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An essay film: "Thinking *with* water"
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Research statement

1. Introduction

The essay film, which could be considered as a form, a mode or a methodology, offers a new direction in the field of media accessibility. Indeed, this special issue of *JoSTrans* entitled "User-centred, and Proactive Approaches in Media Accessibility", which focuses on the three shifts of accessibility that Gian Maria Greco proposes, is the first time that you will come across essay films in this journal. For Greco, a universalist, user-centred, pro-active approach is paramount. As Greco proposes,

> the more the design process is based on such methodologies, the higher the probability of producing artefacts with a greater number of enabling affordances and fewer disabling constraints, and thus, the lower the probability of a conditioning friction between the artefact and the user (Greco 2018: 220).

But more than this, he writes that accessibility "[gives] rise to a plethora of fruitful new ideas, methods and models" (Greco 2018: 206). Reflecting on these ideas, I start with the questions: what happens when essay films take a reactive or a proactive approach? What counts as active participation from users and experts when it comes to essay films? Are essay films user-centred or maker-centred, or neither? First, however, in this commentary I take a critical view of the three shifts. I shall explain the nature of the essay film and what it does. Drawing from Laura Rascaroli (2017) I argue that essay films 'think', but also invite you to think. Following on from this, I suggest how the essay film could be a means through which to think differently about these shifts. I then turn to the work of Rosi Braidotti (2015, 2018, 2019) and Astrida Neimanis (2019) to explore how thinking with water can transform the individualism of humanistic modes of inquiry. As Neimanis writes,

> [b]lood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to water world: *we are bodies of water* (Neimanis 2019: 1).

'We', here, does not only refer to humans, but rather to living earthly entities, and 'I' is not contained within our skin, but leaks, excretes, perspires, and oozes, beyond the boundaries inherited from Western thinking. The aim, however, is not to erase what has come before, but as Braidotti says,

we need schemes of thought and figurations [for multilayered and internally contradictory phenomena] that enable us to account in empowering terms for the changes and transformations currently on the way (Braidotti 2015: 9-10).

We need to identify and disidentify certain patterns of thinking: we need to think *with* water.

2. The three shifts in media accessibility

The three shifts of media accessibility that Greco (2018) identifies, define the "normative boundaries of epistemic and moral action" (2018: 220) in the proposed field of Accessibility Studies, yet are rooted in the field of Translation Studies. In this section, I take a critical view of the three shifts, and in the next section I suggest how the essay film brings new questions about these shifts and how thinking with water challenges the inherent humanism and individualism rooted in current thinking. In order to make these points later on, I first need to explain that although Greco, drawing from Amartya Sen (1985), acknowledges that "'user' does not stand for some remote and amorphous figure, but rather, has to be understood within the variations of human diversity and capabilities (Greco 2018: 220)", there is a humanistic and individualistic thread throughout the fields of study in question. There is not enough space here to unpack these ideas fully; yet indicated by Anthony Pym (2007: 26), the activity of translators became "an object of serious thought" in 15th century Renaissance humanism.

> The dignification of translation then rode on the back of the rising European nationalisms, based on the idea of strong all-purpose languages between which something like equivalence was conceivable, well before the term itself was used (Pym 2007: 26).

But more than this, Rosi Braidotti (2015) writes that rooted in the Enlightenment and modernity, humanistic modes of inquiry set standards for individuals and cultures based on dualistic thinking, which separates man, reason, culture and woman, matter, and nature. This thinking produces an individual subject position and "an ideal of bodily perfection and a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values" (Braidotti 2015: 10), which can also produce ableist tendencies. Posited as universal consciousness, it is "more than just a contingent matter of attitude: it is a structural element of our cultural practice, which is also embedded in both theory and institutional and pedagogical practices" (Braidotti 2015: 10). And as Carolyn Lazard writes,

> [t]he creation of accessible spaces cannot be done without dismantling the pernicious liberalism that pervades our lives and relationships with each other, not just as artists and art workers, but as subjects of the state. To commit to disability justice is to redefine the terms of subjecthood. It's to undo the rampant individualism that is a fiction for both disabled and nondisabled people (Lazard 2019: n.p.).

