Deviations: Poetic Reflections on Method

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Research Statement

Criteria

Does this film engage the viewer in a reflection, on a cognitive and emotional level, on the shifting role, responsibilities, dilemmas of the researcher—and perhaps us all—in a world on the brink?

Research Questions

The questions I aimed to address were partly overlapping and had an existential, methodological, and practical nature:
– What is the role of the researcher—as a human being, and both as a producer of knowledge and shaper of reality—in a world on the brink?
– What is the potential of the moving image as a tool of engagement, i.e. to carry both research content and involve the audience cognitively, emotionally, and experientially?
– What is the potential of the moving image as a tool of investigation, i.e. what difference does it make to the thinking of the researcher?
– How can I make my research portable, shareable, more approachable, especially in a COVID-19 context, where physical co-presence is a risk? How can I establish, despite the distance, an experiential bridge with my audience?

Context

This short essay film weaves my personal story as a human being and researcher together with broader methodological and existential questions. To provide a context for it, it is useful to outline a brief account of my background. This is important also because, as emphasized by references to an 'impostor' in

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the voiceover of the film, I hardly regard myself as a film-maker and I do not come to experimenting with the moving image from Film Studies.

I am a radically multidisciplinary researcher whose work is located, mostly, in the field of Political Communication, but which also extends to Journalism, Security, Health Studies, and Artistic Research. Most broadly, I can say I am interested in the role of communication, both mediated and face-to-face, in society and politics. I have come to the essay film as part of a broader process of experimentation with creative approaches for collecting, analyzing and presenting qualitative data.

Over the years, in fact, I have become aware of the limitations of the theories and methods I have originally been trained in. Political Communication, for example, has traditionally been concerned, most often from a quantitative perspective, on the explicit communication between elite political actors, mainstream media and publics, mostly in Western countries, at high-times of formal political processes, like elections for example (Esser and Pfetsch 2004; Brants and Voltmer 2011; Kenski and Jamieson 2017): the mere tip of a political reality that, in its nuance and complexity, is a vast as an iceberg (Archetti 2017). How to conceptualize and collect data on the infinitely wider "rest"? How to make sense of that sizeable part of our daily reality that is currently dismissed as "irrelevant" or "not worth investigating"? How to study, for example, the silence of the oppressed? How to make sense of a "politics" of daily microaggressions made by unremarkable acts of communication like gestures and throw-away comments (Archetti 2020a)? What kind of research practice, in other words, can help us understand a world that is not only organized around rationality and what is "measurable," but also shaped by ambivalence, uncertainty, intangible values, and feelings like passion, anger, hope, confusion?

My answer is twofold. First, research practice needs to integrate, within a less anthropocentric view of reality, the embodied, situated, sensorial dimensions of experience. Despite the rhetoric of a "material turn" (Mukerji 2015) or an "affective turn" (Paasonen 2020) bodies, objects, places, the senses, still tend not to be taken seriously. Second, we need to become responsible researchers. According to Karen Barad (2007), deciding how to investigate a phenomenon means taking decisions about what (or who) to include and what (or who) to exclude. This has far-reaching effects on the construction of reality: some things and voices become visible—they exist—others remain marginalized—they disappear. That is why for Barad ethics—taking responsibility for the choices we make—cannot be separated from epistemology (how we create knowledge) and ontology (what exists). Becoming responsible researchers, in this perspective, involves developing an awareness of the way the assumptions in our heads lead to bias in how we approach the world and in how we do not just collect data,

but *create* it. It also means, given the devastation and suffering brought about by the emergencies that surround us, from environmental catastrophes to global pandemics, becoming more socially engaged, if not outright activists. Research, as a reflection of this, needs thus also to be more accessible to a wider audience. In the attempt to capture the experiential missing side of an interconnected reality and to communicate with a public beyond academia, I have used (to the puzzlement of more "orthodox" colleagues) creative writing, voice, performance. They have been for me, simultaneously, means of investigation about phenomena that were hidden, like silence, or physical pain; tools of both cognitive and sensorial engagement for my audience, who could gain a deeper and more genuine understanding than in an "ordinary" academic presentation; opportunities to practice reflexivity about my own role as a researcher (Archetti 2020b).

