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## Desktop documentary: From artefact to artist(ic) emotions

Miklós Kiss

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### Abstract

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of desktop documentaries is their affordance of making and presenting a video at the same time: i.e., collapsing boundaries between revealing their thinking and tinkering research process (as unfolding, step-by-step, in front of our eyes) and the presentation of the outcomes of such 't(h)inking' (arriving at results and, thereby, justifying the presented research methods). They are 'exploratory' and 'explanatorily argumentative' in one. There is a particular effect that emerges from such transparent, credible, and effortless performativity – a relaxed and seemingly spontaneous presentation of an unfolding argument in an environment (software on desktop) and through methods (typing, dragging, opening files) that is familiar and rather natural to all viewers. In this paper, I aim to take a closer look at these fundamental qualities – 'transparency', 'credibility', 'effortlessness', and 'performativity' – respectively, and reveal their distinct as well as joint effects, ultimately resulting in what I will call, 'artist(ic) emotions'.

**Keywords:** artefact emotions, artist emotions, audiovisual essay, desktop documentary, performativity, subjectivisation, video essay, videographic criticism

### *What do I see? What is a desktop documentary?*

The desktop documentary is both a filmmaking method and presentation mode: 'an interdisciplinary computer-based variant of the essay film'[2] in which '[s]creen capturing software takes the place of the camera, turning the

computer screen into both the method of production and of dissemination of such a documentary'.[3] As Kevin B. Lee puts it, '[t]his form of filmmaking treats the computer screen as both a camera lens and a canvas'.[4] When played out on its viewer's own desktop, it appears, in Chloé Galibert-Lainé's words, as if one's 'device is suddenly possessed by someone else – it's like a ghost who is moving the mouse around'.[5]

According to Wanda Strauven,[6] the term 'desktop documentary' was coined by Lee, first appearing in the title of his 2014 video *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE (a desktop documentary)*. [7] However, it is difficult to put a finger on the exact moment of the (clearly much earlier) origin of this hybrid audiovisual genre.[8] The technique certainly has roots in screen recording and screencasting practices that are used for capturing and then presenting complex flows of actions unfolding on-screen (for gameplay recording or 'how-to' videos, often including voice-over narration and post-production captions), in video art (as in Camille Henrot's 2013 short video *Grosse Fatigue*), and has close affiliation with genres like the 'desktop film', 'screen movie', 'screencast film', 'Zoom film' (fiction films which are played out entirely in a desktop environment: examples include early shorts like Adam Butcher's 2010 *Internet Story* and Patrick Cederberg and Walter Woodman's 2013 *Noah*. Well-known features include Levan Gabriadze's 2014 *Unfriended* and Aneesh Chaganty's 2018 *Searching*, and a recent, COVID-19 quarantine-inspired horror by Rob Savage (2020) called *Host*, which plays out entirely as a video conference call in Zoom), or the 'expanded cinema performance' (such as Zia Anger's livestream adaptation of her own 2018 work *My First Film*). Great – i.e., instantly illuminating and self-reflexively meta – examples of desktop documentaries covering the trend of desktop films themselves are Trevor Stears' 2017 *Desktop Films – a Desktop Documentary* and Katja Jansen's 2018 *Desktop Films*. Lately, films, as well as their criticism, have shifted their platform from desktops to smartphone screens. Examples for fiction films appearing as though captured on a mobile phone screen are Brian Kramer's 2015 *Ratter* and Mishka Kornai and Zach Wechter's 2019 *Pocket*. As for criticism, it is a safe bet to predict a huge market and academic interest in 'mobile screencast film criticism'. Charlie Shackleton's 2019 TikTok video *Criticism in the Age of TikTok* and Queline Meadows' (known as kikikrazed) 2020 *The Rise of Film TikTok*, making good rounds on their natural habitat of social media, are timely reflections on an inevitable breakthrough.

As may have become clear from all of these definitions and examples, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of desktop documentaries is their

inevitable affordance of making and presenting a video at the same time (i.e., the ‘production’/‘camera lens’ and ‘dissemination’/‘canvas’ in the above definitions by Verdeure and Lee, respectively). In 2012, in his analytical video *Viewing Between the Lines: Hong Sang-soo's THE DAY HE ARRIVES*, Lee already experimented with this idea. In this audiovisual analysis, he aims to make sense of Hong's 2011 metafictional puzzle film that

seems to purposely present an incoherent and inconsistent narrative world. He uses his editing platform to break the film down into its component sixty-five shots and to organize them visually to highlight various locations, repetitions, and patterns.[9]

In fact, the method results in slightly less than 65 tracks, as Lee puts shots that are repeated from the same location and shown from the same angle on the same track – revealing through this particular method, quite clearly, the film's key scenes around which the permutative narrative revolves (see Figure 1).

