section," once an incident has been resolved, there is a slow-moving tracking shot filming a television showing the news coverage of that event. A text overlay then indicates how many "hits" each of the stringers got with their footage. What interests me most about these little epilogues is their duration: each one lasts around a minute or so and serves as little breaths between the chaos of each stringer's chase. To take a minute for these interludes is an editing and storytelling luxury; this not an unprecedented luxury in television structure, but it is one that the producers seem to return to a great deal more than their network-bound counterparts.

While watching *Shot in the Dark*, one is left with an overwhelming sense of polish: a glossy production true to the aesthetics and principles of Slow Media. The image is clean and moves smoothly, even when it is overlaid with a faux viewfinder graphic to denote footage taken by the stringers themselves. There is no attempt to replicate the immediacy of embedded reportage or other reality shows via the shaky cameras of *COPS*, or the crash zooms of *Jersey Shore* (2019-2012) or the *Real Housewives* franchise (2006-). The constructed narrative and compulsive attraction of the show betrays its "reality" status, but its adoption of more cinematic techniques, such as set-up interviews, advanced lighting and sound design, gives it a polish more akin to *Chef's Table* or, as I will now discuss, feature-length documentaries like *The Ivory Game*.

Duration and persuasion: *The Ivory Game*

The Ivory Game is a feature-length persuasive documentary film that takes as its subject the poaching of African elephants for the ivory from their tusks. This is hardly a new issue, but it is one that finds new currency with shifting political landscapes and the pressures of global scrutiny. The filmmakers' approach is to structure their film as an investigation – it begins on the ground in Tanzania, where a notorious poacher is detained, before we then meet the security chief of a wildlife reserve, Craig Millar. Millar's attempts to protect the elephants in his care forms one arm of a branching narrative; the other stories are that of the investigators tasked with finding the poachers, and those attempting to halt the international trafficking of ivory.

The visual style is a combination of sweeping cinematic drone cinematography, combined with more immediate, hand-held footage, particularly when the camera operators follow law enforcement as they raid poacher compounds, or when conservationists attempt to negotiate with land-owners at night. There are also sequences captured with hidden cameras, as undercover operatives attempt to expose the illegal trafficking of ivory. This binary of immediate action and the expansive environment is broken up by scenes that take place in London, where environmental groups lobby for support, and in China, where much of the poached ivory ends up. The grand aerial shots show great swathes of unspoilt desert and greenery and, when combined with a swelling orchestral score, make for compelling imagery.

Viewers who are predisposed to sympathise with the wildlife and its protectors will no doubt be caught up in the affective nature of *The Ivory Game*. Around 53 minutes into the film, for example, a plane is seen swooping low over the environment, as one of the conservationists discusses putting extra protection in place. From here, the film shifts location to Nairobi, Kenya, where a handheld camera descends into the lower floors of a government storage warehouse. The soundtrack features radio and television news reports about the illegal ivory trade as the camera peeks into rooms simply filled with tusks, piled floor to ceiling. A conversation between conservationists and workers reveals that they have catalogued over 55 tons of tusks at this facility alone. The conversation is filmed in close-up, with occasional moves away from the group as something or other is pointed out: a high pile of tusks, or the smart device on which the ivory is being catalogued. Over a score of a single string note, the voiceover notes that if the ivory is not destroyed, then it may be stolen and once again leaked onto the black market. A montage of soft-focus shots, shows the workers sorting through the ivory and marking each tusk with an identification number, desperately trying to find room for the sheer amount of contraband. The editing of this sequence is languorous. Once again, time is taken to ensure that the content of each shot is allowed sufficient screen time for the viewer to take it in: this is particularly true of wide-angle shots of the piles of tusks.

Even in the sequences featuring handheld footage or shots from hidden cameras, each shot is allowed to play through a long duration. As the undercover activists move through a building at around 85 minutes into the film, we see a number of long shots where a couple of enormous polished tusks suddenly appears; another few steps, and a huge bearskin fills the frame. With no cuts, there is certainly a sense of authenticity – this is a real place, these are real people – but as with the other examples discussed here, there is a sense of freedom, of patience, to wait and let the story unfold naturally: to let the audience take it all in.

This is an aesthetic that is enabled *by* technology but is also a sort of response to the ubiquity of technology. The producers clearly enjoy access to multiple different camera types, and have cut together the varied footage in ways that foreground the affordances of each. The measured editing, though, seems to ask audiences to "take their time" in a Slow Media kind of way, and to let it all sink in.

The final filmed image of *The Ivory Game* is a huge mound of ivory tusks being set alight and burning ferociously. A text overlay explains that Kenya destroyed its entire stockpile of ivory in 2016, but subsequent text reminds the viewer that the struggle to end the ivory trade is still very much ongoing: in the words of the film, "The fight continues." These images of flame are slow motion, moving from long, wide angles to close-ups of licking flame. As the orange frames fade, we are left with a single black and white still image of an elephant. Text beneath this image reads:

<div align="center">

Dedicated to the memory of Satao
JOIN THE FIGHT AT WWW.THEIVORYGAME.COM

</div>

This is a compelling call to action. Having just met the many people involved in stemming and trying to end the trade of ivory, the message is unrelenting, and there is

no happy ending. The fight continues, and we cannot forget those that have been lost along the way. The call to action is a staple documentary technique, and can be either explicit, as in the case of this final image and web address, or implied throughout the piece, leaving the viewer to determine how to engage with the issue. According to Bill Nichols, techniques such as the call to action "place documentary in much closer alliance with rhetoric than aesthetics" ("Blurred Boundaries" 47). Carl R. Plantinga says nonfiction films project "the actual world as portrayed" (17) and the filmmakers thus "cue the spectator to understand and evaluate what is shown as nonfiction" (19). With this in mind he offers a number of ways in which filmmakers wrap things up:

> *The end of the formal narrative documentary parallels the overall epistemological function of the text, providing full, clear, high-level knowledge of the ostensible truth. It accomplishes this by answering salient questions earlier raised, summing up, reinforcing main points, or providing a frame for interpretation. (Plantinga 131-2)*

One such frame for interpretation is the call to action, that makes the agenda of the piece plain, and clearly delineates the voice of the filmmakers. All documentaries have an agenda, and each puts forward its own perspective on a person, an issue, or an event. "Documentary voice," offers Nichols, "derives from the director's attempt to translate his or her perspective ... into audio-visual terms; it also stems from his or her direct involvement with the film's subject" ("Introduction to Documentary" 69). Documentaries are discursive and dialogical; they invite the audience to compare their own views with that of the film and its makers. The freedom to employ high production values is a luxury not available to all documentarians, but it is a freedom that the makers of *The Ivory Game* have embraced to tell a story that unfolds with care and duration. With *Chef's Table* and *Shot in the Dark* the attitude seems to be to let the story speak for itself. There is no real need to persuade the audience of anything, least of all to act. But with *The Ivory Game*, there is necessarily an inherent request for confidence, and a call for trust that the full story and perspective will be shown in time. After this has been done, the producers feel comfortable imploring the viewer to consider action. Purely aesthetically, too, as with the two previous examples, there is a clear and unrelenting focus on high production values. This is persuasive, dynamic documentary, but it is still slow, deliberate, and designed as *event* streaming.

Stranger things...

Netflix is a platform that emerged from the hyper-development of media technologies. Rather than a "network" or a "channel" it offers viewers what Sudeep Sharma calls a newsstand (144), and Ramon Lobato a "catalog," based on licensing agreements that "change over time and across space" ("Rethinking International TV flows research" 242). Finally, the platform is built upon and reliant on the infrastructure of the global Internet: "vast networks of fibre and coaxial cable, copper telephone wires, and satellite data links" (Lobato "Streaming services" 180). It is perhaps ironic that on such a platform as Netflix – built as it is upon the principles of speed and instantaneous connectivity – one consistently finds content that seems to "ask for confidence and to take [its] time to be credible" (Köhler et al). Throughout each of the examples discussed

above, there is a predisposition to high production values, and a true sense of polish to the finished product. These are programs, films, that are supposed to be an event, what Lotz calls "prized" content. This is content that is made to be chosen, to be consumed as an event, outside the "flow" of network programming. When their products are removed from flow, producers are afforded the time to make deliberate choices about their visuals and sound, and this is manifest in an unhurried, considered style – even in the "chaos" of *Shot in the Dark*.

The final credo of the Slow Manifesto offers that "Slow Media are discursive and dialogic." I have observed certain trends in Netflix-produced documentaries that comprise what I contend is a "house style." This style, with its sense of polish and patient editing style, fits the documentary remit well. But certain elements of the style can be found not just across Netflix Original documentaries, but its Original dramas, series, and the various acquisitions that it brings into its catalogue. It stands to reason that in the quest to retain subscribers, Netflix will commission or acquire content that stands out, to be chosen by the viewer from the curated selection on offer. How strange, then, that slow nonfiction seems to be the order of the day.

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Sip My Ocean: Immersion, senses and colour

Wendy Haslem[1]

Abstract

Pipilotti Rist's exhibition *Sip My Ocean* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (2017-18) is a dynamic example of screen culture in transition. Rist's aim is to create work that "rethinks the nature of video art itself" and she does this by presenting images and narratives that occupy a space that intersects art, film, sculpture and photography. In *Sip My Ocean* screens do not only appear on walls, but by extending and reducing screen ratios they also appear on ceilings and floors. Rist's video art highlights the use of extreme scale and expressive colour to include and immerse the viewer, destabilising traditional patterns of perception. Extreme screens and heightened aesthetics offer the potential to map the movement of ideas across time, screens, aesthetics and disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords

Feminist Film Theory; Video Art; Pipilotti Rist; New Media; Screens; Aesthetics; Colour

In response to 24-hour news cycle reports of an earthquake, racial violence and political unrest, B. Ruby Rich writes, "so often at times of historical crises, film has risen to the occasion and made a difference." (5) Rich asks, "surely it's time for a new generation of visionaries to arise out of this era of violence and persecution?" (5). This call to action acknowledges the power of film culture to address, and perhaps to intervene, in social and historical issues. Cinema relies on the spectator for activation. Rich wonders what audiences escaping into the deepest 3D experiences today are avoiding (5). Rich asks, "is it possible that a committed digital cinema could arise from the ashes of celluloid and resume the medium's traditional relevance to popular events, historic movements and questions of injustice? And would audiences pay attention?" (5). The questions posed here by Rich require a reconsideration of the position of film and video in the digital age. They wonder whether the movie theatre is capable of activating audiences. However, there is a site where the moving image has been recast in relation to the dynamic transition of technologies and materialities, a site where cinema remains a powerful and relevant force. That space is outside of the traditional

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movie theatre and inside the museum. And one filmmaker/artist who creates such compelling images is Pipilotti Rist.

