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Sitting, standing, dancing with our screens: An introduction

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Although it has received different names over time, from ‘interface film’ to ‘screen-life movie’, a consensus seems to have emerged among practitioners and researchers as to what defines a desktop film: it is the product of a filmmaking method that ‘uses screen capture technology to treat the computer interface (its screen space, internal windows, and microphone) as a camera lens, audio recording device, and (audiovisual) canvas’.[1] By documenting the visual operations of digital interfaces, desktop films ‘offer a new relationship to the apparatuses, programs, networks and habits with which we regulate our lives and allow our lives to be regulated’.[2] They produce a critical, hopefully ‘dialectical’ image[3] of the ever-expanding virtual part of our lives, that other types of cinematic practices struggle to capture.

What eludes this definition though is the fact that desktop films do not only record what happens on the screen – they document (or stage) the thought processes and affects of the person interacting with the screen, the curiosity, desires and anxieties that drive their online activities. It could be argued that this subjective component is implicitly constitutive of the form, as digital interfaces do not operate on their own, and various techniques have been developed by filmmakers to produce their own ‘unique form of first-person perspective, that results from linking the spectator’s gaze with the author’s desktop’[4]: recording the movement of a mouse across the screen; zooming into the interfaces as a way to mimic ocular movements; recording the computer user’s facial expressions via a webcam, etc.

By gathering five video essays that explore the bodily experiences and the various ‘carnal thoughts’[5] that our everyday screens elicit in us, this audiovisual essay section hopes to contribute to contemporary debates about desktop cinema’s capacity to translate in

cinematic terms the tangible, material, and affective reality of our encounters with digitality. Facing up to the screens, bodies take the center stage in these five videographic works: young or older, injured, clumsy, queer, trans, menstruating or pregnant bodies, involuntary 'hybrid[s] of machine and organism'[6] that struggle to conform and fail to 'weigh' (as in 'je pèse', a colloquial expression that means 'I matter', used by one of Nicolas Bailleul's interviewees).

In *Twisties!*, Alice Lenay and Gay-Mazas revisit a televisual archive to examine Kerri Strug's win at the 1996 Summer Olympics. A creative use of Zoom's segmentation algorithm allows them to host Strug's body on the surface of Lenay's own skin, and produces a playfully imperfect image of how mirror neurons can be activated through digital spectatorship. Occitane Lacurie's 'doomscroll documentary' *Xena's Body* questions the data extractivism that governs period tracking apps and how a digital tool that could have helped the emancipation of all menstruating bodies ended up reinforcing a normative understanding of women's health and serving the economic interests of surveillance capitalism. In *Meeting/Eating Meat Joy*, Chloé Lavalette metabolises a difficult interview with Carolee Schneemann about her iconic performance *Meat Joy*. Translating the successive states of their body during the online call into an onscreen silent poem, Lavalette invites us to ponder the dangers of anachronistic hermeneutics and measure the gap of incommunicability that feminists from different generations have to bridge to establish a shared understanding of their gendered realities. In *the look for sit down*, Nicolas Bailleul displaces his attention from the body itself to the material artifact that often frames its encounter with digital media: the chair, and more specifically the gaming chair. A symbol of social status in online communities, the gaming chair conditions the posture of the gaming body, both mobile and slumped, active and encased, ideally prepped for spending hours in front of the screen; yet the actual bodies of Bailleul's interviewees struggle to fill these leather cocoons, revealing how ill-fitted they are to these aspirational, optimised vessels. It is another type of seat that interests morgane frund in *CORPS CANAPE*: the sofas in which we cuddle up with our screens, an aptly named laptop on our laps, or wrapped around our phones. As linked to economic and affective precarity as the gaming chair is associated with success, the sofa hosts our encounters with digitality in transitional periods – in between homes, jobs, relationships – which frund explores through the tender exchange between two fictional protagonists who struggle in their own ways to occupy the vessels that are their bodies.

This section's focus on embodied encounters with digitality can be contextualised with regards to two recent developments in the field of film and media studies. First, it resonates with the growing interest for materialist approaches in both fields, described by Caetlin Benson-Allott as focusing on the 'stuff' through which we encounter audiovisual objects ('projectors, monitors, speakers, and other exhibition technology'), as well as the 'stuff' that

makes up who we are (human bodies being understood as ‘material objects that react to and affect other material objects’ [7]). The five video essays presented here are indeed interested in all sorts of stuff, that all can contribute to the specific texture of a digital experience: the position of the reclining lever of a chair; the anxiety over an absence of menstrual blood; the rough fabric of a worn-out couch; the meowing of a cat interrupting an image-deprived video call. Digital, organic, and technological stuff that tends to only reveal its importance when it dysfunctions, and towards which Lenay and Gay-Mazas, Lacurie, Lavalette, Bailleul, and frund invite us to turn our attention – not as a distraction from screens, but as an indispensable complement to our understanding of the meanings our screens produce. This section can also be understood in the context of the affective turn which Girish Shambu described in the context of a discussion of videographic practices, as ‘a move away from large scale-analysis and social structures, and towards a focus on relationships and encounters with other individuals, technology and the world – and how these relations impact, shape and form us’.[8] Rather than recording interfaces to analyse their algorithmic structures, these five video essays are more interested in the interpersonal relationality that takes place within these structures (all videos are structured around a dialogical component), as well as the intrapersonal relationality they elicit; each of them explores in its own way how algorithms have become entangled with our own sense of self, and how much digital screens have grown to condition our access and understanding of our bodily functions and needs.

