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# Film-making as creative praxis: capturing the intimate side of interculturality

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## ABSTRACT

This article employs creative film-making to explore the *doing* of the intimate and personal aspects of the intercultural encounter. It offers an alternative paradigm for the use of visual methods for ethnographic and auto-ethnographic research. Drawing on phenomenological and auto-ethnographic perspectives, it investigates the lived, subjective experience through film-making praxis via excerpts of the experimental audio-visual essay *A caressing dialogical encounter* (Rifesser, UK, 2019). By using “pensive-creative praxis” (Rifesser, 2020a), a parallel can be established with an understanding of the intercultural encounter in its all its multi-dimensional and multi-layered complexity (Ros i Solé, forthcoming, 2022).

Im Zentrum dieses Artikels steht die kreative Filmproduktion und den Möglichkeiten, die sich für die interkulturelle Begegnung ergeben. Ein alternatives Paradigma für die Verwendung visueller Medien für ethnografische und auto-ethnografische Forschungen wird präsentiert. Über die Auseinandersetzung mit phänomenologischen und autoethnografischen Zugangsweisen, wird der Filmproduktionsprozess als gelebte, subjektive Erfahrung am Beispiel des audio-visuellen Essays *A caressing dialogical encounter* (Rifesser, UK, 2019) erörtert. Basierend auf dem Ansatz der Filmherstellung als „(be)sinnlich-kreative Praxis“ (“pensive-creative praxis”) (Rifesser, 2020a) kann eine Parallele zwischen dem Filmproduktionsprozess und der interkulturellen Begegnung erstellt werden, deren Beschaffenheit facettenreich und multi-dimensional ist (Ros i Solé, in Kürze erscheinend, 2022).

## KEYWORDS

Intercultural; film-making; creative; praxis ethnography; embodied

## SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER

Interkulturell; Filmproduktion; kreativ; Praxis; Ethnographie; Körper

The intercultural can be seen as creative in itself, always taking part in some sort of transformative and unexpected process. The movement inherent in intercultural processes is only ever temporarily fixed, and multilingual encounters may be defined as events whose meanings are ephemeral and in-transit and, as a result, there is an inherent difficulty to capture these by observing languages and cultures at rest (Ros i Solé et al., 2020). This article will make use of film-making praxis as an example of creative research output to argue that multicultural events are best captured in constant motion and in complex relationships with a multitude of successive places, events and frames that highlight the vitality and movement of the intercultural encounter.

This article will explore the epistemological, ontological, and ethical implications (Bradley & Harvey, 2019) of using creative film-making to explore the *doing* of the intimate and personal aspects of the intercultural encounter. By focusing the investigation of the intercultural encounter through and with film-making as an artistic practice rather than as an objective document, it will

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seek to offer an alternative paradigm for the use of visual methods for ethnographic and auto-ethnographic intercultural research. In this context, in dialogue with research in the fields of intercultural communication, auto-ethnography and film phenomenology, three excerpts will be discussed which all stem from the audio-visual essay *A caressing dialogical encounter* (Rifesser, UK, 2019) which came second place in the BAFTSS Awards 2020 in the category videographic criticism. These excerpts are ‘A Letter Of Love To You’ (Rifesser, UK, 2016) ‘Care|ss’ (Rifesser, UK, 2017) and ‘Totsch’ (Rifesser, UK, 2018). Which all form part of the wider work *A caressing dialogical encounter* (Rifesser, UK, 2019, 22:05 mins).

By drawing on a phenomenological and auto-ethnographic film perspective, this article seeks to move beyond an ocularcentric focus and towards an embodied methodology, using a phenomenological approach to film studies. In the 1990s and 2000s, there was an important shift in interest in film studies theory away from the psychoanalytic theory that formed the cornerstone of earlier work and a growing body of research from which applied phenomenology emerged. The ground-breaking research by Vivienne A. Sobchack (1992; 2004) and Laura U. Marks (2000, 2002) is foundational in this area of research. Specifically important for this paper is Sobchack’s conceptualisation of the film as the body in dialogue with the body of the viewer (Sobchack, 1992). This spotlights the lack of research that connects writing about film (i.e. film theory) with the actual practice of making a film. As a result, there is a missed opportunity to establish critical links between these (Sobchack, 2004). This article then aims to contribute to growing scholarship that addresses this gap. Within practices of art, this crucial but complex inter-dependence between theory and practice has been acknowledged (Barrett and Bolt 2010 [2007]; Haseman 2010 [2007]; Haseman and Mafe 2010 [2009]; Hickey Moody, 2015; Nelson, 2013; Rifesser, 2020a) and the term ‘praxis’ has been used to foreground this interplay and the constant shuttling between the two; it is ‘theory imbricated within practice’ (Nelson, 2013, p. 5). Such an understanding of the interplay between theory and practice is acknowledged in the use of the term ‘praxis’. Robin Nelson reminds us here that we must consider not seeing practice that we explore starting from the theory (what could be called ‘thinking-doing’), but highlights the importance of what he calls ‘doing-thinking’ (2013: 29), that is the work that emerges starting from practice and then critically reflecting upon the findings. Using film-making praxis as a methodological tool, or what will be suggested later in this article as ‘pensive-creative praxis’ (Rifesser, 2020a), a parallel can be established with seeing the intercultural encounter as a multi-layered and textured phenomenon (Ros i Solé, 2022). In particular, the intercultural focus on the role that subjectivity and the moment-by-moment unfolding of experience could provide a useful ‘tool’ to explore the kaleidoscopic and multi-dimensional experience of the intercultural encounter. Like Hall (1996) we also argue that this understanding of subjectivity takes at its centre a conceptualisation of identity as ‘becoming’ and as a process that, while in movement, is open and incomplete. This understanding has paved the way for seeing the intercultural encounter and identity as a work-in-progress, a force and ‘vibrant identity’ (Ros i Solé et al., 2020). This article then starts from the understanding of language that goes beyond the ‘representational in language’ and shifts the emphasis from the rational and theoretical focus to one that values the embodied and sensual experience. In other words, such an approach aims to capture the perceptual and sensorial aspects of languages and cultures and the multisensorial nature that lies beyond the linguistic. It reminds us that ‘knowing begins in the body’ (Smythe et al., 2017, p. 19). The concept of ‘haptic visibility’ (Marks, 2000) is of particular importance for this article by exploring the lived and subjective experience of the intercultural encounter through creative film-making, one that provides a methodological tool to investigate such an approach. In other words, film-making praxis allows us to focus on and explore the lived and the textured process of the intercultural encounter.