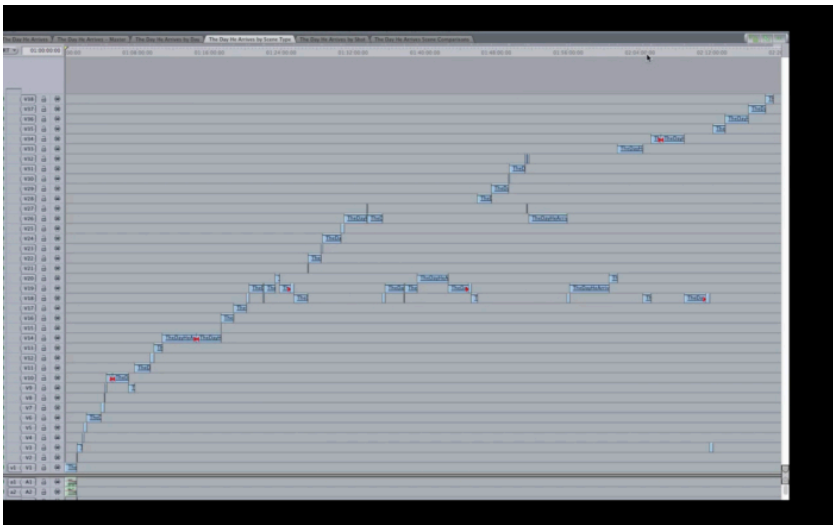


Fig 1: Final Cut Pro as an analytical tool in Kevin B. Lee's audiovisual essay *Viewing Between the Lines: Hong Sang-soo's THE DAY HE ARRIVES*.

Beyond its puzzle-solving virtues, there are at least two other reasons for which I look back to this video. First, it is a clever example of working with a particular software – in this case, Final Cut Pro – against its intended use, exploiting its digital affordances for audiovisual research needs and, through that, practising a kind of purposeful ‘deformative criticism’.[10] Second, I

find this video essay to be rich and useful, as it does not only present the results of its tinkering but also reveals its methodology (that is, the process of its tinkering) in a single video. In the terminology of videographic criticism, it is both ‘exploratory’ and ‘explanatorily argumentative’[11] at the same time.[12] Indeed, one of the most outstanding features of desktop documentaries, that I find to be a kind of natural continuation and full realisation of the present idea, is the genre’s inherent feature of collapsing the boundaries between making and presenting: i.e., between revealing their thinking and tinkering research process (as unfolding, step-by-step, in front of our eyes) and the presentation of the outcomes of such ‘t(h)inking’ (arriving at results and, thereby, justifying the presented research methods).[13]

There is an added didactical value that comes from this type of video’s transparent, credible, and effortless performativity: that is, from the relaxed and seemingly spontaneous presentation of an unfolding argument in an environment (software on desktop) and through methods (typing, dragging, opening files) that is familiar and, at this present point in time, rather natural to all viewers. In the following, I would like to take a closer look at these fundamental qualities – ‘transparency’, ‘credibility’, ‘effortlessness’, and ‘performativity’ – respectively, and reveal their distinct as well as joint effects within the desktop documentary genre.

### ***How does it work?* Transparency, credibility, effortlessness, performativity**

*Transparency* is the very essence of desktop documentaries. A successive capturing and step-by-step presentation of one’s thinking process naturally results in a sense of it being a transparent and, thus, *credible* story. Such feelings of credibility are further ensured by the technical demystification of the process itself, both in terms of production and display. The tinkering and thinking aloud take place in our most familiar environment (on a computer desktop or handheld screen) using basic features and default software or mobile applications (mainly text processors, video players, internet browsers, and other search engines) that are all well-known to the viewers. Indeed, the viewing experience – a ‘soft montage’[14] of these familiar platforms, GUIs, and software on one’s desktop – is entirely analogous to our everyday computer user experience.

Studying the multi-image experiments in Jean-Luc Godard's 1975 *Numéro deux* (*Number Two*), Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki have described soft montage as a mode of representation that brings images into a simultaneous (splitting the screen or superimposing images) rather than successive (the linear sequencing of traditional montage) relation on screen. Though, despite using similar techniques, the desktop documentary soft montage serves an entirely different purpose than that of Godard and Farocki. Contrary to these filmmakers' 'desire to avoid being the one to produce meaning',<sup>[15]</sup> desktop documentaries utilise soft montage precisely in order to support their argumentation and thus maintain the genre's methodological transparency through creating a representation (a desktop of simultaneously open windows and multiple browser tabs, visible all at once) that is similar to our everyday use (see Figures 2 and 3).

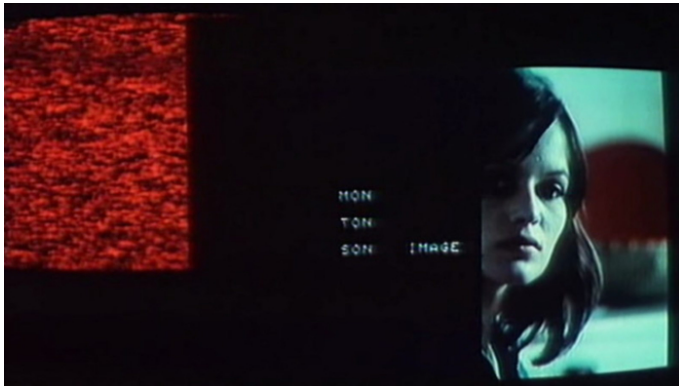


Fig. 2: Experimenting with soft montage in Jean-Luc Godard's *Number Two*.

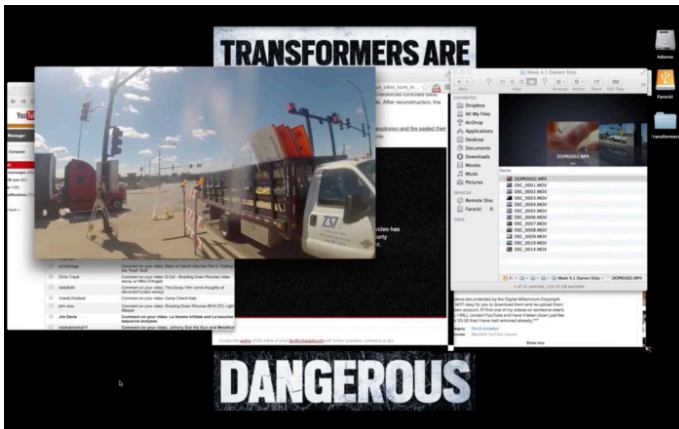


Fig. 3: Soft montage in Kevin B. Lee's *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE* (a desktop documentary).

