

Intermediality in Academia: Creative Research through Film

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of the recent flourishing of research and pedagogy in higher education that seeks a greater rapprochement between criticism and creativity, bringing together diverse media, disciplines, and modes of knowledge production and expression. It focuses on transformations in film and screen studies and on the ethical and aesthetic possibilities of conducting creative, intermedial research through filmmaking, drawing on the author's recent, first-hand experiences of conducting such research through her making of two films about the African women filmmakers Judy Kibinge (from Kenya) and Bongive Selane (from South Africa). The author gives specific examples from her filmmaking process to show how she has attempted to unsettle the generic space between documentary filmmaking, curatorial practice, and video-essay making to engage in a collaborative research practice with Kibinge, Selane, and their communities, as well as her research teams. Grounding itself in a decolonial feminist framework, this article draws on the perspectives of a wide range of thinkers and filmmaker scholars to explore ways in which the colonial, patriarchal values that have haunted many academic institutions can be reformed to allow for the envisioning of new futures that will lead to a more self-reflexive, socially just higher education environment.

Keywords: intermediality; creative research; filmmaking; decolonising; feminism; higher education

“The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and color, or the unseen world of passion and of thought. . . . I would call criticism a creation within a creation.”

Oscar Wilde ([1891] 1993, p. 1623)



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1. Overture

Over the past couple of decades, there has been a renewed flourishing of research and pedagogy in higher education that seeks a greater rapprochement between criticism and creativity, bringing together diverse media, disciplines, and modes of knowledge production and expression, for example, through the growing popularity of the video essay as a way of offering close critical analysis through the audiovisual medium itself (Grant 2016; Sendra 2020). Some of these video essays have no voice-overs or intertitles, relying only on the rhythms and cadences of the researcher's editing choices to express their perspectives and arguments. This trend is not unique to our historical moment or to the place in which I am writing (the UK). It is part of a longstanding, lively, self-reflexive discussion in the academy about the very purpose and value of universities, and one that has become even more impassioned since the 2015 RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa sparked a global reckoning with the ongoing legacies of colonialism and other forms of past and present oppression in higher education.¹ Indeed, far from being outside the “real world”—as they are sometimes characterised—universities are fully part of it, determined by as well as constitutive of society's broader behaviour and values.

I approach this debate as someone who is committed to protecting the space I see universities being able to provide under the right conditions—a space for critical thinking in a world in which the potential for rigorous, respectful debate and considered, specialist research often appears to be shrinking²—but also as someone who feels that universities too frequently cling to colonial, conservative, competitive, and/or corporate models that lack

the creativity and imagination that should be expected of them and, of us, the researchers (both staff and students) who inhabit and enliven them. The same, no doubt, could be said of the art world—as Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund’s magisterial satire *The Square* (Östlund 2017) suggests—and, so I hope that by grappling in this article with the topic of intermediality in academic knowledge production, I will also be able to provide some transposable insights into intermediality in the art world and artworks, as explored by others in this Special Issue. I should make it clear upfront that I will not be undertaking close analysis of intermedial elements within particular academic outputs or films,³ but rather will be exploring the broad value of the increasing integration of diverse media across the arts, humanities, and social and natural sciences as legitimate ways of expressing and inspiring research insights. Although this article itself is mono-medial (expressed in words—and in the dominant academic language of English), in my attempts to unsettle boundaries between criticism and creativity, the objectivity that academia often aims for and the subjectivity that none of us can ultimately escape, I will shift between the first and the third person, drawing on some of my own first-hand experiences of attempting to disrupt mono-medial academic conventions to inform my critical reflections on this subject.

While my interests are interdisciplinary, my home discipline is film and screen studies, so my experiences and reflections are most relevant to this field and to the recent transformations in it, although these changes began a half-century ago, at the very time that the field was being recognised and established in higher education. Laleen Jayamanne refers to Meaghan Morris’ challenge to film scholars’ conservative “Latinized” writing style in the 1970s coming “at a time when [they] accepted, uncritically, the cinema studies curriculum and protocols developed within an Anglo-American intellectual formation” (Jayamanne 2013, p. 27), and Jayamanne praises the Belgian film theorist Paul Willemen for his pioneering work in attempting to broaden the film curriculum geographically and replace “simple schematic oppositions” with “cross-cultural ideas of cinema” (Jayamanne 2013, p. 28). The research project I have been leading since 2019—“Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies”⁴—has similarly been inspired by the work of Willemen (among others), and particularly by his insistence on the value of comparative cinema studies in which academics should humbly consider the impact of their own intellectual and cultural formations on the kinds of knowledge they (are able to) produce (Willemen 2005). Jayamanne’s work as a Sri-Lankan–Australian filmmaker–scholar has also been an inspiration, particularly the way she encourages film scholars when writing to embrace what she calls “mimetic criticism”, in which “If the description [of the object of analysis] does not move, then criticism is no more than a dull copy or repetition of the object”; to her, as to Wilde, the spontaneity of artistic creation is also required in criticism since some things only “seem to emerge through this writing” (Jayamanne 2001, p. xi). I appreciate the way Jayamanne switches between poetic and formal registers in her writing, caressing the contours of artworks and then surprising her readers with sudden, enticing changes in direction away from the artwork and towards the abstract and theoretical; she reminds us that passion—even love—for what we are researching helps create the conditions for more engaged research and that the creation of aesthetic pleasure is as important in scholarly work as it is in artistic work.

