

TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

Make It Real

Context of the Assignment

Having been invited to teach several online workshops during the successive lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, I designed the following exercise as an invitation for students to leave their desktops for a moment and free their eyeballs from the visual pressure of their blue light screens. The idea emerged from my own experiments with paper printing and water projections in my video essays *Forensickness* and *A Very Long Exposure Time*. Finding myself more and more eager to find ways to escape desktop fatigue in my work routines, I wanted to design an exercise that would both perform as media analysis and allow for a discussion about the deterioration of our collective physical and mental health during this period of intensified consumption of digital media.

The Assignment

This exercise is called 'Make it Real'. It is meant for you to leave your desktop. For this exercise, I ask you to invent, and experiment with, a way to transfer or "interpret" the online material that you have chosen to research into an offline form of media. You may employ techniques that you are already

familiar with, or explore new grounds, and you can use whatever you have at home or have an easy access to: paper print, drawing, textile, painting, projections, analog animation, vocal or body performance.... Feel free to try whatever comes to your mind. You may even explore different techniques one after the other: this exercise isn't about producing a finished work, it's all about experimentation!

Examples of Student Work

Anastasia Goncharova's Make it Real video experiment:
<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=RMq0yis84>

Reflection

The exercise was introduced by a screening and discussion session, in which I presented a selection of films and video essays that I thought could inspire the students' experiments. Some of the films I showed in that context (either in full or excerpts) were, in the chronological order of their making: *Über Song of Ceylon von Basil Wright* (Harun Farocki, 1975), *Les plages d'Agnès* (Agnès Varda, 2008), *Interface 2.0* (Kevin B. Lee, 2012), *Pourquoi je vais au cinéma* (Dim, 2016), *A Date with an Enfield* (Adam Butcher, 2017), *Watching the Detectives* (Chris Kennedy, 2017), *Newsreel 63 - The Train of Shadows* (Nika Autor, 2018), *Face à face dans la nuit* (Loïc Hobi, 2019), *Trace and Crossing, ON FREAK ORLANDO* (Johannes Binotto, 2020), *Painting #9* (Persona) (Ruth Baettig, 2021).

When I first taught this assignment during a video essay course at the Hochschule Luzern (Switzerland), it was one among several other exercises that were designed to help the students investigate a given online media of their choosing. The other exercises included documented online flânerie, in-depth textual descriptions, epistolary writing, desktop performances.... The students first spent one week exploring these different approaches to videographic research, then they had another full week to produce their final video essay. The analog experiments they had produced during that 'Make It Real' exercise didn't have to be implemented into their final video, unless they chose to. Many of these experiments haven't therefore been documented digitally.

I have since assigned this exercise in other courses, at the Merz Akademie in Stuttgart (Germany), the California Institute of the Arts (USA) and the École des *Beaux-Arts de Marseille* (France), with bachelor as well as master students, as a solo or as a group exercise. All in all, the range of media and techniques that I have seen students explore as a response to this exercise has been as varied as I had hoped. I saw them re-enact their chosen media with their bodies and voices; build up lightning or projection installations in their home spaces; visit outdoor environments that resembled the spaces depicted in their media of study; make interactive objects with paper, cardboards, collages....

The students who decided to implement the results of this exercise into their final videographic project then had to reflect on how to document their analog experiments in the form of an online video. The exercise then became an analog detour in the journey that led from the digital media they had chosen to research, to their final digital video. This is the case in the video published as a companion piece to this article, which is the final project made by Anastasiia Goncharova during a one week workshop conducted at the California Institute of the Arts in 2020. Having chosen to investigate an internet meme that used a photo taken in 2017 during Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Vladimir Putin, in which the former is seen refusing tea offered by the latter, Anastasiia Goncharova produced an articulated paper hand, with which she attempted to reproduce Salman's hand gesture of refusal. In her final video, her own hands are shown manipulating this paper puppet, while fragments from a letter she wrote to the unknown maker of this meme (the outcome of a different videographic exercise that week) are presented within the interface of an online automated translation app. The movements of the physical, material hands onscreen are as inexact in their attempt at translating the meaning of Salman's gesture, as the online app is in its linguistic approximations.

In the feedback I received about this exercise, I noted that many students commented on the relief they had felt when asked to turn off their online devices and stay disconnected for several hours in a row. But other students conversely asked if they could twist the exercise so that they would translate the original media into another format that remained within the

realm of the digital, for instance digital drawing, animation, or computer code. I accepted these requests and was sometimes amazed by the results, but it made me wonder. Did these students suffer so little from desktop exhaustion, that they wouldn't want to seize this opportunity to look away from their screens for a few hours? Were they simply too comfortable with their digital tools that they didn't want to abandon them, even for a day or two? Did they really have no interest in non-digital techniques? This led to discussions which left me with the impression that I perhaps had as much to learn from teaching this exercise as they had making it. While they could explore their own relationship to online media and materiality, I was led to reflect on the variety of experiences that students from diverse backgrounds and geographical areas entertained with the digital environment during these pandemic times - and the many different meanings that videographic exercises can take on depending on the context in which they are assigned.

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Lého Galibert-Lainé is a French filmmaker and researcher, working as tenured Assistant Professor in Film Studies at the American University of Paris. Their video essays and desktop documentaries, which have been selected at festivals such as IFFRotterdam, IDFA and FIDMarseille, explore the intersections between cinema and online media, with a particular interest in questions related to embodied spectatorship, gestures of appropriation, processes of knowledge production and mediated memory.