Art Writing as Moving Image: Exploring the Film Frame as Page

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Truth is Structured Like a Fiction: Auto-Fictive Practice and the Expanded Screenplay

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My research interrogates screenplay structure uncoupled from the endpoint of film, proposing its textual and spatial components as the framework for an auto-fictive practice. An orthodox screenplay is intimately coupled to a film, describing only what the viewer will see and hear on screen. I explore screenplay uncoupled from the endpoint of film: positioning its textual and spatial complexity as the framework for an interdisciplinary auto-fictive practice. Associated with literature – and more recently film – auto-fiction is a literal, multi-voiced intermingling of autobiography and fiction, differing from the roman-à-clef in that both elements are visible, rather than one disguising the other. My project proposes an expanded screenplay structure as inherently auto-fictive. The multi-voiced components (spatial and time-based) of scene, location, character, mood and action, dialogue, transitions, and viewpoints, produce the framework for method and strategy. Psychoanalytical concepts of the unconscious, memory, language, and the gaze, and aspects of frame analysis and communication theory relating to counterfactuals, reflexivity, staging, layering and performativity underpin the work. The chapters ‘The Unconscious and Repetition’ and ‘OF THE GAZE AS Object Petit a’ in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, (1968), and Erving Goffman’s Frame Analysis: An Essay on the
Organization of Experience (1974), are my thinking companions in mapping structures of the unconscious onto a spatial model of screenplay. The auto-fictive qualities of screenplay components are thus foregrounded by allowing that unconscious drives and fluctuating frameworks of communication direct and shape the ambiguities of memory, revision, and forgetting with which auto-fiction plays, articulating how discourse is formed, framed, and staged.

In material terms, and these are the terms that set the framing of its theoretical relations, the research employs multi-modal methodologies that centre on an art writing expressed as text, film, drawing, performance, and reading as praxis. This presentation focuses on my method of using film editing software as a site for an art writing, a creative and experimental writing that uses the film frame as a page, writing within, not prior to the film, in a reversal of the orthodox screenplay text/image relations. I acknowledge the work of artists such as Laure Prouvost and Jonn Herschend as prompts for my method, in that they both foreground such structures and devices within their work. I also acknowledge the Japanese silent film tradition of the ‘benshi’, performing live narrations and interpretations of films, as a prompt for thinking about further potential for the film text. But back to writing in the film frame…

Video still from Interior #1.2, Emma Bolland (2016). Running time 1 minute 39 seconds.
In my short film Interior #1.2, an initial outcome of the process of writing into the film frame, of writing in dialogue with the process of image editing, can be seen, and I would like to show you a shortened of this before I unpick the process: You can watch this version here: https://vimeo.com/171593367

This series of film fragments examine the screenplay abbreviations ‘INT.’ and ‘EXT.’, which are the baseline screenplay location indicators ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’, thinking about these locators in relation to psychoanalytical ideas about the unconscious; how it is constituted, how it functions as a conceptual space, and how we might begin to experience it in terms of memory and storytelling. In the simplest way possible, with deliberate use of visual cliché in terms of effects, the initial film was built up using layered footage and stills to signal an interior and exterior space: The film can be described as having three layers.

First, an Interior: black and white footage of my hands moving and turning a series of drawings and books that I made by painting the word INT. in a variety of typefaces. I am making and acting the Interior, ‘self-authoring’ both the footage and myself through the use of my own body.
Secondly, an Exterior: imported scans of 35mm slides of landscapes taken from a family collection.

Lastly, the text layer: writing into the film frame.
As a starting point for the writing process I had carried out an intuitive, or 'non-scholarly' reading of the chapter ‘The Unconscious and Repetition’ in Lacan’s Seminar XI, marking out phrases and fragments that seemed to speak to my conceptual ideas, and to what I would materially attempt in the process. These fragments were written into the film, identifiable by being italicized, in the order that they were marked in the book. Following this, my task was to intuitively, or to borrow from psychoanalysis ‘free associatively’ respond to the footage and text within the frame with my own words, and throughout the fragments Interior #1.1 and Interior #1.2 there is a distinction made between Lacan’s words, which are italicised, and my own, which are not. This was, and is, a very curious experience. The software becomes like a page that moves through time, and the necessity of a reflexive, dialogic, spatial and visual dragging, resizing, and arranging of texts and footage layers disrupted the usual dominant linearity of the writing process, and furthermore, the outcomes have resulted in narratives that put reading patterns into shuffle mode.

I am now writing in the film frame as a means of its own evaluation, in that I am embedding a critique and reflection into a remediation of the works as a means of driving forward enquiry, producing new artworks, and integrating areas of theoretical underpinning.
My second supervisor, Dr Peter Jones, is a communication theorist, and not an artist, and thus not as seduced by image. During a discussion of the first Interior films he disputed my assertion that it was the ‘look’ of the base layer footage that was dreamlike, suggesting that is was its framing within cinematic language, and our agreeing to the terms of that language, that indicated to us that we are somehow ‘seeing a dream’. And so, in the most recent remediation of the work, Interior #1.3, I reflect on my own process, critique my visual and textual method, and situate my visual signifiers within a lineage, (within the film I steal dreamlike imagery from Cocteau, Hitchcock, and Romero), bringing together Goffman and Lacan, frame analysis and psychoanalysis, in a text that is much more linear… I sit at my desk editing the film with my text books beside me, much as I would if writing a chapter, paper, or essay. You can watch the film here: https://vimeo.com/173234712

To conclude, I now extend the strategies of writing into the film, attempting instead a writing from within the film, in order to critique and reflect on my own process of production, as the work is made. In this way, I aim to develop a methodology that simultaneously tests and synthesises the interlocking strands of my research: I begin to expand and articulate screenplay components; develop the multiple voices of auto-fiction; position myself as subject within this psychoanalytically textual auto-critical process; address the staging and performativity of the relations between language and the gaze; and provide a skeleton for the development of writing as a meta-methodology, wherein a relation between explicatory and creative writing becomes a tool for research.

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Relevant Texts and Films

Cocteau, Jean, La belle et la bête, 1946, France, 1 hour 33 minutes


Herschend, Jonn, Discussions Questions, 2014, US, 5 minutes 30 seconds

Hitchcock, Alfred, Spellbound, 1945, US, 1 hour 51 minutes


Romero, George A., Day of the Dead, 1985, US, 1 hour 40 minutes