Moreover, despite the visual abundance of soft montage, the desktop documentary step-by-step argumentative causality is ensured by (the post-production of) analytical cut-ins, zoom-ins, and other techniques which highlight the unfolding reasoning by leading the eye of the viewer (see Figure 4).

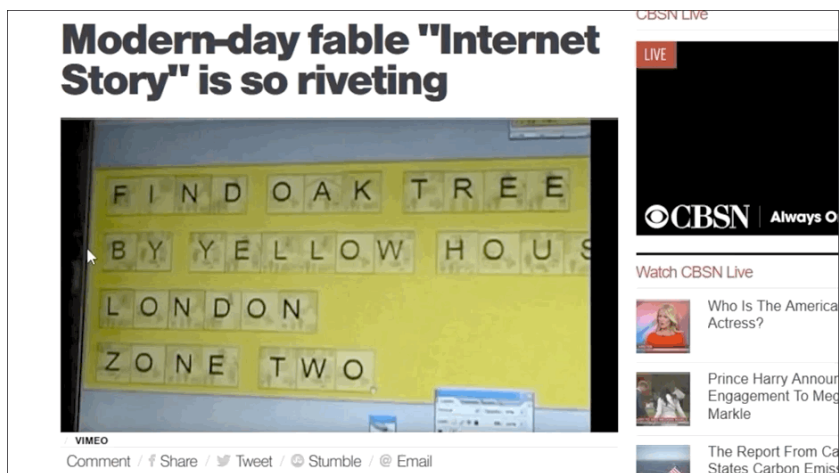


Fig. 4: A combination of zoom-in and highlighted text directs the viewer's attention in Trevor Stears' Desktop Films – a Desktop Documentary.

Transparency's effect of credibility is a powerful pedagogical and didactical asset. Certainly, one's final verdict or interpretation on any specific issue is more convincing if it is clear how one has arrived at that particular interpretation. Desktop documentaries, therefore, provide a convincing communication, or rather – since videographic criticism is not (only) a rhetorical act of persuasion – we can say that their mode of presentation feels genuine and straightforward and their palpably delivered points are open for discussion.

Due to their transparent and credible argumentation presented in a familiar environment, desktop documentaries emanate a kind of *effortlessness*. Their step-by-step, uninterrupted, and clear causality makes it feel as though what is presented is unfolding in real-time: as if no editing was involved in the recording – as if the full video was created in one go, in one uninterrupted run of the desktop-camera. This is, obviously, as much of an illusion as believing that Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) is a single-take film. As an example of this, the GIF presented in Figure 5 and its two enhanced screenshots that I made from Trevor Stears' desktop documentary debunk an invisible cut between two smoothly edited pieces of the seemingly continuous video. The

transition between two consecutive information pieces actually involved a good ninety minutes of tinkering with the recording and editing (9:00 PM and 10:24 PM on 27 November, 2017): see Figures 5, 6, and 7.

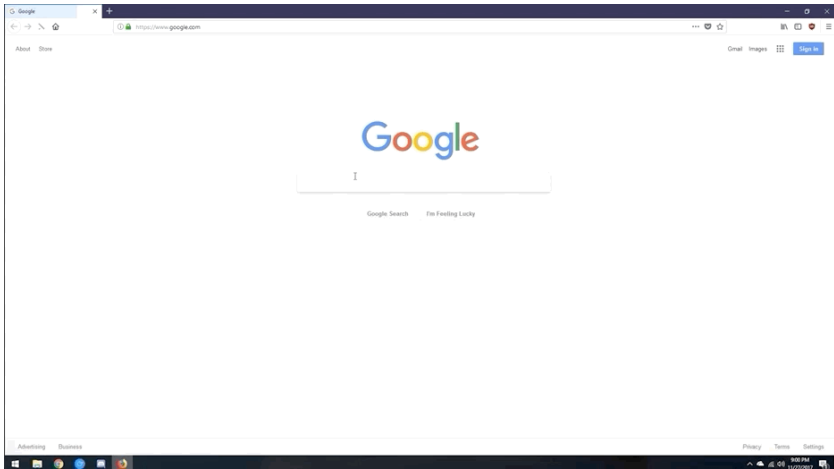
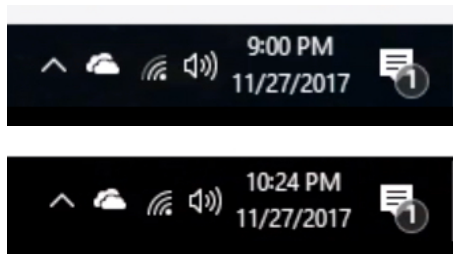


Fig. 5: Invisible cut in Trevor Stears' seemingly continuous Desktop Films – a Desktop Documentary.



Figs 6, 7: Timeshift in Trevor Stears' seemingly continuous Desktop Films – a Desktop Documentary.

Although they are more transparent about their approach (especially through their openly but subtly back-and-forth switching between their computers and desktop screens), the same goes for Chloé Galibert-Lainé and Kevin B. Lee's 2018 *Reading // Binging // Benning* desktop documentary (which also reveal some odd working hours: see Figure 8).