Certain recent academic books foregrounding the blossoming cultural and creative work of Black African women, such as *Gaze Regimes: Film and Feminisms in Africa* (edited by Mistry and Schuhmann 2015) and *Surfacing: on being black and feminist in South Africa* (edited by Lewis and Baderoon 2021), similarly disrupt and undiscipline established academic writing codes through embracing bricolage, autobiography, fiction, poetry, and conversational exchange rather than linearity and mono-vocality. Given the fragility of the creative and cultural industries, universities have, in many cases, become sanctuaries for artists who would not be able to earn a living from their art without academic positions, residencies, or fellowships; many art and film schools that want to carve a space for autonomous creativity and artistic research immune to the brute economic realities of the mainstream market are located within or adjacent to universities. South African filmmaker and scholar Jyoti Mistry

has written at length about this dynamic, for example, in *Places to Play: Practice, Research and Pedagogy* (Mistry 2017), published as part of an artistic research project in the Netherlands. In a very different context, the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association (ASPERA) has recently published a special issue in the journal *Media Practice and Education* titled “Creativity matters: poetics, pedagogy, production, policy” (24.1, 2023) in which the authors explore “how research and teaching can be integrated to creatively address hybrid and inter-disciplinary teaching models, to work collaboratively across platforms, to embrace, innovate and lead change in education and industry” (McVeigh et al. 2023, p. 1). I see the cross-pollination of creative and critical forms and modes that such hybrid contexts and conversations give birth to in research and teaching as generally positive and productive; however, the intermediality these convergences introduce into the academy can be threatening to those attached to clear disciplinary histories and boundaries, and there are also important questions to be addressed around resourcing, review, and assessment, as I discuss below.

Following Jayamanne, Lewis and Baderoon, and Mistry—among others—it is specifically a decolonial feminist ethos that drives the political urgency with which I argue here for the value of greater intermediality, interdisciplinarity, and creative-critical complementarity in academic knowledge production, for multiple reasons, but, not least, for ensuring that epistemologies are inclusive of the most marginalised people in academia and in our societies at large. The more inclusive and diverse our academic communities, the greater relevance and resonance the knowledge produced within them will have for the wider world—something that seems particularly important in our current moment of dangerous social, environmental, and economic crises. Alternative modes of knowledge production that do not fall within the typical, mono-medial templates have often been created by feminist thinkers, writers, and creators who have put emphasis on the experiential and the subjective. For example, Françoise Verges, in her book, *A Decolonial Feminism* (2019), writes the following:

Decolonial feminist activists and academics have understood the need to develop their own modes of transmission and knowledge; through blogs, films, exhibitions, festivals, meetings, artworks, pieces of theater and dance, song, and music, through circulating stories and texts, through translating, publishing, and filming, they have made their movements and the historic figures of those movements known. (Verges 2019, 15%)

It is vital that researchers working in such a way find a community of support. I feel fortunate, for example, to have had the opportunity to work alongside and feel inspired by other filmmaker-scholars, such as Nobunye Levin who, since 2021, has been one of my Screen Worlds team members. Levin’s thinking manifests itself in both visual and verbal media in her creative and critical practice as a way of foregrounding women’s subjectivities in particular—something that I, too, am interested in doing. Levin has made a film called *I am Saartjie Baartman* (Levin 2009), which tries to imagine the memories, desires, thoughts, and emotions of the Khoisan woman Sara Baartman (1789–1815) who was violently taken from her African home and put on display in Europe. Whereas the film is experimental and emotive, Levin’s written piece of the same name in the book *Gaze Regimes* complements and contextualises the film, framing it more analytically and theoretically, thus positioning it as a critique of the male South African filmmaker Zola Maseko’s films about Baartman, which Levin argues deny Baartman’s “subjectivity and self-determinism” (Levin 2015, p. 101). A more recent film by Levin, *SpillOver* (Levin 2021), fully embodies intermediality as a “cinematic poem of relational film fragments assembled in dialogue with various films, songs and written texts about love”,⁵ and through which words, images, sounds, and stories all “spill over” into one another; the film, notably, is also accompanied by a written thesis.