Pipilotti Rist's survey show, *Sip My Ocean* was exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (2017-18). Rist's aim is to create work that "rethinks the nature of video art itself" (2017). Her work achieves such a rethinking of the nature of video art through the ways that she presents autobiographical images and narratives that occupy a space that intersects art, film, sculpture and photography (Rist 2017). Rist's moving images are created using light, colour, sound, objects and pixels. Images are sculpted from a range of light intensities and saturated colours. These moving images are projected on a range of screens including television screens, white walls, dual screens positioned at adjacent angles, or joined at a fold, large screens where content is "self-curated," rounded screens suspended from the ceiling, tiny screens that are almost hidden from view, a chandelier-shaped screen made of underwear, curtains, bodies and the air. Rist's video art relies on a reconfiguration of possible spectatorial positions. The viewer is invited to look at, apprehend and respond to the visions Rist conjures forth. In form and content, materials and technologies, Rist's moving image work steps outside of the traditional exhibition space to reframe the history of the cinema, and to imagine it anew. She is a visionary filmmaker whose work responds to contemporary social issues, particularly focusing on women, the environment and the transformation of film culture. Rist's work is deeply connected to popular culture. It interweaves familiar images with Rist's unique perspective. Rist's work is formally, aesthetically and technically rebellious. This is the approach that Rist has consistently taken since producing her first work of video art in the 1980s. *Sip My Ocean* seems to respond to B Ruby Rich's call for an engaged, politicised cinema.

Inspired by the "richness of installations of every kind" that he experienced at the 1999 Venice Biennale, the film theorist Raymond Bellour called for a "new inventory" to begin to describe the "explosion and dispersal" of cinema "redistributed, transformed, mimicked and reinstalled" (427). He suggests that Rist's installations confront the viewer with an "*other cinema*, which in part borrows from aspects of cinema that relate to society and spectacle but is not reducible to only that" (Bellour 7). The first principle of Bellour's *other cinema* is the "reinvention of projection, divided and multiplied" (408). Bellour notes that certain installations evolve towards the concept of *dispositifs*, "in which one sees in very different ways, an increasingly evident element that is in competition with the cinematic *dispositif*-through the deconstruction and reassembly of its specific elements, and through inspiration from its history and pre-history (whether silent cinema or pre-cinema)" (5-6). Inspired by Rist's video art, Bellour's definition of an *other cinema* can be revised in contemporary film culture to acknowledge the *multiplicity of cinemas* and the proliferation of screens that are positioned on gallery walls, on floors, on bottles displayed above bars, on light fittings, using underwear as screens and projecting images across bodies.

Rist is part of a generation of video artists who emerged after the one-hundred-year anniversary of the cinema. Eivind Røssaak classifies this generation as filmmakers who "represented a cinematic turn through their interest in cinema and its techniques and iconography, but they have also been labelled post-cinematic as they mixed video and

new media often using the installation format" (87). The immense transition that Rich sees present in contemporary cinema emerges in the themes and subject matter of Rist's moving image art, and becomes most evident in her experiments with screens, materials and technologies, both solid and ephemeral. This article investigates the particular type of media expansion that is presented throughout *Sip My Ocean*, focussing on marks of Rist's authorship as they arise explicitly and implicitly within the content, aesthetics, style and form of specific exhibits. Throughout, I explore each exhibit in detail, identifying the materials, technologies, form and aesthetic that comprise individual artworks. This analysis is designed to trace Rist's particular creation of fluid screens in both form and content. It follows the layout of the exhibition to identify the transitions across the screens that comprise Rist's career. I consider how spectators experience and participate in the installations within *Sip My Ocean*. Simultaneously, I consider how the exhibits imagine the spectator beyond the singular focus, or physical stillness in the movie theatre, or living room. Throughout this article, I focus on what is theorisable in Rist's video art, identifying the filmic, spatial design, objects and the spectator herself, as discursively constructed. I track some of the ways Rist's video art articulates and enables new forms of intimacy and reciprocity between bodies, images, objects and screens and the ways it renews cinema as it does so. Convergence, for Rist, is less about the conflation of media and materials and more about the dynamic expansion of screens and the interrelationship between media.

Meditation for Suburbbrain: The (over) proximity of suburban life

Meditation for Suburbbrain (2011) consists of a number of interrelated elements. A single-channel video and a two-channel video installation, *Kleines Vorstadthirn (Small Suburb Brain)* (1999/2007), an assortment of white packing materials – *The Innocent Collection* – covering a wall, and a miniature diorama of a flat-roofed modernist house surrounded by a fence combine to identify the suburban home as an isolated fortress. The architecture and surroundings appear to be stilled in time. The lawnmower is abandoned on the grass, the blow-up pool sits alone in the yard, the clothesline is bare. The home is lit by small screens that glow with an unnerving orange hue. The packing materials appear as a frieze in sculptural form, surrounding the diorama. Both walls carry a wash of projections of yellow abstract landscapes, with one wall featuring an insert of Rist, often in extreme close up. Rist reveals that this installation is concerned with the beauty of what is usually overlooked. *Meditation for Suburbbrain* shows both the horrific constancy of suburban life, and the "contradictions of today's civilisation" (Rist 2017). Rist is referring here to the ways that what is classified and excluded as the decay of everyday life produces evanescent effects akin to the sparkle of "instant diamonds" (2017). *The Innocent Collection* begins in 1985, presumably when the objects were collected, and ends in 2032, perhaps referring to the year when the PET materials break down. Her decision to include polyethylene terephthalate packaging cleaned of branding to sculpt the wall reverses the traditional hierarchy of value that usually orders the gallery space.

Meditation for Suburbbrain has multiple iterations with the 1999 iteration being the most influential. Raymond Bellour's experience of Rist's precursor to this installation, the triple screen model of a suburban Zurich home, entitled *Vorstadthirn/Suburb Brain* (1999) highlights the ways that her work destabilises the solidity of domestic architecture by overlaying it with liquid screens. Multiple screens juxtapose the joy of celebrations such as birthdays, with nightmarish images of decapitated bodies and disarticulated heads. Adding such a dark dimension to domestic femininity dispels preconceived notions of blissful suburban life. Bellour writes, "this suggests that everything in the house is a screen; that it is both a place of projection and a support for it; that it becomes a place of fiction told by the work as a whole, according to the conventional identification with the heroine, whose voice guides us, through fragmented views that never stop combining with the unpredictable spectator" (7). Multiple iterations of this video artwork show that adaptation is characteristic of Rist's *oeuvre*. In Rist's work, concepts transform, as do screens, aesthetics and narrative. Convergence is less a system of domination and blurring or erasure of media here than a phenomenon or process that highlights the specificities of materials and the interrelationship of screens and materials.

Bellour uses the word "gesture" to describe Rist's installations. Bellour suggests that the effect of the gesture *Suburb Brain*, is to seduce and to overwhelm the viewer (410). This is certainly the case with the inclusion of moving images that alternate between the distant perspectives of landscapes and the over proximity to the body, fragmented and framed in close up. Bellour outlines various principles of Rist's gestures, one of which is the projection that is extended onto everything, with the body becoming "a site for a frenetic expansion of projection" (410). The body of the visitor comes into contact with the body on screen, which is often Rist's body in extreme close up with context occasionally masked, or uncertain. For Bellour, this is powerful and dynamic work, "more forced and more lively than that which we experience at the cinema" (410). Bellour sees Rist's work as a "mimesis of cinema using alternative means" (6).

Sip My Ocean: Rupturing the romance

Pipilotti Rist says that in *Sip My Ocean* (1996) there is a "kind of mutual understanding of which art can be a non-linguistic offerer" (2017). Two large dual, intersecting screens form a corner for the exhibit. These screens extend beyond the limitations of vision, "cornering" perspective. The image-track shows transforming abstract impressions folded like Rorschardt block prints. The fold connects the images, doubling, duplicating and mirroring these fluid figurative animations. Abstract images are presented in layers, requiring the viewer to simultaneously look in to the image, and to notice the images that appear to billow across its surface. Depth is revealed in the spaces and layers glimpsed through gaps in the surface patina. Abstract images morph into figurative images of a body that swims underwater. A television falls into the water and bobbles around, uncharacteristically light. Two animated mermaids ride whales off into the distance. Rist plays guitar and begins to sing Chris Isaak's "Vicious Games" sweetly. Gradually Rist is heard singing out of synchronicity and in an increasingly discordant style. Towards the end of the song, her voice screeches the lyrics. Sweet harmony finds

its counterpoint in the screaming rendition of the song. The soundtrack augments the complexity of the surface and depth of the image-track. This exhibit begins with a sense of play. Screens, images and sounds appear harmonious. Gradually disconnection emerges in the cacophony of sounds and complex, layered images. As Harriet Hawkins notes, *Sip My Ocean* is an exhibit that relies on abstractions, fragmentations and implied images to build patterns of "accumulative associations rather than linear narratives" (159). Rist reveals that whilst the illusion of synchronicity and connection might be present in the images, her rendition of the song "Vicious Games" shows the impossibility of being totally in tune with others.

On the surface, Rist's screens display extraordinarily coloured fantasy worlds. Catherine Elwes notes that "cinematic pastiches in the mid to late 1990s reveal the extent to which the creative imagination is colonised by phantasms of Hollywood film. They are also a form of retreat from the real, a re-immersion in the escapist enchantment of a celluloid dreamland" (170). Elwes continues, "it is always easier to recycle an elegant, glamorous and illusive past rather than face the uncomfortable realities of the new millennium" (170). Rist certainly creates a celluloid dreamland, but throughout her *oeuvre*, she engages with social and political issues. Rist provokes the spectator by drawing the eye towards vivid colour, establishing a sense of enchantment and then dispelling that illusion. Revising and disrupting the glamour of an illusory past is crucial to the attraction of *Sip My Ocean*. The deconstruction of cinematic narrative across the exhibition more broadly, and the revelation of the contrivances of filmic illusionism, denies spectatorial omniscience. Elwes notes that feminists working with video art in the 1980s showed "a need to externalise the internal struggle with cultural ideals" (164). Writing specifically about *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* (1996), Elwes comments that the key themes of this installation, "distance, time, performance, parody and the technological collapse of video realism, all point to the imperfect absorption of culture by the individual. This imperfection suggests a kernel of resistance that puts paid to the arguments of semiotic essentialists who see nothing but the workings of language and culture in the make-up of the individual" (164). Such imperfect absorption is clearly evident in the discordance and dissonance that structures the dual views, soundscapes and abstractions, figurations, where surface and depth are represented implicitly and then explicitly in *Sip My Ocean*.

Ever Is Over All: Colour and rebellion

Rist describes the two-channel video installation *Ever Is Over All* (1997) as a "modern fairytale" that "questions obvious, but illogical rules" (2017). She revises the David and Goliath battle using the red-hot poker stick to represent David and the environmental destruction of civilisation to depict Goliath. Whilst Rist draws from mythology to frame her narrative, we can also identify the gleeful radicalism of an unidentified woman (Silvana Ceschi) who almost skips down a street smashing the windows of parked cars using the stem of a kniphofia plant, which is also known as a red-hot poker. As she continues down the street a female police officer passes her, nods and smiles and continues on her way. With ruby slippers and a flowing blue dress, she appears as a rebellious incarnation of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming 1939). More

accurate cinematic references would be to Vicky Page's mesmerised, wild dance where the shoes begin to control the performance, allowing her to take flight in *The Red Shoes* (Powell and Pressburger 1948), or the coda of *Black or White* which begins by focusing on Michael Jackson's shoes and then tracks his dynamic movement around and on top of cars, smashing their windows (Landis 1991). Like Vicky Page's magical red shoes and the dynamism of Jackson's dance steps, Ceschi's shoes provide rhythm, propelling her forward, focused and deliberate, unrestrained by the forces of the law. It is hard not to see the exuberant glee associated with the destruction of systems of oppression as a premonition of the #MeToo movement, twenty years prior to the uprising. Even the police are on her side.