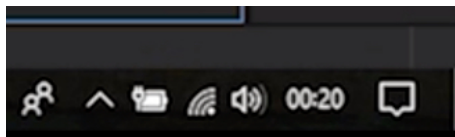


Fig. 8: Late hour work by Chloé Galibert-Lainé and Kevin B. Lee's in their Reading // Bing-ing // Benning desktop documentary.

Not that these would put the delivered points of these excellent videos in any danger, but, if videographers want to maximise their desktop documentary *real-time liveness* effect, they could consider hiding their desktop clock and date (as, for example, Galibert-Lainé recently did in her 2020 'netnographic' desktop documentary *Forensickness*) or freeze it on a specific time and date (see Figure 9) (the approach that Jessica McGoff chose throughout the entire fifteen minutes of her 2020 desktop documentary *My Mulholland*), or, even better, do what Katja Jansen achieved: her twelve-minute-long *Desktop Video* on desktop films runs for exactly twelve minutes on her desktop screen (recorded on 6 May 2018 between 11:55 and 12:07: see Figures 10-11), making me believe that she really did pull off a real-time performance on a meticulously planned scenario with twenty well-ordered browser tabs and even more pre-written text boxes (appearing as typed texts in numerous TextEdit windows, or within the interface of Google Translate, read aloud by the browser's speech service). The effortless real-time live-like effect, which others managed to elicit on their editing software, is achieved here by a 'mere' sequential click-through of a mixture of well-prepared audiovisual materials.[16] (Bear with me – this is not some kind of analytical hair-splitting but an acknowledgement of a rhetorical feat, which will play a role in my upcoming argumentation concerning the desktop video eliciting artist(ic) emotions.)

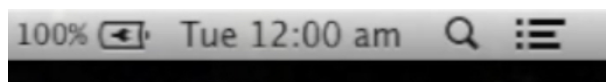
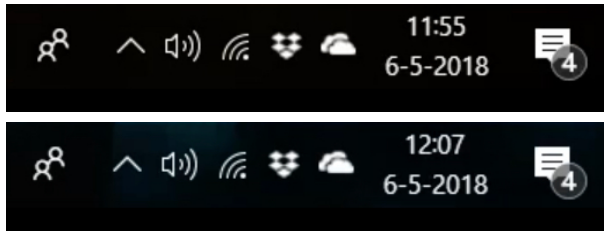


Fig. 9: The frozen desktop clock (12:00 AM) and date (Tuesday) in Jessica McGoff's *My Mulholland*, remaining the same throughout the 15-minute video.



Figs 10, 11: The first and last shot of Katja Jansen's 12-minute Desktop Video, making evident the maker's real-time performance.

Back to my main line of reasoning: the sense of effortlessness that these videos create is only make-believe – achieved through a variety of clever techniques (such as speedy typing, swift clicking, and smooth opening of applications) as if there is no thinking involved, as if no waiting time is needed for loading software, or as if no buffering delay exists on the internet.[17] As Vadim Rizov put it when reviewing Lee's *Premake*: a desktop documentary 'offers up the illusion of watching someone work on a computer in real time'.[18] While Jamie Tram is impressed by Lee's spontaneity ('we watch him spontaneously gather data from a bottomless pit of YouTube'[19]), Rizov, more reflexively, writes about how desktop documentaries create an illusion of effortlessness by pulling off a 'seemingly spontaneous argument'.[20] From the maker's perspective, Kevin B. Lee brings in an important nuance, describing and by that reclaiming the act of spontaneity of desktop documentaries as a narrative re-enactment of a laborious research process, full with intuitive and serendipitous discoveries.[21] Either way, that is if one defines spontaneity as unplanned and effortless creativity without any premeditation or as a restaging of a once genuinely experienced creative impulse, the imitation of spontaneity can become a powerful rhetorical device. On the one hand, it can increase the illusion of the video's real-time liveness (as if one is just thinking out loud on the go), and thus contribute to the sense of 'genuine sincerity' in an unfolding argument. On the other hand, the imitation of spontaneity – that is, 'the fiction of constructing a conversation', as video essayist Grace Lee[22] puts it when reviewing the *Benning* video – is a double-edged rhetorical weapon, as it can also undermine credibility. This is not the case here, however she makes an interesting point about it when pondering upon the rather natural but clearly scripted and therefore acted out laughing of the maker-narrators (Chloé Galibert-Lainé and Kevin B. Lee) about one of their otherwise indeed funny remarks (at about 00:00:47 in the *Benning* video). Concerning the obviously scripted nature of desktop documentaries, she summarises not so much her doubts about the genuineness of

such rhetorical acts but the effect of such rhetoric on her own sound judgement:

It feels like just a conversation, even though it's obviously – I would say it's obviously scripted. I think it's obviously scripted. I actually don't know. ... but I'm going to say that as if it's fact. Because I'm fairly sure, it's obviously scripted.[23]

It is not that by pointing out these effective (and entertaining) rhetorical strategies that I would generally criticise this technique and therefore discredit this particular video's illuminating points in the process; it is only that I would like to call general attention to the triggered hesitancy of even a professional viewer in the act of analysing a desktop documentary, and then invite the reader to imagine the potentially powerful effect of such a seemingly effortless communication style on non-reflexive and non-medium-aware audiences. All things considered, achieving the sense of effortless spontaneity, as always, requires the most effort in preparation and production.

