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Encounters and affinities: Exchanges through the essay form

Malini Guha

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Abstract

The term interdisciplinary has achieved ‘buzzword’ status across academic channels in recent years. Interdisciplinary methods of research are often carried out as a matter of import and export; terminology is borrowed from across disciplines by scholars and is then applied in an analytical fashion to whatever case study is at hand. In this article, I will present two case studies that position the essay form and especially the essay film, as privileged sites of interdisciplinarity as praxis. The first example centres on the relationship between illustrious cultural geographer Doreen Massey and filmmaker Patrick Keiller. The second case study focuses on the longstanding relationship between cultural studies luminary Stuart Hall and filmmaker John Akomfrah, before and after his tenure as co-founder of Black Audio Film Collective (1982-1998). These case studies illustrate the intellectual promise of interdisciplinary exchange as praxis, shaped by relations of affinity, reciprocity and duration.

Keywords: essay film, interdisciplinary, John Akomfrah, praxis, Stuart Hall

The term interdisciplinary has achieved ‘buzzword’ status across academic channels in recent years. As Masha Salazkina observes, it is found with ‘monotonous regularity’ in calls for papers, job descriptions, academic programs, and funding applications.[1] One trend in this regard is the import/export method: terminology is borrowed from across disciplines and is applied in an analytical fashion to whatever case study is at hand. Can another kind of interdisciplinary project be imagined, one more ambitious and consequently

more fraught in its scope? What would it take to transform film and media studies into an interdisciplinary *project* and why would we want to do so? As Salazkina argues, our enduring disciplinary attachments to questions of medium specificity inadvertently interferes with a pressing need to de-Westernise film and media studies within an Anglophone context.[2] While medium specificity will remain a valuable area of inquiry, the de-Westernisation of film and media studies is a goal often relegated to the edges of disciplinary revision. Doing this work may require moving beyond disciplinary lines, to, as Salazkina writes, ‘extend the geographic contours of our understanding of film and media’.[3]

Against the backdrop of the broader goal of de-Westernisation, I offer two case studies that position the essay, and particularly the essay film, as sites of interdisciplinarity as praxis. These examples do not speak directly to the question of the de-Westernisation of the discipline posed above. However, they model the deeply transformative potentialities of interdisciplinary work forged as encounters that are shaped by relations of affinity, reciprocity, and duration. As such, they give us practices of intellectual and artistic labour that can aid in fulfilling the promise of an alternative future of moving image scholarship. The first example centres on the relationship between illustrious cultural geographer Doreen Massey and filmmaker Patrick Keiller. The second case study focuses on the longstanding relationship between cultural studies luminary Stuart Hall and filmmaker John Akomfrah, before and after his tenure as co-founder of Black Audio Film Collective (1982-1998).

Massey and Hall are figures who have travelled across disciplines; they have conducted interdisciplinary work throughout the entirety of their careers, including with each other, while many of their signature concepts have journeyed far past their disciplinary homes.[4] Akomfrah and Keiller are well-known practitioners of experimental cinema and, significant for the matter at hand, they are emissaries of the essay film tradition. I argue that Massey’s notion of ‘space as becoming’ as well as Hall’s concept of ‘identity as becoming’ bear strong affinities to the essay film as form, drawing upon Keiller’s *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) and Akomfrah’s *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013) as examples. I advance the claim, in conversation with others, that interdisciplinary work that aims to move beyond the import/export model must also engage with the question of form.[5] Why are certain genres, including the essay film, so conducive to an interdisciplinary praxis?

Interdisciplinarity as praxis: A formal matter

The notion of interdisciplinarity as praxis that I develop in this essay takes its initial inspiration from a passing observation made by Gayatri Spivak. In an interview with *e-flux*, Spivak recounts her experience of translating Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. She remarks,

But one thing I've never done is apply theory. Theorizing is a practice. It becomes internalized. You are changed in your thinking and that shows in your work.[6]

Spivak makes clear that an application of theoretical concepts does not lead to the transformative potentiality of theorising, if undertaken as a practice. Stuart Hall proposes a similar distinction between an external method of interdisciplinarity and something internal; when writing about the relationship between sociology and cultural studies, Hall observes that the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies had to '[appropriate] sociology from within', as opposed to 'grafting sociology on to Cultural Studies from the outside – though this was often what, at the time, "interdisciplinary" was taken to mean'.[7] Like Spivak, Hall situates the struggles of the Centre (in those early days) as building towards 'the best kind of theoretically informed practice'.[8] A theoretically informed practice is invested in the question of *how* intellectual work is performed and not just the theories or methods in use. These authors suggest that intellectual labour that is transformative in its undertakings must begin from 'inside out'. While Spivak addresses an individual scholarly practice in her observations and Hall further references the formation of an entire field, both situate the application model as external and unidirectional.