On an adjacent screen, hypersaturated images of kniphofia plants waft and bend in the wind. Time is slowed, highlighting the flows of bodies and plants. Looking closely, we notice the diminution of the outline and the bleeding of saturated colour blocks as they stretch out, unrestrained by outline. Colour escapes its outline and becomes its own animated force. It mirrors the thematic emphasis on disruption and disturbance. This is evident in the blur of the red shoes and in the blue dress that Silvana Ceschi wears. Rist acknowledges the value that has traditionally been attributed to outline in favour of colour and uses the painterly aesthetic of video in combination with a heightened colour balance to resist this hierarchy. In *Ever Is Over All* line blurs and becomes unstable, compromised by colour. Hawkins writes of Rist's tendency to refuse to prioritise "outlines that contain things within determined forms and spatial fields," pointing out that "the saturated colour volumes that Rist creates put at stake structural outlines and so distinctions between objects" (172). This refusal to define images clearly casts the spectator as participant, rather than distanced voyeur.

Colour is one of the many rebellious forces within this video. Rist talks about formless colour, suggesting that "colour is something dangerous, like music, very seductive; you don't know where it stops. It's also linked with the proletariat" (2012). Saturated colour is both sensual and political. Rist aligns her video art with broader art traditions that had to fight for colour, "whilst the intelligentsia distances themselves from colour" (2012). Colours pulse and move, escaping outlines and creating a kinetic spectacle on their own. Colour attracts, directs and diverts attention. It does not regulate perception into a coherent structure but provides myriad viewing possibilities. Rist's aesthetic is influenced by David Batchelor's argument that colour has been the object of extreme prejudice (63). Batchelor labels "chromophobia" the loathing of colour due to a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown (64). This fear manifests in the tendency to devalue colour and to purge it from culture (64). Batchelor suggests that colour is marginalised is in its alignment with the feminine, Oriental, primitive, infantile, vulgar, queer or the pathological (64). A second way that colour is disregarded is by its classification as superficial, supplementary, inessential or cosmetic (Batchelor 64). *Ever Is Over All* reverses this bias in valuing the heightened colours and contrasts that are possible using video. It centralises extraordinary colour and links it to rebellious femininity. Bellour describes the colours of *Suburb Brain* as violent and overexposed (409) a similar aesthetic is visible in *Ever Is Over All* and each of the screens, spaces, materials and objects included in this exhibition.

Ted Snell perceives *Ever Is Over All* as an intermedial text occupying a liminal zone between video art and music video (2017). Snell argues that the, the rhythm, sound, spectacle and rebellion borrowed from the music video, joyfully encourages our complicity (2017). Beyoncé borrows the rebellious gesture of *Ever is Over All* and combines this with the cultural critique explicit *in Black or White* in her music video clip, *Hold Up* (Åkerlund 2016). Beyoncé centralises her African American identity and replaces the red-hot poker with a baseball bat. Beyoncé is barefoot as she strides down the street, swinging her bat, with the explosive fire of high concept action films behind her. Baseball bats and fire replace the symbolic violence that is enacted with plants and fugitive, hyperreal colours in Rist's video. The impact and influence of Rist's work is seen in such quotations. Beyoncé's homage is part of a pastiche loop that includes *Ever Is Over All* as it nostalgically reframes iconic images from film history. Significantly, *Hold Up* imagines feminist intersectional rebellion inclusive of African American women. Snell suggests that, "This feminist intervention provides a powerful and ebullient critique, which is in turn having a powerful effect in re-shaping popular culture" (2017). Beyoncé's *Hold Up* is part of that new generation of visionary media that assumes film's traditional relevance and social intervention. In this respect *Hold Up* resonates with Rich's call for filmmakers to look, "further and harder at the rigors of contemporary societies, the toll exacted on individuals, and the systems of repression and domination that resist examination" (6).

4th Floor to Mildness: Clandestine encounters

In *4th Floor to Mildness,* Rist creates under water images that dissolve boundaries between the human and organic ocean plants, simulating our own dissolution (2017). Bodies are imagined as emerging from, and sinking back into the organic quagmire at the base of the Old Rhine. The heavily curtained, darkened room that houses *4th Floor to Mildness* (2016) invites viewers to take off their shoes and lay down, positioning bodies horizontally and intimately within this public space. As participants recline, underwater images unfurl on screens above. Rist is interested in how perception changes when the viewer's head is supported by the bed (2017). These images were shot underwater in the Old Rhine, close to Rist's childhood home. Rist avoided using any horizontal camera movement, rather the images only provide impressions of vertical movement – gliding down, coming up to the surface of the water (2017). Perspectives shift from the horizontal layout of the space, its furniture and surfaces, expanding out to a vertical imagination of human bodies, flesh and our inherent connection to plants and water, their growth, flows and movements. Rist points to the intersections that are visualised on these screens. She draws connections between bodies and their organic, living, miniscule component parts, particularly "mud, slime, molecules and atoms" (quoted in Bullock 480).

Beginning with a perspective that is individual and immediate, the experience of *4th Floor to Mildness* expands out to connect the individual with the group, highlighting the viewing connection as shared fantasy or daydreaming. The bed, the pillow, the linen has been shared by previous visitors and will be used subsequently. Rist mentions that participants are asked to take their shoes off as a sign of respect for the next viewer, but

it is also an acknowledgement of the participants who are connected by this experience (2017). *4th Floor to Mildness* extends the potential for the cinema to provide, as Balsom describes it, "a site of erotic possibility and clandestine encounter, whose pleasures redouble those culled from the entertainment on screen" (29). She writes about the public experience of collectivity and public intimacy, describing the "specific aesthetic experience as at once personal and intersubjective" (32). Reclining horizontally, the participant looks up at the projected images that wash over the screens where underwater reveries of plants, water, seagrass, bubbles and body parts are disembodied and de-identified, all moving vertically. Close by, *Selfless in the Bath of Lava* (1994) reverses this perspective entirely. This single channel, miniscule projection has Rist peeping out from amongst the floorboards. Here, the artist appears naked and surrounded by what seems to be the orange heat of lava flows. This is one of the elements of the multi-dimensional, multi-screen exhibit titled *Your Room Opposite the Opera* (2017). Another is a cosy bed where viewers can lay down and feel the projected images of the universe fall across their bodies.

Administrating Eternity: Ephemeral screens

Administrating Eternity (2011) expands the traditional definitions of both screens and spectators. This exhibit is designed using intersecting net curtains that catch and deflect projected images. The curtains materialise and distort the image, revealing the fragility and ephemerality of the projected image. These projections are images that don't have a consistent screen to settle upon. The curtains are diaphanous, billowing and responsive to their environment. Each shows a delayed movement as it registers the impression of the visitors who were present moments ago. These are screens that can be touched, that waft in the breeze as visitors pass through. Projected images that appear in focus, or coherent on one curtain "fall apart on the ones behind" (Rist 2017). Images on these screens are elusive. Rist says that the only place where we don't see an image distorted is when we go close to the surface, "if we want to be close to the other, we have to take a look from her or his position" (2017). Rist imagines these innovative screens as analogies for memories that can be both clear and diffuse, part of the encroachment of the past on our waking consciousness (Bullock 473-474).

This exhibit also reveals the influence of pre-cinematic experiments on Rist's videos. Bellour understands moving image installations as both deeply connected to film history, and exceeding it. He writes, "by both duplicating cinema and differentiating itself from it, the installations thus also make cinema enter into a history that exceeds it. The history of installation begins with the invention of the camera obscura and projection, and unfolds through its many different devices (from phantasmagoria to the diorama) throughout the nineteenth century" (407). These diaphanous screens have their origins in early spiritualist photography where images of people, often recently deceased, were projected onto smoke or fog. These images are only glimpsed fleetingly as spectres of those who had once existed. Walking through *Administrating Eternity* participants can touch and imagine the history that exceeds these projected illusions.

The role and responsibility of the screen is extended to the body of the audience as they move through the exhibit. Rist offers the participant an opportunity to become a

"projection surface" (2017). The role of the spectator is reconfigured as a mobile, gliding screen, picking up impressions of projections. *Administrating Eternity* borrows the skin to project its imagery. Bullock describes the experience as, "folding the viewer into space, image and sound. We become part of the experience, surrounded by fabric we can touch, images that fleet across our bodies and sound that tinkers and seduces" (473).

Whilst voyeurism is "central to the affective economy of film spectatorship" (Balsom 32), installations like *Administrating Eternity* subvert the distance required for such a power structure. The intimate spectacle of the female body, fragmented and framed in close up provides a proximity and detail that undermines the power structures that support the gendered gaze that Laura Mulvey argued was characteristic of mainstream Hollywood cinema (1975). On the contrary, Rachel Stevens perceives the relationship as one of intimate proximity, writing "If such a fluid artist could possibly have a system, you might say she systematically reimagines a relationship between the body, the viewing experience, and the image, bringing them ever closer to one another" (24). The differences between film spectatorship and the experience of moving image installations usually highlights the contrasts between mobility and stasis, distance and proximity, as well as the temporal difference in the durational commitment inscribed into their respective invisible rituals. By wandering through *Sip My Ocean*, stopping to watch some screens, experiencing exhibits and passing by others, visitors create and curate their own experience based on the rhizomatic pattern of the exhibition design. Bellour describes the programmatic experience of the spectator of an *other cinema* as operating by jumps and fixations (420). The cinematic gaze and the televisual glance are replaced by a visual, sensual and corporeal apprehension of the spaces and projections of *Sip My Ocean*.

Erika Balsom argues that "the act of looking long and hard can in fact be an important and politically invested gesture in today's visual culture" (31). Balsom describes a "chronopolitics of the image for a digital age," which acknowledges the importance of both time and the level of engagement afforded exhibits. Rist's images are inherently political, and they call for an equally political apprehension of both the spectacle and the rebellion that is inherent within some of her images. The site-specific digital video *Open My Glade (Flatten)* (2000) which consists of seven, one-minute films originally made for projection in Times Square positions Rist's face framed tightly, pressed up close against glass acting as a camera lens. The effect is the squeezing of the face into the space, the imposition of femininity into a space where she is constrained, limited, and struggles to occupy. Scale is invoked here again, this time to deconstruct the illusion and augment direct address. The chronopolitics of vision and engagement have additional significance in cultures that show signs of redress amid the #MeToo movement. The affect and intensities characteristic of Rist's textured spaces and hypersaturated images address and centralise femininity.

