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# 'Tentacular thinking' in Creative Practice Research as a Radical Intellectual Gesture

## A case study of an experimental hybrid film Wash (2022)

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### Abstract

*As a filmmaker and scholar I have been involved in the project of creating knowledge through making films, even before I did a PhD and became an academic. It has always been unclear to me why there is the curious divide between the so called 'academic' and creative'. All my documentaries for the broadcasters in some way I would argue were 'practice research' without me being quite aware of it. The paper considers the notion of what 'knowledge' might be for a creative research practitioner and how 'high theory' might be of assistance in inspiring ideas and creative strategies. I will share my most recent experience of working across disciplines with the new experimental film Wash (2022). It is a hybrid documentary with element of animation and drama dealing with serious issues of development in Zimbabwe, a country in which I have done much work over the years. The piece of work has been funded by Strategic England Research 2021 and the University of Edinburgh.*

*In terms of methodology for any creative practice research work, here I suggest that casting a wide net in the search for theoretical and artistic inspirations, using what Donna Haraway would call 'tentacular thinking' is not only not a hindrance in the creative process but could be positively helpful. In this context I discuss here Surrealism, arguably the most influential artistic and theoretical movement, which itself began with a bold drawing from a different praxis and theory, namely psychoanalysis and the work of Sigmund Freud. Surrealism as a creative tool has of course been re-framed, re-thought and re-positioned by various cultures as demonstrated by Venice Bienale and the recent exhibition at Tate Modern in London.) In some way it has also influenced the hybrid film Wash I am presenting here, even as it deals with important issues of understanding a given community before introducing practices that might even be 'good for them. In the film I have used a patchwork of knowledge, a patchwork of influences, drawing from Surrealism as well as other influences such as postcolonial theories and intangible local knowledge reservoirs.*

**Keywords:** creative practice research, Haraway, tentacular thinking, surrealism, (de)colonial studies



Credit: Tomas Mitkus

## Preliminary Remarks

'Love', says Rimbaud, 'has to be reinvented' (quoted in Felman 1982: 5). Creative practice research involving making things has to be re-invented too. I argue that this historical moment in time is both our chance and a huge responsibility. 'Our chance' I say meaning 'us, creative research practitioners'. Weighted by the post-pandemic depression, the climate challenges which are being ignored despite all evidence to the contrary, the wars which instead of decreasing appear to be getting closer – it is easy to begin to feel despondent, not to say to give up the project of creating a real disruption, making the difference and changing the world – even if it is only by one millimetre through the creative practice research. Moreover, in the current atmosphere of a certain suspicion vis a vis creative practice research in higher academy, even expressing such a sentiment can be seen as dangerous and subversive on the one hand, and on the other, simply a waste of time. Why should anybody bother to change the status quo? The neo-liberal university makes academics fearful (for their jobs) and thus in some way there is a certain amount of self-censoring taking place.

In this article I will both share my experiences of making a new work *Wash* (2022) and also make a broader claim that 'tentacular thinking' as defined by Donna Haraway (2016) is particularly useful for a creative practice researcher. A creative practice researcher more than any other researcher needs to open her mind to different ways of thinking and intellectual and artistic influences. This is a direct counter proposal to the established academic way of thinking that once you have chosen your theoretical or practical paradigm you

must stick to it rigidly. This is a different idea: take what you need and use it creatively and be bold in your thinking.

The idea to use 'tentacular thinking' as a deliberate 'eclectic methodology' might not be completely new and yet it is worth re-stating it as a gesture which celebrates diversity of approaches and a possibility of using them in one space. It is also clearly a gesture against patriarchal rigidity. In this context I will give an example of one important movement. Surrealism, as a conceptual proposition of how theory and practice can work together and fuel each other, but clearly even in the short piece like *Wash* I have used a variety of other paradigms and ways of thinking. However, to my mind this is no accident that it is Surrealism which has been named as the key influence in the 2022 Venice Biennale (entitled the Milk of Dreams <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022>) as well as featuring in a major exhibition in Tate Modern in London the spring 2022. Linked to psychoanalysis and the unconscious, Surrealism has been a major artistic and philosophical movement celebrating a diverse and often unconscious ways of creating work and being in the world. This approach I claim can be used as a radical tool against anti-intellectualism and the neo-liberal commodification of any research in higher academy.

Taking a cue from the way Surrealists would frame this as a manifesto, this is indeed a call for action: be free in your thinking and see where it takes you. This approach also has major pedagogical implications as encouraging students to think outside various boxes is not only demanding from the point of teaching but also institutionally almost dangerous in the current neo-liberal system. Nonetheless, it is necessary. One might recall bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) in which she suggests that the role of education is to encourage students to challenge accepted ideas, transgress boundaries and borders and be bold. In my own creative work and pedagogy I have used this approach extensively. I claim that psychoanalysis and indeed Surrealism as the main artistic movement which draws from it offers a conceptual and aesthetic language which I have found generative.

In this context, I will review some of the creative practice research notions of my own, and the notion of 'knowledge' and 'knowledges' in particular as enunciated by Donna Haraway (2016). I will present the hybrid documentary *Wash* which I have been working on for at least a year, in a collaboration with a scientist from the University of Edinburgh, the Professor of Immunology Francisca Mutapi. The craft in *Wash* is linked to *Surrealism* even as its main purpose is to promote health awareness in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, rather than being an exercise in creative aesthetic tools. It is important to state here clearly that without 'tentacular thinking' on my part, the project was near unmakeable: there was no narrative whatever, I couldn't go to Zimbabwe because of the pandemic, the actual message was stark and simple and yet it was important that both the rural community and the wider audience would feel respected and respectable. It was important that the film used the aesthetic language that the community in Zimbabwe would appreciate and understand the concept of the film, and that the academic community internationally would find pleasing too.