Finally, we can take a look at the *performativity* aspect of desktop documentaries (which is, of course, a general quality in every kind of audiovisual expression, including all kinds of video essays across the range between suggestively poetic and straightforwardly explanatory). As I have pointed out elsewhere, 'one should never underestimate the audiovisual expression's greater performative capacity over the textual form, and its potential effect on the argument one is trying to make'.[24] Indeed, this is a reminder that one cannot posit an equivalent relation – and, thereby, a fully reciprocal adaptability – between textual and AV communication of the same information, as their distinctive media work very differently through their performative dissimilarities and idiosyncratic affordances. As for desktop documentaries, this sweeping remark seems to be even more valid and apparent. I notice an *intensified performativity* in their core functioning, which is not that unexpected, as desktop documentaries are specifically designed for not only communicating but also literally performing their makers' experience, understanding, or interpretation.[25] The sense of intensified performativity comes from the very nature of the genre that allows for a causally (and also casually) unfolding performance of a train of thought on the desktop screen. In sum, enhanced performativity, which is an inevitable aspect of all audiovisual communication, becomes the primary mode of communication in desktop documentaries. An explicit and immediately clear example to illustrate this point is Chloé Galibert-Lainé's 2018 work *Watching the Pain of Others*,

during which Galibert-Lainé appears on the desktop screen of her own desktop documentary, to be watched by the viewers of this video while she is watching Penny Lane's 2018 documentary film *The Pain of Others* herself (see Figure 12).

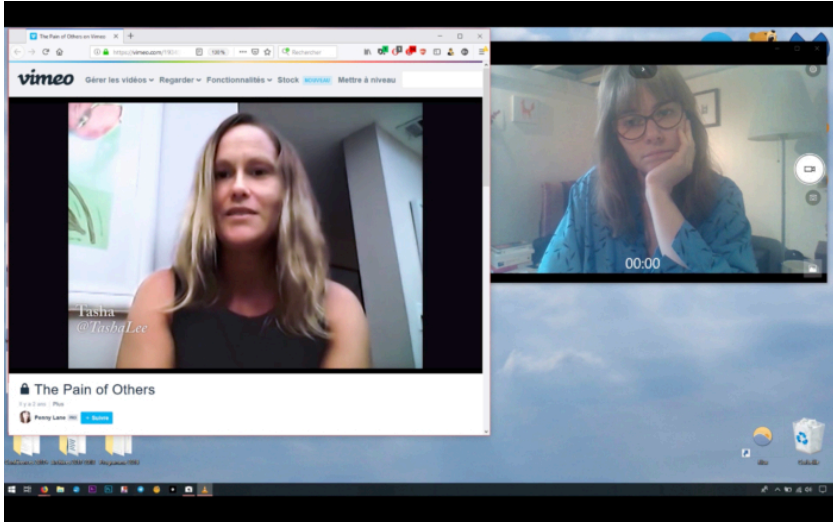


Fig. 12: Chloé Galibert-Lainé (on the right) is watching Penny Lane's *The Pain of Others* (on the left) in her desktop documentary *Watching the Pain of Others*.

On her blog, Galibert-Lainé calls her desktop documentary a 'personal desktop diary' that narrates and puts on display (quite literally) her own intellectual, affective, and bodily experiences while she researches Lane's film.[26] Yet, she sees her appearance on screen as not being specifically personal, but more as a method to model and trigger her viewers' reflexive thinking. As she put it in an interview,

[w]hen I say 'I' in the video, it isn't so much about 'Chloé Galibert-Lainé' as a biographical entity as it is about whoever recognize[s] herself in that 'I'. Adopting the first-person is a way to guide the viewer into thinking reflexively and critically about her own act of watching.[27]

Still, the 'personal desktop diary' moniker and her explicitly presented performativity are quite in line with the currently unfolding general trend in audiovisual communication,[28] further feeding into the more specific claim about the increasing subjectification that one can witness in videography and desktop documentaries – a point I will come back to later.[29]

All in all, in desktop documentary videos, viewers see not only the audiovisual material that the essayist is talking about but also the context of the viewing: i.e., the desktop, platform, software and apps, as well as the method, process, path, and sometimes even the very personal exhibition of the thinking itself, quite literally, as the previous case has shown. The effects of transparency and its ensuing credibility, the (illusion of) effortlessness, and an intensified performativity are numerous. In the rest of this paper, I focus and briefly sample each of these, before zooming in on a specific, more salient effect that seems to characterise most desktop documentaries.

### ***For what effect? From anxiety to artefact emotions***

As we have seen so far, the (illusory) transparency of desktop documentaries adds to their experience of credibility and technical demystification. The seemingly effortless presentational mode of the desktop documentary gives rise to the feeling of real-time liveness, and its result is a sense of spontaneity. Such apparent spontaneity, presented as a real-time-like experience, can be somewhat perplexing for some, if not distressing. Once again, one can easily identify with Grace Lee, who speaks about her experience concerning the *Benning* desktop documentary in the following:

At some point, it appears to be doing things in real-time, which is something that I find anxiety-inducing. It's like, at any point, I'm expecting the internet connection to break down, or for things to start buffering or accidentally close down a tab you need and you have to navigate back to it. I'm waiting for the mistakes to happen. It's like listening to a live performance. ... I always feel like something is about to go wrong. And I was waiting for it, even though I knew it wasn't going to happen, because actually it's not in real-time. ... The Monkey brain again is telling me 'bad things are going to happen'. [30]