Despite these recent expansions in the field, working within a decolonial feminist and intermedial ethos can sometimes feel lonely and difficult because of ongoing colonial legacies in higher education and because creative, intermedial work is still in the minority

in an academy that prizes written articles in English in prestigious journals more than anything else, particularly when it comes to research assessment exercises, such as the REF (Research Excellence Framework) in the UK—despite the fact that the REF 2021 Main Panel D said it would welcome more non-traditional, intermedial research in the future.⁶ While peer-reviewed publication venues for creative research remain limited, pioneering online, open access journals, such as *[in]Transition*, *Screenworks*, *Open Screens*, *Axon: Creative Explorations*, and *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*, are leading the way in this sea-change, and allow for writing to serve as companion pieces to audiovisual work, thereby respecting the need for multiple media to sit alongside one another. The co-editors of a recent special issue of *Screenworks* focused on the intermedial topic of “Musicology on Screen” have an important note to offer:

There have been increasing moves in academia to go ‘beyond text’ over the last few decades. This includes a diverse range of artistic or practice research that engages with different audiovisual formats and media (Cox, Irving and Wright 2016; Ferrarini and Scaldaferrri 2020; Vannini 2020). Video essayists such as Catherine Grant and Liz Greene have also noted the great potential of the Internet in the field of creative critical practice (Grant 2015; Greene 2020 and 2022). (Sendra et al. 2022)

Many people in the UK and globally have been involved in initiating and supporting this ‘beyond text’ movement. For example, the AHRC-funded Filmmaking Research Network (FRN), a partnership between the University of Sussex (UK) and the University of Newcastle (Australia) led by Joanna Callaghan, ran from 2017 to 2019 and developed a range of different resources, specifically related to the vital questions surrounding how to assess practice-based film research outputs.⁷ The “Assessment of Filmmaking as Research” report that was created by the FRN is particularly helpful in clarifying the criteria needed to judge such work, emphasising that complementary written work is often indispensable to creative work in order to elaborate on the research gaps, questions, and framework underlying and driving the creative work, and in order to flesh out how the creative work meets the same standards of originality, significance, and rigour expected of conventional REF publications. Since 2022, Agata Lulkowska from Staffordshire University has also been running an excellent online Arts/practice-based research seminar series called “Rebellious Research”, and the session by Erik Knudsen is especially useful in addressing issues of assessment.⁸

As someone who initially entered academia reluctantly because I wanted to be a filmmaker, I have found my place over time through an intermedial approach in which I combine theory and practice, moving between writing, curating, and filmmaking. Even if these mediums of expression sometimes occur in parallel rather than simultaneously, they, nevertheless, inform one another across my work in my ceaseless desire to express myself both critically and creatively through words, images, sounds, and by collaborating with other people. In my journey, I feel fortunate, for example, that the flexibility of my liberal arts undergraduate degree in the US allowed me to produce an intermedial fourth year honours thesis, in which I made a film inspired by a novel and also wrote a thesis that complemented the film and where I analysed the novel and shared my experiences of making the film.

In the film and screen studies context in the UK, where I have been based for the past two decades, the recent expansion of assessment options for students—which now regularly encompass video essays, film festival/curatorial projects, and other creative, intermedial formats, including practice-based creative PhDs—offers a shift towards more “authentic” teaching and assessment (Kaider et al. 2017), which empowers students to embrace both theory and practice, activating their own imaginations and lived experiences in their learning (Freire 2018) while also teaching them important practical skills, such as film editing and arts management. This change does, however, require far more input and attention from teachers as creative, intermedial research is more time-intensive to create

(particularly if students first need to learn technical skills); and it also demands that teachers are far more explicit about the criteria they are using to assess the work, particularly if an author surrenders the conventional logic used in academic writing for a more lyrical form. As with peer review of creative research, documentation of and reflection on the processes of practice leading to a final portfolio—for example, through diaries and/or written work that serve as complementary, companion pieces to the non-textual work—are vital, allowing students the space to flesh out the ways in which their work constitutes scholarly research. Their work can then be assessed according to appropriate criteria, such as adherence to the original brief for the work; relevance to the topics and themes of the course for which it was created; contribution to filling gaps in prior scholarly knowledge; clarity of research questions; and originality in terms of both content and form.