Credit: Tomas Mitkus

Creative practice might like to see itself as a radical project in the academy, truly attempting to disrupt existing modes of scholarship, and yes, knowledge. To this effect though I suggest that the 'anti-intellectualism' which I have mentioned has been one of the neo-liberal postulates which we as creative researchers must resist (this also of course is repeated in its dangerous guises in the rise of political populism and utilitarianism). Anti-intellectualism is a conservative move and must never be confused with rigid 'scholarly' approaches. We need to be careful not to confuse vocational training or vocational practices with true creative practice research. It is great to conceded that there are overlaps between the two, it is also important not to give up on experimentation in one's pursuit to be vocationally viable. It is here that bold 'tentacular' thinking is not only helpful but vital.

Theory, and particularly 'high theory' can be an important and inspirational force in creating practice research and a gesture of defiance against the 'anti-intellectualism' of the populist movements. I use Surrealism is a key example of an artistic movement which stemmed from theory, has impacted 'knowledge' and history of art in ways that certainly would win a 'world leading' accolades in any governmental exercise, but clearly there are other ideas and theories which one can deploy as an inspiration in crafting of the creative practice research.

## Knowledge, patriarchy and the rational human

Academics are not supposed to cite Wikipedia. Nonetheless, it is rather illuminating to do so here as at a glance one can see that philosophy as presented to the so called ordinary intelligent reader is effortlessly

patriarchal; and masculine, simply because women have not been thought of as real thinkers and philosophers.

The definition of knowledge is a matter of ongoing debate among epistemologists. The classical definition, described but not ultimately endorsed by **Plato**, specifies that a **statement** must meet three **criteria** in order to be considered knowledge: it must be **justified**, **true**, and **believed**.

Epistemologists today generally agree that these conditions are not sufficient, as various **Gettier cases** are thought to demonstrate. There are a number of alternative definitions which have been proposed, including **Robert Nozick's** proposal that all instances of knowledge must 'track the truth' and **Simon Blackburn's** proposal that those who have a justified true belief 'through a defect, flaw, or failure' fail to have knowledge. **Richard Kirkham** suggests that our definition of knowledge requires that the evidence for the belief necessitates its truth.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge> last accessed 25th July 2022

All the thinkers quoted above are men. The further exploration of the issue perhaps is beyond the scope of this paper but the definition of 'knowledge' and therefore the impact it can produce is the key issue of the current UK Research Exercise Framework governmental exercises. It is important to address the issue here because of the different registers which I have used to discuss the matter of creativity and knowledge, particularly in the arts.

Following a solid and not at all 'tentacular' report by the Kings College Scholars, that is the Hewlett, Bond and Hinrichs-Krapels' 2017 publication *The Creative Role of Research: Understanding Research in the Creative and Cultural Sector* one can observe a range of astute observations emerged concerning long-standing issues relating to the role and understanding of creative practice research in UK Higher Education,

especially it's social and cultural impact. This is of course not new to practitioners in H.E. but as a result of Hewlett, Bond and Hinrich-Krapel's report we have for the first time the closest picture of what practice-based impact looks like in the creative and cultural sector: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/assets/171020-thecreativeoleofresearch-shorter-version-web-v2.pdf>

Released between the 2014 and 2021 REF exercises, the report highlights a number of on-going concerns including the inconsistency of narrative approaches to evidencing impact, approaches to successfully quantifying public benefit and the need for greater consideration of longer-term impact more suited to creative and cultural practice. However, what is of great interest here is that the analysis of the impact cases presented by King's College Researchers in this significant report from 2017 asserted the following:

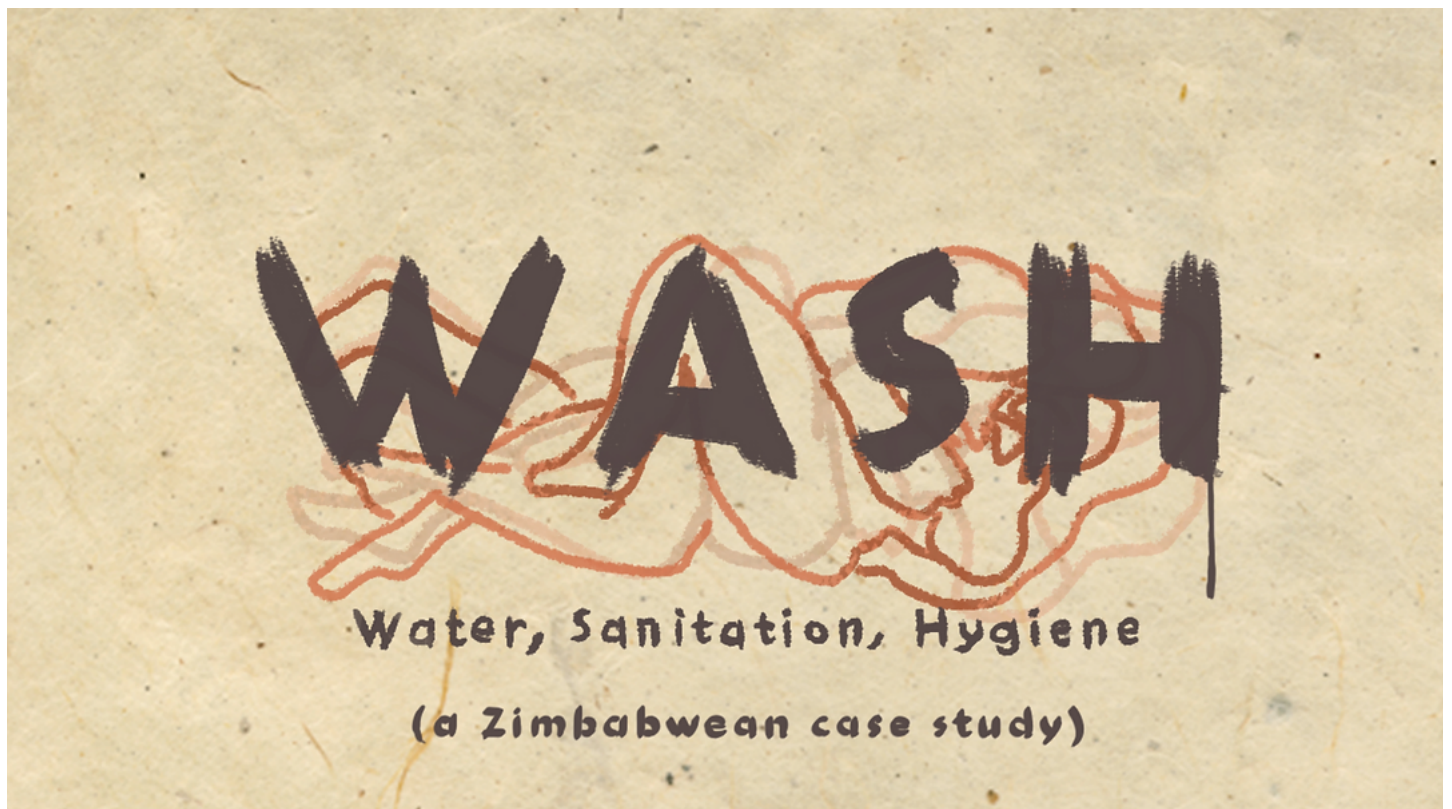
**75 per cent of the case studies that were identified in this study as being relevant to the sector came from *the arts and humanities*, with the remainder coming from other fields. • The academic disciplines with the greatest interaction with the creative and cultural sector in REF 2014 were: – English language and literature (15 per cent sample, 238 case studies) – history (14 per cent sample, 222 case studies) – art and design: history, practice and theory (11 per cent, 176 case studies). (ibid.: 10) (my emphasis)**

It is important to reiterate a somewhat surprising piece of information which is that the vast majority of the REF Impact cases in 2014 were from humanities: seventy-five per cent. However, only eleven percent out of that group were the practice research submissions. This is significant: despite the various governmental postulates including closing down arts and humanities departments up and down the country, it is in fact the humanities research which produces tangible and important impact. Creative practice research less so.

Certainly, in the United Kingdom, and actually in Europe too, practice research is still a discipline which has to find ways of redefining its value. This is the landscape we need to recognise and continue to struggle for the work to be recognised.

## Wash- how did it come about





Credit: Tomas Mitkus

My brand-new creative research project *Wash* is a hybrid documentary which uses a variety of creative tools (documentary, drama, animation, paintings, Zoom recordings). It also, as already mentioned, is a small example of my own 'tentacular thinking' of which further down this article. The project was initiated through various conversations about Zimbabwe over many years: Professor Mutapi of the Edinburgh University saw an experimental documentary of mine *Lovers in Time or How We didn't Get Arrested in Harare* at a screening in Edinburgh in 2017. That piece of creative research (an experimental documentary of a very different nature) work had been screened extensively internationally and also published in *Screenworks* in 2019. Francisca and I have kept in touch ever since and she was very taken by my other creative practice research which too has links to Zimbabwe (*Screenworks* 2021). The project I am presenting here is a result of our successful grant application to Strategic England 20 and was also supported by the University of Edinburgh.

The hybrid film was inspired by the immunology and social studies research carried out by the University of Edinburgh and the University of Zimbabwe. Their project focused on an attempt to curb the spread of diseases through a variety of simple tools. In particular, the researchers tried to encourage the community to build toilets where they were not any. What Mutapi discovered was that there was an unexpected resistance to the project – on the part of women. It transpired that the women treated the space of a walk to the bush or the river bank where they would relieve themselves as a special space for intimate personal communications with each other, a space where men would not interfere. There was therefore a resistance in getting rid of that space.

In the broader context of the work of the core collaborators of Professor Francisca Mutapi in Zimbabwe, that is the NGO called Uniting to Combat Against Neglected Disease and they launched the film on 16th June 2022 as a tool for advocacy. [Here](#) is the link to the press release, and the film itself is below:

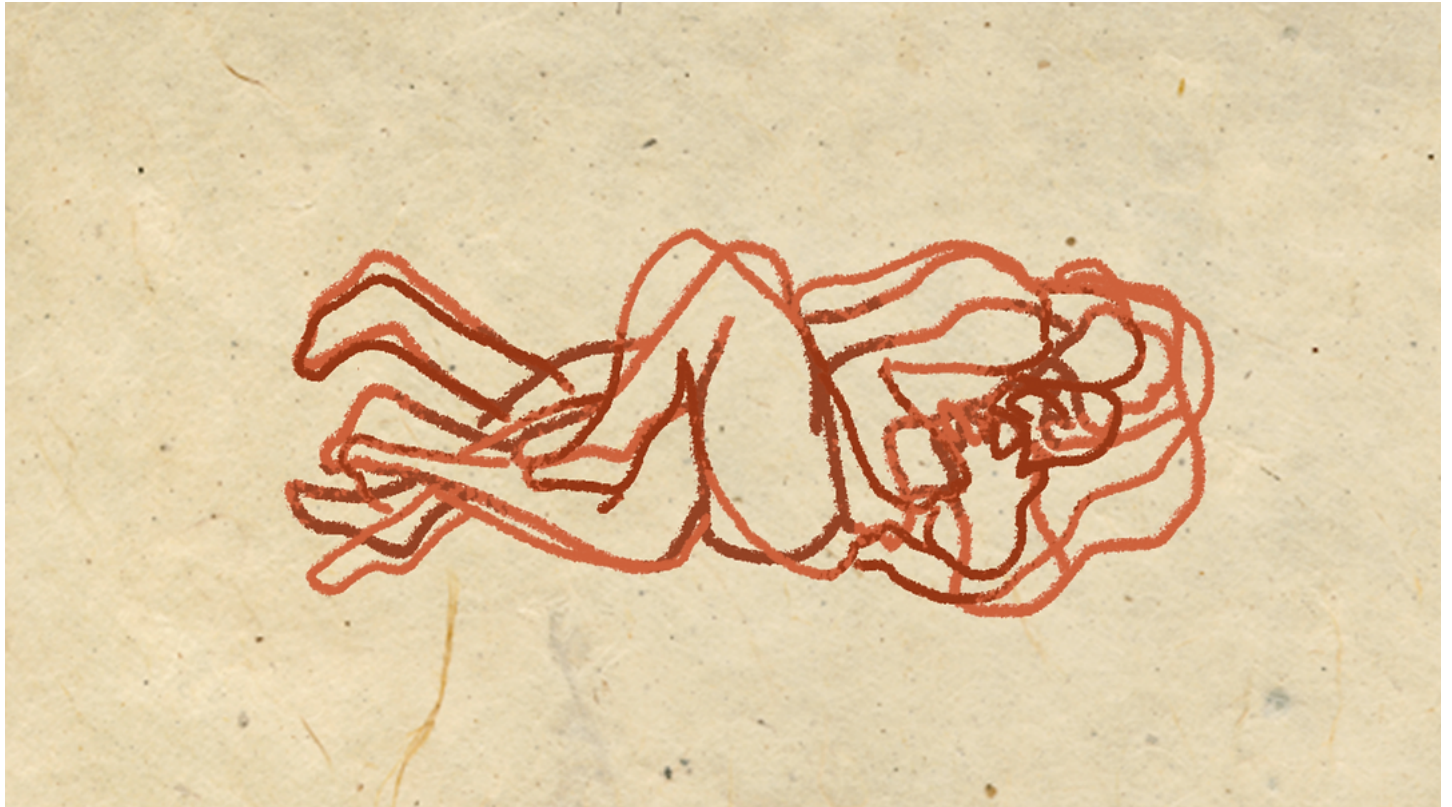
15:44



Wash (2022) – Dir. Agnieszka Piotrowska

It was important to state and re-state that the engagement with the community with which one is working of a key importance. What was also very illuminating was to discover that Francisca Mutapi, herself originally from Zimbabwe, was not perceived as one of the community despite her ethnicity and embodiment being similar to the inhabitants of the village. We therefore wanted to explore gently the issue of the Difference which does not run across the lines of ethnicity but rather across the lines of education and class. 'The knowledge' therefore that we were exploring here was an ethical space of sharing with the perceived Other something that might even be 'good' for them – without understanding the context in which one works. The bigger issue we wanted to present was the notion of the necessity to understand the different communities one worked with and be respectful and understanding of their needs and desires, which may seem less important than those of the academics who turn up to work with the community. There have been furthermore issues of sharing the knowledge that the 'outsiders' had with the community but also being able to accept the community's viewpoint, which was very different from that of the researchers. I have been working in Zimbabwe for some 10 years, and there is a big difference between rural communities and urban areas – of course one could say that there are big differences between the two spaces anywhere but in Africa it can be profound. The overarching research question of a lot of my theoretical and practice work including *Repented* published last year in *Screenworks* was as to how a specific artistic community could deal with the challenge of Difference - meaning cultural and bodily difference, but also differences of opportunity and

privilege – in circumstances of postcolonial melancholia. Theoretically this does draw from the classic texts such as Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabba, and also the fiction work of the feminist Zimbabwean novelist Tsitsi Dangeremba who in her work too drew clearly the lines between the village and the city, but also very much between education and freedom, which one can see as a battlefield of (de)colonial modernity. However, in this context the issues were a little different – the listening as well as communicating and creating.



Credit: Anna Dobrowodzka

For myself, in my own practice research work I have understood for a long time that central to the de-colonial project is the question of finding a voice, understood as both a matter of language and identity. Here we were not dealing with the obvious postcolonial project, at least not on the surface – although one could argue that Francisca, coming as she did from a British university, had to work hard to get to the point in which she understood, digested and was able to communicate to me and others the knowledge which she got from the women in Murewe, the rural community about which we made the film.

Once I understood the issues, I felt the only way forward on this particular project was to use non-literal ways of aesthetically expressing the tension between the outsiders and the community. The issue of the education for women was perceived as particularly acute in the village and elsewhere in Zimbabwe. From that point of view, I hope that the film is more than simple ‘public engagement’ important thought it is. In addition, the issue of how to put together something simple and attractive in terms of using different creative disciplines was a challenge. This is therefore a knowledge I was exploring and which I will share here for the



first time. As we have only just launched the film internationally but also very much in Zimbabwe the issue of its further impact will still needs to be explored further in due course.