For others, such live-like and fluently spontaneous presentation modes provide a feeling of genuineness. Will DiGravio, host of the podcast conversation with Grace Lee, stated his thoughts in the following:

there's an authenticity ... that ... still exists, even though it is scripted. Because it feels as [though] this is a conversation that Chloé and Kevin had, independently of this video, and then they were like 'oh let's recreate elements of this for the video essay'. And I think that's an incredibly effective tool that they use in crafting this piece. [31]

Whichever way they do it, desktop documentaries – as products of either bottom-up (requiring tracing back and then reconstructing and re-linearising one's research tinkering) or top-down (looking at the result of the research process, and then telling the best 'story' about these findings) processes – are powerful videos that can be clearly scripted and thought through to the last detail. Their authentic transparency and seeming effortlessness, communicated through an intensified performativity, can be seen as a strategically utilised rhetorical act which results in a specific format that viewers can admire for its 'constructedness'. On this note, desktop documentaries are a bit like those metaleptic films that are about their own making: like Spike Jonze's *Adaptation* (2002) or Quentin Dupieux's *Reality* (2014), both presenting a development of a film idea which turns out to be the very film that we are watching. Similarly, desktop documentaries also present the development of an idea – the 'research tale', as Galibert-Lainé puts it in her *Forensickness – Presentation Video* (00:03:35) – while, at the same time, being the inherent result of this development. Once again, the genre is both exploratory and explanatorily argumentative, at the same time, as combining a just-unfolding investigative method with a final display as the result of that very unfolding method. As for its effect, such a narrative trick impacts not only the viewer's experience but also their appreciation, becoming baffled by or celebrating the clever 'operational aesthetics'.<sup>[32]</sup> Indeed, we are not only inhabiting the 'building' but also reflecting on its architecture and scaffolding. Just like Jonze's and Dupieux's films, desktop documentaries (through their described medial transparency that grants free view to their makers' methodological steps and digital workplace) often direct attention to the medium and the construction itself. Using the right terminology, such a triggered mode of reflexive viewing is prone to stimulate so-called *artefact emotions*: i.e., affective appraisals of audiovisual media as aesthetic constructs. Media psychologist Ed Tan defines artefact emotions as follows:

Movies can move us not only in our role of witnesses of events in a fictional world, but also as artefacts made by filmmakers with some formal intention in mind; appreciation of visual beauty are an example. They have the construction of the artefact as their object, and need to be distinguished, as *artefact emotions* from emotional responses to witnessed events in fictional worlds. They are aesthetic emotions because they involve appraisals of artefact features, such as form, style, use of technology and implied meaning.<sup>[33]</sup>

It follows from this definition that artefact emotions are based on or, more precisely, require viewers to be aware that works of art are artefacts derived

from choices made during their construction, and such awareness presupposes a somewhat medium-literate audience. Now, if we see desktop documentaries as works that operate on an increased level of performativity and produce information for an informed audience (like scholars and cinephile experts of audiovisual media), then one can assume that these audiences will be aware of and potentially appreciate the desktop documentary ‘madness’. In this reasonable case, we can slightly rework Tan’s definition to make it fit for defining artefact emotions that are specifically triggered by desktop documentaries:

**Movies** Desktop documentaries can move us not only in our role of witnesses of events arguments in a ~~fictional-world~~ presented explanation, but also as artefacts made by ~~filmmakers~~ videographers with some formal intention in mind ... They have the construction of the artefact as their object, and need to be distinguished, as artefact emotions from emotional responses to witnessed events arguments in ~~fictional-worlds~~ explanations. They are aesthetic emotions because they involve appraisals of artefact features, such as form, style, use of technology and implied meaning.

### ***To what end? From subjectivisation to artist emotions***

The sum of all of these effects – specifically characteristic to desktop documentaries – seems to be in line with a more general and palpable shift in the entire current of videographic practice. Ultimately, an intensified performativity of transparent and effortless videography (through its effects of credibility, technical demystification, feeling of real-time liveness and spontaneity, mastered anxiety, evoked sense of authenticity, and their result in reflexive artefact emotions) brings about an increasing display of the videographer’s subjectivity. Such development is not only acknowledged but also openly embraced by many videographers. During the second roundtable discussion of the Videographic Criticism: Aesthetics and Methods of the Video Essay event,[34] David Verdeure admitted that he is ‘less and less interested in talking about film. I’m more and more interested in talking with film’ (00:21:15 – 00:21:20). This is, we should note, his own ‘talk’: that is, his private and subjective relationship to the audiovisuals at (his) hand. During the same event, Kevin B. Lee acknowledged this profound shift of emphasis in recent videographic criticism in a similar way, claiming that ‘when [he] started doing this ... it was all about understanding how movies work. And now it’s more about understanding how *we* work through and with movies’ (00:32:09 –

00:32:20). By saying this (and also showing it throughout their videographic works), Verdeure and Lee sensitively point out the recent, more general trend of the subjectivisation of criticism and scholarship – a trend to which video essays, through their tradition of highlighting the self in the essay form in general and their affinity to the essay film in particular, clearly contribute. Recently, in his response to a collection of video essays that were curated specifically to revisit their makers' individual film-related memories,[35] Christian Keathley compellingly advocated for a return to an acknowledgement of the personal in one's experience: that is, for reinstating the subject(ive)'s significance and thus arriving – or, in fact, returning – to a truly cinephile study of audiovisual media.[36]

Through the sum of its effects, the genre of desktop documentary – being both a software-augmented thinking machine and a result of this thinking process, all at once – specifically contributes to (the return of) the development of this subjectivisation. I will substantiate this claim about the (re-)emerging subjectivity position by sampling some arguments, all of which result from the earlier discussed characteristics of the genre.