Spivak's and Hall's comments reverberate with the enduring traces of a persistent debate that has often pitted theory against practice, where thinking is opposed to doing. Theory is, of course, one of Raymond Williams' key-words, explored in conjunction with the terms practice and later praxis. Williams charts some of the significant tensions that arise between theory and practice, where they are occasionally reconciled (though distinguishable) and at other times thoroughly pulled apart.[9] Praxis, as Williams writes, is 'intended to unite theory with the strongest sense of the practical: practice as action'.[10] Theory and practice inform each other in this model, to varying degrees, which is the approach Hall advocates for. While theory and practice still remain distinguishable, they constitute a 'whole activity' in this scenario.[11] I advance an analogous claim regarding interdisciplinary methods

of research; while the transformative promise of such work is staggering, it is often unrealised through import/export methods that serve as examples of application rather than praxis. Praxis is envisioned as a mutually enriching set of exchanges, ones that transform the thinking of its participants while also generating alternate methods of research that could only have stemmed from such encounters. The case studies that constitute the crux of this essay yield two trajectories of exchange; one involving cross-disciplinary encounters that centre on theoretical concepts and another, where such encounters transpire between figures working across different mediums of expression. I suggest that both these scenarios count as illustrations of ‘practice as action’ that have resulted in multiple forms of dissemination, including the scholarly essay and the essay film.

It is the varied nature of these presentational forms that lead me to explore the question of what genres prove amenable to interdisciplinarity as praxis, in conjunction with Hall’s assertion that form matters when embarking upon a praxis-based approach. In ‘Aesthetic Matters: Writing and Cultural Studies’, Ben Highmore asks ‘what sorts of forms and genres has Cultural Studies generated in the past and what forms and genres might it produce in the future as part of its ambition and desire for a distinctive engagement with the world’.[12] I modify this question in asking what forms and genres of interdisciplinary research has film studies produced that might prove significant for a future that engages with moving image practices, histories, and theories in a global context? Though this question cannot be addressed in any kind of fullness within the scope of a single essay, it remains at the forefront of my thinking about these case studies. More simply, Highmore asks, ‘what does a particular form allow a practice to do?’[13] He makes an intriguing claim in this regard, and in part through an aesthetic analysis of Hall’s intellectual pursuits (including keynotes, conference papers, and journal articles). He characterises Hall’s approach as one of ‘mixed registers’, described as ‘the combination of intellectual, political, and moral seriousness with a lightness and looseness of presentation and performance’.[14] Highmore privileges mixed registers as among the most expansive of cultural studies approaches to scholarly work, one that facilitates ‘complexity and contradiction’.[15] A version of mixed registers is in evidence across my case study examples, the most prominent of which is the essay film.

Cross-disciplinary constellations: Cultural geography meets the moving image

Two overarching questions preside over this subsection of the essay: what makes a number of Massey's key geographical concepts conducive to the study of moving images, and why did Massey gravitate towards the moving image in her longstanding scholarly commitment to matters of space and place? In 'Landscape/space/politics: an essay', Massey performs a textual analysis, typical of a film studies scholar, of Keiller's *Robinson in Ruins*, the third film in his loose 'Robinson trilogy', which also includes *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997). Both the essay and the film are two outputs of their collaborative project, which was instigated at the behest of Keiller. During a panel discussion, Massey clarifies the roles assumed by each of the participants; while they were each responsible for a single output, they were all collaborative in nature as they shared in each other's production processes. The essay and essay film constitute two key elements of their praxis as a whole activity, where theoretical writing meets essayistic filmmaking.[16]

The essay film aims to emulate the process of thinking through moving images and sounds. This is a cinema of ideas and *for* ideas that are shaped as non-linear formal configurations and often accompanied by voice-over narration that denotes, as Timothy Corrigan puts it, 'an unsettled subjectivity'.[17] As is true of the essay, as discussed famously by Theodor Adorno, and the essay film, this is a hybrid form that 'inhabits' fictional and non-fictional practices as well as multiple mediums of artistic expression.[18] Highmore's notion of mixed registers is given a particular inflection in its application to the essay film as the provenance of the form spans literary, philosophical and theoretical channels. The form's adherence to method is complex: as Adorno has claimed, the essay proceeds 'methodically unmethodically', unfolding like 'the threads of a carpet'.[19] These works are best described as constellations that have been assembled through a laborious intellectual engagement with its chosen subjects. The essay is a preeminent example of both a historically and theoretically informed practice.

Keiller's essayistic practice is primarily spatial in its orientation, grounded in an earlier predilection to photograph 'found architecture', including old sites and ruins of industry.[20] As Keiller describes it, his broader aim was to transform even the most recognisable and iconic of structures, to 'set out and re-imagine spatial subjects'.[21] Keiller simultaneously operates in a traditional scholarly mode, as he has held fellowships and visiting professorships,

and has published numerous essays in addition to a book that illuminates aspects of his practice (*The View From the Train: Cities and Other Landscapes*[22]). Keiller engages in a hybrid or mixed practice, where his essayistic ventures inform and nourish each other.