Building on Luce Irigaray's research, Hawkins argues that Rist's installations build "a feminist photosensitivity" from a range of encounters with the exhibition that are offered as experiences of surfaces, volumes, colour, light and screens (161). Hawkins and Irigaray aim "to develop a feminist language of light … to build an alternative vision

and language of thought" (161). Hawkins disarticulates the illuminations presented by Rist to investigate light as texture and how light is cast across bodies, reflecting the potential for corporeal screens and the interrelationship between vision and touch. As Hawkins contends, founding vision in touch destabilises the power dynamic that opposes subjective and objective, the intelligible and the sensed (162). If, as Vivian Sobchack suggests, film is created in the discursive space between the spectator and the screen, this distance is diminished and replaced with proximity as the spectator comes into contact with Rist's screens (2004). In *Sip My Ocean* this includes spatial positioning as well as ephemeral, hapticity, the touch of the surface of the screen with the eye and the light that projects onto the body, directly and indirectly. Touch is configured as a complex reciprocal relationship between the eye, screen, light, colour and body. Distance recedes in favour of intimacy in the ways that the screens and the body interact.

Pixelward Motherboard: Exploding the screen

It is with *Pixelward Motherboard/Pixel Forest Mutterplatte* (2016) that we find the "exhibition's spiritual climax" (Bullock 2017). In this experiential site, three thousand hanging LED lights are surrounded by illuminated, crystalline strings of "pixels." This is visual, sensual and experiential installation art. The light bulbs are programmed in dialogue with other exhibits, or "gestures" within *Sip My Ocean*. Pixels are programmed to understand where they are in space and they change colour in response "to music in the corresponding exhibition spaces" (Bullock 2017). As Rist describes it, individual pixels work to create "a 3D image," one that we can walk into and create ourselves (2017).

In *Pixelward Motherboard* Rist reconciles various types and qualities of light that we are exposed to including: harsh fluorescent lights; warm glowing forms of illumination; coloured lighting; the blue light that emanates from computer screens; cool lighting; even "sparks in the synaptic clefts, nerve cells, chemical signals between neurons" and sunlight in its "different temperatures according to the daytime and one's position on the planet" (Rist 2017). One way that Rist imagines this exhibit is from the perspective of an oceanographer beneath water, describing the pixels as appearing like "oxygen bubbles" that are emitted by sea grass (2017). From a different perspective, Rist describes *Pixelward Motherboard* as an attempt to "explode the flatness of the screen" into the space where people could wander through the pixels "as though they could wander through a brain" (2017). But rather than the eradication of the screen that has been feared by the threat of media convergence, *Pixelward Motherboard* re-inscribes the power of the moving image. Balsom posits that, "the cinema-beyond-cinema of the gallery can offer a way of interrogating film history and medium specificity precisely as the medium undergoes significant transformation" (26). Balsom reminds us that "as Bellour has emphasised, technological convergence is not just a homogenizing motion; rather, it is a dialectical movement that compromises boundaries between media at the same time as it allows new considerations of medium specificity to come to the fore under the spectre of obsolescence" (35-36). *Pixelward Motherboard* is a new consideration of digital screens and the spectator.

Pixelward Motherboard magnifies, fragments, atomises and disperses what would otherwise be the barely visible components of an image, displaying its elements as if under a giant microscope. Colours are literally suspended on their power cords, creating a forest of pixels. This exhibit shows the complete deconstruction of the screen and offers an invitation to visit its microcosmic remnants. Viewers are able to see, touch and wander through the core components of contemporary digital screens, atomised and diffused in the gallery. Here there is a complete eradication of the frame and a breakdown of the distance between the spectator and the pixel. This frameless magnification is not signalling the end of cinema, nor the end of video art; rather, it provides an environment of increasing proximity and intimacy between spectator and moving image. *Pixelward Motherboard* invites the spectator in to the image. Spatial relations are reversed as the magnified and dispersed pixels surround and miniaturise the visitor. Bellour writes, "the desire for installations thus makes use of the desire for film in order to explode it" (417). *Pixelward Motherboard* becomes a space where the digital image is exploded and then recreated. Visitors bring their own screens into this space. Selfies reinscribe the importance of the screen, frame, body and installation. These images are subsequently (or simultaneously) disseminated along a new, powerful network for the circulation of images – social media. The immense transition that emerges in *Pixelward Motherboard* is evident in the eradication of the frame, the magnification of the atomic structure of the image, and the reconfiguration of production, distribution and exhibition as visitors take new images of this exhibit and disseminate them online.

Conclusion

B. Ruby Rich writes that, "the horrors of the age demand expression in what I still believe to be its foremost medium, right there alongside its greatest dreams and fantasies" (6). The transportation of the moving image into the gallery provides a space for the expression of the historical and social crises that Rich outlines. It also offers an experience that is sensory and experiential. Rich perceives a similar potential in Harun Farocki's work. She writes, "moving from film to video to multiscreen gallery installations, he continuously developed works of critique, essay films, and reflective meditations that inspired a generation" (Rich 6). Such "works of critique" and "reflective mediations" also describe the work that Rist offers in *Sip My Ocean* which revises, repositions and deconstructs the moving image. It also activates the viewer by destabilising conventional relationships between spectators and screens that support omniscience.

Inscribed into celluloid, recorded on video and captured by digital cameras, Rist's creative work spans the shifting materialities of the moving image. In each instance the images test the limitations of the aesthetics of its media. Rist's moving image installations are multidisciplinary. The design of spaces is architectural, the formation of technologies and screens are sculptural. In *Sip My Ocean* screens are positioned to provide a range of kaleidoscopic attractions. In each instance the spectator is invited to take up various positions and poses in relation to the screens. The participant is dazzled, entranced and unsettled. In form, content, design, in the blurring of colour and

the atomisation of elements of the image, *Sip My Ocean* expands the possibilities of exhibition, resulting in the potential for the gallery space to become "a newly radicalised 'cinematic' space" (Elwes 153), an aspect of screen cultures that B. Ruby Rich calls for urgently.

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Media convergence and the teaching of film studies

Melanie Robson[1]

Abstract

In today's increasingly fractured media landscape, technology is changing rapidly, and the way we watch and teach films is undergoing transformations that can be understood as both positive and negative. This article seeks to examine how the era of media convergence has affected the teaching of film studies at tertiary level. I propose this has occurred in two key ways. The first is the digitalisation of media content. This process has had a profound effect on the specific practice of teaching and how tertiary students engage with the media and screen texts they study. The second, perhaps more meaningful, way is a redefining of the disciplinary boundaries of film and media studies. I argue this has had significant implications for film studies in particular, in terms of how it is valued as a singular discipline and how its integration into tertiary programs is increasingly marginalised in favour of more vocationally-focussed media programs.

Keywords

Media Convergence; Film Studies; Teaching; Pedagogy

This issue of *fusion journal* has explored "what it means to study cinema and/or other forms of screen-media in today's increasingly fractured media landscape." This is a landscape in which, increasingly, not only is technology changing rapidly, but also how we watch and teach films has undergone transformations that can be understood as both positive and negative. This article seeks to examine how the era of media convergence has affected the teaching of film studies at tertiary level. I propose this has occurred in two key ways. The first is the digitalisation of media content. This process has had a profound effect on the specific practice of teaching and how tertiary students engage with the media and screen texts they study. The second, perhaps more meaningful, way is a redefining of the disciplinary boundaries of film and media studies. I argue this has had significant implications for film studies in particular, in terms of how it is valued as a singular discipline.

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There are several evident ways the digitalisation of media content has had, and continues to have, a positive effect on the teaching of film and media. Increasingly, these two disciplines have been categorised under the wider umbrella term of screen studies. For the sake of streamlining this discussion, however, I will focus specifically on film studies. If we compare the differences between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in terms of film technology, the overwhelming distinction is the increasing availability of film in the home and in the cinema. In the early years of film studies as an academic discipline, films were only available via theatrical release at the cinema, a small selection of VHS tapes and film reels, or the sometimes unpredictable opportunity to watch and record a film playing on television. The past 25 years have seen a vast improvement and expansion in the availability of film with the introduction of DVDs, Blu-Rays, subscription streaming services, as well as crowd-sourced technologies such as YouTube and torrents. This significant improvement in the availability of film has made possible the study of previously less accessible categories of films, such as foreign, cult, and silent film, allowing for a substantially richer film education program. It is not just the ability to obtain films that has had such huge benefits for teaching in a media converged world, but also the ability to share, pause, rewind and scrutinise films closely for the purpose of analysis. To offer an example of personal experience from my own classroom, my students are often given broad, analytical questions related to their topic of study for the week. Using their laptops and either free services such as YouTube or film databases from the university library, such as Kanopy, they are tasked with answering that question by finding very specific examples and techniques in the film. Such access to digitised media content allows for close analysis by both film studies students and teachers. It also teaches students not only the broader philosophical and thematic significance of a film, but also the more technical and analytical skills of locating camera, sound and performance techniques in the film.

While the digitalisation of media content has had measurable benefits for teaching film, it also has several drawbacks. The students' access to content on their devices certainly aids learning. But the key issue here is that film students access all media—cinema, television, YouTube videos, podcasts, video essays—on the same devices via the same means; this means that not only are the platforms converged, but the experience of engaging with them are, too. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate between different forms of visual screen media in the classroom. Students are coming to university with more visual literacy than ever before—since they are immersed in an increasingly hyper-aestheticised popular culture—but, paradoxically, they do not always have the tools to deconstruct and analyse distinct forms of visual media. Students are now not as familiar as they once were with the unique experience of viewing a film in a cinema, or as Dana Polan puts it, with the "position of power over the spectator" exerted by the imposing theatrical cinema screen. While this outcome is the inevitable result of digitised media content, and certainly a sign that film studies needs to develop to keep up with changing consumption practices, it creates numerous issues for teaching film. Students' lack of familiarity with a broad range of viewing experiences means that, for the film studies teacher, differentiating between the various techniques, histories and values of individual forms of screen media is challenging. For a significant part of screen history, the practices of viewing and exhibiting film and

television have been very separate, with their own distinct set of traditions and cultural values. By conflating these media forms, these histories are at worst lost and at best challenging for students to engage with.

Greater than the effect of digitalisation is the gradual redefining of disciplinary boundaries that has had a profound impact on teaching film in an era of media convergence. Much has been written on whether film studies can and will remain a distinct discipline or whether it has or will become subsumed into the broader field of media studies (See Polan, Kouvaros). As often acknowledged (Polan, Kouvaros) film studies is not and has never been a distinct discipline. Throughout its approximate fifty-year history, it has always borrowed methodologies, theories and approaches from other disciplines, such as philosophy, history, art history and sociology. Through the 1980s and 1990s, film studies was also considerably affected by "the rise of interdisciplinarity" (Cartwright 8) which subsumed film studies into cultural studies and introduced to film the parallel research methodologies of gender, queer and non-western studies, to name a few. Similarly, other humanities and social science disciplines—history, philosophy, languages, and literary studies, for example—use film as either a secondary or primary source within their own research methodologies, and yet, these disciplines remain distinct from film studies. In other words, to use film as a research object is not necessarily to undertake film studies. As such, film studies has been constantly evolving since its beginnings in response to its relationship to these other disciplines and has become much more allied with other humanities subjects than its media studies origins suggest.