Moving onto the essayistic short film is an attempt to further advance this agenda and to explore the possibilities of a new genre. Rascaroli (2008: 26) illustrates the key features of the essay film: a content revolving around the discussion of a topic for the purpose of engaging the viewer and encouraging reflection; a personal, subjective approach marked by a strong authorial voice; a connection, at the same time, to more 'abstract-universal' issues (Rascaroli 2008: 26). Two aspects that particularly attracted me are the opportunity the essay film offers to combine the analytical and the experiential dimensions into a self-contained, easily "consumable" and "portable" product, and the possibility to cover, simultaneously, the general and the extremely specific. Academic prose, as I have observed in my own experience of it, often tends (indeed demands) to leave behind those details that are regarded as too small to be "significant" or too tangential to the focus of the investigation to be "relevant" in favour of generalization. The result, especially for a researcher like me who is interested in examining politics and society, is a loss of "real life." What is captured on camera, instead, invites both the researcher and the viewer to focus on the defined area of investigation within the frame while capturing all of its microscopic details; it zooms on a specific object or actor while, through the sequence of images in the editing, or the association between images and voiceover/sound it evokes a broader reality.

In addition to this, experimenting with the moving image is something new in my field. Despite the increasing focus of investigation on new media and the impact of communication technologies on political processes, the object of most analyses remains, overwhelmingly, text. Studies of images, whether still or moving, are extremely rare (for an exception see Veneti, Jackson and Lilleker 2019). Image and film might be approached as *subjects* of analysis, but I have never come across their use as actual tools of investigation or within reflections

about the function that their nature and affordances can play in the research process itself.

Methods

My work on the film has drawn most heavily on my combined experiences in creative writing, theatre, and in writing poetry. Regardless of how "creative" and "free" any of these genres might look to an external observer, their disruptive and expressive potential depends, with no exception, on a well thought-out structure. In the same way, as much as the practice of the film essay is regarded as 'heretical' (Rascaroli 2009: 2), I assumed I needed a structure to provide both the arc of a story and the steps of the reflection I wanted to draw my audience in. There are thus five explicit parts: "The Brink," "Dilemma," "Plunge," "Distorting Identities," "Transformation."

My interest in writing, including film script writing, has also led me not only to practice extensively the usual "show, do not tell" rule, but also more specifically a visual and sensorial way of writing—as I called it, a language of 'feeling-in-the-body' (Archetti 2020a: 16, 96-100). In writing, I achieve this effect through associations, fragmentation/disruption, layers of meaning created by parallel stories and parallel voices (all techniques I used in Archetti 2020a). Poetry is, in this respect, extreme in so far as the selection of terms, their association/disconnection, placement, sequencing and timing, are part of a clockwork emotional explosive device. The intensity of the sensorial "detonation" can be gauged, as if the poem was a perfume or a recipe for a dish, by making careful adjustments in the proportions of the ingredients. It can further be enhanced and fine-tuned through additional sensorial dimensions, like the sound of a voice, or images.

The medium of film gave me, in this perspective, the unique opportunity to combine a spoken poem (words and voice) with a visual poem made by a sequence of clips. The timing through which the spoken word and the visual intersect between each other multiplies the possibilities for further associations and tensions. These are left, deliberately so, quite loose. I did not want the images to be a mere illustration of the words. I wanted them rather to open up little breathing rooms, bubbles of uncertainty, and therefore spaces for creativity, that the viewers could fill in with their own interpretation and experience.

A defining feature of essay film is the engagement of the viewer through a "summoning" of the audience (Rascaroli 2008: 34-37). In my film I am not directly

addressing the viewer, but the audience is invited to participate in the "gaps" and through the connecting power of the human voice—something, the latter, I have had direct experience of in performance and in conducting dozens of phone interviews in past research projects. My subjectivity—my presence, despite the disembodiment—manifests itself not only through the editing, the "directing" of the timing of the associations, and the orchestration of the gaps, but also through the gaze of changing human faces (the self that continuously transforms)—a woman with dark hair reflected in a screen, a masked dancer, for example—and, above all, through my voiceover. This is, at times, polyvocal (I was inspired here by Næss 2020, Næss at al. 2020) to bring in my multiple roles as researcher-being-playful-at-the-edge, researcher-tied-by-conventions, worst-critic, human-struggling-to-find-her-own-way-to-live, as well as the voices of "the others." Overall, however, while *present*, I wanted to be a human among plant-, environment-, and object peers.

My experimentation revolves around skills that are partly self-taught. I took online courses in film-making and video editing for social media during the COVID-19 lockdown in the attempt to refine my editing beyond amateur level. These course proved useful, however, they also made me more acutely aware of my limitations: in getting my own footage (I could not rely on going outside because of the "stay at home" policy), in the equipment I had (was my phone camera enough?) and skills (in using sophisticated software, which I did not have and was not allowed to download on my university PC, for processing the video material). I reframed these circumstances, though, as "safe boundaries" for the experimentation of, essentially, a beginner. While I worked on found free-to-use footage available online (from Pexels.com, [Pexels, n.d.]) for opportunistic reasons, this recycling of existing material (which I further manipulated through editing and reassembling) also met my socially-engaged-researcher commitment to sustainability. I edited the clips with the standard Photo editor on my PC. The audio was also recorded on my PC (then edited with Audacity) while I was evacuated to temporary accommodation after the ceiling of a flat next door in our building collapsed. This came on top of being stranded in Wales, at a time of its strictest lockdown, after I had travelled there from Norway to visit my husband. The sound reflects the fact that I was, literally, and doubly so, in the "space in between."