In her essay, Massey situates *Robinson in Ruins* as a research method, through which a central question emerges: 'to whom does the landscape belong?'[23] Keiller's method resonates with *London* and *Robinson in Space*, with a few notable differences. Titles at the start of the film establish a fictitious conceit, which is that *Robinson in Ruins* is a found footage film. They inform us that members of a research team, one that we eventually learn is working on a project that investigates the transformative power of landscape, has assembled some of this footage into the film we are about to watch, narrated by the team's co-founder. The voice-over narration is spoken by Vanessa Redgrave in place of Paul Schofield, who narrated the previous two films. *Robinson in Ruins* makes playful reference to the conditions of its making, as an exponent of a collaborative research project. As is true of the previous films, Keiller employs a static camera, and the film's otherwise steady rhythm is periodically punctuated by shots that last on screen for a significant duration. This formal pattern, in conjunction with the constellation-like effect of the content of the narration, leads both Keiller and Mark Fisher to refer to the film as a spiral.[24]

We learn that Robinson is the cinematographer of the images that we see. The film makes good on its title, as Robinson journeys across rural landscapes in Oxfordshire populated with ruins, including remnants of once active pipelines and other monuments to industry and high finance. However, Robinson's attention is simultaneously drawn to the flora and fauna of the landscapes he traverses, thus intertwining an economic narrative with an ecological one, also echoed by the narration which details the global dimensions of the 2007-08 financial crisis. A similar intertwining is articulated in a quote from Fredric Jameson that is read out by Redgrave early in the film. Jameson declares that it is easier to imagine the end of the earth than the end of late capitalism. Such is the failure of imagination, according to Jameson.

The spatial subject that is researched and re-imagined by Keiller is the agricultural landscape. If, as he notes, such landscapes are often pictured as one of the last bastions of traditional dwelling in a globalised, hypermobile world, *Robinson in Ruins* unearths 16th century narratives of displacement, dispossession, and fierce resistance to the dismantling of the commons that continues to haunt these lands. Keiller refers to Robinson as a 'would be

scholar' with the itinerary of a Baudelarian flâneur let loose in the countryside and with an analogue camera.[25] Keiller's version of the essay film, which gives rise to a particular kind of cinematic thinking, features a protagonist whose ideas and thoughts are quoted and discussed by other narrators. Robinson himself is an absence/presence, as he is never actualised in corporeal form in any of the films. But as Keiller notes, this is the first time that Robinson has vanished, and possibly for good.

In what ways do these two essays – one written by Massey and the other filmed by Keiller – constitute two components of a praxis-based approach to the topic of landscape and belonging? How do they speak to each other through these forms? While Keiller's film is clearly informed by theory, Massey's essay, in turn, is influenced by the formal procedures of *Robinson in Ruins*. The film enables us to witness Massey's views of space in action. For example, Massey writes about the moments of biophilia that proliferate the film. The narrator describes Robinson's inclination towards biophilia over a long take of a white foxglove that sways in and out of the frame. Eventually the narration ceases, as is true of all of these instances in the film, and we are presented with a close-up of the undulating foxglove, accompanied by a soundscape comprised of different species of birds, the wind, and possibly an airplane overhead. The camera is static but the image is in full motion. In these durational encounters with flowers and fields, Massey sees her own understanding of spatiality come to life in formal terms; as she puts it, 'They tell us of "becoming" in place.' [26]

One of Massey's signature concepts concerns 'space as becoming', one she returns to time and again across her vast body of work. For example, in a published conversation with film and television scholar Karen Lury, she writes,

And philosophically I would argue anyway for a conceptualization of space which incorporated precisely this principle no spaces are stable, given for all time; all spaces are transitory and one of the most crucial things about spatiality (a characteristic which lends both its continual openness and, thus, its availability to politics) is that it is always being made.[27]

Massey delineates space as the site of difference.[28] Her much-cited phrase, 'stories so far', similarly describes this particular quality of space, which is produced through a multiplicity of narratives that lend it a provisional, rather than static character.[29] This claim is grounded in her refusal to proffer distinctions between space and time; space is shot through with a multiplicity of temporal registers and thus can never be confined within the bounds of a

single story.[30] As recounted by Massey in several essays, her notion of space *as* time intervenes within certain geographical discourses, whose emissaries include David Harvey, Michel de Certeau, and others, who all relegate space to the domain of representation.[31] In collapsing the distinction between space and time, Massey not only renews space as a site of openness that pulsates with temporality but redeems representation itself as a conduit through which to grasp the dynamism of space-time.