Notably, film studies has also responded to broader technological and industrial changes, particularly in dominant western film industries. In the mid-1990s, scholars and filmmakers alike began announcing the apparent "death of film" as digital technologies used for filmmaking began overtaking analogue ones, changing not only the aesthetic but also the form of films and film distribution. As Andre Gaudreault points out, this "death" is only the most recent one to be bestowed upon film: the introduction of both sound in the 1920s and television in the 1950s sparked similar crises (287). Of all the various forms of convergence and major shifts, technological convergence as part of the digital revolution has had the most profound effect on both film as a medium, and film studies as a discipline. Undoubtedly, convergence has occurred at the level of the platform; cinema, television, photography and even print media are all viewed and consumed on the same device. Their digitalisation makes them more alike than different.

Film studies has had to respond to these changes in the pedagogical approaches outlined at the beginning of this article and also in including a broader range of media texts as part of a film studies education. Students of film studies are increasingly introduced to visual media outside the traditional definition of theatrically-released cinema, which is expanded to include television (both broadcast and streaming), web series and video art. While film was once defined by its commitment to the indexical, photographic image, the digital revolution has necessitated the redefining of film (Uricchio 267). In response to this changing environment in the past ten to fifteen years, many universities have converted their film studies programs to titles that

encompass a broader range of screen texts, such as "visual cultures," "film and television," "screen studies," and "moving images" (Gaudreault 280, 288-289). These broader program titles offer a safeguard against the inevitable and constant shift in technologies, which will continue to destabilise the definition of film. The "death of film," proclaimed over twenty years ago, has had a progressive and undeniable effect on film studies.

It is problematic, however, to equate convergence, as part of the digital revolution, with the death of film studies, or, to equate the apparent death of film with the death of film studies. The core issue in defining the boundaries of film and media is not the form of the text being studied. The development of film studies over the past few decades has proven that the discipline is capable of adopting new texts as objects of studies while still remaining steadfastly the same discipline at its core. Rather, the threat to film studies' stability is both pedagogical and institutional. Although media studies and film studies increasingly share many of the same objects of study, they differ substantially in their disciplinary methodologies. Both disciplines are demonstrably valid approaches to the study and teaching of media objects, but neither one can replace the other. Yet, the overwhelming trend across tertiary institutions in Australia and elsewhere is to subordinate film studies to media or screen studies; to emphasise the dominance of the latter, which threatens to diminish the significance of the former.

These program changes at universities risk removing film studies from its origins as a humanities discipline—a non-vocational discipline, designed to encourage critical thinking and a questioning of the world around us via cinema—towards becoming a potentially neglected sub-discipline of the more vocationally focussed media studies. Media studies is not, by definition, a vocational discipline. Its implementation in several Bachelor of Arts degrees across Australia, however, is geared towards producing graduates for specific professions and industries. In several of these degree programs film studies exists not as a discrete discipline, but as part of a broader media studies or screen studies major. The University of Technology Sydney, The University of Newcastle and Macquarie University, for example, all maintain a vocationally-focussed media studies major, which includes a small number of film studies courses. This vocational focus is further strengthened by the exploding enrolment numbers of dedicated Bachelor of Communications and Bachelor of Media degrees at UNSW, RMIT and Monash University. These program structures have potential benefits for the media studies student. They are offered the dual benefit of a program that prepares them specifically for a career in the media—journalism, public relations, or screen production—and the skills of critical thinking and textual analysis normally offered by film studies. Numerous universities in Australia maintain a humanities-focused film or screen studies major, including Monash, University of South Australia, UNSW, University of Queensland, University of Sydney and University of Melbourne, but these are increasingly threatened by decreasing enrolment numbers.

Understandably, universities and individual departments are under pressure to demonstrate value to students through the courses they provide. One of the ways this value can be demonstrated for film studies is by increasing the number of practical, vocationally-oriented skills taught in a program. As such, film studies program

designers are pressured into including filmmaking skills or internships with studios and film festivals in their curricula. Undeniably these kinds of skills are advantageous for the students; they provide them with practical skills and industry networking opportunities invaluable to their future careers. But their inclusion in countless film studies programs confirms a common assumption of the discipline: that its only worth is its ability to practically prepare a student to work in the film industry. It undermines film studies' vital role as principally a humanities subject, which can offer equally valuable but less tangible skills to a graduate. Given the significant crossover between film and media students in many university programs, the issue of keeping media and film studies separate is not just a matter of producing two different kinds of graduates; it is more likely a matter of producing one type of graduate with a broad range of analytical as well as practical skills. In 2017, Therese Davis expressed a similar concern that "a media student would leave university without exposure to the humanistic tradition of increasing their self-understanding and furthering their critical enquiry into culture and society through analysis of a human art such as cinema" (Davis). While technological convergence gives media studies and film studies the appearance of being the same, they serve very different ends. Film studies examines a human art. It teaches a specific way of reading, and its methodologies are unique to the discipline and bare little relation to media studies. We live in a world where visual literacy and critical thinking are increasingly important, and by losing the disciplinary specificity of film studies, we also miss the opportunity to instil in our students these vital intangible skills.

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Women, film and independence in the 21st century: A public forum

Jodi Brooks,[1] Therese Davis[2] and Claire Perkins[3] (Eds.)

Abstract

What are the issues and factors that impact on the shape of women's independent filmmaking today? What does "independence" mean both in and for women's screen production today? On 22 February 2018, The Melbourne Women in Film Festival and Monash University presented a public forum at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) on women, film and independence. The forum brought together a number of filmmakers, academics and industry representatives to reflect on the meaning of independence for women working in Australian screen industries. Guest panellists were: Santilla Chingaipe (Journalist/Filmmaker); Professor Lisa French (RMIT); Margot Nash (UTS, Screenwriter/Director); Dr Claire Perkins (Monash) and Kristy Matheson (Senior Film Programmer, ACMI). The forum was co-convened by Associate Professor Therese Davis (Monash University) and Dr Sian Mitchell (MWFF Festival Director) and facilitated by Dr Jodi Brooks (University of New South Wales). "Women, Film & Independence in the 21st Century" is an edited transcript of this forum.

Keywords

Women's Filmmaking; Independence; Australian Screen Culture; Gender Matters; Independent Filmmaking; Women's Film Fund; Gender Equality; Gender Equity; Australian Women Filmmakers

An edited transcript of a Public Forum, Melbourne Women in Film Festival, Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), 22 February 2018.

What are the issues and factors that impact on the shape of women's independent filmmaking today? On 22 February 2018, The Melbourne Women in Film Festival and Monash University presented a public forum at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) on women, film and independence. The forum brought together a

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number of filmmakers, academics and industry representatives to reflect on the meaning of independence for women working in Australian screen industries. Guest panellists were: Santilla Chingaipe (Journalist/Filmmaker); Professor Lisa French (RMIT); Margot Nash (UTS, Screenwriter/Director); Dr Claire Perkins (Monash) and Kristy Matheson (Senior Film Programmer, ACMI). The forum was co-convened by Associate Professor Therese Davis (Monash University) and Dr Sian Mitchell (MWFF Festival Director) and facilitated by Dr Jodi Brooks (University of New South Wales).

This public forum was part of the 2018 Melbourne Women In Film Festival (MWFF) program and was supported by Monash University's School of Media, Film and Journalism. MWFF is an annual festival – now in its third year – that celebrates "the work of Australian women screen creatives and technicians." Showcasing a diverse range of new independent and experimental film and video work by Australian women screen creatives alongside retrospectives of earlier ground-breaking work, MWFF was an ideal context for exploring what "independence" means both in and for women's screen production today.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Jodi Brooks (JB): Over the last few years we have seen the introduction of a number of initiatives to address the continuing gender imbalance in the Australian screen industry. Screen Australia has introduced its "Gender Matters" program, and various state-based screen media funding bodies have introduced similar funding schemes and gender diversity targets. These initiatives are aimed at addressing the negative effects of the celluloid ceiling in two key ways – they aim to increase opportunities for women to have access to key creative roles in the screen industry (access to the means of production) and they aim to enrich Australian screen culture by creating possibilities for more voices, visions and experiences. These recent initiatives are by no means the first of their kind for Australian film funding bodies. Since the 1970s a number of initiatives have been introduced to better enable women to enter and progress in the industry. As we start to discuss women, film and independence and the relationships between them in Australian screen culture today, it is worth thinking about the similarities and differences between how their relationship is understood now and how it has been understood at other key moments in Australian women's screen production.

Reflecting back a decade later on women's filmmaking in Australia in the 1970s, Lesley Stern observed that while women's filmmaking at that time coincided with a wider revival in Australian cinema, it was a movement that "marked its 'independence' not as national but as sexual." It involved what Stern describes as "a double movement: a struggle to gain access for women to the means of production (which involves the 'positive discrimination' exercised by women's training courses, and lobbying for government funding), and a struggle on the level of meaning-production...the production of alternative images, of a point of view radically different to that offered by the dominant patriarchal perspective" (Stern).

The 1970s were important years in Australian cinema and they were also very important years in the development of women's filmmaking not just here in Australia but globally. As Laura Mulvey has commented, the 1970s was a period when the "terms

'women' and 'cinema' were brought together as a problem and as a possibility" and when "women began to make films within the collective consciousness of a women's movement" (26) and when experimental filmmaking was driven by "the need to find new ways of visualizing ideas and freeing cinema to be an instrument of thought" (27).

When we talk about independence and women's filmmaking today what do we mean by independent? Perhaps we can start our discussion of women, film and independence this afternoon through the frame of African American cultural critic bell hooks' distinction between two different kinds of marginality: the "marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures" and the marginality "one chooses as a site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility" (23). bell hooks distinguished between these two forms of marginality back in a piece published in the late 1980s. While hooks' essay is close to 30 years old her distinction between these two kinds of marginality is a useful distinction for us to draw on today as we think about the diverse range of stories, forms of screen media, aesthetics (and women) that are included – or should be included – in contemporary discussions about redressing the gender imbalance in the Australian screen industry.

The two forms of marginality that hooks identifies have been key concerns in women's filmmaking in Australia over the last 40 years or so. Sometimes more emphasis has been placed on the former – addressing the forms of marginality that come from oppressive structures that exclude, bracket, contain – at other times there has been more space for the latter. With this distinction in mind, I would like to start by asking each of our panellists to comment on how they understand "independence" in the context of filmmaking. Margot…

MN: Well I think independence is a very rubbery and complex word when it comes to filmmaking because so few of us make films really independently. Someone like U.S filmmaker Kelly Reichardt made her second film independently because a relative died and left her some money. In the U.S. being independent means working outside the system, but we don't have a studio system here. In Australia what we mean by independent film is different. When I first started making films we saw ourselves as independent filmmakers because we had a certain amount of creative freedom, but we were getting money from the government funding bodies, so we were not really independent. But now the funding bodies have a lot more say in how things are made. The only truly independent film that I've ever really made is my film *The Silences* (2015), because I chose to make it outside of the film funding structures. It was a deliberate choice, because it was very personal and I wanted creative control. I wanted time to be able to think about it and to find other ways into solving problems. I paid for the film myself and I edited it myself. That was truly independent, but usually when you make films here, you are not really making them independently because the funding bodies' gatekeepers have a big say in it. And with more and more people trying to make films and less and less money available, it gets harder to get funding and you are under a lot of pressure to please the funding bodies. So, I think it is a complex term, independence.