The first shift I shall discuss is from a particularist to a universalist account of access. As Greco (2018) explains, the initial focus in media accessibility

was on subtitles for deaf and hard of hearing, audio description, and sign language, each being for a specific group with sensory impairments. Later, it expanded to include linguistic barriers, as well as sensory barriers (Díaz Cintas 2005; Díaz Cintas *et al.* 2007). Both these accounts of access are what Greco (2018) terms as particularist, which means that anyone who would not be considered within the parameters of the specific group would typically be excluded. For Greco, a particularist account is a rigid perspective. Furthermore, what may appear as inclusion, can actually be a form of segregation. Approaches to access have since broadened to a universalist account however, which is reflected by the most recent definition of media accessibility by Greco as,

> concerning access to media and non-media objects, services and environments through media solutions, for any person who cannot or would not be able to, either partially or completely, access them in their original form (Greco 2019: 18).

The definition shows how considerations now include non-media objects as well as media objects, and that services can be for any person who would find them beneficial rather than being targeted at specific groups.

Following the shift from a particularist to a universalist account of access, Greco identifies another shift, which is from a maker-centred to a user-centred approach. Previously in media accessibility, the makers were viewed as the only "bearers of valuable knowledge" (Greco 2018: 212). A maker-user gap exists in this scenario, "which places makers and users at opposite ends of the spectrum of creation and production" (Greco 2018: 212). The wider the gap, the less likely the content will be accessible, which could reinforce the ghettoisation of users and potentially create new ghettos (Greco 2016a, 2016b). Perspectives have since shifted and it is now considered that the knowledge of users, as well as other stakeholders, are as valuable as that of the makers, which explains the shift from maker-centred to user-centred approaches. It is important to note for the purposes of my argument that the maker-user gap is a separation and an absence of knowledge. In other words, the gap is not generative, but I shall come back to this point in the following section.

The final shift that Greco (2018) argues is a shift from reactive to proactive approaches. A reactive approach refers to when accessibility is considered/designed/provided once the object, service, or environment has already been created. For example, when SDH is provided during the distribution stage of production after a film has been created. Accessibility is an add-on or an afterthought in the process. Not only does a reactive approach create challenges that could easily be avoided if accessibility was considered earlier, but drawing from Kaptelinin and Nardi, Greco (2018) points out that users are left as an afterthought where they have to accept whatever is offered to them and this approach is often based on the paternalistic assumption that "users are victims of poorly designed systems and need to be rescued by designers" (Kaptelinin and Nardi 2006: 112).

Greco (2018) explains that while the previous two shifts are epistemological, the shift from reactive to proactive is methodological. These shifts are interlaced but can also be different ways of thinking or different methodologies. A proactive approach means considering access earlier in the process and

> placing the users and potential users at the heart of the development process rather than leaving them as an afterthought where they are left to put up with whatever has been designed on their behalf (Taylor et al. 2002: 257).

The essay film raises questions in consideration of the three shifts, however. For instance, what happens when essay films take a reactive or a proactive approach to access? What counts as active participation from users and/as experts when it comes to essay films? Are essay films user-centred or maker-centred, or neither? While these questions remain unanswered to a certain extent, I can speak in relation to this essay film "Thinking *with* water", which takes a proactive approach mainly by weaving and including descriptions of sounds, and poetic audio descriptions into the narration. There is no active participation from users here, but if, as Laura Rascaroli argues, the essay film attempts to establish a dialogue with you (Rascaroli 2017: 184), could this film be considered as the beginning of a conversation? Active participation is still possible, but it is not something I can determine or guarantee. I would not consider my film as user-centred or maker-centred either, which suggests I need to think outside of these categories in the context of essay films. But first, I shall explain the nature of the essay film and what it does.