What is the specific value of intermediality in academic work? Why not simply play by the rules and produce books and journal articles that adhere to the typical format and register of analytical academic writing? I have nothing against such work and thoroughly enjoy engaging with this kind of knowledge production myself. In a world that seems to be increasingly consumed by short-form social media content and knee-jerk reactions to it and at risk of succumbing to fake news and misinformation that mock rationality and logic, the kind of rigorously researched, long-form writing that academia allows for needs to be guarded. However, given that there seems to be no imminent danger of this kind of research disappearing, I am instead interested here in the marginalised but growing movement to counterbalance this logocentric, linear work with more creative, intermedial approaches to research, and particularly in the ways in which the distinct aesthetics of such research also has the potential to contribute to reforming the ethics of academic knowledge production.

2. Aria: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Academic Knowledge Production

As a White academic who grew up in South Africa and Australia and has lived in the UK for the past two decades, I recently published an intermedial article—combining words and still and moving images—about the personal and professional experiences that led me to embark on a process of trying to decolonise my pedagogical and research practices (Dovey 2020). These struggles partly motivated me to return to filmmaking, my first love, not only as a mode of creative expression but also as a way of undertaking research. In the case of the Screen Worlds project, I have made two feature-length films about the work of two African women filmmakers—the Kenyan filmmaker and executive founder and creative director of Docubox, Judy Kibinge, and the South African film producer, Bongive Selane—and the film communities they have helped to bring into being in East Africa and South Africa, respectively.⁹ It is not my intention here to explain in depth the contents of the films since I have other forthcoming written publications that complement these films in terms of elaborating on Kibinge and Selane’s work within their broader contexts (Dovey forthcoming, forthcoming); as I will explain later, I also hold a particular, considered position on what kinds of knowledge I am and am not able to elaborate on in relation to the films, given my positionality and lived experiences. Rather, my interest in this article, given the focus of this Special Issue, is more abstractly on the ethical and aesthetic possibilities of undertaking research in an intermedial way—in this case, as creative research through filmmaking. I highlight below certain experiences from my own filmmaking to illustrate my points, but I will not be offering a cohesive overview here of my process of making these films.

Most importantly, by deciding not to write single-authored journal articles or monographs about Kibinge and Selane’s work but rather make films about/with them, I was able to engage in a collaborative research practice with these women and their communities as well as with my research teams. Although the films draw on many years of my own engagement with these women (since 2009 with Kibinge, and since 2019 with Selane), they were filmed collaboratively during 2021–2023 with filmmakers in Nairobi and Johannesburg, respectively, including cinematographers Christopher King, Maia Lekow,

Wambui Muigai, and Emma Nzioka in Nairobi, and Neo R. Paulus and Samantha Nell in Johannesburg. As the academic researcher, I directed the films and led the editing, working closely on the post-production with Anna and Remi Sowa of Chouette Films, Polish filmmakers based between the UK and Spain who often make films as part of academic research projects. As exciting as such collaborations can feel, given that research films are typically made on micro-budgets by film industry standards (indeed, researchers will rarely have at their disposal the significant resources of those working in mainstream arts industries), researcher–filmmakers need to make the most of these constraints aesthetically (devising creative solutions where there are budgetary restraints) while also ensuring that they do not result in exploitative situations in ethical terms. While research participants themselves cannot be paid, for obvious reasons, anyone who has contributed to the making of the film should be paid for their labour.

One of my hopes, through engaging in creative research through film, is to unsettle the generic space between documentary filmmaking, curatorial practice, and video-essay making. In relation to the academic discipline of Film and Screen Studies, I want to contribute to what I like to call a “people-oriented” approach that decentres the authority of the film critic and foregrounds the voices of the people and communities whose work the critic is exploring; this is something that many video essays—focused as they are on analysing films and films alone—cannot achieve. In relation to historical and contemporary practices of documentary filmmaking, I also want to contribute to undoing what Pooja Rangan (2017) calls “immediation”, through which (usually privileged) filmmakers believe that they can transparently give voice to (usually marginalised/subaltern) subjects. Similar issues can exist in curatorial practice as another way of “telling stories”, as Sujatha Fernandes (2017) has shown. By working in a liminal, interstitial space between conventional film genres and practices—engaging in conversations with my research participants rather than trying to “unlock” their work through analysis and hermeneutic interpretative frameworks—I intend to foreground “intermediality” over “immediation”, rejecting problematic assumptions of transparency in the way knowledge is exchanged and traded, and instead valuing opacity and a poetics of relation (Glissant [1990] 1997) and the refusal of research-as-artwork “to simply become an object of empirical anthropology” (Ferreira da Silva 2018). Indeed, our whole Screen Worlds project has adopted what we call a conversational ethic and aesthetic which embraces the to-and-fro, the call-and-response, of ongoing dialogue and collaboration and care—rather than isolated encounters or one-off interviews—as a crucial methodology when it comes to the ethics of research in relation to both creativity and criticism. At the heart of this conversational ethic and aesthetic is a need for sensitivity when it comes to understanding who carries privilege or not in any particular collaboration, and thus where authorship and speaking space need to be respected, and where one should rather adopt the role of the listener, something that Albertine Fox has modelled and written about powerfully in her contributions to the conversations and articles published on our Screen Worlds website.¹⁰