What I also see is the affinity of the essay film as form to Massey's understanding of space as becoming. In keeping with the reflexive nature of the essay film, there is an extended sequence featuring a close-up of a spider whom we observe remaking its dwelling in real time, one thread at a time. In Massey's reading, this sequence is emblematic of all of the multiple threads the film pulls together:

big systems, huge infrastructural networks, the military, the financial crisis itself, closing in as the spider weaves its web. The complexities of global capital; the pretensions and attendant subordinations of geopolitics.[32]

In place of Adorno's carpet threads we have a spider web – an updated metaphor for certain kinds of essay making in these times. As Adorno notes, discontinuity is an essential feature of the essay, which unexpectedly converges with Massey's view of space as one of difference that time essentially brings.[33] The seamless quality of the image is continually unsettled through voice-over narration, which gives presence to other narratives that, as she writes, 'shoots out of the soil'.[34] One of Massey's most significant arguments resides in her claim that while representation can convey the provisional and unfinished nature of space, space itself is not synonymous with representation because it encompasses multiple temporalities for which no visible trace exists; for Massey, these histories are without finality and constitute 'loose ends in space'.[35] A key example is the uprising led by Bartholomew Steer in the 16th century in the village of Hampton Gaye, against the Barry family who enclosed aspects of the land when they built their manor. While portions of the story are explained through voice-over narration, it is never completed. In a difference sequence, the voice-over narration tells us that Robinson believed that looking closely at landscape 'hard enough might reveal the molecular basis of historic events and in this way he hoped to see into the future'. Later in the film, there is a sequence that consists of close-ups of lichen on road signs for Newberry. The voice-narration explains that the lichen offer examples of 'mutualism, where all partners benefit from

their association'. This sequence provides an antidote for the problems of belonging raised in the film. The essay film, as a hybrid, complex and open form, is particularly suited to a depiction of Massey's specific understanding of space. In the organisation of her essay, Massey takes her cue from the film itself. As she writes,

The camera stays still at each point; it concentrates; in some small measure it gives each its due. And at each point we are in the midst of an ongoing story.[36]

As she states later, this is what she does in her lengthy essay by elaborating upon many of the stories of the landscape referenced in *Robinson in Ruins*. For example, she offers a fuller explication of the history of the uprisings against land enclosures in Otmoor in the mid-1800s, detailed in the film over a long take of a tractor moving across a field that is vigorously pursued by seagulls. During another section of the essay, she describes a sequence in the film and writes, 'Pause for a moment, as the camera does, at the rural road sign.'[37] This sign points towards Thatcham, enabling Massey to offer further details concerning an agricultural labour uprising in the region in the mid-1800s that is mentioned in the film.

Massey's essay does not simply perform an analysis of sections of the film. Rather, it is the film's companion piece. Massey's tone is dialogical and to a large extent assumes the shape of the film itself. The transformative possibilities of the interdisciplinary encounter come to fruition in this example of a theoretically informed film and a cinematically informed essay. The project as a whole yields fresh insight on the role of agricultural landscapes in the formation of 'the market' while making visible once again all of the labour related uprisings that fought hard against the enclosure and subsequent privatisation of land. Both outputs speak back to Massey's claim that geography and cinema are inherently linked through a mutual preoccupation with questions of space, representation, and social relations.[38]

The searchlight turned back: Akomfrah and Hall's 'Practice of Friendship'

Moving images, identity, and theory are the among the most prominent of moving parts stemming from the 'unfinished' conversation between Hall and Akomfrah that unfolded over a 25 year period. *The Unfinished Conversation*

(2012) is also the name of Akomfrah's three-channel moving image installation dedicated to Hall, out of which grew *The Stuart Hall Project*. Akomfrah's first encounter with Hall transpired across the television screen while watching *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum* (1979), made by the group Campaign Against Racism in the Media.[39] He notes that Hall was among the few people of colour to grace the British television screen in that period who was not an athlete or a performer.[40] Television is the medium through which a transformative experience was wrought. When Akomfrah encounters Hall in the flesh for the first time during a lecture at Open University, the term ideology becomes another flashpoint. Akomfrah's narration of this event centres upon the trauma of identification. This trauma, over which the spectre of Fanon presides, is the moment when Akomfrah internalises a view of himself as racialised Other, as 'the trouble, the nightmare from which others are trying to wake'.[41] Upon hearing Hall speak about ideology, and later, reading his scholarly work, Akomfrah observes: 'From that point on, you begin to piece it together; you start to understand how you and that phantom became fused into this monstrously unfamiliar whole, this new figure of abjection.'[42] Hall's work enables Akomfrah to understand the vicissitudes of his own condition, thus igniting a cinematic practice that began with Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) and continues today.[43]

Akomfrah's varied encounters with Hall transformed him and members of BAFC into 'representational activists', which constitutes a vital example of practice as action.[44] Hall's notion of a theoretically informed practice doubles as an appropriate description of BAFC and Akomfrah's work more broadly. BAFC's practice is always in dialogue with theory, as embodied in figures like Hall but also Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Homi K. Bhabha, and many others. As a practice that often takes the shape of the essay film, Akomfrah's work with BAFC and beyond demonstrates the labour of engagement with theoretical concepts at the level of form, as films that think as well as *feel* their way through questions of identity, diaspora, and memory.[45] The interdisciplinary and intertextual nature of Akomfrah's work, in conjunction with a long history of working collaboratively with a plethora of artists and thinkers, also speaks to the influence, as least in part, of Hall's working practices. As Charlotte Brunson explains, 'Stuart's legacy is not just what he thought, but how he "did thinking" – with others, in constant dialogue, a practice of exploring, of learning, of teaching, of making thinking.'[46] The essay film is yet another method of making thought.