I have always been interested in the problem of establishing the relationship between the experience (for example Piotrowska 2020 and 2021) and the description of it, and here the particular translation that occurs between the two, between author (and therefore the reader and the viewer) and the place and the experience described. One could argue that we are discussing here the issue of an adaptation in the broadest sense – the adaption of a story which exists as a purely factual account and translating it or adapting it into something else. This work was mostly that of a writer for me. There have been very many works on cinema and adaption (for example: Andrew 1984; Cohen 1979; Corrigan 1999; Stam 2000) and it is important to mention them – be it in passing. Here I am trying to focus in particular on the process of 'describing' and 'naming' a particular situated experience and what it might mean in terms of some kind of notion of accuracy, both historical and geographical, and epistemological truth. I am also interested in the ability of writing to describe physical experience as an enabling procedure. As we will see directly, there is controversy about the above and the question is indeed: is it true that the writing and naming enhances experience? Or does it take away from it, making it too concrete and obvious? Can the desire, conscious or otherwise, to name the experience lead to a drive to make something? Indeed, psychoanalytically this certainly is the case – for many reasons, sublimation for the desire to name the one – but also because creativity and 'play' has been used by psychotherapists through Donald Winnicott's (1982) work stressing the importance of creative play in personal development and growth, but also in education.

In this particular hybrid work, the notion of a place is also of course crucial: the main narrative takes place in a particular actual village in Zimbabwe, Murewe. But of course, in the film, the place becomes both an actual place and a mythical space. One could say that this is reminiscent of the work of the philosopher Michel de Certeau, who advocated the notion of a generative space in opposition to a fixed and stable place. Simplifying his thought somewhat, one can say that the philosopher advocated the superiority of a 'space' above a 'place': '*Space is a practiced place*' (de Certeau 1984: 117) in which only those who use it (through walking in particular he says) give it a sense of fluidity and mobility. One could argue that, theoretically, the notions of a 'place' and belonging are contested ideas. In De Certeau's ground-breaking book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) he deals with a creation of spaces in which speech acts become sites of subjectivity. In this context, the development of a sense of place could be referred to as developing one's own voice.

Interestingly, in oral culture and traditions in Zimbabwe a concrete place is not more important than a parallel world of embodied artistic experience (dance for example), stories and the notion of spirits and the inner life. Something therefore which might appear quite abstract as I am writing it down here, is not abstract at all in Zimbabwe. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore in any details the issues of intangible heritage in Zimbabwe, and in particular in rural Zimbabwe but it is important to say that in terms the non-rational knowledge which has been nearly extinguished by the colonisers the research is now being carried out. It is a new project initiated by Professor Diana Jeater of the University of Liverpool, who, in

collaborative work with researchers in Zimbabwe is looking into the experience of 'spirits' in traditional communities.

Here, the challenge in addition is that, as we were working on the hybrid film during the global pandemic, the issue of translating the experience and the knowledge was particularly challenging in terms of finding an appropriate visual and emotional language to be able to sustain a simple message.

The act of writing is linked to a place but becomes something different and more complicated. Many creative practice researchers, theorists and filmmakers have been reflecting on the notion of expressing one's experiences of a place through filmmaking for example. In this very journal creative researchers Dungala-Baaka River & Catherine Gough-Brady (2021) (<https://www.creativemediaresearch.org/post/the-river-and-the-filmmaker>) have evoked Agnès Varda's concept of *cinécriture* as providing "[...] a mechanism to view these seemingly personal and emotional experiences as mortice and tenoned to creative practice: 'Cinécriture isn't the scenario, it's the ensemble of exploratory walks, the choices, the inspiration, the words one writes, the shooting, the editing: the film is the product of all of these different moments.' (2014: 124).

*Cinécriture* can be a helpful concept which in essence describes the maker's ability to describe the surroundings and the situation through film work but it would not have been enough in this project. At times the physical walking through the place you want to recreate is not possible or is more complicated: because of the pandemic I had to rely on my memories of the place, and my actual Zimbabwean creative collaborators to carry out some of my vision as they were in the position to actually shoot some of the material in the village. We then created a separate shoot in the UK, with some dramatic reconstructions. I therefore deployed my 'tentacular thinking', looking for inspirations and influences from different theorists and different traditions.



Credit: Francisca Mutapi

## 'Knowledges'



In my work (2014, 2017, 2019, 2021) I have heralded the importance of subjective accounts particularly for women ('subjective' here means simply 'personal' or 'autoethnographic'). This is not a new way of thinking about knowledge and goes back to Donna Haraway's writings about 'situated knowledges' (1988: 581), particularly regarding challenging knowledge claims and female authorship. In the academy this kind of approach is gaining traction but it is still considered radical. Haraway argues for

**(...) politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity (ibid.: 589).**

Thinking about the beginning of the article, it is not just that 'love has to be re-invented'. It appears that knowledge too has to be re-invented and reflected on. For a creative practitioner, the key thing is to resist the need to succumb to the demand – the interpellation as Louis Althusser would say – to frame one's creative work within the so called 'objective' parameters for the panicked reason to be taken seriously as a researcher and not, let's just say it, an artist. It is here that I suggest that 'tentacular thinking' as presented by Donna Haraway below could be not only an inspirational source of creativity for a creative practice researcher, but can in practical terms help us to be regarded seriously in the governmental exercises if we frame and position it 'correctly', clearly within the humanities disciplines. All that I have written above is an example of such a 'tentacular thinking' which here simply means drawing from different theoretical and creative paradigms in order to make something that still works as a harmonious even if disrupted and disruptable whole.