## The lived and the textured in language

Language can be conceived as abstract representation of a reality out there, or rather, as it will be argued in this paper, as lived intensity and energy, a constant flow of affect that connects us to

things (Bakhtin, 1981; Deleuze & Guattari, 2004 [1987]) and as an intensity that pre-exists individuals and their control. Language is seen in its ‘pre-verbal’ state where there is no such a thing as an individual agency but ‘pure event’ (Ros i Solé, 2022). In this understanding, language is visceral and in movement and is made up of flows and rhythms (Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Busch, 2017; Pennycook, 2018). This ebb and flow of language highlights the inhabiting of language in the ordinary and every day of our lives. As MacLure (2013) explains, language is actualised in the contingency of our lives. A constant personal re-working of language that is experienced not only with our heads, but also with our bodies and our affects. In this view, the ‘pure event’ of language lets us have a glimpse of what it means to experience ‘the wild in language’ (MacLure 2013), that is, to locate language between rationality and sensation and by putting the focus on the ‘lived experience’ of language (Busch, 2014, Ros i Solé, 2020). The lived experience of language, or ‘Spracherleben’ as Busch (2014) calls it, emphasises the primacy of perception over reason. By introducing the notion of ‘body memory’, the notion of *Spracherleben* points towards the importance of personal experience and biography in the creation of personal intercultural worlds, and the traces and textures of other worlds. Similar to the ‘lived experience of language’, creative film-making allows us to capture these textured ‘body memories’ and the different arrangements of predispositions for apprehending the world. We are interested in seeing how the bodily traces of the past create and update the relationships that we form with the world, its languages and cultures. As Busch says: ‘If we conceive language as part of this body memory, it becomes possible to understand repertoire in its biographical dimension, as a structure bearing the traces of past experience’ (Busch, 2014, p. 11). The ‘lived experience of language’ then is made up of its relationship with actual lives and bears the memories of the places and the people it has been with, that is to say, its relational experience.

### Auto-ethnography as relational

In this article we propose a shift in current understandings of ethnography by introducing a way of doing ethnography in the social sciences that introduces a post-qualitative approach to data (MacLure, 2013). Such an approach avoids categorising and ‘representing’ data and instead focuses on the evanescence of data. We argue that the relationality of this post-qualitative approach allows for a more grounded, creative and multi-layered approach to interculturality. The use of auto-ethnography outlined in this article would be situated within this approach. The data obtained by auto-ethnographic film-making are not seen in its own right as a document, i.e. independently from its material context and time–space coordinates. Rather, film-making is understood as entangled and in relation to the materialities that have surrounded and constituted the specific intercultural experience. This epistemological standpoint means a new understanding of what constitutes ethnography and interculturality. On the one hand, it proposes alternative new tools for observing, documenting and reflecting on the intercultural experience that go beyond multisensorial ethnography (Pink, 2015) by allowing us to observe and record multisensorial events in a moment-by-moment process. On the other, it presents an ontology of being intercultural that invokes three concepts:

- (1) The expansion of the notions of ‘languages’ and ‘cultures’ by the introduction of an embodied, tangible and complex semiotic chain.
- (2) The belief that interculturality is relational and created in intra-relations.
- (3) An understanding of identity as contingent and susceptible to processes of becoming anchored in time and space.

Using an auto-ethnographic approach, creative film-making also proposes investigating a liminal way of portraying the intercultural encounter, by focusing on the marginal of intercultural personal narratives. It is a methodology that aims to investigate a ‘deviant’ story that delves primarily into the ‘subjective’ and ‘affective’ (Ros i Solé, 2022). The focus then is on the contingent

exceptionality of the affective rather than on the universal and the rational. It focuses on the evocation of memories that the fleeting images of ‘lives-in-motion’ trigger (Ros i Solé, 2022). As Muncey (2010) explains ‘experience is always incomplete and in transition, and at best, can only be described as a snapshot’ (Muncey, 2010, p. 23). The advantage of auto-ethnography is that it is able to tell stories that provide multiple layers of consciousness that simultaneously contain different levels: the personal, the cultural, the interior and the exterior, which constitute the heterogeneity and multiple threads of the self.