In my films, I use clips from the films Kibinge and Selane have brought into being in both intellectual and affective ways,¹¹ interspersing these carefully chosen fragments with Kibinge’s and Selane’s sharing of their own experiences with filmmaking, rather than attempting to interpret their films myself, since—as a White academic—I do not share their positionality and lived experiences. More than a critic, I was a curator in these moments of filmmaking, where my authorial decisions were based on which parts of my filmed conversations with Kibinge and Selane I chose to include and how I would move between these conversations and the screen worlds of the films. An inspiration to me in this editing work was the elegant and lyrical film *Passages* (Nagib and Paiva 2019), co-directed by Lúcia Nagib and Samuel Paiva, which is not only an intermedial feat in the way it undertakes academic research through filmmaking but also a study of intermediality itself in its focus on how Brazilian filmmaking has been influenced by other art forms, such as music, painting, theatre, and literature. The energy and momentum that Nagib and Paiva

create in the movement between the film clips and Nagib's interviews with filmmakers make the film feel like a choreographed dance at times and were a significant model for me.

One might have expected that, given my interest in intermediality rather than im-mediation, I would have chosen, in a self-reflexive gesture, to include footage of myself conversing with Kibinge and Selane in the films; however, given that the films are intended to engage with, celebrate, and archive *their* work, I did not think it appropriate to distract from that focus by including myself. I only appear briefly in the film about Kibinge towards the end and not at all in the film about Selane. Again, this is because I see my role in these films as more curatorial than critical, as more a listener than a speaker. If the films seem overwhelmingly positive about Kibinge and Selane's work, it is because I do not see it as my place—as a White academic, and one who has not lived in an African country for many years—to offer critique in contexts I am not intimately familiar with. Rather, as a curator, my role, in this case, is to gather, assemble, and edit (indeed, hundreds of hours went into the editing of the films), and thereby offer up this work for others to appreciate and draw their own ideas from and conclusions about. And, as a White academic, it is my role to try to listen as best I can, despite the very obvious geographical and cultural distances. On the plane from London to Nairobi for the film shoot with Kibinge and her community in February 2022, I read James R. Martin's book *Actuality Interviewing and Listening* (Martin 2017).¹² Martin includes in this book one of the Chinese characters for the verb "to listen", which includes not only the ears but also the eyes, the heart, and one's undivided attention. As Martin elaborates, "Being mindful and aware in the present moment is listening without preconceived or imagined ideas. This allows new ideas and solutions to be recognized" (Martin 2017, p. 31). This definition of mindful listening, and the Chinese character itself, guided my own process.

If mindful and sensitive, the researcher-as-listener, rather than the researcher-as-expert/explainer, can play a significant role in transforming the very conditions of knowledge production, where the emphasis is more on attempts to approach and converse with rather than master, author, control, interpret, and argue. As I have suggested above, when a researcher is not from the community about which they are conducting the research, and especially when the researcher is from a historically privileged group and the participants from a historically disadvantaged group, this shift is, of course, even more important to ensure respectful relationships for—as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has pointedly told us—"research", which has been a dirty word for many Indigenous Peoples, whose trust in the benefits of academia needs to be wholly recuperated in many contexts and cases. As Mees and Murray (2019, p. 1) have noted, screen-based research potentially has the "capacity to document and audio-visually represent intersubjective, embodied, affective, and dynamic relationships between researchers and the subjects of their research". The researcher needs to go beyond documentation and representation of these relationships on screen, however; behind the scenes, they need to respect and maintain these relationships. Of course, in order to be given permission to make a film, respect is indispensable. I would not have been able to embark on making my films without Kibinge and Selane generously sharing with me, and this sharing grew out of relationships of trust. The fact that films are far more visible than written research—particularly with many funders' open access requirements—means that they have greater potential to reach broader audiences and have an impact beyond academia, but this also requires greater accountability from researchers who need to value their relationships with their subjects rather than treat participants as short-term "informants" who have no or limited access to the final, published research.¹³ Intermedial, people-oriented research thus involves ongoing conversations with participants that ultimately benefit the research as well. In my own experiences, Trinh T. Minh-ha's concept of "speaking nearby" one's participants has constantly come to mind as an appropriate way of describing this process (Chen 1992).