JB: Thanks Margot. Claire…

CP: I might follow up on some of the things you said there Margot. My work is mostly around American independence and indie culture, which is something quite different, and absolutely it's important to understand that in America the concept of independence is very much about being outside of the studio system – or it was historically, I should say. What I think has happened over time is that that the studio system has absorbed the type of work that we think of as independent. So, for instance, while someone like Kelly Reichardt does work relatively independently, some of her more recent work has been distributed by Sony. So we're looking at a situation where independence isn't really a financial descriptor so much as a discursive idea, and – in a wider sense - even an aesthetic idea. What gets a film labelled "indie"? Is it what happens at the level of content, of characterisation, of subversive content? And I think it's particularly around the idea of "indie" rather than independent where these ideas have been taken up and run with in various ways. So I'm interested in thinking that through in relation to what's happening in Australia. Australia.

LF: I think independence or the idea of independent film is a bit of an oxymoron in Australia because a large percentage of our films are government subsidised and there is significant dependence.[4] But I think there are some areas of filmmaking in Australia where there is a lot more independence. For example, women's participation in documentary is higher than other genres, there are a lot of women there, and that's because they can create their own opportunities. They can produce, write, direct and they shoot it and edit it themselves. It's obvious that the more women there are in the key creative roles, the more you get all the way down the line, so they bring women in. But I also think where there's a lot of money there's less independence. Women tend to get cut out of expensive films and end up with the smaller budgets and in areas where there's less money. We worked with Women in Film and Television to present an event at RMIT with the Little Acorns team, which is this really fantastic, hilarious five-minute web-series designed for busy mums who just need a laugh.[5] It's set in a childcare centre and it's made by Trudy Hellier and Maria Theodorakis. They got funding through Screen Australia to do it, so there was a dependence, but the thing they said was that because it's new, because it was a small amount of money, they were left to their own resources quite a lot and therefore there was a higher level of independence. And that helped them form it and they plan to evolve it into a television series. So perhaps my answer is that this is the way I understand independence. It depends on the mediums too.

SC: I take on a very different meaning to independence. I see independence in my work as a voice, as having an independent voice. I strongly believe in the themes I explore in all of my work, which is essentially contemporary migration and cultural identities. And I think that the struggle for me has always been how to stay true to that and finding

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[4] There are of course exceptions and maverick filmmakers find a way to make films. However, often these are assisted after production with marketing support, e.g. Donna McRae's *Lost Gully Road* (2017). Some independent films that are finding release are also being made in academia as creative production research, e.g. Angie Black's *The Five Provocations* (2018).

[5] See: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-05/child-care-comedy-web-series-little-acorns-launches/7809792

what best fits, what I'm trying to say without compromising on the need to tell those stories. That's why I work across mediums. They're not necessarily the sexiest stories to tell, and they're not necessarily the most popular stories to tell, and perhaps even in terms of my long-term survival as a filmmaker it might not necessarily be the best decision to primarily focus on those themes, but that's where I see myself as being independent. I'm pretty strong about continuing to push for those stories being told, and that's where I see and value my independence as a filmmaker.

KM: I'd like to pick up on a number of the points that have been raised. I think in terms of when we watch films the idea of independence versus a studio system, it's all just one big soup now. The corporate culture owns the film industry from start to finish in many ways, but I think when we look at filmmakers who have very singular voices or have very singular stories to tell then that's what I would deem independent. And I think documentary filmmakers are probably one of the most obvious examples of that because they're often working in much smaller scale environments and they're sitting with stories for a very, very long time. But I do think it's about the intent of the filmmaker, I think the structure in which people make their films industrially is just changing so rapidly that I don't know that I can put those two things next to each other anymore. Because you could be a very singular independent filmmaker and be funded by Netflix, or you could make a film out of an inheritance you get. I don't know that the funding necessarily means one or the other.

JB: I would like to pick up here on Santilla's comment about surviving as a filmmaker long-term and talk about the recent wave of attention that has been given to the gender imbalance in the Australian screen industry. Lisa, as someone who has been very involved in Screen Australia's Gender Matters initiative, I wonder if you could comment on what other things might need to be put in place to enable a shift in in the industry.

LF: Well I think there's a segue out of what Margot and Santilla said about survival, because there is a sustainability problem. Some of us on the panel are old enough to have been dealing with it for decades and decades and kind of getting over it, and wondering: when will it ever end? When will change happen? The statistics have just gone on and on without showing improvement. When I looked at the Australian figures on women's creative participation, I noticed that actually there was a dip towards the end of the nineties. And women started going backwards. In 1992, there were 22% women directors, and so there were some losses in the period before the 2000s, and now the number of features directed by women is 16%.[6] So obviously it was a question of something having to be done about it, and it was global. People all over the world are

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[6] For example, the 1992 report, *"What Do I Wear for A Hurricane" Women in Australian Film, Television, Video & Radio Industries,* produced by The Australian Film Commission and The National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, noted on page 10 that in feature films "there are clear gains also in the position of directors in which women have moved from 7% in 1985/6 to 22% in 1990/1." However, the most recent Screen Australia figures are that women are 16% of directors as outlined on page 5 of Screen Australia's Gender Matters, Women in Film and Television report. https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/getmedia/f20beab8-81cc-4499-92e9-02afba18c438/Gender-Matters-Women-in-the-Australian-Screen-Industry.pdf

saying right, well it's not good enough. And it's not good enough not just in the film and television industries but in all industries. And so I think there had to be an intervention. And the problem is it's slow, it's bit by bit, and you've got to make sure these things aren't this year's flavour of the month and then they get dropped. So all of the "Brilliant Stories" initiative that got funded, obviously they're not all going to be made, but it's going to make a dint.[7] From my point of view I think that we need to also get male champions. For example, producer Sue Maslin says that when she was trying to get *The Dressmaker* (2015) up, she was going around and talking to the producers and they were saying "oh, but it's all women." She couldn't get the funding until she cast Liam Hemsworth in the lead role. And she said the thing that made the big difference was Mike Bard at Universal who was really on board with it. He knew he had women audiences, he was watching the shift. So, getting the male champions will make a difference. And the other thing that I think is really important is that it's a question of leadership. The people in leadership positions have to say – "just fix it" – like Michelle Guthrie did at the ABC with her executive teams. We need proactive leadership to get women into key roles. That's why there's a whole lot of leadership initiatives in Gender Matters. So attachments were funded, and a conference for the Natalie Miller Foundation, who also have a career development Award, which Kristy received.[8]

JB: Thanks Lisa. I think your point about repetition – about the lack of any real progress in women's involvement in key creative roles in the industry and the repeated need for initiatives to address the gender imbalance and impasses in Australian film – is something we might want to come back to. Margot and Santilla, could you talk about how you maintain your work as filmmakers? What do you need to produce the kind of work you want to produce? What is it that enables you to produce your work, and to what extent is it reliant on other sources of income?

SC: I find the only way I can survive is by working across different mediums. I don't think I could survive just in one medium. I started in documentary simply because it was I guess an easy transition from journalism. But also, documentary allows me to attach myself to projects that will bring in a regular income, whereas the pathway to feature films is not as easy. It's incredibly expensive. Just to be eligible for Hot Shots[9] for example, you need at least a credit. Which would mean that one of your short films that you've made independently would have had theatrical distribution or been seen at a festival. And that is very tough, that's a very tough bar to reach for anyone. And then

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[7] Brilliant Stories (formerly Women's Story Fund) – an initiative to stimulate awareness and increase industry activity around storytelling by women, focusing on bold, original and compelling fully-formed story concepts.

[8] Kristy Matheson was awarded the Natalie Miller Fellowship in 2017. The Natalie Miller Fellowship is awarded to a woman in the Australian screen industry who has "demonstrated initiative, entrepreneurship and excellence." https://nataliemillerfellowship.com/kristy-matheson-awarded-2017-natalie-miller-fellowship/

[9] Screen Australia's "Hot Shots Short Film Program" was established in 2013 to fund short fiction film production. In 2017 it was "refreshed" to include two stages – production and development – and eligibility for funding was "broadened to include public release on a social media platform and/or a festival screening credit." https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/sa/screen-news/2017/02-21-hot-shots-plus-announcement

if you factor in where you're getting the money from, who's supporting you, whether you're a woman who has children or is married and has all these other things factoring in to where you allocate your finances, there are those things that have to be considered. If you're coming from a background that is underrepresented and you don't have the networks and the connections, then that also makes it incredibly hard to access funds to reach that criteria. But once you do reach that criteria, you then have to go on and develop that feature and that also requires that you've got the backing of networks and you've got the backing of big producers, because there is no way that Screen Australia is going to give you $70,000 to go and develop your first feature. And so it makes it really, really hard. And my only option was going through documentary. That was just the only way I could do it. There was no way I was going to do it straight from a scripted narrative perspective. But also I'm finding I'm moving into the visual arts context simply because the themes I want to look at will not be funded in documentary because of the funding model and structure. But equally they're themes that Australian audiences are just not ready to consume in an entertainment context. So it's thinking about those things, but also thinking about the fact that access to these pathways is not as easy as many people think that it is. And when you're a woman and you add in all of the other intersections that come into that, it makes it a little bit harder. And the things that have helped me through my documentary journey is being connected to networks, and to people who have come on board and backed me and supported my ideas. It's made it a little bit easier. Getting an attachment through a Screen Australia initiative, and them being able to support me working out of Arenamedia and working with Robert Connolly, has been huge because that's just opened doors for me. But that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't proven myself to get that attachment. I did so many things before I could get that. So you know, it's hard. You really have to love films to make films, because the models, as they are currently in Australia, are just not conducive enough for creativity, they're not necessarily conducive enough for women, they're not the best for people from diverse backgrounds. It's just really, really hard.