The use of creative auto-ethnography and the flexibility and the potential to follow the movement of film-making gives us a subjective lens and epistemology that focuses on the embodiment of these fragmented layers rather than a unique and coherent thought; on the concrete and the messy, rather than on the purely transcendental of cultures. On the one hand it highlights rhizomatic connections, multiplicity and possibilities for growth. On the other, it argues that while the focus on experience and embodiment is foregrounded, this epistemology still engages with abstract theory in a dialogic and reflective way. The emphasis on the rhizomatic aspects of the intercultural encounter is a celebration of the inhabited encounter, its multiplicity and its continuous search for new connections and entanglements. Such an understanding borrows from Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004 [1987]) conceptualisation of the rhizome and nomadic thought, which does not ‘repose’ on identity but rather highlights and actively follows its movement and connections. Nomadic thought helps us conceive the subject as non-finite and connected to a multiplicity that knows no bounds. This connectivity and potential for growth is what we mean by ‘rhizome’. The idea of the rhizome then emphasises not only movement and connection but also heterogeneity and change. Here, there is no order, no fixed route, but proliferation without recourse to an original point or hierarchy. Multiplicities involve total transformation and change of the nature of the subject rather than the enlargement of a pre-arranged structure. As Deleuze and Guattari (2004 [1987]) point out, the multiplicity of the rhizome means that there are no fixed points to branch out, like in a tree or a root, but entangled lines in time and space. As Ingold (2016) describes in his ‘anthropology of the line’, and his analogies with the act of travelling, lines define the movement in relation to space: they ‘occupy’ spaces (settlers), ‘fail’ to do so (nomads), or they ‘inhabit’ places (wayfarers). The lines that inhabit spaces, like wayfarers, do not establish boundaries to places, but they consist of a zone ‘in which their several pathways are thoroughly entangled’ (Ingold, 2016, p. 106).

### Film-making as an organ of touch

But perhaps the most useful term to describe how we can use the techniques and epistemologies of film to offer an embodied and inhabited vision of the intercultural encounter is the term ‘haptic visuality’ coined by Marks (2000). Inspired by the work of the nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl, it describes the experience whereby ‘the eyes themselves function like organs of touch’ (Marks, 2000, p. 162). Unlike ‘optical visuality’, that is the way in which we perceive objects from a distance in the process of viewing to discern their position within space, haptic visuality involves moving closer. In other words, instead of focusing on depth, it focusses on textures. It is a way of looking that involves ‘movement’ rather than ‘focus’, ‘grazing’ rather than ‘gazing’ (Marks, 2000). Importantly, while optical visuality gives way to perceive the subject that is viewed as an ‘all-perceiving’ subject, this is not the case within the process of perception in haptic visuality. The use of the term haptic visuality is useful for the purpose of this article for two reasons, firstly, due to its emphasis on movement, and secondly, due to the relationship between the viewer and film that establishes ‘a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image’ (Marks, 2000, p. 164) in their embodied encounter.

Firstly, haptic visuality emphasises, as mentioned before, the idea of movement in the process of viewing. In Marks’ own words, it invites ‘a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realises what she or he is beholding’, therefore involving the body of the viewer in engaging in the materiality of the image (instead of a focus on its representational

aspect and narrative) (Marks, 2000, p. 163). Secondly, what Marks refers to as haptic images aligns, as she observes herself, with what Deleuze calls ‘optical images’ in his time-image cinema. Importantly, despite the confusing terms used, the essential element in both these concepts is the fact that for the viewer to sense or to make sense of the images, they must draw on their memory and imagination to perceive them. The body of the viewer encounters the body of the film (Sobchack, 1992), inviting not an identification with, for example, a protagonist, but rather encouraging ‘a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image’ (Marks, 2000, p. 164). Haptic visuality then is intrinsically linked to the body and is rooted in desire – the desire to conjure up ‘sense memories’, or ways of remembering that are multi-sensory and active. Such sense memories might express themselves ‘somatically, in pain, nausea’ (Marks, 2000, p. 11), but even in more violent forms, the senses can bring forward what might have been forgotten or buried, therefore providing a crucial link to the notion of memory and our personal, sensual and sense-evoking experiences.

Such an emphasis signals an important shift away from an ocularcentric (a focus on the visual) and towards the embodied, lived relationship of engaging with the film-making process that foregrounds the personal and intimate aspect of the intercultural encounter. The memories lived, the ‘body memories’ (Busch, 2014), experienced through the senses, and the marks that history has made on one’s body are the focus here. The ideas of movement and the dynamic embodied and personal relationship between viewer and film are central to Marks’ work on intercultural cinema. Drawing on nearly two hundred examples from around the globe, Marks explores how film-makers living in diaspora convey memories and cultural experiences through film. Through this haptic way of perceiving, the viewer is actively engaged in a multi-sensory, embodied journey of exploration that goes beyond the image as a merely visual representation of experience. Early on in her seminar work *The Skin of the Film* (2000), Marks defines the term ‘intercultural’. She argues: ‘Intercultural’ means that a work is not the property of any single culture but mediates in at least two directions. It accounts for the encounter between different cultural organisations of knowledge’ but, as Marks cautions, the exchange between cultures is never neutral (Marks, 2000, p. 7). As Laura McMahon asserts, the active and critical engagement with film then ‘can help us to think further- and feel more- about our relation to our bodies, to other bodies, to our experience of the artwork and to our existence in the world’ (McMahon, 2012, p. 2). In other words, it can help us create a sense of ourselves in relation to the other and the world that we share. Therefore, thinking about the relationship between our bodies and images, they emphasise ultimately the process of making sense of these different bodies and our relationship with the world (MacDougall, 2006).