Outcomes
Working on this project led to unexpected insights about the effects of the moving image on the thinking process of the researcher. First it made me strongly experience the agency of the materials I was

working *with* and *along* (Archetti and Eeg-Tverbakk 2022). The resulting essay film is a co-creation, a dance where I both led and was led: although I started with some ideas about what I wanted to do, watching the online clips in order to select them led me into previously unplanned directions, which fed into new words; these, then, in turn, led to returning to the clips with a different perspective, and new unexpected selections, in a series of progressive, creative loops. In this process I chose the clips decisively, yet intuitively, out of a *felt* "resonance," for "reasons" that would always become clear to my conscious mind later in the process. This aspect is connected to a second insight.

Elisabeth Brun, whose film *3xShapes of Home* (2020b) strongly inspired me both for the concept it develops and its form, demonstrates that the essay film can be used *to think*, and more specifically to think topographically (Brun 2020a, Brun 2021). The experience of working on my project has confirmed to me not only that film can be used to think, but also that editing can be a point of access to embodied knowledge. In fact, my bouncing back and forth between the clips and the writing of the text that would later evolve into a poem, in hindsight, maps rather accurately on to the process that philosopher Eugene Gendlin calls "Thinking at the Edge" (TAE) (Gendlin 2004), particularly on to its 'zigzagging' between the experiential and the logical order (Krycka 2006: 6). This is part of Gendlin's "philosophy of the implicit" (Gendlin 1997) in which, squarely opposing systems of thought that see language as the very limit and medium of all we can know, he identifies lived *embodied* experience as a primary source of knowledge. TAE is aimed at generating new ideas that exceed the limitations of language through tapping into 'felt sense' (Gendlin 2004: n.p.), ultimately allowing us to access the "new" we have become experts of through our lived experience (both life and research in my case), but do not know yet quite how to express with the "old" words. Film not only extends this process from the verbal and ideal to the visual, but also, perhaps by being available for being watched, initiates it in the viewer. This process might also be an explanation of *why* essay film, ultimately, is not only 'protean' (Lopate 1992: 19; Rascaroli 2008: 25)—changeable in shape—but also, I would say, *promethean*—carrier of innovation.

Dissemination

The film was presented, so far, at mostly academic events: at Artistic Research at Kristiania (AR@K) 2021 in Oslo, as part of my contribution "Research & Art in a World on the Brink: Theoretical, Poetic, and Methodological Reflections from the Space-in-Between" (Archetti 2021b); at a POLKOM [Center for the Study of Political Communication] internal seminar (University of Oslo, 15 February 2021); at the inaugural meeting of the newly established research group "TØR [Norwegian for "to dare"] – Experiential humanities" (online, 25 February 2021)

(Archetti 2021a); at the Annual Convention of the Italian Political Communication Association (Bologna, 1 July 2022) (Archetti 2022). The film, from the feedback I received, resonated with many both at an intellectual and emotional level. To open it to a wider audience, it could be further submitted to poetry festivals (like the Athens or Cadence Video Poetry Festivals, for example).

This experiment encouraged me to engage more deeply with essaystic film (I started attending an online course, "Essay Film Studio," organized by the Łódź Film School). It confirms the importance, within my broader research agenda, of integrating embodiment and intuition, alongside intellectual enquiry, as key sources of new insight. I intend to develop this further in a new book I am working on, whose provisional title runs along the line of *Re-Writing Politics and Communication: A Research Manifesto for a World on the Brink*. Lastly, by showing that a concept can be developed with minimal skills, basic equipment, and even no footage of one's own, I hope this can encourage other researchers and students, who have never considered this before, to experiment with film.

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Peer Reviews

All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response to what follows:

Review 1: Accept submission for publication with no amendments.
This essay film delves into a reflection on the role of the researcher. In five parts, it traces a path from the courage to throw oneself into the void of doubt to embracing the transformation of the author in the course of her research. Reflection and shadows, technology and nature, the human and the non-human are the images that illustrate the argument and methodology of this film, which is explorative.