This brings us back to Haraway who more than 30 years ago insisted on the 'situated knowledges'. More recently (2016) she has begun to question our Anthropocene obsession with knowledge. Haraway sees this as a patriarchal move and advocates a different approach, situating a human and human knowledge within the world as a whole which we inhabit and instead advocates 'tentacular thinking' (ibid.: 30) which I want to appropriate as a term and invite all creative researchers to do so. Haraway, a troublemaker for decades, says she wants to 'stay with trouble' and goes on to say '[...] and the only way I know to do that is in generative joy, terror, and collective thinking' (ibid.: 31). She invites us to consider non-human solutions to being in the world, including spiders and other creatures; '[...] nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something' (ibid.: 31). She proposes 'string figures' as a theoretical model of getting at the knowledge.

Haraway insists that this way of working, which I think will come naturally to most creative practitioners, is not only a radical gesture against the rigid and patriarchal ways of thinking but that it is also generative of new knowledge and new ideas: 'I work with string figures as a theoretical trope, a way to think-with a host of companions in sympoietic threading, felting, tangling, tracking, and sorting. I work with and in sf as material-semiotic composting, as theory in the mud, as muddle.' (ibid.: 31).

Haraway insists further that thinking of the human as simply part of nature, that urging us to become more like mushrooms, octopuses and spiders is not excuse at all for giving up on thinking. One could indeed reflect that, according to one of the greatest patriarchal philosophers of them all, Descartes, thinking is the absolute core of our humanity and our existence 'Cogito ergo sum' 'I think therefore I am'. Haraway insists that the process of 'thinking' is something we need to engage in a non-linear way, and within every activity we do, and this does connect to my reflection on knowledge and what it means for a creative researcher. Haraway evokes the moral philosopher Hannah Arendt here as read by Valerie Hartouni:

**Thinking, in Arendt's sense, is not a process for evaluating information and argument, for being right or wrong, for judging oneself or others to be in truth or error. All of that is important, but not what Arendt had to say about the evil of thoughtlessness that I want to bring into the question of the geohistorical conjuncture being called the Anthropocene.**

**Arendt witnessed in Eichmann not an incomprehensible monster, but something much more terrifying—she saw commonplace thoughtlessness. (ibid.: 36)**

This is most relevant to consider in this moment in time, almost more than in any time in the last as what Haraway is saying, after Arendt and Hartouni, that it is our ethical and epistemological obligation to think, meaning to ask questions about the demands that are placed by ask by society, by our line managers and by whoever happens to be in some way directing our activities or attempting to assess them or measure them.

In her book Haraway talks about the anthropologist, feminist, cultural theorist, storyteller, and connoisseur of the tissues of heterogeneous capitalism, Anna Tsing's work too (ibid.: 37). Anna Tsing's project is to examine the "arts of living on a damaged planet,"<sup>21</sup> or, in the subtitle of her book, "the possibility of life in Capitalist ruins" (Ibid.: 37). Written a few years before the COVID pandemic Haraway describes Tsing's research as an acceptance, through story-telling, that all creatures on this planet, including us, humans, live

in the age of precarity, insecurity, not knowingness what tomorrow might bring and how we can possibly be creative and ethical on this planet. So here what Haraway discusses is a knowledge of the impossibility of any real certainty. This kind of knowledge therefore I would argue is different from facts, information and technology. Haraway quotes further Anna Tsing focusing on her reflections on how mushrooms survive collaboratively in disturbance and contamination. She calls this skill the skill for living in ruins' (*ibid.*:). Most of the creative practice researchers will know about collaborative work and how crucial it is. The post-pandemic work feels even more the need for developing of this skill.

Haraway is at pains to explain her notion of non-anthropocene story-telling 'Storying cannot any longer be put into the box of human exceptionalism.' (*ibid.*: 39). Haraway engages with Bruno Latour too in terms of learning to narrate out of the box of the story of the humans, or at least for now, out of the patriarchal and rigid boxes.

Of course, Latour is interested in environmental politics mostly but the way of thinking about the world in the tentacular way and finding ways of working and thinking creatively. His thinking is not without its challenges, with his emphasis on war, and the very patriarchal it seems to me notions of winning and losing, particularly read today, when we find ourselves in the middle of the unnecessary and already cruel war with Russia invading Ukraine. Haraway's take on this: 'Latour makes clear that he does not *want* this story, but he does not propose another. The only real possibility for peace lies in the tale of the respected enemy, the *hostis*, and trials of strength. "But when you are at war, it is only through the throes of the encounters that the authority you have or don't have will be decided *depending whether you win or lose*' (*ibid.*: 43). Haraway though in her presentation of the thoughts of different thinkers seems to be encouraging the reader to be thinking of the tentacular thinking as an actual.

