

Embodied Encounters: A Case for Autobiographical and Haptic Filmmaking

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Between May and July of 2014, I embarked on a journey with my Argentinian friend and filmmaking collaborator, Maria Pérez-Escalá. Together, we set out to document our travel experiences as women across three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe. In this video essay, I draw on footage from our journey in order to argue for the potential of film in general—and autobiographical documentary film in particular—to capture and convey embodied experiences in a spatial and visceral way.

Most of the original footage in the video essay has made its first appearance in a feature-length travel documentary *Wanderlust, cuerpos en tránsito* (2017), which I co-directed and co-produced together with Maria Pérez-Escalá. The film forms part of my hybrid dissertation for my German Studies and Digital Humanities PhD from Michigan State University. The dissertation combines collaborative, creative filmmaking and feminist scholarship and sets out to reframe the woman traveler by focusing on three fundamental issues in feminist filmmaking: body, voice, and collaboration.

In this video essay, I focus primarily on the body, and I make the argument that exploring women's bodies, diverse cultural contexts, postcolonial power relations, and subjectivity is aided by the affordances of audiovisual images. While documentary filmmaking is a growing practice within the field of Rhetoric and Composition, a disciplinary gap persists. In *Cámara Retórica: A Feminist Filmmaking Methodology for Rhetoric and Composition*, Alexandra Hidalgo talks about this gap and explains that there remains a “disconnect between the profound importance of film and video production to our culture and the attention we as a field are paying to it.” In “Totally, Tender, Tragically,” Bonnie Lenore Kyburz echoes this sentiment as she thinks through her own place as a filmmaker and scholar by considering the “creative limitations of group membership” (1). Hidalgo's “Vanishing Fronteras: A Call for Documentary Filmmaking in Cultural Rhetorics (con la ayuda de Anzaldúa)” argues for documentaries' ability to “bring new features to cultural rhetorics scholarship that can help the field better capture the ways in which culture helps define our experience and how others perceive us” (*Fronteras* 0:05:45). At the same

time, however, Hidalgo also admits that there are certain (reading) experiences that are hard, or impossible, to recreate by means of documentary filmmaking (*Fronteras* 0:03:30). Hidalgo's and Kyburz' thinking about limitations and possibilities of using video in our scholarship deeply resonates with me as I set out to make my own arguments for the investment in film and video to gain insights into the spatial and embodied complexities which play a role in our encounters with others.

SUBJECT/OBJECT FLUIDITY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FILMMAKING

One central argument in my video essay is that autobiographical filmmaking is a type of autoethnographic work that affords ways to break down the subject/object binary. I argue that since autobiographical filmmaking requires the inscription of the filmmaker's body into the filmic material, it differs from traditional documentary filmmaking where the *filmmaker* and the *filmmatter* are often divided into two clearly separable categories. This division between *filmmaker* and *filmmatter* has often served to visually master the *filmmatter* for the purpose of establishing power hierarchies with the camera, setting up a frontier between those who are the source of knowledge and those who are the holders and producers of knowledge.

I do not wish to suggest that *all other* documentary filmmaking that is not autobiographical, autoethnographic, or self-reflective is involved in visually mastering and in creating hierarchies through means of filmic representation. Neither do I wish to suggest that autobiographical filmmaking prevents such a troubling use of filmic representation. Instead, I argue that a type of filmmaking, which requires the filmmaker to make an appearance either as the seen, the seer, or the speaker (see Russel), is more likely to reveal the filmmaker as a social actor. The acknowledging of the *filmmaker's* body can remind us that the process of cinematic production is dependent on the participation of others: every image carries the footprints of a culturally and historically situated way of knowing, the absence or presence of an agreement between the camera operator and the object of the gaze, the incentive of economic gain, power relations, gender roles, expected ways of behaving, and so on. Rendering the *filmmaker* as a social actor makes documentary filmmaking not just something that is concerned with showing things, but also with making visible the socially and culturally situated ways of seeing things.

During our travels from Egypt to Germany, I often found myself in situations where I felt like the camera served as a shield we carried close to our bodies in order to protect us. In the streets of Cairo, we found ourselves exposed to increased male attention and used our cameras as a buffer for looks we experienced as uncomfortable. The camera became a body that could return the gaze when our own bodies could not. It became a surrogate body, which we used to regain a sense of agency. At the same time, however, the camera also made us

conscious of our own gaze that we were imposing on others. People reacted to the camera in different ways: some posed to be photographed, while others avoided being filmed. The forces at play when someone acknowledges the filmmaker by looking into the camera in documentary filmmaking are thematized in a much-discussed scene of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983). In this scene, a freelance cameraman sends letters to an unknown woman from different places around the globe as he films people in the Cape Verde Islands waiting on a jetty. Several of the people he films stare right into his camera while he comments: "Frankly, have you ever heard of anything stupider than to say to people as they teach in film schools, not to look at the camera?" The visual contact between the "seer" and the "seen," which Marker reflects on in his voice-over, opens up the space for visual ambiguity. Looking through the camera as an autobiographical filmmaker then also becomes a way of *being viewed*.

The fluidity and mutuality that render the filmmaker as both subject and object are also owed to the advent of hand-held cameras that were robust and light enough to be carried by one person. As an intermediary that could record sound and image, it afforded filmmakers ways to engage in more self-reflective and intersubjective filmmaking practices where the camera could be turned around spontaneously or record the bodily movement of the camera operator (see for example Edgar Morin's and Jean Rouch's *Chronique D'Un Été* [Chronicle of a Summer, 1961] as an example of the type of filmmaking made possible by handheld sound cameras).