3. The essay film

As Laura Rascaroli writes, the essay film is a form (Rascaroli 2014), or a mode (Rascaroli 2017) that occupies a place at the crossroads between "documentary, avant-garde, experimental, and art film impulses" (Rascaroli 2017: 194–195). For Rascaroli, the essay is a "genre of absence" in which "there is no truth, just truth-making" (Rascaroli 2017: 190). On that basis, the film-essay confounds issues of authority and challenges "the existence of objective, permanent, fixed viewpoints on the world" (Rascaroli 2017: 190). Rascaroli describes the essay film as hybrid and self-reflexive, it "must embrace openness and uncertainty; it must leave questions unanswered, and accept and nurture the ultimate instability of its meaning" (Rascaroli 2014: 84). There is a necessity of heresy towards traditional documentary practice, in order to keep the form, or mode, fluid, as essentially the essay film "is an open field of experimentation" (Rascaroli 2017: 194-195). Indeed, this experimentation is never finished, but is an on-going process of change. I argue that essay films 'think', following Rascaroli, who uses Gilles Deleuze's concept of the interstice — which is a space "between two actions, between affections, between perceptions, between two visual images, between two sound images, between the sound and the visual" (Deleuze 1989: 180) — to explain her idea. For Rascaroli,

the way in which the form thinks "lies in addressing the dialectical tension between juxtaposed or interacting filmic elements and, more precisely, the gaps that its method of juxtaposition opens in the text" (Rascaroli 2017: 8). It is in these gaps, these in-between spaces, that it becomes possible, as Adorno writes, [for the filmmaker in this case] to "coordinate elements, rather than subordinate them" (Adorno 1982: 170) and "approach the real by allowing access beyond the immediate visible surface of things" (Wagstaff 2006: 32). For example, my research process for "Thinking with Water" uses formal properties of the essay film, like self-reflexivity with a voice over while considering accessibility from the beginning. These gaps are then generative because not only does the essay film 'think'; it also invites *you* to think, as the dialogue and experience of the viewer is central to the form, or the mode. The enunciator, which is also the narrator within the essay film in question, who uses the subject position 'I', addresses you, as a viewer or a reader, and attempts to establish a dialogue with you (Rascaroli 2017). Furthermore, Rascaroli argues that in addressing a viewer, they become embodied, as they become involved in the construction of meaning (Rascaroli 2017: 187). The hope is "to spark a curiosity that moves from the inside out" (Rascaroli 2017: 15). But more than this, the film invites the viewer to think with the filmmaker, to think with water, while exploring and questioning the three shifts in media accessibility, which I turn to in the work of Rosi Braidotti and Astrida Neimanis to explain in the next section.

4. Thinking with water

Rosi Braidotti suggests starting by mapping our embodied politics of location, by which she means, to "account for one's locations in terms both of space (geo-political or ecological dimension) and time (historical memory or genealogical dimension), thereby grounding political subjectivity" (Braidotti 2019: n.p.). Yet, as Braidotti points out,

> the task is not to become intimate with an inward-looking definition of an egotistic self, but rather become intimate with the world, looking outwards, pouring our interrelations with the world – a world that is non-human, technological, non-Western, an infinity of diverse entities. Become intimate with the outside, with otherness, with diversity (Braidotti 2018: 83).

The ethical question at the root of Braidotti's ideas is, following Gilles Delueze and Félix Guattari (1980): what are we capable of becoming? What Deleuze and Guattari mean by this concept is that 'becoming' is the dynamism of movement and change, and 'affect' is the force, or forces, that is the product of movement/change, and which makes this movement/change possible. Following Baruch Spinoza, Brian Massumi explains that,

> [a]ffect is being in the world — a non-cognitive embodied belief in the world's potential, directly felt and no sooner felt than acted-upon. […] Affect is not the opposite of thought. It is the movement *of* thought. It is the force of thought,

embodied. […] Affect, throughout, is what I call a 'thinking-feeling' (Massumi 2019: 112).