A significant portion of Hall's work on representation and identity engages with BAFC as well as other exponents of Black British cinema both on and off the page. Akomfrah's invitation to Hall to view a newly completed version of *Handsworth Songs* (1984) is a widely told story, as is Hall's defense of the film against Salman Rushdie's notorious critique of it in *The Guardian* and a further recounting of the incident in 'New Ethnicities'. Rushdie's critique centres on what he situates as the film's over-emphasis on structural understandings of 'race' and 'criminality', which works to obscure the voices of Handsworth residents.[47] Hall laments Rushdie's inability to grasp the struggle which it represents, precisely, to find a new language. The most obvious thing to me about the film is its break with the tired style of the riot-documentary.[48]

Struggles connected to the quest to find a new language to describe configurations that are always both old and new are endemic to Hall's practice. He outlines the complexities of such an endeavour as it pertains to the Centre's early formation, including their working definition of culture. Hall writes, 'The term culture could not simply be taken on loan from other traditions of thought and surreptitiously applied, by indefinite extension, to an unfolding series of objects.'[49] The difficulty of rethinking theoretical concepts in their application to new contexts is not dissimilar to Akomfrah's, and by extension BAFC's, mission to find a new formal language suited to the contemporary political moment. This conflict plays out in this example, where *Handsworth Songs* was in need of new frameworks of analysis that someone like Hall, unlike Rushdie, could supply.

The Stuart Hall Project marks a different moment in Akomfrah's ongoing dialogue with Hall, one that he has described as a 'practice of friendship'.[50] In a recorded lecture titled 'The Origins of Cultural Study', Hall explains the project of cultural studies thus: 'the searchlight of critical analytical attention – well that was the vocation of cultural studies, that's what cultural studies in Britain was about'. In this film, Akomfrah turns a 'searchlight of critical analytic attention' upon Hall himself. More precisely, he unearths 8,000 hours of BBC television footage and radio segments spanning over 50 years that documents a significant portion of Hall's remarkable history as a public intellectual and as a media personality.

In his review of *The Stuart Hall Project*, Ashley Clark notes its links to Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2010), in the film's extensive use of archival footage and sounds – but I would add, in the way this footage signifies indexically

and expressionistically across the breadth of the film.[51] This is what Highmore has referred to as Akomfrah's predilection for 'interfering' with archival materials.[52] While I discuss this aspect of the film in greater detail below, at this juncture I want to suggest that *The Stuart Hall Project* provides a variation of the mixed registers approach that has come to define the tone of Hall's oeuvre. In a review of a conference titled 'Living Archive', Hall has this to say about the concept: 'Consequently, heterogeneity, the multiplicity of discourses, not only of practice but of criticism, history and theory, of personal story, anecdote and biography, are the "texts" which make the archive live.'[53] This is a second phrase by Hall that seems made for yet another Akomfrah project. *The Stuart Hall Project*, in bringing together extracts of Hall's television and radio engagements in a constellation-like relation with footage of the most significant global events that have contributed to Hall's formation, cycles through history, theory, anecdote, and biography. The film shows us Hall in action against the backdrop of a constantly shifting, turbulent, global context.

In this essay, I concentrate on the film's cultivation of a montage aesthetic. The term montage has been used by Akomfrah in interviews and essays as a way of describing what many have identified as Hall's 'protean sensibility', where, as Schwarz observes, 'bits of him could be allied to multiple, contrary positions'.[54] Schwarz inadvertently espouses a classic definition of montage in this statement, where 'bits' can shift in meaning and signification depending on the conditions and circumstances of their deployment. Akomfrah writes that Hall '...as a figure of montage, with a diversity of interests, identities and orientations, seemed to hold clues as to what an alternative could literally be like'.[55] Hall also uses the language of montage when describing the value of diasporic thinking vis-à-vis the workings of the imaginary. In his memoir, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*, Hall pronounces montage as 'the lifeblood' of the imaginary, which is governed by the logic of condensation, alternation, slippage, and substitution.[56] He concludes: 'We have to work *with* such ways of telling and speaking, with no attempt to iron out the disruptions.'[57] The essay film, as a form made to the measure of montage, is particularly amenable to the depiction of Hall as 'figure of montage' and as 'a diasporic subject' who learns to live with displacement and disruption.[58] As I have argued previously, the essay film bears strong affinities with an Eisensteinian notion of intellectual montage, coupled with a montage impulse that can be detected across some of the writing on the literary essay, particularly in Adorno's claim that discontinuity is essential to the unfolding

of the essay.[59] *The Stuart Hall Project* is structured on the basis of periodisations that initiate configurations comprised of archival images and sounds that are united on the basis of theme or concept. The film has become famous for the way it intertwines Hall's trajectory with songs by Miles Davis that correspond to and yet remain distinct from their relationship to each period under investigation. Both the memoir and film inform us that Miles Davis 'put his finger' on Hall's soul.[60]