Moving from written to audiovisual modes of knowledge production not only allows for a visualising and vocalising of participants themselves—since we can see their faces and hear their voices as they express their views themselves, in their own words and

languages—but also creates the conditions for what I want to call “envisioning”. According to dictionary definitions of this word, it means to visualise and also to “imagine as a future possibility”, something that appeals to me since I have thought about my filmmaking as a way of creating archives of Kibinge’s and Selane’s filmmaking practices for the future. This definition of “envisioning” also resonates with that of “archiving”, where I understand the archive as “an agent in its own right” and as involving “a performative dimension in constructing documents and sources and, as a consequence, in creating the grounds from which history is written” (Brunow 2015, p. 40).

Imagining, performing, and re-creating have all been part of the aesthetic process of undertaking research through filmmaking for me in a way that writing alone would not have lent itself to. For example, in my film about Kibinge, my cinematographers and I reconstructed a scene of Kibinge storyboarding her most recent film for the opening scene of my film, with Kibinge speaking in voice over about how her filmmaking work emerges out of—and has always been underpinned by—her love of writing and drawing. This was one of the final scenes that we shot for the film because it was only after all the research that I realised how fundamental this practice of writing and drawing is to Kibinge’s filmmaking and that I needed to foreground it visually and aurally.

In the case of my film about Selane, I not only reconstructed several scenes—for example, to visualise the way in which Selane met Dineo Lusenga, a younger film producer whom she has mentored—but also orchestrated the event that became the opening scene of the film: a reunion to celebrate the “Female Only Filmmakers” programme, which Selane led from 2013 to 2016 and through which she has supported many young South African women filmmakers. Practically, this allowed me to film Selane and her community together and to interview these women and, structurally, it helped me establish the focus of the film. Aesthetically, it also allowed me to dream up and spirit into being a beautiful opening for the film that, for me, is symbolic of the flourishing of women’s filmmaking in contemporary South Africa. The film begins with a drone shot of Johannesburg at a distance before moving to a grounded view, a low-angled shot looking up at the flowering lilac jacaranda trees that are characteristic of Johannesburg in the springtime; the film then moves to La Cucina di Ciro, a restaurant beneath jacaranda trees, where we see Selane and her female film community gathering for their reunion. The symbol of trees and growth continues throughout the film’s imagery.

The imaginative, performative, and collaborative opportunities of creative, intermedial research thus also open a space for lone-ranger critics to become artists working as creative collectives through exercising their aesthetic as well as analytical abilities. Of course, as Wilde suggests, the critic who works with words can also be an artist by using verbal language beautifully. But, given films’ intermediality—their ability to encompass still and moving images, words, text, music, sound, dance, and performance—and their dependence on collaboration (unlike writing, which can be done collaboratively, but more often than not is an individual pursuit), filmmaking offers itself up for aesthetic experimentation in myriad ways. The questions this provokes in terms of the style through which we express our research and not solely the content is refreshing, invoking the full “haptic” potential of the film medium of which film scholars, such as Vivian Sobchack (1992), Laura Marks (2000), and Giuliana Bruno (2014), have long been speaking.

By taking this “haptic” dimension of intermedial research seriously, we have the potential as researchers to “touch” our audiences emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, as well as ethically. Elaine Scarry is well-known for her work *On Beauty and Being Just* (Scarry 1999), in which she views the ethical as being able to emerge out of the beautiful. Scarry knows well, however, that assumptions about what is or is not beautiful can also be the foundation for the grossest human violations. From a decolonial feminist perspective, Bradley and Ferreira da Silva (2021) note, “Genocide, now as before, is an aesthetic project. The question, then, should not be why rethink aesthetics now, but rather how do we survive the aesthetic regime that carves and encloses the very shape of our question?” Bell Hooks (1999) has given us a framework for thinking about our whole lives as related to

an “aesthetics of existence” and I would like to adapt her thinking to consider, far more narrowly, what I want to call the “aesthetics of academia” in my closing words of this article.