MN: I know. But I'm older than you and I remember when it wasn't quite so hard as it is now because back then there were fewer people trying to get money. I remember when there was an Experimental Film Fund and that's quite a long time ago now. My friend Robin Laurie and I received funding from it to make a short film. I was working in the theatre, I had never made a film, but Robin had been a first AD (Assistant Director) on a feature film by Bert Deling called *Dalmas* (1973). This film started out as a police drama, but everyone took acid and it descended into chaos, but somehow or other it was a credit and we got $1800. This would have been in the early 1970s, but it took a while to get it together to make the film. When we finally did we called it *We Aim to Please* (1976). No-one took any notice of us so we just went and did it. We had written a script to get the money, but we never went back to it, we just pulled out our shoe-boxes full of poems and quotes and pictures and the feminist theory and the film theory we were reading or not reading or, you know John Berger, we were very into John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, which looked at the history of the female nude and critiqued the male gaze and we were also very influenced by Godard. It took us about a year to film it. It was very "out there," and it's *still* "out there." It's just been restored by the National Film and Sound Archive and it screened at Sydney Film Festival last year

(2017). I'm still so proud of that film and it still makes me laugh. I edited it in my bedroom using a hand wound pic-sync. It was pretty funky kind of filmmaking, but you could do it then because you could live on the dole [Australian unemployment benefits] and take the time. You can't do that anymore. And then it went off and won a prize in Paris and it did all sorts of things, so people took notice of me when I wanted to make films and didn't want to work in theatre anymore. I think the next initiative that really helped me was when Film Australia set up a Women's Film Unit. It was a bit like the Gender Matters initiative because it gave new opportunities to women. Jane Campion made *Two Friends* (1986) in that program and I made a short documentary called *Teno* (1984) about repetitive strain injuries. It won a couple of prizes, so it gave me the confidence to be a director.

I think what has allowed me to survive is some sort of weird tenacity and passion, but as time went on it became harder and harder to survive financially. I worked at Film Australia for a while making documentaries and I did make a feature film fully funded by the Australian Film Commission in the mid-1990s called *Vacant Possession* (1994), but it wasn't a big commercial success although it was critically acclaimed. I finally took a job teaching screenwriting at UTS [the University of Technology, Sydney], but this meant it was hard to find the time to make my work. So, when I first looked at the question that was put to us to consider about "what do you need to create your work", my answer has to be time. When I started out I was young and I had time. I got my hands on the equipment and I worked for nothing. I shot films and I edited films. Back then as a young feminist I thought it was really important to get access to the means of production. But I was also very engaged with pushing the boundaries about the representation of women and how we might look at things differently, and to do that you also need time. And I never seem to have that time now, because that space requires critical thinking and it requires making mistakes and being allowed to make mistakes. The funding bodies want everything down on the page – exactly what it is going to look like and you're not allowed to make any mistakes, but we all do. That's how we learn. The film industry's obsessive quest for certainty is a killer because the creative process is full of uncertainty. So for me, what I need to survive as a filmmaker is time. When I came to make *The Silences* I just didn't want to go near the funding bodies because I knew I'd still be in film development for years and I knew I had to make this film. I knew I could cut it myself because of digital technology. That is the other thing that hasn't been mentioned yet today – how digital technology has opened up spaces for young women, young people in general, to get their hand on the means of production and do it in a very simple way. It doesn't cost the amount of money that it did when I was young.

I was interested in what came up before about the champions, when Lisa said we need male champions. I don't necessarily think we need male champions, I think we need male *and* female champions. And I've been lucky enough to have both. Andrew Pike from Ronin Films and Bridget Ikin from Felix Media both really championed *The Silences*. So you need people who are going to bat for you, because you can work and work and work and not get anywhere unless someone that they listen to says "have a look at this." The problem about saying we need male champions is the assumption that people are only going to listen to men. And while they do listen to men, and men still

are very powerful in the film industry, I think there are some fantastic women as well. Jan Chapman is going to be here tonight with *Love Serenade* (1996), she's been very powerful in the film industry. Jane Campion has also been an incredible champion for different filmmakers. She's put her name to things and suddenly they've got money. But the thing that I come back to is needing that space for uncertainty, needing the space to make mistakes, needing to have some time without all that pressure. In order to survive as a filmmaker what I need as the moment is time. I'm a Senior Lecturer at UTS, I'm reducing my hours, clawing time to make a new project.

JB: This question of getting time to work also brings up another issue that many female independent filmmakers experience. It's not just about how long it takes to make something when you're struggling to get funding. It's also about what's recognised as a substantial body of work and track record, a body of work that people will write about and give feedback on. That kind of commentary and feedback loop is often critical to what makes people get recognised as filmmakers and what can help open doors. I was interested, Santilla, when you were talking about the issue of credits, in terms of what Kristy does, because I was immediately thinking about web series and film festivals. As a programmer you're constantly in a position of either being able to create spaces for bodies of work and make connections between work – that's obviously critical to what you do – but if a credit is that important and a festival can help locate one for you, what does it mean in the digital era if we can start manoeuvring festivals to start opening up more to web series and the like and the digital platform? I'm just wondering, as a programmer, how might you think about that in relationship to independence?

KM: Well I think that in terms of film museums, like ACMI, but also in terms of festivals, the commercial and exhibition side of the screen industry sector is actually really innovating and constantly looking for new work and looking for new audiences. So I think that you can look at how television was once ghettoised in a place not near cinema and of course now Sundance, Berlin, the Cannes film festival this year will be doing their own exclusive television festival. I think that in terms of web series that dam has been broken in the last few years. So I don't think that audiences make any kind of distinction between "this was made for television" and "this was made as a web series." I think that audiences respond to what they see on screen. So I think programmers across the board in cinemas and in film museums and festivals have really got the jump on that. I don't think that hierarchy exists anymore. I think that people need to think about their audience and what work will service their audience. So I think that most programmers come from that place. You know, with the exception of A-list festivals, which come from that place but they also come from a different place where they need to have world premieres, the need to champion filmmakers who they have brought though their ranks. But I think on the whole most programmers are obsessed with audiences and they work their way back from there.

MN: And they want stars. A-List festivals want stars.

KM: Yes. A-list festivals need stars and that is where they are different to other festivals, but they also have a very deep vein of programming that is about championing new work. Making sure that you can have Catherine Deneuve, Apichatpong

Weerasethakul and Jessica Chastain all on the same red carpet. So they all understand the importance of that, as well as having Brad Pitt there for the photo opp.

SC: But just adding to that, in terms of the stuff that is made for the online space, for the digital format, my last short doc *Black As Me* (2017) was funded through the Screen Australia Gender Matters project. It was exclusively supposed to be for online and wasn't supposed to go anywhere beyond that but ACMI saw it, and they programmed it and it got a theatrical release. And that in itself became a credit. So I think that it's about having programmers who are really looking to find ways of bringing that sort of content to audiences that perhaps doesn't arrive through the traditional means that they're used to. And it requires a lot of innovation, it requires people that are willing to be bold in that sort of decision making. But that certainly was the most recent example with me with *Black As Me*, I mean you [gesturing to Kristy Matheson] saw it online and said we [ACMI] want to program this.

KM: But this is the thing. We had this really great feature documentary, it would be considered an American indie documentary, but it's a film that came through Twentieth Century Fox, it premiered at Sundance. It's hardly left of field in that way, but it was this really wonderful documentary and when we saw your short *Black As Me* we were like this is great. It's very short, it will go wonderfully in front of this feature. The audience coming to the feature are not going to expect this short. The filmmaker, who is local and here, will also be wanting to see their film on the big screen and it's about creating those spaces where you can give audiences surprises or something a bit extra. So it's also about creating those spaces where people can get something to maybe riff off and send them down another little rabbit hole where they might discover the documentary work.

JB: Yes, and creating those spaces without producing the kind of double-bind for new work that Whitney Monaghan has discussed in her recent work on *Starting From Now* (2014-16).[10] Whitney has written about the double-bind where the web-series is seen as this new utopian ground but its success is still being measured in terms of whether it moves to television. So we're saying yes this is really fantastic and utopian and new, but only if it's recognised by the traditional cultural gatekeepers. What you're doing is something different. It's about saying OK we can have this work, but it doesn't need to be marked off as acceptable and approved by traditional screen media cultures.

KM: Because I don't think audiences make that distinction. Funders might, but I don't think audiences do, they don't mind.

JB: On the television link, I might move over to Claire who has written extensively on television and is working on television right now. We know in terms of the US there is a lot of stuff happening about how television is the new promising ground for women independent filmmakers, how do you think that plays out here?

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[10] The Australian production *Starting from… Now* (2014-2016) began as a web-series and ran for three seasons online before being picked up for television for a fourth and fifth season.

CP: I think it's an interesting problem. Just to speak to the US context for the minute, yes, on the one hand it's great. There's this real optimism around the idea of feminist filmmaking with a wave of women's television work from female auteurs who have largely come from the indie sector – I'm thinking here about people like Lena Dunham, Jill Soloway, Tig Notaro. There's a huge amount of this work by and about women going on at the moment. But I think it's also problematic because it repeats a myth that has plagued women's independent filmmaking for a long time, which is the idea that this sector makes the overall situation for women "OK." Women are working in the independent sector so it's ok that they're not working in Hollywood or in the mainstream, there's this sort of ghettoization. And if you look at the independent figures, in terms of the percentage of women in creative roles, they're not that great anyway. They're better than what's happening the mainstream in America but they're not fantastic.[11] So, I feel like that transferring that argument to television, which is what I think is happening, is repeating that myth. I think you need to be careful. Yes, it's fantastic, a lot of this work is really interesting and innovative, but I think this general optimism around progress needs to be qualified. In terms of what's happening in Australia, I see some really interesting connections. One of them, probably the most important one, is the question about value. So before, I noted Margot you said you made films you don't tell anyone about, that you're embarrassed about, which I'm very interested to know more about. I feel like television has been that undervalued work for women filmmakers for a long time – work that was done to make ends meet, work that was done as a kind of invisible labour. It wasn't a big auteur production, it was gun for hire sort of work. I do think that what's happening in Australia, similar to the US, is that attitude is changing. So, because of the rise of peak-TV and prestige television, the value of this work is changing. We see this with authored series like Jane Campion's work on *Top of the Lake* (2013-), but also much smaller work. For instance, something like the work that Alison Bell and Sarah Scheller are doing on *The Letdown* (2017) in Australia, or Kate McCartney and Kate McLennan's work with *The Katering Show* (2015-16)[12] and *Get Krack!n* (2017-) is very much seen as valuable in a way it hasn't been historically. So I think that's really important when we talk about what's happening in the television space. The other thing that I wanted to flag, and this goes back to what I said earlier about what independence means, is a question about why these texts are being caught up as independent? A lot of the time, particularly with US fiction series, it is the trope of imperfect womanhood that functions as a marker of independence. And I think this is again something that is transferring to Australia. *The Letdown*, for instance, trades on this trope of imperfect womanhood with its "messy mother" central character. The idea of the messy mother has a long history in American television as well. So I think that's something to think about, when we call something up as indie TV, generally we're not talking about it in terms of funding systems, we're

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[11] See, for example, the most recent report compiled by Martha M. Lauzen at the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film: "Indie Women: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in Independent Film, 2017-18." https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2017-18_Indie_Women_Report_rev.pdf

[12] *The Katering Show* is another Australian production that began as a web-series before being picked up for television for a second season.

talking about it in about in terms of tropes and characters. And while it's great to see women that aren't picture perfect, that idea of imperfection is a little bit problematic.

MN: I'm thinking about [Sarah Gubbins and Jill Soloway's series] *I Love Dick* (2016-17). That's the classic messy woman.