The exploration of the intercultural encounter through the lens of film-making and auto-ethnography, as is offered in this article, aims to support closing this gap and yield insight into how intercultural theory could be more interdependent on an embodied understanding of experience. The concept of ‘entanglement’ (Barad, 2007) is useful in this context as it highlights the interconnection between theory and practice and the way in which the intercultural encounter can be uncovered and traced with and through the film-making process.

In his 2013 work, Robin Nelson refines the link between research and practice to articulate not only the multimodal dynamic of creative practice research but also to assert the relationship between theory and writing. For Nelson, the ‘know-how’ of the practitioner is linked to the notion of ‘doing-knowing’ (Nelson, 2013, p. 40), that is, the knowledge that has been acquired over time, incrementally, and that is often difficult to verbalise. This is because it is grounded in the lived, embodied experience of the researcher-practitioner and has become an automated process (Nelson, 2013, p. 40). It is then only through the act of reflection that the ‘process of building knowledge’ is made visible. This includes, for the purpose of the example discussed below, both reading before the practice of film-making of the intercultural ‘moment’ and subsequent critical reflection but both are a method within this methodology of praxis, as Nelson underscores. However, we must go further by saying that we must discover through the act of ‘doing-thinking’ (Nelson, 2013, p. 29) that is by also carving out space for an engagement with practice before the critical thinking and engagement with theory happens, thereby establishing a dialogue between doing (practice) and (abstract)

thinking. Film-making allows for such a space full of potential. Following the etymological root of the word 'creare', stemming, like the word 'creative' from the Latin 'creates/creare', the act of 'bringing into being' and, via the word 'crescere' that which can 'arise, be born', 'pensive-creative praxis' considers the dialogical encounter between theory and practice and the researcher-practitioner engaged in this porous, messy and creative process, providing a space in-between for new ideas to arise (Rifesser, 2020a). It is again here that the term 'praxis' is particularly useful because it acknowledges this interplay between theory and practice. More than that, the term 'praxis' is used here deliberately because it 'foregrounds the dialogical and creative interplay of the porous, dialogical encounter, well as its political intent' (Rifesser, 2020a, p. 242). If film-making is perceived as 'pensive-creative praxis', it could indeed be perceived as walking along one's practice, establishing a dialogue through critical reflection to allow for new knowledge to emerge. This creative space is a space for play, and play is a space in-between 'at once repetitive and imitative and, equally, exploratory and innovative'; it is the space where both what is 'known and secure' comes to meet 'what is new and has never been experienced' (Sachs, 2017, p. 129). The idea of 'play' creates useful spaces of innovation and creation as it is through initial imitation and performance that one develops one's own creativity, which, in turn, leads to the creation of something new (Sachs, 2017: 129).

Film-making, is, like languages and cultures, always in action, moving the researcher/practitioner in the process (Rifesser, 2020a; Scott, 2016, p. 21; Nelson, 2013; Haseman, [2007] 2010), using 'experience to express experience' (Barbash & Castaing-Taylor, 1997, p. 1). Like language learning that is deeply personal, accidental and messy (Ros i Sole, 2016), so is the film-making process for the researcher-filmmaker engaged in this 'pensive-creative praxis' messy and porous (Rifesser, 2020a). By drawing on a phenomenological and auto-ethnographic film perspective, this article then shifts the focus from an ocularcentric towards the embodied, lived experience, showing how auto-ethnographic film-making praxis can be a useful methodological tool in intercultural communication.

Using the imagery of a 'double movement' (Nelson, 2013, p. 41), Nelson emphasises how both the collection and juxtaposition within the art production and the selection and editing decisions of the various elements, are key parts of the process, emphasising methodological rigour and the originality or impact of the practice itself as crucial for the validity of creative practice research. In the film-making process decisions are made constantly: before, during the process of film-making, and afterwards in the editing suite. As feminist film theorist and film-maker Laura Mulvey (2006) highlights, technological shifts in the past decades have drastically changed and shaped our engagement with the medium of film and indeed film-making. With the rise of free and user-friendly film editing software, the spectator is now able to not only still the image, as per Bellour's (1987) idea, but also they are indeed able to modify the image itself. What is called 'ripping' in film-making terminology is indeed a 'ripping' of parts of the film from the whole, to change it, adapt it to the needs and likes of the spectator now turned into the editor. The process is then turned upside down in that, starting from embodied practice, 'the practice becomes theory generating' (Bolt, 2010 [2007], p. 33). As the practitioner-researcher engages in this embodied, messy and porous encounter of praxis (Rifesser, 2020a), new ideas emerge, new connections are formed that can prove to be essential to inform theory (and not only vice versa). It is only afterwards in the research process, in the act of reflection upon the process, that it is possible to see how the practice can indeed be theory-generating (Bolt, 2010 [2007]). Below, I will provide two examples of the dialogical interplay between theory and practice that film-making praxis constructs - what could be understood as 'pensive-creative praxis' (Rifesser, 2020a), a term that is explored later in this paper.