Whether these five video essays should be considered desktop films can be debated, as they all depict screen-based interactions, but tend to do so without explicitly representing digital interfaces. I argue that the field of desktop cinema (whether we consider it as a genre, a creative practice, or an object of study) would benefit from seeing its definition expanded enough that it could welcome such works. As an example of what they contribute to the field, these five video essays can be said to offer a sideways response to Miklós Kiss’ criticism of what he calls the ‘intensified performativity’ of contemporary desktop documentaries, that to him runs the risk of ‘claiming part of the viewer’s attention away from [the phenomena that they are supposed to address] and calling for recognition of the craft that goes into the making and presentation itself’.[9] Formulated three years ago in this journal, Kiss’ criticism was very reminiscent of discussions that have agitated the world of social sciences for decades, and have recently received a particularly striking formulation from the sociologist Matthew Desmond, for whom when engaging with the many structural problems of our contemporary world claimed: “‘I” don’t matter.’[10] I would argue that in the five video essays presented in this section, “‘I” don’t matter either. As unapologetically personal as they are, none of them is concerned with autobiographical singularity. The undeniable performativity of these five videos (three of them have indeed been presented as live performances before they became video essays) should therefore be understood as a method

that embraces, as Catherine Grant writes, ‘the same medium or mode as the subject of the research’;[11] their approach is subjective because they research processes of subjectivation. Each in their own way, they explore how our relations with screens (and everything that surrounds them) inform our own sense of being a subject. The methodological trust they place in personal forms of enunciation also resonates with the argument of the 2023 workshop *Embodying the Video Essay*, held at Bowdoin College, where participants were invited to seek inspiration from performative practices to reflect on the positionality of their research. Though none of the videos presented here was developed in the context of that workshop, they can collectively be perceived as desktop-based (or desktop-adjacent) responses to its core prompt: ‘explore the relationships between embodiment and the screen, and how these connections might find expression in the video essay’.[12]

Finally, it should be acknowledged that the five video essays presented here were produced in French. This reflects the relatively recent excitement for and growing popularity of videographic research methods in Francophone academic and artistic circles. It is also a deliberate attempt to contribute to the necessarily collective effort towards the linguistic diversification of videographic practices – from editorial projects such as *Tecmerin*, to Barbara Zecchi’s defense of accented voices.[13] In the current absence of a Francophone peer-reviewed journal dedicated to videographic research, this section aims to highlight the vitality and a certain thematic congruence among a community of French-speaking video essayists – and perhaps formulate the hope for a larger Francophone editorial project to be launched in the future?

Author

Chloé Galibert-Lainé is a French filmmaker and researcher, currently working as a tenured Assistant Professor in Film Studies at the American University of Paris. Their written and videographic work explores the intersections between cinema and online media, with a particular interest in questions related to modes of spectatorship, gestures of appropriation, gendered experiences, and mediated memory. Galibert-Lainé’s films, video essays, and desktop documentaries have received support from institutions such as the CNC, CNAP, Eurimages, and the Sundance Institute, and have been screened at festivals including IFFR, IDFA, FIDMarseille, Berlin Critic’s Week, Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, and Ars Electronica. They have published articles in peer-reviewed journals such as *[in]Transition*, *Iluminace*, *Théorème et Double Jeu* as well as a number of book chapters, and have also co-edited an issue of *Images secondes* that invited videographic contributions to explore and critique the notion of ‘post-cinema’.

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Notes

- [1] Grant 2016.
- [2] Distelmeyer 2023, p. 327.
- [3] In a curatorial note written in 2020 to accompany a selection of several net found footage films, Chauvin formulates the idea – or the hope – that 'facing the ocean of images on the internet, cinema still seems to be a space where the relationship between two shots, two images, offers the possibility of a dialectic' (Chauvin 2020, translation from French).
- [4] Avissar & Lee 2023.
- [5] Sobchack 2016.
- [6] Haraway 1985, p. 65.
- [7] Benson-Allott 2021, p. 1.
- [8] Shambu 2014.
- [9] Kiss 2021.
- [10] From Desmond's sociological study that documents the financial struggles of eight families in Milwaukee. The complete quote is: 'No matter how much care the author takes, the first-person ethnography becomes just as much about the field-worker as about anything she or he saw. [...] At a time of rampant inequality and widespread hardship, when hunger and

homelessness are found throughout America, I am interested in a different, more urgent conversation. “I” don’t matter.’ (Desmond 2016, p. 306).

[11] Grant 2016.

[12] The complete description of the workshop can be found at the following link: <https://sites.google.com/view/embodyedpractices2023/>.

[13] Zecchi 2021 and Zecchi 2022.