CP: Right, the unhinged woman. And that's my favourite example of the current wave because it actually reflects on women's independent filmmaking as part of its material. It's a brilliant series, but what also interests me about *I Love Dick* is that it's an Amazon series. In America a lot of these platforms – Netflix, Amazon, Hulu - have been framed as creative havens. You often hear people, and particularly women, talk about how they didn't have boundaries when working with these platforms; they were just given creative control, artistic licence to go and do what they want. Jill Soloway said that about *I Love Dick*, that the Chris Kraus character could never have been made anywhere except Amazon. To me it's really weird and problematic that Amazon is being framed as a creative, feminist haven. Whereas because we don't have that kind of studio structure or mentality in Australia we're seeing that work on ABC on SBS, some on Stan originals, on the web. It's a different environment, it's a different scenario.

MN: I think the studio mentality is "fund 10 things and one will go." So you take a risk on something like *I Love Dick*, but you also you do something that is really safe and you do other things in between and you just hope like hell one of them will go and make money. That's why they spread the money around. It's an investment strategy.

KM: But also with these streaming services, they have to think about how they're built on a model where they need subscribers and so they constantly need to be giving you new product. They're building libraries from scratch. So it's also like, as you say, it's a volume game. So this will definitely start to taper off, and it's already started to taper off with both Netflix and Amazon, neither of which bought anything out of Sundance this year. But if you think about these last few years they've ferociously trying to build catalogues so people will continue their subscriptions. I mean I think it's interesting because you will speak to producers who will speak of their Amazon experience, and they will speak about it quite positively. They get their data, they are paid their money up front. People who are with say a Netflix Original, they don't know anything about their data but they're given their money up front. So I think it's interesting.

LF: But I don't think that's going on in Australian TV. It's totally risk averse.

MN: Totally risk averse!

KM: Yeah, it's not the same.

MN: I think what's interesting here is some of the work that is being done outside the margins. I supervised a young woman called Natalie Krikowa who was doing her doctorate on transmedia and how queer filmmakers can get past the gatekeepers by creating low budget work that slips under the radar. Natalie had made a webisode series called *The Newtown Girls* (2012) with some friends. They made it on the smell of an oily rag and they ended up with millions of hits worldwide. It was a lesbian love story and it has had a massive following globally – a lot in Saudi Arabia, go figure. So

her argument was that through really slipping under the radar you can bypass the gatekeepers and create new audiences because it's the queer, LGBTQI audience who want those kinds of programs and who will go watch them online and support them. What I think is happening is that the people who are the distributors are taking note of the fact that these types of programs have an audience. They didn't think there'd be an audience for them before, but things like this series have proved that there *is*. That's when they jump on board, when they think they are going to make money. There is a lot of very interesting work going on digitally, particularly with webisodes, and this work is happening under the radar where people from different communities are *creating* communities. I think that sense of community is something we have to really fight for these days because everyone is in these virtual communities by themselves and we're losing that sense of speaking to each other. So I really welcome the Melbourne Women in Film Festival and this forum too because it creates a space to speak and to have a conversation about these issues.

JB: Before we open this discussion up to the audience I would like to pick up on something that has been coming up a lot in this discussion, and that is the idea of "risk." Sophie Hyde talked a lot about our risk averse industry after the success of her film *52 Tuesdays* (2013) and one of the things she stressed was how important taking risks is to filmmaking and creative work more generally. As people working in screen education, research, programming, policy and filmmaking, what do you think is critical for enabling the type of openness that bell hooks talks about or the type of risk-taking that people like Sophie Hyde are advocating?

SC: I would say development is a big thing. I think that there is not enough investment in development in Australia and I think that is a very critical step in terms of making work that is innovative, that's creative, that is risk-taking, and that audiences want to engage with. There's just no money and innovative, creative work requires time. As Margot talked about, time is very, very important. Especially if you're creating characters that you want to be full, you need to live with those characters. I write a lot and I spend a lot of time living with characters. That requires time, it can't be rushed. In order for me to translate that onto paper I need that time, but there's no money that affords me that time to really think about things from a character's perspective and to think about the journey I'm taking the character on and therefore taking the audience on. And it's just not there. I think that if we're thinking about how we can have long term solutions, development is something that has to really be thought through. Again, as Margot mentioned, when you get to that stage when you are at the end of development and you are about to go into production and you go to the screen agencies, they want to know exactly what it's going to look like. In documentary that's very unrealistic, because you really don't know what this person is going to say or do. And, again, you're having to do so much work that is not covering the cost of development simply to get to that point that they can give you that money to go into production. In the US it's a little bit more robust in terms of development and how much is put in development including within organisations and broadcasters, and I don't necessarily think we value it as much in Australia in terms of the overall story-making process. And that feeds into the results in many ways because you can't make a good story if it's

rushed. It's just not possible and I think we need to go back to the quality over the quantity.

JB: I'd say risk-taking in programming as well actually…

KM: I think a big thing about that is this idea that you really have to democratise culture because it's a really big thing to ask someone to cross a threshold as intimidating as a museum or as expensive as a cinema. I think that if you democratise culture you can show people incredibly challenging work, but you don't need to make them feel like an idiot before they've bought that ticket. So I think if you can find a way to talk about things that feels quite inclusive and feels like an adventure then you've got a better chance of saying to somebody "you should have a look at this. It might not be your thing but you might find it interesting." That is how you can set people off on a journey of actually becoming curious and discovering. I think that's a big thing. It's important to not put any barriers up for people because every time you see something new it will lead you somewhere else and that is how you keep people curious.

MN: I agree and I think the more that we expose people to other things, other ways of seeing, the better. I teach, so, it's no use just looking at a class and saying now, I want you to take risks, you're allowed. They go "ooh, scary." So over the years I have tried to expose students to work they've never seen before, work that is risk-taking, work that will shock them, work that will excite them. There's not always that much time to do it. I taught an Australian film class a few years ago, which now sadly doesn't run any more. But it had no mainstream content, it was all Australian film against the grain, all the underground stuff. It was part of a sub-major called Reading Australia, and the idea was 'how do we read Australia by what gets left out?' So I exposed those students to the early feminist films, to the workers films of the 1950s, to the poetic and the Avant Garde films, to stuff they'd never seen before. I said OK, go off and do a creative response. I don't care what you do, you can write a script, you can make a film, you can dance, you can do photographs. One girl embroidered an evening purse as a tribute to Paulette McDonagh, the McDonagh sisters from the late 20s who made these society melodramas about women's issues, and it was beautiful. The National Film and Sound Archive have acquired this purse. The students did such wild, risk-taking things. It was so exciting because I didn't put any boundaries on them. It comes back to that bell hooks stuff, about trying to get students to think critically, and saying I want you to pick one of these films or group of films and make something that is a creative response, and I don't care what you do. And it was the most exciting class I've ever taught. I'm starting to use that technique more in teaching. And then the students aren't faced with that blank page of having to be original. That's terrifying out of nowhere, but they have to bring their originality and their individuality to make a twist to it. If they can do that it's a great learning thing. So I think it's about students being exposed to other kinds of ways of seeing, to other films. You hear that people like Scorsese, when he went to film school, just watched films all the time. That to me is the perfect film school.

JB: As someone who also works in the tertiary sector, I've got to say, Margot, that I think tertiary education is also becoming more and more risk averse. We are all increasingly required to [MN: Hit our markers] design courses with specific,

measurable and repeatable learning outcomes and marking rubrics. I'm sitting there thinking, how did you mark the embroidered purse…

MN: High distinction

JB: And your course sounds wonderful…

MN: I don't teach it anymore.

CP: It does, I want to do that course. I'm really interested to know, were the students resistant to that material at all?

MN: They were really shocked. They all thought they were coming in to learn about *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *Gallipoli* (1981) and I went no, no that's not we're doing in this class. I think the turning point was when I had them in the palm of my hand was when I showed them *Yackety Yack* (Dave Jones, 1974). I don't know how many people here know anything about *Yackety Yack*, it is the most anarchistic outrageous film that was made at La Trobe during the 1970s. It is insane and hysterically funny and it deconstructs film and they went 'whoa, are we allowed to do that?' And I said yes. I think they'd never seen anything like it.

CP: Can I just quickly add to that as someone who also works in higher education. Yes, I think there are immense challenges at the level of education, but at the level of research this is also a real issue. How to be resistant when we're being pushed toward getting money, cooperating with industry? I think it's a challenge. I don't say this as a criticism, I think it's up to us to think creatively about how to do this. But how do we co-operate with industry in a way that lets us be resistant, and do these projects, research these things, while asking for money from the people that are very often maintaining the systems that we're challenging? I think that's a real paradox for higher education at the moment and for how we continue to think about and try to fund research into women's cinema.

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At this point in the forum, the discussion was opened up to questions from the floor providing an opportunity for student and emerging female filmmakers to contribute their thoughts and share their experience. The panellists' conversation about the cultural and political logic of "independence" for women screen creatives working in Australia today established a key theme for the festival. It was carried over into subsequent panels and Q and A sessions and led to further discussion of the severe restrictions on time and development that a dominant, chronically risk averse system poses for women filmmakers. There was also extended discussion about the importance of 'independence' as the drive and capacity to maintain a singular voice. The range of generative strategies for achieving 'independence' raised by panellists and others throughout the festival repeat aspects of creative feminist practice that women have relied on for decades. They also demonstrate the complex work of resistance and negotiation required today in the face of the imperative to be an "ideal" worker in a gendered neoliberal environment—adaptable, creative, entrepreneurial, networked. As such, the notion of "independence" proves a productive lens for highlighting the range

of tensions facing women screen creatives as the second decade of the 21st century draws to a close.

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About the participants

Jodi Brooks is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of NSW and has published on feminist film, screen performance, film sound and feminist film theory.

Santilla Chingaipe is an award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker whose work explores contemporary migration, cultural identities and politics. Her documentary *Date My Race*, which screened on SBS in 2017, broke new ground by forcing us all to confront the roles that race plays in the world of dating, specifically in the online world.

Lisa French is Professor and Dean of the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Lisa is co-author of *Shining a Light: 50 Years of the Australian Film Institute* (2009 & 2014), and *Womenvision: Women and the Moving Image in Australia* (2003).

Kristy Matheson has worked in independent distribution and film festivals. She is the Director, Film at The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne where she programs contemporary films and retrospectives. Kristy has served on festival juries, written on film for *Senses of Cinema* and is a regular film reviewer on ABC Radio, Melbourne. She is the recipient of the 2017 Natalie Miller Fellowship.

Margot Nash is an Honorary Teaching and Research Associate at the University of Technology Sydney and director of three feature films *The Silences* (non-fiction), *Vacant Possession* (fiction) and *Call Me Mum* (fiction), the short fiction, *Shadow Panic* (fiction) as well as credits as filmmaker on films that were made collectively: *For Love or Money* (feature non-fiction)*, Bread and Dripping* (short non-fiction) and *We Aim To Please* (short fiction).

Claire Perkins is Senior Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies at Monash University; author of *American Smart Cinema* (2012) and co-editor of *Indie Reframed: Women's Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema* (2016).