Donna Haraway is an original thinker, a philosopher. The way she has been thinking for decades have been generative of many others deploying, and of course transforming her ideas so they can be used for different projects. Donna Haraway is clearly *not* a fiction writer, or a filmmaker; she is philosopher, although one wonders if she would how she would fare at a neoliberal university, what corrections might be asked to her work. She is not a maker but her kind of writing, and ours too, is a creative practice research as well. I hope that one could argue that my work *Wash* the hybrid documentary which I directed in a collaborative project with the University of Edinburgh and Professor Francisca Mutapi, of the Immunology Department there pushes the knowledge of working in the unknown communities by a tiny step. As stated, the ethos on the project was to begin with a simple 'public engagement' that is helping the message of Professor Mutapi and her colleagues to become better known. However, in terms of the 'knowledge' it contributed to it was both the dissemination of the message of the research team but also the 'knowledge' regarding different challenges in leading different creative practitioners to achieve the goal of the film – how did we overcome various practical challenges? How did it work for me to lead a team of different creative practitioners? How did we deal with the simple challenges of the distance, which in part were alleviated by technology, but in



some ways technology cannot really make up for the embodied encounter? Was the stylised language of the film a choice that would have been made in non-pandemic times?

## **And how is Surrealism relevant here**



Credit: Francisca Mutapi

This association of 'tentacular thinking', of finding associations where they are not obvious, of accepting that a creative desire might (or perhaps must) involve a desire to take different intellectual journey, this association finally leads me to Surrealism. The movement arguably is the greatest creative practice research project ever and the impact of which can hardly compare with any other creative movement in the history of art and thinking. It is far beyond the scope of this article to explore its impact in any detail, but I will make some simple points.

The Tate Modern's recent Surrealist Exhibition (March 2022) points to the fact it, far from it being a narrow European tradition, surrealism has travelled globally, has been redefined, appropriated, re-thought about and has been the incredible springboard to a variety of creative outputs as our managers would say: from paintings to sculptures moving image work, theatre, literature, photography - everything. The most important artists globally over the last century defined themselves as surrealists and these include such astonishing artists as Jean Miro, Yausi Nakaji, Diego Riveira, Frida Kahlo, Eva Sulzer, Grete Stern and many others. Its invitation to liberate the artistic mind to explore new creative avenues, outside the realistic representation has become a lasting tool to subvert any established status quo.

A few years ago I created a video essay about the links between Christopher Nolan's *Inception* and the classic surrealist film *Un Chien D'Andalou*. The video essay made a simple point that Dali's work still has impact on contemporary Hollywood. Watch below:

06:57



Credit: Francisca Mutapi

It would be hard to think of any other art historical movement which would have had such a great influence not only on the creative endeavour but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the way artist and 'civilians'



have been thinking about the world ever since. Was it a colonisation of sorts? The notion of dissecting our experience of making work and calling it knowledge is a centuries-honoured tradition and yet, in the neo-liberal academy it is often questioned and doubted, despite the statements and meetings to the contrary: the shadow of the men of science insisting that only that which is 'objective' has any epistemological value throws a long shadow over the proceedings still.

Surrealism and its far-reaching tentacles started as is well known in France officially with Andre Breton's *Manifesto for Surrealism* in 1924. One can trace the origins of the movement to the poet Guillaume Apollinaire who a few years earlier, inspired by the new psychoanalytical thought, started using the term surrealism and called it 'a new spirit' ('esprit nouveau') that he shared with Eric Satie and the then young painter Pablo Picasso. When Andre Breton published his manifesto in 1924, he clashed with a German poet Ivan Goll who too wanted to use the term (see the exhibition's catalogue D'Alessandro & Gale 2022:13).

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, the writers and curators whilst acknowledging the indisputable influence of the movement globally are perhaps less clear that Surrealism came from psychoanalysis, and in particular was inspired by Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* first published in 1900 as well as his subsequent writing. Freud proposed that the examination of the world through the examination of the conscious and stated aims and objectives only will end up producing a false picture of the world as it will not allow our often repressed and secret unconscious desire which represent themselves in our dreams. It is this idea which inspired a variety of writers, poets and artists – but these ideas took a couple of decades to really impact to the perception of the public and to those who in a particular moment in time and place were able to transform these theoretical ideas into creative work and then influence the whole world in a lasting world. The notion of 'the tentacular thinking' which here I have presented from the point of view of Donna Haraway's work on the 'string figure' thinking - of reaching from different areas of experience in a way which in a ways is chaotic in its objective of acknowledging the unknowability of the creative process and knowledge itself. At times theory is most useful one makes creative or artistic work.

'I have always been amazed at the way an ordinary observer lends so much more credence and attaches so much more importance to waking events than to those occurring in dreams' – this is a quote from Andre Breton's *Manifesto for Surrealism* (1924). In it he called for the fellow artists and filmmakers to find a language, which would correspond to the language of dreams thus tapping into their unconscious desires and their creativity. But he said more than this, he believed that the world of dreams is linked to the very core of who we are – in short it is more 'real' than the waking life. Whilst psychoanalysis deals with the unconscious in offering those who suffer a 'talking cure', surrealism was offering a freedom to discover our inner selves through accepting and entering the world of the dreams and, as Breton calls it, the irrational, the unexplained, the magical - 'the marvelous'.

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in Seminar XI (1964) writes about some characteristics of a dream, namely its 'the absence of the horizon, the enclosure, of that which is contemplated in the waking state, and, also the

character of emergences, of contrast, of stain, of its images, the intensification of their colours' (– the subjects, he says, cannot see but experience one's existence in a profound way (ibid.pp. 67-68).

