

Essay Film and Narrative Techniques: Screenwriting Non-Fiction

Symposium of the BAFTSS 'Essay Film' Research Group

18th-19th November 2017 University of York

A great symposium! The members of the SIG Essay Film gathered in York to debate the very special kind of non-fiction form that is the Essay Film. The two-day symposium opened with the panel 'Screenwriting Essay Film', which introduced the process of the essay film's screenwriting and the variety of the scripts' provenance. Jill Daniels, a filmmaker and Senior Lecturer at the University of East London, presented the process of scripting her film *Not Reconciled* (2009), and the narrative techniques she applied to translate historical research in a narrative. Ultimately, in this case study, the fragments of research, ideas, ruminations and creative decisions culminated into a film that, as Jill stated, is the script itself. Kayla Parker, Lecturer at the University of Plymouth, artist filmmaker and experienced producer-director, and Stuart Moore, filmmaker and sound artist based at the University of West England, presented the screenwriting process supporting the collaborative essay film *Green Line*, currently in production in Cyprus. A project that reflects on the island's history, current political and social situation, and on processes of personal reflection. Brenda Hollweg, Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Leeds and a filmmaker, explored the work of filmmaker Marianna Christofides and analysed the multiple voices and temporalities inscribed in the landscape and the history of the region in *Days in Between* (2015).

In the early afternoon, our keynote speaker, Professor Laura Rascaroli, Co-Head of Film and Screen Media at the University College Cork, Ireland, establishes the underlying central theme of the symposium and presented on the research and the material covered for her new book *How the Essay Film Thinks* (Oxford UP, 2017). To the generative speech followed a lively discussion, which was enriched by the contributions of the informed and enthusiastic audience. The second panel, 'The Essay Film in the West', focused on discourse in the essay film in Western culture. Rob Coley, Senior Lecturer at the University of Lincoln, analysed the work of Adam Curtis, which is notably absent from critical discussions of the contemporary essay film. Curtis' work seems to construct a narrative that destabilizes perception and induces the audience to explore the limit point of a powerful imaginary that conditions everyday experience. Jouko Aaltonen, Adjunct Professor, and visiting researcher at Aalto University, Helsinki, introduced the work of leading essay filmmaker Peter von Bagh (1943-2014). Von Bagh favoured associative structures, and his films were created by writing, shooting and editing simultaneously. His methodology is reflected upon in his theoretical writing, and Aaltonen added them novel information obtained from personal discussions with the author. A lively roundtable concluded the session. The delegates, keynote speaker and organisers, Romana Turina, Visiting Lecturer at the University of Greenwich, and Richard Walsh, Director of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Narrative Studies at the University of York, enjoyed an evening out in the centre of York, the famous Shambles.

The morning of the 19th, the delegates reconvened and followed the third panel, which focused on 'The Essayistic in the East'. The panel opened with Samuel Kaczorowski, Associate Professor at Tokyo Hosei and Toulouse 2 Jean-Jaures (France) Universities, animator and filmmaker. Kaczorowski explored the work of manga director Osamu Tezuka in *The Legend of Son Goku*, a work that crossed the whole career of Tezuka. In this work, the author seemed to employ different incarnations of himself during the various adaptations of the film, in that he mirrors the concept of *plural bodies* as theorized by Roland Barthes. Kiki Tianqi Yu, Lecturer at the University of West of Scotland, introduced the audience to what the essayistic looks like in Chinese cinemas. Tianqi Yu explored how Chinese films inherit Chinese literary origins and cultural-linguistic traditions, and in what way they reference western essay films. Ming-Yu Lee, Assistant Professor at Shih Hsin University, Taipei, Taiwan, presented the work of Na-Ou Liu (1905-1940), one of the earliest avant-garde film and literature pioneers in Taiwan. Examining Liu's manuscript of *Man with a Camera* (Liu 1933), in which Liu pays respect to Dziga Vertov's Kino-Eye theory, Lee cross-referenced with the film, personal notes, and production documentation to uncover Liu's authorial presence.

The symposium brought together impressive academic and professional practices, generative new research and joy in the meeting of fellow scholars working in and on one of the most exciting film forms, the Essay Film. Our gratitude goes to the Director of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Narrative Studies at the University of York, Dr. Richard Walsh, and the BAFTSS' team, who supported the initiative from the very beginning!