There is a fascinating confluence between *The Stuart Hall Project* and *Familiar Stranger* that Hall himself raises in a discussion session. He makes mention of an 'unfinished memoir', alongside of film and *The Unfinished Conversation* as texts that 'resituate me in a context that I was wandering about, trying to find'. The memoir, as is the case with Hall's body of work, was also a collective effort. The memoir was intended to be published as a conversation between Bill Schwarz and Hall, a project that was still incomplete at the time of Hall's death. Schwarz continued to edit the manuscript and it was eventually decided that it would read as first person narration.[61] *Familiar Stranger*, as a scholarly memoir, adopts a mixed registers approach, where theoretical insight rests alongside of rich historical detail and vivid personal recollections. While the memoir and the film are radically different in their construction, they often traverse similar ground in their attempts to restore a formative context to Hall's intellectual trajectory. In the sections that follow, I put the two in conversation when relevant.

Hall becomes a figure of montage in *The Stuart Hall Project* by virtue of its formal procedures: his image and his voice are dispersed across the film through the use of radio recordings, visual imagery, and photographs, the latter of which also appear in the memoir. It is an aesthetic that produces Hall in a state of becoming, in line with his seminal work on identity as becoming.[62] This quality is expressed through intertextual means, as is typical of Akomfrah's style. But what I find striking about the film is the way it situates Hall in a 'context he was trying to find', that is within the context of ever-shifting global dynamics and relations. The world, as such, is evoked in this film through archival footage and photographs of some of the major events of the 1950s onwards, including but not limited to: the arrival of British troops marking the invasion of Egypt during the Suez crisis; men with guns stalking the streets during the onset of the Hungarian Revolution; large-scale protests during May '68; and the arrival of Black migrants from the Caribbean by ship and on trains, many of whom gaze directly into the camera. This imagery does not always stem from Hall's appearances on television or

from the programmes he participated in. Rather, these images speak to the question of Hall's formation, within and against ongoing processes of decolonisation. Brunsdon offers an eloquent summary of one of Hall's most cherished methods of analysis, which involves seeing 'the world in a grain of sand'.^[63] Highmore also alludes to this aspect of the film, arguing that Akomfrah gives us a Hall 'possessed, inhabited, ruptured from an elegiac aesthetic that grasps recent history from an uncertain future'.^[64] Montage is the crucial device in this regard.

There is a section of the film where Davis' 'Silent Way' is the ambient soundtrack for a composite depiction of the birth of one of Hall's children. Archival footage of a woman giving birth gives way to black-and-white photographs of Hall and Catherine Hall on a seaside with the child as the sound of a beating heart forges a sonic bridge between the footage and the photograph. Colour footage of the seaside is interspersed with the photographs until a jarring cut and slightly unsettling tone in the music takes us to the events of Selma, Alabama in 1965, including photographs of the notorious acts of police brutality inflicted upon those marching for civil rights. Hall's voice is heard over these images and he explains that 'identity always is constructed in a conversation with who we are and the political ideologies out there'. Eventually, Hall's voice is reunited with his image as we cut to footage of him further explaining that identity is 'the product of an ongoing, endless conversation with everybody around you'.

Akomfrah stitches together archival footage to tell the story of the birth of Hall's child, drawing from images that do not indexically belong to this narrative. He takes great liberties with the archival footage, as is also true of *The Nine Muses*. This sequence suggests that this event in Hall's life occurs simultaneously with the Civil Rights Movement in America and that his ideas pertaining to identity, as constructed within and against an existing ideological landscape, are imminently applicable to an understanding of the fight for Black liberation. This mini constellation of images, voices, and sounds interweaves biography with theory against a historical backdrop that tethers Hall to events of seismic significance. We can see the world in Hall, and also Hall in the world. The relation is rendered in all of its reciprocity, suggesting that Hall is becoming in a world that is also in a complex and often violent process of postcolonial becoming.

These gestures are repeated across the film. Over the melancholy tones of Davis' 'My Funny Valentine', we hear Hall's voice, telling us that history is never finalised: 'another history is always possible, another turning is waiting

to happen'. The images include soldiers jumping from planes and tanks moving across an arid landscape in Egypt in 1956, followed by footage of more tanks, but this time moving through Hungary. The story continues as the title 'New Voices' appears and more footage of the Hungarian revolution appears on screen, accompanied by Hall's analytical insights concerning Britain's 'gunboat diplomacy' regarding Suez as well as the start of the Hungarian uprising against the Soviet Union. The dawn of the Hungarian Revolution and the invasion of Egypt, which happen during the same historical moment, are situated as the start of Hall's New Left experience. This sequence uses archival imagery to visualise one of Hall's formative moments, which is his involvement in New Left politics. Once again, biography, history, and analysis meet forcefully in this example, when we hear Hall's voice explain that between these two events, a vision of a democratic, socialist, anti-imperialist politics was born.