A sense of real-time liveness and its anxiety-inducing effect can be seen as a kind of *bravura feature* that a video artist pulls off. The (seemingly) uninterrupted flow of information distribution in the desktop documentary is comparable (in their experience, quite literally) to the long takes in film or television, which often invite marvelling reflection towards the craft and the craftsmen behind it. Also, a demystification of technology, through speedy typing and expert use of software, adds to the emerging subject of the video artist as a kind of tech wizard. The platform and the method's transparency – revealing the videomaker's private desktop as a setting for his or her unfolding research-story – is another tool for the subject's self-positioning.[37] A step-by-step transparent presentation brings about didactical effects which give rise to an image of a brilliant pedagogue. Relatedly, the seemingly effortless and spontaneous argumentations are indicative of a superior scholarly persona. Finally, artefact emotions, claiming part of the viewer's attention away from the discussed work at hand and calling for recognition of the craft that goes into the making and presentation itself, add to the appreciation of the maker, i.e. the creative subject who pulled all of this off.

It seems that the trend of subjectivisation and its listed effects all contribute to the rise of what I would call 'artist emotions'. If artefact emotions result from the awareness and subsequent appreciation of the video's expert 'constructedness', then artist emotions potentially develop from the appreciation



of the skilful maker of such an appreciated video. Artist emotions are not about the emotions *of* artists (while working), but about the emotions that viewers feel *about* or *towards* the artist while looking at his or her work. Artist emotions originate in the foregrounding of one's personal and subjective thinking process. Doing precisely that, desktop documentaries contribute to the advance of the subjectivisation shift in recent videographic criticism through visualising and, what is more, performing an acknowledgement of the inevitable subjectivity of studying audiovisual media. Once again, while making (and also watching) an audiovisual essay may trigger artefact emotions towards the craft of audiovisual communication, in the case of the desktop documentary as an increasingly performative genre, there is an added acknowledgement and subsequent appreciation that is evoked towards the maker of the artefact at hand. For viewers, video essayists emerge not only as *auteurs* of videographic criticism, with recognisable idiosyncratic style and recurring authorial patterns, but, as an audience member of one of Kevin B. Lee's lectures has put it, 'as the protagonist, kind of, as the hero in a way, in a sort of road movie'.<sup>[38]</sup> This is a flattering metaphor: seeing videographers as protagonists in a mainstream road movie, roaming on the wider internet, or flaneuring within the 'arthouse' walls of online academia.

But where does such a subjectivity-trend and its increased triggering of artist emotions lead? Or, from a specific scholarly point of view, where should the limits of performativity and its enhanced subjectivity lie (if at all)? How can one avoid creating videos about their makers instead of the phenomena that they are supposed to address (if this is something to avoid at all)? How does a presentation of personal experience contribute to a shared and more widely valued understanding of these phenomena, and what distinguishes these from mere subjective opinions? Ultimately, what is the value of foregrounding the person in the personal? What is so interesting in *me* that others need to know about?

I believe that potential answers to these questions depend on the contexts and discourses within which the given videos operate. On the one hand, an escalating subjectivity should not mellow our (scholarly) ideals concerning argumentative precision and accountability – qualities that video essays promised to bring about through bridging a long-existing and wide medial gap: i.e., when actually presenting what was only indirectly describable before. On the other hand, one should not reject the rise of subjectivity off-hand, as it might be a key to evolving a more human Humanities. Moreover, on a rather mundane but very existential note, if foregrounded subjectivity

is coupled with a sense of self-positioning (well, in these times of a crowded academic job-market – self-branding), then a strategic elicitation of artist emotions through subjectified videography can be seen as an important merit. Established scholars with safe jobs may or may not like this development, however, a new generation of emerging videographers cannot afford the luxury of refusing the benefits of expressing the very personal sides of themselves and, through that, standing out from the sea of (faceless) textual knowledge production with their audiovisual performances.

## Author

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## Notes

- [1] This paper is an extended version of a talk I gave at the symposium Videographic Criticism Performative Knowledge Production and Aesthetic Practice, held on 8 November 2019 at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Technische Universität Braunschweig, Germany. Thanks to the organisers, Heike Klippel and Eckart Voigts, for the kind invitation, and to the participants for their constructive questions and feedback.
- [2] Bešlagić 2019, p. 51.
- [3] Verdeure n.d.
- [4] Lee 2014.
- [5] DiGravio 2019a, 00:18:37 – 00:18:43.
- [6] Strauven 2016, p. 151.
- [7] 'The 'Premake' produced and studied viral fan footage of the making of Michael Bay's 2014 blockbuster *Transformers 4: The Age of Extinction* and examined the ways in which this operated as an unofficial crowdsourced publicity vehicle for the film' (Grant 2015). About the production and distribution history of the video, see Lee's own account, suitably presented as 'a desktop documentary in text form' (Lee 2016, p. 212).
- [8] Bešlagić 2019, p. 51.
- [9] Mittell 2019.
- [10] *Deformance* (a term introduced by Lisa Samuels and Jerry McGann in 1999) or *deformative criticism* is a collective noun for a variety of methods 'revealing new insights into media texts by "breaking" them in controlled or chaotic ways. Deformance includes a wide range of digital experiments that generate heretical and non-normative readings of media texts' (Ferguson 2017).
- [11] Kiss 2018a; 2018b.
- [12] This combination is, in practice, a rarely-achieved ideal of audiovisual essays, 'which, in the spheres of film and media (both their analysis and production), has come to carry the simultaneous connotations of intellectual research and poetic exploration – neither simply a vehicle for instrumental rationalism nor art for art's sake' (Álvarez López & Martin 2014).
- [13] Kiss 2020.
- [14] Silverman & Farocki 1998; Farocki 2002.
- [15] Silverman & Farocki 1998, p. 121.
- [16] Watching a live/synchronous offline or online lecture that uses the technique and rhetoric of a desktop documentary is probably the only way to experience a true liveness effect (with all its technical dangers and thrills). Kevin B. Lee's *Learning Farocki: A Live Desktop Response*, delivered at the 2015 Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference in Montreal, is a good example for doing this. His *Desktop Cinema Presentation*, recorded in 2014 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is doing something similar – at least up to a certain point (around the nine-minute mark), when Lee leaves his laptop and continues his presentation while a pre-recorded desktop documentary illustration of his live-unfolding talk automatically plays out – and, thus, inadvertently but illuminatingly illustrates the small but important nuance that I am dealing with here.