*Creative film-making praxis and touch: A Letter Of Love To You* (Rifesser, UK, 2016) and *Care|ss* (Rifesser, UK, 2017)

*A Letter Of Love To You* (Rifesser, UK, 2016) and *Care|ss* (Rifesser, UK, 2017) form part of a wider research project entitled *A caressing dialogical encounter* (Rifesser, UK, 2019, 22:05 mins) which was

the runner-up for the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS) awards 2021 award in the category ‘videographic film criticism’. It seeks to explore the philosophical concept of Luce Irigaray’s of the caress using found footage (already existing cinematic material) drawn from the work of eighteen filmmakers from around the world, and personal experimental audio-visual material by the film-maker – Rifesser – that was shot as part of the film-making process. For the purpose of the discussion here, focus here is placed on the elements that use own, personal, experimental material. Luce Irigaray’s theory of the ‘philosophy of the caress’ offered the starting point for discussion to envision a peaceful and respectful living together. The application of Irigarayan theory to phenomenological film scholarship is novel because sensory scholarship has to date mainly engaged with either the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Sobchack, 1992; 2004; Barker, 2009; Lindner, 2012) Gilles Deleuze (Shaviro, 1993; Marks, 2000; 2002; del Rio, 2008) and more recently Jean Luc Nancy (McMahon, 2012).

But the engagement with praxis also brought to the fore the underbelly of using Irigaray’s theoretical work as a basis for creative praxis research. As discussed elsewhere in detail (Rifesser, 2020a), *A Letter Of Love To You* is a short stop-motion animation piece that was the first of the five pieces created as part of the wider audio-visual praxis project, *A caressing dialogical encounter. A Letter Of Love To You* premiered at the London Feminist Film Festival 2016 and was later screened at other venues across London and in the run-up to the Leeds Queer Film Festival 2017. As discussed in detail elsewhere (Rifesser, 2020a), it was created to put Irigaray’s theory that formed the basis of a discussion ‘into action’ through film-making. Irigaray’s philosophy of what she calls the ‘touch of the caress’ (Irigaray, 1993) establishes a peaceful and respectful meeting between two, whereby a space in-between is created for dialogue (Rifesser, 2020b). The key element of Irigaray’s philosophical concept is perhaps best understood in the way that she inserts a ‘to’ into the sentence ‘I love you’ to establish both the speaker and the recipient of the love not as subject and object but both as independent subjects. In *A Letter Of Love To You* this exact concept is explored through the lived experience of a person who seeks to grapple with their own identity and the concept of love. In the process of making this short film, the understanding of Irigaray’s theoretical concept shifted. As noted in the detailed discussion of the piece, the practice became ‘theory-generating in that it exemplified to the filmmaker the complexity of and contradiction embedded within Irigaray’s theory of the caress for the lived experience of embodied subjectivity’ (Rifesser, 2020a, p. 254). That is, that it ‘remains within the dualistic heterosexual woman/man paradigm’ (Rifesser, 2020a, p. 254), an aspect that has been critiqued in relation to Irigaray’s work more broadly but which it was only able to be articulated clearly as a result of the ‘doing-thinking’ and the process of reflection that followed it. However, what is more, the engagement with theories of interculturality and the adoption of an auto-ethnographic lens allowed for a re-consideration of the process of making *A Letter Of Love To You*, to consider the aforementioned personal aspect of the intercultural encounter and to draw on the work of Busch and Sobchack, the marks that were left both on the body of the film and the body of the researcher/film-maker, changing the history of this project. Contradictions emerged in the research that foregrounded the need for critical engagement with and a (re-) negotiation of the (in)visible borders of the (inter) national, (inter/intra) personal, intimate and sensuous space(s) and horizon(s) of being of and in this world. Then, instead of seeing the film-making work as a final product, it became a project in motion.

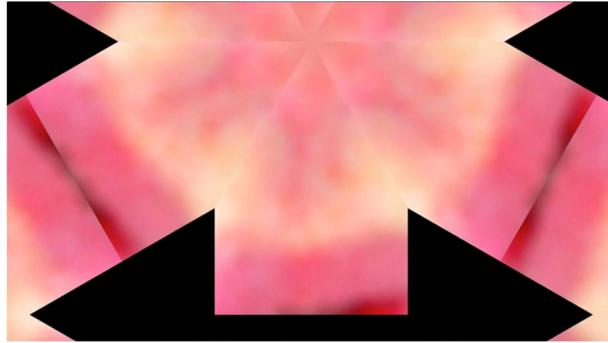
Out of these initial marks carved into these bodies, the short film *Care|ss* was developed. It was commissioned by Irigaray herself and an initial version of the piece premiered at the ICA London in 2017. Starting from breath and tracing the etymological roots of the words and the word ‘care’ embedded within the word ‘caress’, it seeks to show the importance of touch and the caress in Irigaray’s philosophy. This short film is set up as an imaginary epistolary exchange with Irigaray. In both *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985 [1974]) and *To Speak is Never Neutral* (2002 [1985]), Irigaray foregrounds the idea that woman is in exile. She is the other and she is trapped within a patriarchal society that excludes her, with no language, no space for a feminine enunciation. Irigaray adopts not only in her work on the philosophy of the caress. It is already in her