3. (Un)finale: The Aesthetics of Academia

The colonial, patriarchal values that have haunted many academic institutions in the West—and elsewhere—can be discerned through reading their aesthetics. At Oxbridge, for example, one can ascertain much through an analysis of the traditional hierarchies of rooms and gardens in terms of who is allowed to enter or walk through them and who is not. When I was a graduate student at Cambridge University in the early 2000s, I was astounded that there were “bedders” who came to clean students’ rooms, including making their beds if the students were too lazy to do so, and these people were invariably working-class women. I remember Mary, my own “bedder”, telling me about the disgusting state in which certain young students left their rooms for her to clean—which reminded me of my own brief stint, over the course of a year, cleaning my peers’ bathrooms at Harvard University when I worked for the “dorm crew”. One of the key questions Françoise Vergès asks throughout *A Decolonial Feminism* (2019) is “who cleans the world?” I was in the privileged position of having a cleaning job by choice and leaving a cleaning job by choice, but for the working-class women (and, to a lesser extent, men) of all backgrounds who do not have the luxury of this choice, the aesthetics of their own lives and the aesthetics of other lives to which they contribute are intimately connected also to the ethics of existence.

Aesthetics and ethics are intertwined, as powerfully emphasised in Denise Ferreira da Silva’s (2018) use of the word “poethical” and in her pointed questions, which relate also to my own quest in making films, as a White academic, about and with Black African women filmmakers:

What is it that a black feminist poethics makes available? What can it offer to the task of unthinking the world, of releasing it from the grips of the abstract forms of modern representation and the violent juridic and economic architectures they support?

Dwelling for a moment on Ferreira da Silva’s own poethical reading of an artwork—Pakistani artist Madiha Sikander’s *Majmua* (2017–2018)—seems an appropriate way of trying to draw together the threads of my reflections into some kind of textile/texture in these closing words, which I hope will invite new conversations. Ferreira da Silva says that by undertaking a “poethical (material and decompositional) rather than critical (formal and analytical) reading of the work”, her own writing “does no more than to experiment with an approach to artistic practice that seeks to expand its relevance beyond the bounds of criticality . . . and considers artistic practice as a generative locus for engaging in radical reflection on modalities of racial (symbolic) and colonial (juridic) subjugation operating in full force in the global present” (2018). I understand this poethical move as similar to Jayamanne’s mobile mimetic criticism (2001). I already feel some anxiety about the kinds of questions I might be asked when I screen my films made about/with Kibinge and Selane in certain contexts—questions that will seek to position me as the “expert” who must elaborate on and explain the contexts in which Kibinge and Selane work in Kenya and South Africa, respectively, and interpret and analyse their films. Of course, I have my own, subjective responses to their films—I would not have chosen to make films about these women had I not felt a resonance with the films they bring into being. But my intermedial, creative approach to their films emerges more out of my impulse to be a curator following the contours of their screen worlds rather than a critic dissecting them through interpretation (Sontag [1966] 2009). It is precisely my awareness of my own positionality and lived experience that led me to make films as an expression of my research interests and explorations, but these films are also creative works in their own right, and it is that status that helps to create an environment for them to assert their own opacity and resistance to appropriation and incorporation into the modes of “transparent” knowledge production often expected of academics.

Mees and Murray (2019) provide a cogent overview of discriminatory uses of visual media in the nineteenth and twentieth century by researchers, which means that we cannot take for granted that intermedial methods will serve the liberation and empowerment of those who have been oppressed and/or marginalised in the past and present. Working within a decolonial feminist ethos, my “envisioning” practice intends to counter the absences from and/or exploitation of Black African women, as represented in (audio)visual archives of the past, by recognising and affirming, through the film medium, Black African women’s empowering, creative, and contemporary filmmaking practices. My hope is that my films will contribute, in this way, to the collective project to ensure that an entirely different kind of audiovisual archive exists in the future, creating new kinds of worlds. For, as artistic researcher Ram Krishna Ranjan has suggested, through our quests for “reenactment of the archive”, it becomes possible “to arrive at renegotiated and remediated readings, and ultimately to imagine new futures” (Ranjan 2020, p. 131). Nevertheless, such imagining and envisioning also have to be fully cognisant of the fragility, ambiguity, and contingency of archives, and I have thus tried to anticipate and ward off attempts to subsume these films within any fixed, final frame. As Ferreira da Silva (2018) notes

A black feminist poethical reading deploys blacklight to dissolve determinacy, which grounds the Kantian rendering of aesthetic judgement, shifting the focus to the elusive, the unclear, the uncertain—the scent—thereby making it possible to dislodge sequentiality and expose the deeper (virtual) correspondences comprehended (but not extinguished) by the abstract forms of modern thought.

