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**A review of Kate Dangerfield, “An essay film: ‘Thinking *with water*’”
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The video and its accompanying research statement effectively suggest that the essay film, as a form, might be useful for thinking through accessibility. The exciting suggestion made, in particular by the essay film itself, is that the formal properties of the essay film (self-reflexivity, often with a voice over) not only make of the essay film an ‘open’ and/or dialogic form, but they also make the essay film ‘accessible’ in and of itself. That is, especially via this film’s voice over, its very self-reflexivity involves providing commentary for HoH viewers not as an addition to the ‘film itself,’ but as part of the film itself. Put differently, the essay film — or at least this essay film — is designed as ‘accessible’ from the get-go, without any need for modifications and/or supplements that would otherwise make it ‘accessible’ *a posteriori*.

By this token, “Thinking *with water*” urges filmmakers to think more ‘essayistically’ such that they might incorporate considerations of accessibility earlier into the filmmaking process, rather than having them tacked on to the end of that process. That is, rather than thinking about how to make their films accessible, filmmakers might think about how to make their films essayistic, and in doing so they will automatically make their films accessible (at least to a certain degree). Intellectual justification is given for this through the notion that humans are aqueous, and thus porous and unfinished, always in a state of becoming — like and with water. Understood as ‘unfinished,’ or as ‘water,’ humans might let go of the rigid notion that films are complete and closed entities, and thus be more open to openness, or the making-accessible of their work.

While voice over is common in the essay film, it is not necessary, and so one wonders how one might make ‘accessible’ a ‘poetic’ film consisting only of images and where silence is a key experiential component of the film as far as ‘able’ audiences are concerned. That is, essay films might to some degree be always already ‘accessible,’ but this is in part because they are ‘inaccessible’ to ‘able’ audiences, who are not passive recipients of some fixed meaning (if that is what they want, they won’t get it and likely won’t like the film), but who rather must themselves participate to become with the film. And so, if all essay films are always already accessible and/or inaccessible, one still needs to convey this in each instance of an essay film. And how to do this remains a challenge, one resolved here through voiceover...but one wonders how to achieve this without that device? And/or how to convey that being unfinished is precisely what the (essay) film is supposed to be without ‘finishing’ it (e.g., by assigning closed language to an open and poetic visual poem)..?

Perhaps the research statement that accompanies this essay film might, then, make more clear some of these issues, even as space is limited. There

are some minor typos (especially of names), with a lack of clarity at the top of page 4 in the statement, and with Neimanis spelt incorrectly at around the nine-minute mark in the film. Furthermore, the use of Ashon Crawley, while interesting, does introduce an unaddressed racial aspect of the argument. That is, Crawley might well encourage us to 'think otherwise,' and he might also encourage us to 'breathe (under)water,' but this line of thinking is born out of the afterlives of slavery and in particular the Middle Passage. Breathing underwater — as per mythical figures like the Drexciyans — is a necessary legacy of having been tossed overboard during the Middle Passage; and 'thinking otherwise' is how to survive when Black and living in the USA. To appropriate these concepts for accessibility is on one level fine, but one wonders that the essay film, or more particularly its statement, might address the intersectional nature of this thinking, especially so that it does not appear appropriative (is there not a case to be made, as per William Brown's recent rebuttal of Rick Warner's *Godard and the Essay Film: A Form that Thinks*, that the essay film is a 'white' form that uses various ideas and tropes from Black culture without often enough acknowledging as much. Is white accessibility the same as black accessibility? It is an important question that this work raises, but it does not go so far as to address... While perhaps an unanswerable question in the space, perhaps the work might signal the issue all the same.

References

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