aforementioned earliest work, that Irigaray uses this tool to interrogate the work of leading Western philosophers such as Freud, Hegel and Plato – to challenge and indeed subvert phallogocentric thought and to establish herself as a woman philosopher. For the purpose of the project described above, this process of writing oneself into the audio-visual film-making text through original work is a way to follow Irigaray's example, and to disrupt and subvert traditional scholarship that separates academic writing and film practice, as per Sobchack's (2004) previously mentioned work. In this audio-visual praxis, and by adopting a feminist framework, one's own body is situated within creative practice, in an in-between space between writing and practice that merges the real with the fictional through the imaginary epistolary exchange. A link can be established between exile and epistolarity. They are 'constitutively linked because both are driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss', and simultaneously evoking the desire to be with another and to reimagine and elsewhere and other times' (Naficy, 2001, p. 101), aspects that are also crucial to thinking about interculturality and specifically the notion of home. Hamid Naficy considers this in his rich discussion of exile letters as a way of establishing a link to one's home and the longing for this feeling. The epistolary form also underscores an essential element of the Irigarayan caress. That is the continuous negotiation of 'the dichotomies of active/ passive, presence/ absence, touch/ the absence thereof and closeness/ distance' (Rifesser, 2020b, p. 28), which is explored audio-visual in *Care|ss*.

*Care|ss* draws out the emphasis of 'care'. To caress another, is to show a sense of care, a desire – as per Irigaray's theory – to enter into a peaceful and respectful dialogue with a person to do so while providing a space for the person to give voice to their experience. Acknowledging their lived experience means acknowledging the other as an individual with a voice. The notion of 'care' is also used as a vehicle to draw out Irigaray's emphasis on the importance of self-care and self-preservation that can be achieved through attention to one's own body breath, contemplation, repose and silence (Rifesser, 2020b). In *Care|ss*, Marks' theory of 'haptic visuality' is explored in relation to the Irigarayan caress that was discussed earlier. To briefly re-iterate the key points, in Marks' (2000) exploration of diasporic moving image texts, she makes use of the word 'haptic' to explore the evocation of memories through the experience of being close, of 'touching' the audio-visual material. Marks then draws on the Greek word 'haptikos' that means 'pertaining to the sense of touch'. Yet, for Irigaray, the term 'haptic' is problematic as she perceives the notion of closeness to not allow for space. Here she draws on the root of the word 'haptic' from 'haptēin' which means 'to fasten together'. That is, the Irigarayan caress moves beyond the importance of closeness in relation to touch also to include the notion of distance. According to Irigaray, understanding that touch is *combined with* distance allows both subjects to perceive the meeting with the other in a space in-between. Throughout *Care|ss*, intertitles appear. The ones entitled 'Caress' are presented for the duration of 30 frames each to provide moments for pauses and reflection. The letters are purposely set against a white but slightly patterned background (water drops falling on a glass surface) to symbolise a blank canvas onto which the private reflections of the viewer can be inscribed. The pattern is to evoke not only the fact that every human carries memories of touch but also that these are prior to the encounter with the images and indeed prior to language, aspects that, as we pointed out above in our understanding of the 'pure event' aspect of language are crucial when thinking about the intercultural encounter.

The use of irises and kaleidoscopic effects in *Care|ss*, serves to underscore Irigaray's emphasis on a peaceful, respectful meeting with oneself and the other, drawn from the meaning of the term 'kaleidoscope', namely from the Greek 'kalos', meaning 'beautiful' and 'eidos' shape (Harper, 2019). However, the use of kaleidoscopic images is also to bring forth a crucial aspect of this film-making praxis work discussed here, namely how the theoretical discussion was shaped and continuously shifted through the dialogical interplay between theory and practice in writing and through film-making. Like vibrant subjectivities that are fluid and ever-changing (Ros i Solé et al., 2020), so is the research process. To embrace its kaleidoscopic effect, the 'potential contradictions, messiness and disparate elements, offers the potential for creative practice research to have a profound impact on our knowledge and our ever-moving and shifting globalised world' (Rifesser,

2020a, p. 254) but it is only possible if we acknowledge the embodied, lived experience of the researcher-filmmaker.



© Dr Judith Rifesser. Reuse not permitted without consent from copyright owner and with the subtitle: Excerpt from *Care|ss* (Rifesser, UK, 2017) in *A caressing dialogical encounter* (Rifesser, UK, 2019, 22:05 mins).

Excerpt from *Care|ss* (Rifesser, UK, 2017) in *A caressing dialogical encounter* (Rifesser, UK, 2019)

This example of film-making praxis is directly linked to the aforementioned idea of ‘know-how’ or what is sometimes termed as ‘procedural knowledge’ (Nelson, 2013, p. 41). This is tacit knowledge that is often difficult to articulate and is deeply rooted in embodiment and embodied knowledge (Nelson, 2013, p. 44). That is, the knowledge that is automated, that, like riding a bike or swimming, becomes muscle-memory and is born out of doing, practising, practising again and again. But for the ‘know-how’ to become useful for the research process, it must be followed by the development of ‘know-what’. The method of moving from ‘know-how’ to ‘know-that’ is through a mode of ‘critical reflection’ (Nelson, 2013, p. 44). ‘Know-that’ then describes ‘pausing, standing back and thinking about what you are doing’ (Nelson, 2013, p. 44). It is then, for the filmmaker-researcher, a way to develop ideas further but also to correct misconceptions or errors. The previously mentioned notion of ‘ripping’ as part of the editing is useful also because it brings forth the notion of pain and even conflict, to be open to being vulnerable and being ready to learn. It is then a way of ‘*doing being critical*’ that allows for parallels to be established between film-making praxis and Critical Pedagogy in relation to interculturality. That is, to also acknowledge elements that might be contradictory or reveal friction points. As Alison Phipps and Manuela Guilherme assert, critical reflection is a key competence and the ‘capacity to deal critically and successfully with dissent and even conflict through critical cultural awareness towards the Self and the Other and through honest and balanced negotiation’ (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 3).