The Stuart Hall Project operates within the domain of formation, so that Hall's theories and his very person are brought together with the circumstances that he has commented upon and that have made him. While watching the film, I am also struck by a fundamental incommensurability between Hall and the world, even in the midst of techniques designed to bring the two into relation. The world is not at Hall's behest; it continually exceeds him. This argument is borne from the breadth of historical contexts that come into view and the content of the images themselves that often feature scores of unnamed individuals in public spaces, engaged in diverse activities of world-making as well as world-breaking. To make this claim is not to undermine the brilliance of Hall's insights but to understand that the turning of which Hall speaks always ensures that the world will move beyond one's analytical prowess.

This quality of the film bears some affinities with Hall's own pronouncements concerning cultural studies as 'the intellectual project'.^[65] Parallels can be drawn between Hall's understanding of the vocation of cultural studies and the tributary lens that Akomfrah casts upon him in this film. As Hall writes in 'Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies', while the insights theory brings to the work of a political practice are invaluable, this practice must also remain attentive to 'the modesty of theory, the necessary modesty of cultural studies as an intellectual project'.^[66] This modesty stems from a reckoning with what *should* feel like the limitations of cultural studies to effect material change in the world.^[67] The film positions itself within this tension

as the editing draws our attention to Hall's critical engagement and involvement with global events while simultaneously showing us that the world is only partially ever within his grasp; this aspect of the film comes to the fore near the end, when a much older Hall reveals that he feels both 'out of time' and the increasingly strangeness of the world. *The Stuart Hall Project* translates this method of doing cultural studies into an aesthetic that is demonstrative of the complexities of Hall's chosen path.

The world in this film is also inclusive of Jamaica and the life Hall lived before arriving to Britain as a student at Oxford. There is a section of the film that performs a critique of his mother's aspirations of grandeur that placed on her the side of the British and against both working class Jamaicans and those who were of darker skin. The story is narrated through a compendium of footage, including a television programme where Hall returns to Jamaica in the 1990s, as well as photographs of his mother and himself as a teenager. The story extends to his sister, who became a victim of his mother's colonial aspirations, as her desire to marry a Black doctor was thwarted, sending her into a mental health spiral. Hall is situated in a deeply personal context in this film in its most biographical moments that were foundational for the work he went on to do as a cultural theorist and intellectual. This is the context that Hall has longed to restore to an understanding of his work, as expressed in *Familiar Stranger*. He writes, 'this book stands as an experiment in drawing out what connections I can between my "life" and my "ideas", in so far as these are ever separable'. [68] Aspects of *The Stuart Hall Project* follow this trajectory in including footage that details aspects of Hall's early life, which are more fully elaborated upon in the memoir. In some respects, Hall was always already of the diaspora: as he observes in the memoir, he was 'someone born out of place', and from there his displacements continue. [69] The essay film as form captures this key quality of the diasporic experience as form and as *feeling*. Late Hall meets an established Akomfrah in this work.

Conclusion: Essayistic ventures in interdisciplinarity as becoming

Both Massey and Hall are great proponents of the possibility of the alternative – that history could always be otherwise, and just as significantly, that there are always alternatives, even if those in power persistently suggest otherwise. As Massey writes, 'Such reductions of the world serve, as always, to

cover over the reality that there are always alternatives, and that the way ahead they urge upon us is a thoroughly political choice.’[70] Akomfrah’s and Keiller’s filmmaking practices exemplify a similar preoccupation with imagining a different world. The two examples of interdisciplinarity as praxis explored in this essay are demonstrative of the alternative paths of research and of making embarked upon by artists and scholars. What lessons can be gleaned from their methods?

The hybrid nature of the essay film as form is inherently conducive to the aims of an interdisciplinary praxis. This is particularly the case with Massey and Hall, whose most significant concepts involve becoming. The scholarly memoir is similarly a hybrid, open form that allows for a mixed registers approach that Highmore deems especially generative in a cultural studies context, and by extension for an interdisciplinary context that moves beyond cultural studies and into other domains. As he notes, this approach treats the reader as a ‘fellow traveller’ who is encouraged to develop responses to the work at hand by ‘echoing its modes of attention’.[71] Certainly, this assertion is applicable to the essay film, which does not try to convince viewers of its positions, but rather coaxes the viewer to follow the process of thinking that it sets in motion. Highmore also cites reflexivity as ‘the best route to engaging with the world in the most direct and most material way’.[72] All of the forms examined in this essay – and here we can include Massey’s essay – are reflexive in their orientation and thus exemplify a direct and material engagement with the worlds they examine. They constitute examples of interdisciplinarity as becoming.