For Deleuze and Guattari, affect is not exclusive to humans who feel, understand, or act due to its effects. For instance, this essay film could be considered as an affective entity in its own right. It is not an end point of a product; however, affect flows through this film and the process continues, hopefully deterritorialising, or disrupting what is commonly considered or accepted, or, in this case, challenging the individualism inherent in humanistic modes of inquiry, such as the boundaries between maker and user, and 'you' and 'I'.

Bodies of water are important here, firstly for personal reasons as highlighted in the opening quote, which begins with the statement "I started to learn how to breathe with water". Here, I am referring to when I started going cold water swimming during the Covid-19 pandemic. The shock of the water makes me breathe more deeply and slowly and I can feel my body reacting to the changing conditions. I feel embodied. But also, because, as Astrida Neimanis writes, bodies of water have the potential to reset the stage for new directions, past and future. Neimanis focuses on this idea in terms of "environmental waters, feminist theory, and our corporeal implication in both" (Neimanis 2019: 3), but I find her thinking useful to challenge individualistic thinking. For Neimanis, our watery bodies

> enter complex relations of gift, theft, and debt with all other watery life. We are literally implicated in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells:
> human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, while reservoir bodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean bodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies – which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by the ocean's dark belly (Neimanis 2019: 3)

Thus, our watery bodies blur the boundaries between you and I and other living entities. We are "both different and in common" (Neimanis 2019: 3). Yet, as Braidotti emphasises, as researchers, "while we experiment […] we cannot let go of the social, […] because we are human-rights people and we are campaigners for social justice" (Braidotti 2018: 184). But we can speak from where we are, with others from different generations, to recognise our mutual positions and common belonging. And, ultimately, we can continually question: who does "we" include and what do we want to become?

The opening quote of the film says, "I started thinking differently, or perhaps as Ashon Crawley (2016) proposes, 'thinking otherwise', which led to my interest in the concept of, and title here…" In my PhD thesis (Dangerfield 2022), I write about the process of becoming an ally with disabled people. During that time, I found many similarities with what was explained in anti-racism resources and my experience understanding my privilege and the ableist attitudes in society. For example, Janet E. Helms

(2019) proposes six stages of white identity development: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion and autonomy. In brief, these stages range from the belief that you are not racist if you do not purposely or consciously act in racist ways (contact) to where a person recognises their own identity and that growth is continual, in order to be effectively anti-racist (autonomy). While Crawley explains that 'thinking otherwise' is about surviving as a Black person in the USA, which is very different from my experience, he writes that, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and in this case ableism, are deeply entwined in Western thinking. However, these problematics are often "grounded in the individual who either receives or is refused rights, rather than the problematics emerging from within a system of inequities that are institutionally enforced" (Crawley 2016: n.p.). For Crawley, "[t]o begin with the otherwise as word, as concept, is to presume that whatever we have is not all that is possible" (Crawley 2016: n.p.). Wanting equitable access is the announcement of the otherwise. There is also a promise in the realisation and recognition of the otherwise. I make a connection here with the idea that access is a promise, rather than a guarantee, as Carolyn Lazard proposes (2019). Yet 'thinking otherwise' is an unfinished process, much like the essay film and much like humans, in a continual state of becoming. There is space to disrupt normative function and form, to let go of rigid notions and categories and to be open to the possibilities that accessibility brings.

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Biography

Kate Dangerfield is an independent researcher, filmmaker and accessibility consultant. Her practice as research PhD focuses on developing the approach of accessible filmmaking by creating space for the people involved in *The Accessible Filmmaking Project* (in collaboration with the UK charity Sense, funded by the British Film Institute) who have dual/single sensory impairments and complex communication needs. As an ally, Kate is passionate about challenging the disabling barriers that currently exist within society.

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