In the audio-visual praxis *A caressing dialogical encounter* (Rifesser, UK, 2019) in addition to irises and kaleidoscopic effects, loops and multi-screens are used. Irigaray’s own way of working also makes use of the notion of excess through her use of repetition to draw out certain elements and ultimately to carve out a space for a feminine enunciation. Furthermore, no sound adjustments were made nor was the working colour corrected. These moments could be perceived as ‘stutterings’ or ‘stammerings’, emphasising the notion of excess (also see Rifesser, 2021a). As a result, then, there are some abrupt cuts. Instead of the perception of one ‘whole’ piece in which sound and images beautifully merge, the viewer is continuously reminded of the specificity of each element of the praxis that engages with found (that is, already existing material) footage of the work of 18 film-makers from around the world, in dialogue with personal, original experimental material. What holds the audio-visual piece together is an overarching imaginary epistolary exchange with Irigaray. As Hamid Naficy (2001) reminds us, the epistolary genre strongly evokes the notion of home, a home that one longs and desires and the friction between one’s new home and that place and those people that were left behind. Here the work of Alistair Cole (2015) is useful

who, in addition to Nelson's (2013) 'know-how', 'know-that' and 'know-what' foregrounds the 'know-from' that is the genealogical knowledge. In other words, the knowledge that we acquire from our ancestors, and which of course plays a crucial role in thinking about intercultural understanding and the knowledge and experiences that we have and acquire throughout our lives.

Gameli Kodzo Tordzro, in his research on film and storytelling praxis, usefully suggests the term 'material' when referring to the 'data' collected in the practice research process, 'as a more suitable terminology for the generative and performative nature of this narrative enquiry of the self, process, production and reflection on production' (Tordzro, 2018: 25). The term 'material' itself then highlights the embodied nature of praxis research again because it draws out the physicality, the 'matter', the earthily, lived experience of the encounter and the lived, embodied entanglement of the filmmaker-researcher in the process.

### Film-making and intercultural epistemologies

The idea of embodied and 'critical knowledge' expressed in the 'know-how', 'know-what' concepts above links well with intercultural researchers that have felt the need to tap into the meanings of the intercultural through direct and embodied experience. For example, Phipps (2019) concedes that her incursions into new languages resembled more the detailed observation and deeply experiential immersion work of traditional anthropology than the modern research methods of 'hard' second language acquisition sciences. She claims that her work was like the 'the kinds of observations in early anthropologists' writings, especially Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski, and my own notes, when I was unable to understand language in various settings where I was undertaking fieldwork (...) She continues to point out that her observations did not focus on language itself, on its 'representations', but rather, 'my fieldnotes focused on rituals, clothing, food, objects, greetings and farewells, not on meaning, or on a language other than the words I was tentatively learning' (Phipps, 2019, p. 40). By focussing on the embodied and experiential aspects of language rather than its abstract meanings Phipps shows that there is another way of researching the intercultural, as the raw untaught experience.

Similarly, Badwan and Hall (2020) use the methodology of a 'walk-along', a road in Manchester (The Curry Mile), as a way of exploring the ways in which places are inhabited through the entanglement of places, emotions and materiality. They help us understand this is using the idea of 'decentring' of the intercultural encounter by shifting the focus from language to explore the role of places, objects and emotions in the intercultural encounter. Following Ahmed (2014), Badwan and Hall (2020) focus on the dynamic interplay between humans, objects and spaces and the affective 'stickiness' that develops around the subject as s/he moves through space. Similarly, in film-making praxis, the individual is seen as being entangled with the socio-spatial activity, their practices and experiences. Objects and spaces together with the subject trigger new 'threads' and connections in the intercultural encounter. Whereas in Badwan and Hall (2020) objects provide the bridges and 'commonality' to bring different experiences together, the methodology of film-making praxis foregrounds and zooms in the textures of 'difference' and dwelling in the mediating process. Film-making harnesses what is particular and intimate about the lived experience in the intercultural encounter. Emotions and affects are not just 'accessed', but they are experienced, dwelled on and constructed in motion. But, like in the 'walk-along' methodology used in Badwan and Hall's research, film-making creative praxis also amplifies intercultural meanings. Film-making, with its doing and creating with the camera, and its moving and shifting of the researcher-practitioner in the process, creates new entanglements with space and place and new meanings emerge from it. It is the way that spaces are inhabited with the camera that infuses emotion and meaning into the event. Emotions and affect are not projected onto the situation as Ahmed (2014) argues, but rather, the other way round, they function from outside-in so that it is the space and the interaction between the subject and the object that produces emotion and helps us 'feel our way' and get to inhabit the world.