- [17] The desktop documentary (illusion of) swift and smooth delivery reminds me of the small controversy Apple suffered in 2008 when breaking advertising regulations in the UK for exaggerating the speed of its (then new) iPhone 3G. 'The ad showed a close-up of the handset being used to surf a news webpage, view the Google maps service and download a file, with the user waiting just a fraction of a second for each action. ... The ASA said 17 viewers complained that the ad was misleading because it exaggerated the speed of the iPhone 3G' (Clarke 2008).
- [18] Rizov 2014.
- [19] Tram 2019.
- [20] Rizov 2014.
- [21] Horwell 2021, 00:32:10 – 00:34:01.
- [22] DiGravio 2019b, 00:41:57 – 00:42:00.
- [23] Ibid., 00:36:01 – 00:36:16. In a follow-up episode of DiGravio's *The Video Essay Podcast*, Galibert-Lainé addresses this specific case, confirming 'it was sooo scripted' (DiGravio 2019a, 00:04:31). In an interview for *Hyperallergic*, she further clarifies her general method as being meticulously planned and developed to perfection: 'every move has to be recorded dozens of times before it's right' (Schindel 2020).
- [24] Kiss 2018b.
- [25] Kevin B. Lee sees the genre's inherent potential for (intensified) performativity as a specific reason that could justify the use of the desktop format. In his online tutorial, hosted by Jenny Horwell for the Bertha DocHouse, he reminds us that 'the potential of desktop documentaries is not just to explain things like a normal documentary would, but also show a process – a process of searching, of discovering, of reflecting' (Horwell 2021, 00:17:21 – 00:17:34).
- [26] Galibert-Lainé n.d.
- [27] Hinojosa 2019.
- [28] A current trend (and its abundant software solutions) that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about allows the socially distancing maker-speaker to be visible in a small window alongside the other audiovisual material consisting of the content of his/her talk (the captured screen and the presenter's manipulations of it). An example (from the desktop documentary genre) is Galibert-Lainé's 2020 *Forensickness – Presentation Video*: a desktop introduction to her *Forensickness*.
- [29] For an enlighteningly rich conversation on the video essay's subjective performativity, see the recording of the first roundtable of the Videographic Criticism: Aesthetics and Methods of the Video Essay event, held on 21 June 2019 at ACUD-Kino Berlin, Germany (Loock 2019a).
- [30] DiGravio 2019b, 00:36:45 – 00:37:27.
- [31] Ibid., 00:39:18 – 00:39:40.
- [32] Jason Mittell borrows the term from Neil Harris (1973), referring to a mode of viewing that invites viewers to engage in a pleasure that is 'less about "what will happen?" and more concerning "how did he do that?"' (Mittell 2006, p. 35).
- [33] Tan 2018, p. 18.
- [34] Loock 2019b.
- [35] It is no coincidence that a collection that invites videographers 'to confront the most personal, intimidating, and visceral encounters with film during [their] childhoods' (Avisar & Kreutzer 2020), features a desktop documentary (*My Mulholland* by Jessica McGoff) – a genre that seems to naturally facilitate the presentation of one's subjective experience.
- [36] Keathley 2020.
- [37] The sneak peek at those desktops and wallpapers, and the folders and documents on them, revealing menu bars and software dashboards, all remind me of those coffee table glossy art books

and magazines which are seemingly casually – but are in fact very precisely – selected and positioned in one's living room. Confirming such a cheeky assumption, Chloé Galibert-Lainé speaks about her *staging* acts: '[w]hen you record your entire desktop and your entire internet browser, you're recording a lot more information than what you're actually talking about. And a lot of the pleasures of making a desktop documentary, at least as far as I'm concerned, is like staging the information ... Everything that you can see on my desktop ... it's not my personal desktop ... it's like this character of a researcher that I'm building for this specific video that sort of hides this desktop that is staged, and the bookmarks are staged' (DiGravio 2019a, 00:14:09 – 00:14:38). Further in the interview (00:17:10), she reveals that she changes her desktop and chooses a wallpaper fitting to the desktop project.

- [38] Grant 2015, 00:38:04 – 00:38:10. Lee's Masterclass was held on 17 March 2015, at the University of Sussex, of which only a 26-minute video excerpt is available online. My sincerest thanks to Catherine Grant who provided me the entire audio recording of the talk (the time codes are referring to this audio file).