## The Wash and tentacular thinking

Without the ability to deploy a kind of tentacular thinking inspired by Surrealism in terms of a boldness of using different tools and materials, there is no question at all that *Wash* could not have been made. It is not a surrealist work but it does draw from its visual freedom, some aesthetic solutions and from the invitation to combine very different elements in one place. It's contribution to knowledge is to demonstrate how this can be possible in an exploration of a scientific project as well as the notion of different disciplines working together under challenging circumstances of COVID 19. The practical difficulties seemed almost insurmountable: there was a global pandemic which made it impossible for anybody to travel, the budget was very low for such a complicated project with a variety of visual language challenges. The sub-story of the young woman who gets pregnant as a teenager, drops out of school and dreams of being funded to go to a big city to study was also a difficult narrative to present because the anonymity of different girls was important. In the event the documentary shoot in the village in Zimbabwe was directed by me remotely from the UK and my long-term collaborator in Zimbabwe, Joe Njagu, who led the crew working with Professor Francisca Mutapi's colleagues from the University of Zimbabwe. We then gathered as many stories as possible for me to construct the figure of Tsitsi who was then played by Glencia Samuel, a graduate of the performing arts course at the University for the Creative Arts (where I was the Head of School for Film, Media and Creative Arts) and we shot the whole thing in a countryside in Surrey. I worked with Glen on her script but let her add various elements to it too so her contribution to the final character was substantial. Glenn is not an African (she comes from the Caribbean) which has presented an issue regarding her accent but we simply ran out of options so we had to go with it.

One of the reasons I wanted to introduce the idea of animation to underscore the fact that the piece was a stylized experimental film and not a pure documentary. It is here yet again that the tool of 'tentacular thinking' was deployed – we did not just do a 'dramatic reconstruction'. We tried to inhabit and understand a person like Tsitsi who is both loving and lovable but also angry that the educated researchers offer the community toilets and what she desires is education. We had a big problem in terms of presenting her needs in a way which would touch upon the issues of a post-colonial country without making a heavy-handed statement in a piece which was meant to be seen by children in the community. Another issue was the presentation of physical love in the film. It is here that I have had the biggest discussions with Francisca who in the end insisted these animations were removed in their entirety. In this article we include the initial trailer for the film with the animations evoking sex. They were but a second long and were reprised only once later in the film. I felt it was important to show something which would approach the issue of sex head on as the problem of teenage pregnancy is a big issue in rural communities in Zimbabwe. However, Francisca insisted that this would make the work less viewable and less accessible. We then considered having two versions – and this of course is still a possibility – but in the end the version without the 'sex animation' is the official version of the film.

Animations were driven but the voice over and so conceptually I wanted different artists working on these sequences in different ways as to create a sense of a composite character, and even a composite village – the special metaphorical space which I have mentioned at the outset. Different animators have chosen different modes of expression from traditional drawn animation through computer drawing and rotoscoping. These were then edited in the final montage. The animations and the music as well as the editing attempted to evoke different emotions rather than illustrating those. The aesthetic and the language were at times quite a long way from the reality of the situation – using indeed some ‘tentacular’ and surrealist solutions. We needed to use some recognizable images in the piece which would be of significance to the community as well as Western funders and researchers: we looked at different images for waters, the closeness of animals, the sense of movement from women. Francisca Mutapi, as well as being the executive producer and chief research consultant on the film, and the scientific interviewee, offered some painting of her own which we included in the film too. I very much liked the idea Professor of Immunology is an artist too. The film editor Anna Dobrowodzka is my long-term creative collaborator and she too contributed some of the animations as well as being the editor for the whole piece. Unfortunately, some of her drawn animations of love making were edited out as requested by Francisca. The musical score for the film is important and has 3 different composers and musicians working on the film with us, using some voice recordings too from some other work of my own which I did in Zimbabwe previously. That work was quite laborious as we wanted the score to be both recognisably African but also in some way Western and slightly strange. It feels a little unfair to be so very brief in the description that work as it involved of hours of discussions as well as looking through different iterations of Zimbabwean music, as well as kind of non-specific melodic and choral work which could work with the narrative and the main themes of the piece.

To my mind the surrealist inspired tentacular notion that it is not only *possible* to use different creative tools in one piece but in fact desirable in order to arrive at a richer texture onto which the viewer can also pain their own narrative worked well in this piece.

Because of the main interviews with Francisca being recorded on Zoom, there is a distortion on some of the sound recording and we are currently wondering whether it would be a good idea to find a way in which one could replace some of the distortions. It may be possible. On the other hand, I feel that perhaps it is important to hold onto the traces of the real challenges we had to overcome through the pandemic, and curiously I started feeling that perhaps re-recording the interviews would be a sort of a cheat. This of course makes no sense in a piece of work which is semi-fictionalised but it feels right that the documentary material should be just that, documentary and of the moment. I am leaving this decision open – as something we may want to revisit yet in future.

There are very many ways of thinking about creative practice research. For me, it is always an adventure and space (again citing de Certeau) of mobility and fluidity. I hope that some readers might find my notion of deploying our intellectual as well as artistic ‘tentacular thinking’ inspirational or at least helpful.



This of course is but my view but for me, in any creative endeavor, it is important to give oneself a permission to draw from different theoretical and creative paradigms to allow for our creative minds to work freely. In the work it is good to be fair and ethical, as personal as is justifiable, and visually engaged and bold at the same time, hoping that the 'knowledges' that will be produced through such creative practice research might be able to contribute to our understanding of different communities and different multi-media work.

Finally, the initial feedback to the work has been excellent from those whom we wanted to reach the most: the community itself. The conversation about education, communication and female empowerment has begun, and the compromises regarding toilets and other ways of creating important spaces for dialogues have been initiated by our film in ways which was not quite possible previously.

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