Film-making 'pensive-creative praxis' as a new methodological lens into interculturality – frictions as elucidated through Totsch. (Rifesser, UK, 2018)

Creative film-making and the embodied audio-visual experience that it can provide amplifies many of the more obscure and secret aspects of the intercultural encounter, such as 'time'. Cinema's relation to time is difficult to articulate through language (Mulvey, 2006, p. 182). Similarly, the intercultural experience on the intimate is often difficult to articulate adequately in words. It is an aspect cinema and the intercultural encounter share and complement each other: one by the accurate reflection of the pass of time (language), the other by getting closer to the feeling of the intimate (cinema). Such considerations are useful also when thinking about the creative research process of film-making and the articulation of the process through and indeed beyond language. In other words, 'the language of creative research is related to the goal of material thinking, and both look beyond the making process to the local reinvention of social relations' (Carter, 2004, p. 10). As Phipps and Guilherme remind us: 'Those of us associated with this critical project of language(s) and intercultural communication wish to offer resources for imagination, empowerment and hope' (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 5). Creative film-making praxis can offer such a new lens. It then can offer a valuable tool for research in intercultural communication because it provides a creative space to voice and 'address radical concerns' (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 1), providing a way of amplifying intimate intercultural spaces and make them more visible and textured. Such considerations offer a fruitful base for the consideration for the intimate side of interculturality. By returning to the previously mentioned concept of the Deleuzian assemblage, we can then shift beyond 'what language *means*' and instead move 'towards thinking performatively, in terms of what it *produces*', and the way in which it 'is not at the top of a hierarchy and does not create or erase difference; rather, it is entangled among and within the inseparable entities which make up assemblages' (Harvey, McCormack & Vanden, 2019: 453).

The complexity of dealing with these frictions and establishing a feminine enunciation is the central topic of *Totsch* (Rifesser, UK, 2018), a further segment in the audio-visual praxis *A caressing dialogical encounter*. In this section a montage of two clips with the screen split three ways can be seen. In the middle section, there is an extreme close-up of the face of the film-maker – Rifesser – the lens used as a way to insinuate a caress with this face, while foregrounding the notion of movement. The fast camera movement that follows the face stands in contrast to the slow camera movements of an image to the left and right of a drawing of the grandmother of the film-maker in a portrait picture. This drawing was made solely by writing the word '*casa*', meaning house, in the native tongue of the grandmother, Italian, carving the pencil into the white paper to bring forth the face of this maternal grandmother. The image is used to evoke the complexity of engaging with a quest for feminine enunciation within a patriarchal system. The non-diegetic sound chosen for this practice piece is a lullaby often sung to children in the Austro-Bavarian dialect of the Puster valley where the filmmaker was born, which goes: '*Heia, popeia, mein herzliabschto Schotz, wenne unfongsch zi rearn, noar kriegsche an Totsch*'. It translates loosely into: 'Heya, popeya, my most-previous treasure, if you start crying, you'll get a slap-but'. As can be heard in the recording that forms part of the audio-visual praxis, the word '*Totsch*' (slap-but) evokes the notion of the word 'touch'.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, it was often sung by women, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, trying to get a baby to sleep. The four verses were sung repeatedly. The perpetual repetition reaches its peak in the second part of the verse, with the word '*Totsch*' foreshadowing the sound that the slap-but will make, accentuating sonically the need to attend to aspects of violence and frictions in relation to the caress and Irigaray's theory and foregrounding the feelings that evolved through the engagement with this praxis.

As Sarah Ahmed (2014) suggests, rather than looking at how the feeling is determined, we can look at what the feeling 'does' and how it travels and is embodied in our bodies. The conceptualisation of affect in Ahmed is very akin to the idea of knowing here where it is the inhabiting of space and body that makes and shapes feeling. 'It is through the flow of sensations and feelings that become conscious as pain or pleasure that different surfaces are established' (Ahmed, 2014, p.

24). Such considerations on the spaces, where affect is constructed, inform our understanding of the intercultural encounter. It opens up a space in-between the subject and the object for critical reflection and the opportunity to consider the lived, embodied experience of the researcher-practitioner that is ever-shifting through continuous movement, embodiment and reflection. Ahmed furthermore observes the importance of intense and playful engagement, resonating with the aforementioned ideas of play and ‘pensive-creative praxis’. She advocates a ‘scene of a feminist instruction’, ‘turning ... word[s] this way and that ... attending to the same words across different contexts, allowing them to create ripples and new patterns like texture on a ground’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12). The editing of the pre-existing film material offers the opportunity, like the ‘prolonged physical engagement with one or more objects [... of a] deeply immersive and meditative practice’ (Budach et al., 2020, p. 190), evoking the notion of play yet again.

But if in the intercultural encounter we are required to step out of the comfort zone (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p. 148), the ‘pensive-creative’ researcher-practitioner is asked to take action, embody and embrace the continuous movement of the process and the unknown (Haseman & Mafe [2009] 2010) and be open to what is exchanged in the process. In other words, ‘[t]he nature of creative practice research is permeable in that it aims to create a dialogical space that allows for a meeting between two: practice and theory’ (Rifesser, 2020a, p. 248). María del Carmen Salazar reminds us that ‘[f]uture research should therefore focus on the active role of students in co-creating a humanising pedagogy in the classroom and beyond’ (Salazar, 2013, p. 143). Film-making can offer such opportunities whether that is via the editing of already existing material, or the creation of new material, if we understand (film)-making as being ‘at the heart of human experience and social transformation’ (Anderson & Macleroy, 2017, p. 497). By film-making as creative praxis we are capturing intimate and embodied action while engaging critically with the aim of bringing about a more humane pedagogy and social transformation.

## Note

1. ‘Touch’ and ‘Totsch’ are not homophones, as the UK IPA for touch is /tʌtʃ/, while the word ‘Totsch’ spoken in the dialect of the Puster Valley would sound more like /totʃ/. Please note that there is no official written form of this dialect. Written accounts follow the personal style of each individual and can differ drastically even from village to village.

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