The aesthetic and ethical value of creative, intermedial research is, therefore, not simply related to being able to make an “impact” through the work being accessible to broader audiences, to people outside academia, although that, of course, is important too. It is also fundamentally related to this work having the self-reflexive ability to transform the aesthetics and ethics of academia itself—just as intermedial artworks have the potential to transform the aesthetics and ethics of the “white cube” of the art world. It is about rethinking the ways in which we communicate with one another, where aesthetics is not a superficial “surface” (as a noun), but offers the possibility of a “surfacing” (as a verb, a movement, a rising) of various kinds of things that have previously remained in the domain of the unacknowledged and unappreciated (Lewis and Baderoon 2021). In this figuring, ethics in academia are not something of secondary importance—an online training course, or a bureaucratic tick-box exercise—but are necessary in a deep, primary sense to the ability for us to work not as solitary figures but in solidarity with one another, to contribute to the surfacing and aesthetic envisioning of a more humble, socially just higher education environment. As Lilla Watson, an Australian Indigenous activist, says, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (cited in Verges 2019, 18%).

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Notes

- 1 I do not have the space to elaborate here on the full impact of the RhodesMustFall movement on higher education globally. What I can share here is that, at my own university, SOAS University of London, it led students to start a “Decolonising Our Minds” society which, in turn, inspired a SOAS-wide Decolonising SOAS working group, open to all staff and students, which helped SOAS to embed a “Decolonising Vision” as part of its strategy. This working group also created a Decolonising Learning and Teaching toolkit (which can be accessed at <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/learning-teaching/>, accessed on 27 July 2023) that has been taken up by universities around the world, as documented in a SOAS REF2021 impact case study titled “Decolonising the University Across Disciplines” (which can be accessed at <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact>, accessed on 27 July 2023).
- 2 I share Amia Srinivasan’s concerns about the impact of the appointment of the UK’s director for freedom of speech and academic freedom on the space for rigorous, respectful debate (see [Srinivasan 2023](#)), and I have personally experienced the rationalisations of specialist research and teaching that is the effect of the neoliberal corporatisation of universities.
- 3 There is rich, related research on cinematic intermediality (see, for example, [Pethő 2011](#); [Nagib 2020](#); [Knowles and Schmid 2021](#)), which I unfortunately do not have the space to engage with here because of my focus on intermediality in academic methods more broadly.
- 4 See www.screenworlds.org, accessed on 27 July 2023.
- 5 See <https://screenworlds.org/announcements/uk-premiere-spillover-2021-a-film-by-nobunye-levin/>, accessed on 27 July 2023.
- 6 A 2022 Times Higher Education survey suggests that publishing articles in top-tier journals that produce high numbers of citations remains the dominant form of academic knowledge production [3 August]. The REF 2021 Main Panel D comments were published in the “Overview report by Main Panel D and Sub-panels 25 to 34” in May 2022 (see www.ref.ac.uk, accessed on 27 July 2023).
- 7 See <https://insightsforimpact.co.uk/our-work/filmmaking-research-network/>, accessed on 27 July 2023.
- 8 See https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMUvev1_9LqMOfj-PThKWAUmVmqCNxJT, accessed on 27 July 2023.
- 9 These films are *Out of the Box: The Screen Worlds of Judy Kibinge* ([Dovey 2023b](#), UK/Kenya) and *From One Woman to Another: The Screen Worlds of Bongwiwe Selane* ([Dovey 2023a](#), UK/South Africa). Towards the end of the Screen Worlds project, they will be made freely available online on our website: www.screenworlds.org, accessed on 27 July 2023.
- 10 See <https://screenworlds.org/publications/seeing-and-listening-differently-an-exchange-with-the-documentary-filmmaker-katy-lena-ndiaye/>, accessed on 27 July 2023.
- 11 I would like to acknowledge Ágnes Pethő as one of the foremost scholars of intermediality in cinema and, in particular, in terms of the study of how this intermediality contributes to audience’s *affective* encounters with the cinema, something that I do not have the space to engage with more here. As I write this article, Pethő is circulating a call for a conference on “Affective Intermediality” to take place 20–21 October 2023 in Cluj-Napoca in Romania.
- 12 I am very grateful to my co-editor Anna Sowa for recommending this book to me.
- 13 In our Screen Worlds project, ensuring that there are screenings for the communities who participated in our films—for example, in Lagos, Addis Ababa, and Nairobi—has been paramount to our ethical approach.

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