The breaking down of subject/object binarities in autobiographical filmmaking is then partly aided by the medium's technical "limitations." Swiss film scholar Christine Brinckmann explains how difficult it is in autobiographical films to say 'I' with the camera. This difficulty in declaring a sequence of audiovisual images as a statement of a single person is related to the technical demands of the medium (Brinckmann 88). She highlights that it is challenging to imagine the protagonist as the cameraperson because then the audience is unable to see her (the protagonist). At the same time, it is difficult to imagine the protagonist not being the camera operator because then the perspective of what is happening is no longer hers (that of the protagonist, which is something we usually expect in an autobiographical film) (Brinckmann 88).¹ In other words, the point of interiority, from which any autobiographical account looks at the world, must be externalized to some degree in autobiographical filmmaking.

I claim that this is an important technical difference to alphabetic writing, where an author's words/alphabetic writing can only be externalized after they have been filtered through the author's own subjectivity. The instantaneous externalization through the camera, however, affords a perceptual opportunity that allows autobiographical filmmakers to see and hear themselves as others. As a type of self-estrangement, the camera as an intermediary can make the filmmaker's own alterity perceivable not only in the moment of image production, but also by serving as a temporal intermediary

between the past, present, and future. In the video essay, I provide an example of how working with autobiographical filmmaking allowed me to look at myself as an object. It shows how I was able to perceive myself from different angles and at different moments in time. In a way, the camera's instrumentality as a means to separate filmmaker and filmmatter is reassigned here as it enables me, the filmmaker, an autoethnographic investigation into the ways in which I am embedded in different cultural contexts and historical frameworks.

HAPTIC FILMMAKING AND THE TRACE OF THE BIO

In the video essay, I also talk about haptic filmmaking and the way it can transmit lived experiences in unique ways. I draw on Laura Marks and her description of haptic visuality as a way of seeing that draws upon visceral experiences and multiple senses, a "kind of seeing that uses the eye like an organ of touch" (Marks Ch. 3.6, location 2732, par. 1). An example of haptic visuality is when one looks at objects from extreme proximity so that the human eye might be able to sense the materiality of the object, but cannot discern what exactly the object is. In order to grasp the image, haptic visuality invites the audience to adapt a more tactile way of seeing.

The way I understand haptic filmmaking in the context of my work does not mean that a haptic image is always perceived as "touch." Instead, I advocate more broadly for the idea that the filmic medium affords access to visceral knowledge that is not accessible through alphabetic language and that haptic filmmaking is one way to think about this.

In their video essay "The Dancing Floor," Sarah Johnson-Arroyo and Bahareh Alaei make a similar case for moving images as affording access to new meanings. They draw on Victor Vitanza's argument that language turns "against the models that are constructed in its name" (148) to point to the limits of alphabetic language. Similar to Marks' idea that "cinema is able to evoke the particularly hard-to-present memories of people who move between cultures, by pointing beyond the limits of sight and sound" (Marks Ch. 3.1, location 2203, par. 2), it is the "trace of the excluded" (Vitanza 4), which made these scholars turn to audiovisual images.

My argument for the use of haptic filmmaking follows these scholars and filmmakers in their search for these traces. As I explore the traces bodies leave on audiovisual images, I mean not just the visual ones when bodies make an appearance on screen, but also the way bodies are involved in the filmmaking process and leave their trace—for example as camera operators (e.g. through the way their bodily movement *behind* the camera transmits meaning and appeals to the senses) and on an audible level (e.g. through their voice, tone, mood, accent, etc.).

Marks' idea of seeing *like* touching serves as a reminder that audiovisual images are dependent on lived experiences and based on translating multi-sensory experiences of 'real bodies' in 'real places' to the screen.ⁱⁱ In the video essay you are

about to watch, I provide an example of how María and I used haptic visuality in our documentary to transmit an experience we encountered at the border between Egypt and Israel.

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About the Author

Anne von Petersdorff is a filmmaker, scholar, and advocate for the public digital humanities. She received her Ph.D. in German Studies and Digital Humanities from Michigan State University where she created her hybrid dissertation which is made up of two equally weighted parts: *Wanderlust, cuerpos en tránsito* (2017), a bi-autobiographical travel documentary, co-directed together with Maria Pérez-Escalá, and a theoretical-historical exploration of film aesthetics. The documentary, *Wanderlust*, has been invited to several international film festivals in Europe and Latin America and aired on national TV in Argentina.

About the Mentor

Alexandra Hidalgo is an award-winning Venezuelan filmmaker, whose documentaries have been official selections for film festivals in 14 countries and been screened at universities around the United States. She is assistant professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures and co-director of the Doc Lab at Michigan State University. Her video book *Cámara Retórica: A Feminist Filmmaking Methodology for Rhetoric and Composition* received the 2017 Computers and Composition Distinguished Book Award. Her academic video essays have been published in *Enculturation*, *Kairos*, *Present Tense*, and *Peitho*, among others. She is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the digital publication *agnès films: supporting women and feminist filmmakers* and of *constellations: a cultural rhetorics publishing space*.

ⁱ One example of an autobiographical film where the protagonist is also the only camera operator and operating the sound is *Kassel 9.12.67*, 11.54h (1968) by Adolf Winkelmann.

ⁱⁱ For the sake of simplicity (and to not enter discussions about documentary vs. not-documentary) we might think of ‘real people’ in documentary filmmaking as non-actors and ‘real places’ as those that exist without the presence of a production company.