Returning to the provocation raised at the start of this essay: do these examples enable us to envision another future for film and media studies, one that makes more room for collaborative, praxis-centered approaches? In the first instance, the slippages across this essay between film, media, and moving images already point towards the difficulty of imagining such a project outside of medium-specific bounds, even if they are already blurred to a large extent across scholarly and material registers. But just as importantly, it is clear that these models of interdisciplinarity as praxis cannot achieve ‘buzzword status’. Such research is dependent upon a confluence of factors, equal parts historical, theoretical, and personal that cannot be readily reproduced. There is no model to follow, no singular method to embark upon, though there are tools to begin the work. In conjunction with mixed registers and reflexivity, these examples of praxis cultivate reciprocity amongst participants so that theory and practice meet in a whole activity.

The import/export model of interdisciplinarity persists because such methods are within the realm of what is possible, particularly within university structures that make it particularly hard to move beyond disciplinary silos. And yet, the ‘buzzword’ moment is precisely the time to push for alternatives, for more funding and other forms of administrative assistance that will enable more of us to explore praxis-based research that might restore a sense of what Highmore refers to as the ‘solidarity’ between artists and writers that a professionalised academia has made increasingly difficult.[73] Highmore cites BAFC and their relationship with Hall as among the most vibrant examples of solidarity in this regard. Certainly, Massey’s collaboration with Keiller and others is an example for the present, as is Akomfrah’s continual engagement with Hall throughout the entirety of his career. These instances of collaboration and in this case ones that do in fact offer potent critiques of ‘the west’ along the lines of neoliberal capitalism and racialised oppression offer glimpses of another moving image studies future that we might want to consider realising.

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Notes

- [1] Salazkina also notes that the 'transnational' is similarly one of these buzzword phrases (Salazkina 2015, p. 326).
- [2] *Ibid.*, p. 338.
- [3] *Ibid.*
- [4] For example, see Massey & Rustin & Hall 2016.
- [5] This question is inspired by Highmore 2018, p. 240.
- [6] Spivak 2016.
- [7] Hall 1991, p. 10.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- [9] Williams 1983, p. 317.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 318.
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] Highmore 2018, p. 240.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 244.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 244.
- [16] Given the brevity of this essay, I decided to restrict my analysis to Massey and Keiller's respective outputs.
- [17] Corrigan 2011, p. 55.
- [18] Adorno 1958, p. 3; Corrigan 2011, p. 51.
- [19] Adorno 1958, p. 13.
- [20] Keiller 2013, p. 77.
- [21] *Ibid.*, pp. 77; 83.
- [22] Kinik 2010, p. 107.
- [23] Massey 2013.
- [24] Keiller 2011, p. 3; Fisher 2010, p. 12.
- [25] Keiller 2011, p. 1.
- [26] Massey 2013.
- [27] Lury & Massey 1999, p. 231.
- [28] *Ibid.*
- [29] Massey 2005, p. 130.
- [30] Lury & Massey 1999, p. 231. See also Massey 1994 and Massey 2005.
- [31] Lury & Massey 1999, pp. 233-234.
- [32] Massey 2013.
- [33] Adorno 1958, p. 16.

- [34] Massey 2013.
- [35] Ibid.
- [36] Ibid.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Lury & Massey 1999, p. 233.
- [39] Akomfrah 2019.
- [40] Akomfrah 2013, p. 5.
- [41] Akomfrah 2017, p. 188.
- [42] Ibid., p. 189.
- [43] Bogues & Akomfrah 2017, p. 85.
- [44] Akomfrah 2017, p. 200.
- [45] As Akomfrah notes, his work is as motivated by emotional questions as they are by formal ones. See Eshun 2007, p. 133.
- [46] Brundson 2017, p. 152.
- [47] See <https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=1343>
- [48] Hall 1987.
- [49] Hall 1991, p. 13.
- [50] Bogues & Akomfrah 2017, p. 83.
- [51] Clark 2013, p. 67.
- [52] Highmore 2014, p. 145.
- [53] Hall 2008, p. 92.
- [54] Schwarz 2017, p. 32.
- [55] Akomfrah 2017, p. 187.
- [56] Hall 2017, p. 171.
- [57] Ibid.
- [58] Ibid.
- [59] See Guha 2018.
- [60] Hall 2017, p. 129.
- [61] Schwarz 2017, p. xv.
- [62] For example, see Hall 1989, p. 70.
- [63] Brunsdon 2017, p. 154.
- [64] Highmore 2014, p. 147.
- [65] Hall 1996, p. 267.
- [66] Ibid., p. 272.
- [67] Ibid., p. 271.
- [68] Hall 2017, p. 63.

[69] Ibid., p. 95.

[70] Massey 2013.

[71] Highmore 2018, p. 243.

[72] Ibid., p. 258.

[73] Highmore 2014, p. 147.