The first section, THE BRINK, begins with a green frame, a glitch that functions as a warning: this film raises questions, it is not intended to provide answers. The first part is about jumping off the edge of academic knowledge, asking oneself, in the words of Cristina Archetti: "In a world falling apart, does a researcher matter? What is my role as a researcher? How can I help?". We never see the speaker. The voice represents the author's thoughts. As we listen to it, the image of a ruined building, of technology and nature follow one after the other. A child walks through these ruins and reminds us of the compost children in Camille's stories from Donna Haraway's wonderful latest book, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). "The theories I have inherited don't work anymore. I can't see boundaries, categories". The world is changing, and not always for the better. We see footage of the Black Lives Matters movement in a nod to fighting against injustice.

The second part, called DILEMMA, reflects on the duality between scientifically recognised knowledge and the human feeling of knowing something. "When I know it, I can feel it". Digital networks of algorithms are intertwined with the image of a woman walking through a field, and the child in the ruins approaching plants.

PLUNGE is the title of the third section, in which the elements of water and wind appear while the author states that she is not a scientist, but an impostor. It is the object that ends up investigating her, and not the other way round. Interestingly, throughout the film, vertical images, which are representative of mobile phone recording and therefore of social networks, are mixed with horizontal images, more cinematographic. It involves questioning the very legitimacy of contemporary audiovisual products.

Fourth, DISTORTING IDENTITIES, delves into the often highly contentious issue of art practice and activist work. Other voices appear in this section of the essay, as if it were the spirit of the author's conscience or the critical voices of society questioning her legitimacy as an artist, as an activist and as a researcher. The author, who considers herself neither an artist nor an activist, then asks herself what the point of her work as a researcher is. And here comes the comment that sums up the intention of the whole film: "I am here, UN-DERS-TAN-DING. It's me and you connecting beyond the mere content of an argument". We see two neon hands touching before giving way to the final part, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for the journey from chrysalis to butterfly.

With the title TRANSFORMATION, the author embraces her indeterminacy in this closing statement: "Artist, authority, researcher, expert, beginner, I don't know". Again, we watch the woman walking in the countryside and later arriving at the seashore. Archetti stresses that the research process has transformed her. This can also be extrapolated to the process of making the film. Research and artistic practice finally come together: "It is a way of seeing, sensing, a way of being in a more than human world".

It is a very sensitive and kinaesthetic film, in which the author has made an effort to adapt form and content. Although the research statement is solid, with fundamental references in the study of essay film such as those of Laura Rascaroli's, Archetti has managed to move away from an academic language in the voice-over that guides the whole film, opting for a communication that appeals to emotions and with which the contemporary spectator can feel identified. On the fear of the future and the need to create new ways of relating to the living and non-living beings of this planet, of living with the ruins, I recommend Anna L. Tsing's recent works as an extension to the theoretical framework: *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015) *and Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017), the latter as co-editor. It can also be reassuring to read Maggie Nelson's On Freedom. *Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (2021). More than ever, thinking about other forms of life through art with the tools of academic observation becomes necessary to learn how to *stay with the trouble*.

Review 2: Accept submission for publication with no amendments.
This short essay film offers a poetic and compelling account of the creator's personal relationship with the research process, global events, and art more generally. The work is highly personal, yet also offers a degree of universality in its treatment of global crises and the functions of research, knowledge, and the scholar in relation to such events. Each of the film's five segments in some way engages with the creator's own personal journey and reckoning with their

profession's sometimes limited relationship with the world and the crises of our time. As the narrator says, "I am not a scientist, I am an impostor." The work then becomes about the creator's own response to their own crisis. At one point, they question whether they should respond by creating such a moving image work at all. "I am not an artist, I am an impostor," they say, suggesting that creating art is not the typical means through which they engage with the world.

The work's meta approach to the research process marks a genuine contribution to our understanding of practice-research. The scholarly traces in the work come not from the usual markers, like, for example, citations, but from the creator's own experience as a scholar. That the creator is a scholar and brings to this work their experience as a scholar is an important and refreshing way to engage with practice-research and an important reminder for how we engage with this work more generally.

I understand the creator's decision to situate this work within the essay film tradition, but I am not sure that is the best comparison for this work. Though if reading works by Rascaroli, et al. on the essay film inspired the creation of the piece, then that is of course valid. However, on a more theoretical level, the work could perhaps do better to situate itself within the film poem tradition, or to also engage more generally with the existing work on the nature of practice research, including statements published in *Screenworks.* Additionally, the creator may want to engage with the existing scholarship on the video essay, another form that resembles this piece. Video essay scholars have written at length about the limitations of "traditional" academic scholarship, and how using moving images and sounds have offered new ways to engage with existing areas of study. Overall, the statement is well organised, clearly-written and accompanies the work well.

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