Research article

How do we look at animals? – Decolonising Documentary Art Practices and the Global Crisis for Donkeys

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Abstract

This article poses the question 'How do we look at animals?', suggesting a link to inherent problems of documentary film-making. However, the question further suggests that there may be ways of relating to animals other than 'looking at'; other than 'observing'. Drawing from the research project De-Doc-Donkeywork: Decolonising Documentary Art Practices and the Global Crisis for Donkeys, the article offers a reflection upon how specific art-practice-led research is brought into education. The interrelatedness of art practice, research, theory and pedagogy allows for connections to be identified between the decaying borders of disciplines, documental knowledges, and possibilities of decolonising our relation to animals. At the core is a problem of 'coloniality' related to film education: the domination of documentary concerns and valances through film discourse. The *documental* is identified as an epistemic practice that can reorganise extra-disciplinary resources into collaborating collectives in research and education, allowing for new ways of knowing 'donkey'.

Keywords decoloniality; documental episteme; art-practice-led research in education; artistic research; global crisis for donkeys; animated camera; animals

Is it possible to rethink documentary practice in a way that rejects the classical humanist divisions of self and other, mind and body, and human and animal, in order to fashion a different mode of critical thinking in the 'posthuman age'? Can documentary theory and practice have a future if they are anti-anthropocentric and reject human exceptionalism? What could a posthuman reformulation of the idea of the human lead to in documentary studies? (Cammaer et. al., 2018: 8)

I understood that the borders separating disciplines depended upon the frontier separating those who are allowed to speak and those who are not and ultimately those who are supposed to be human speaking beings and those who are supposed to be noisy animals. (Jacques Rancière, in Sternad, 2016: 207–8)

Thinking through animality as an infrastructure of decolonization re-positions animal bodies as agents of anti-colonial resurgence. (Belcourt, 2015: 8)

Outlining the scope of the research project De-Doc-Donkeywork

The research project De-Doc-Donkeywork: Decolonising Documentary Art Practices and the Global Crisis for Donkeys combines two crises. First, the global crisis for donkeys is paradigmatic for the general ethical and eco-political, as well as economic, crisis of globalisation that we are living in and through. The donkeys' hide is exploited in the Global South to produce the traditional Chinese medicine ejiao, with particularly devastating effects in Africa. Second, the concept of the 'documental' provides an example of a general epistemic crisis of documentary practice in industry, research and education. Documentary practice is subjected and relegated to discourses of specific media and disciplines, that is, film or photography, rather than enabling an independent field of documentary study through research and education with its own concerns and valences.

Both documentary practice and global networks of production and exploitation inevitably intrude and alter the reality upon which they depend. Hence, relationality and intersectionality, the problems of coloniality and the possibilities of decoloniality, and questions of testimony and complicity, are central to this enquiry, and to the pedagogical experiments informing the study. Addressing the crises of an exploited animal species and a subaltern discipline in conjunction promises to produce mutually informed and informing knowledge, as well as insights into decolonial possibilities of collaboration in research and education. (For the sake of coherence with cited texts, the ambiguous term 'animals' is generally maintained, instead of the precise term 'nonhuman animals', to describe all animals except humans.)

The case of the donkey provides a helpful link between the documental and decoloniality. As an exploited, yet witnessing, creature, the donkey, when put in a critical relation with a documenting camera or documentary archival work, enables a reframing of the animal–human relation from the standpoint of both the documental and decoloniality.

Education 1: epistemic crisis of documentary art

There are two levels on which questions of education are explored in this project. On a theoretical level, the project addresses directly the epistemic crisis of documentary education, research and practice. As Gerda Cammaer et al. (2018: 4) lament:

The emphasis on film has meant the development of a body of literature along the lines of medium specificity and the disciplinary concerns of film studies rather than the long-overdue development of a field of study that would address all types of documentary image-making practices irrespective of established university disciplines.

While the authors argue that 'a department of documentary studies encompassing photography, film and the visual arts would have been more appropriate to address documentary esthetics and the shared concerns of documentarians working in visual media' (Cammaer et al., 2018: 5), the intriguing question arising from this proposition is how a *documental* mode of address would operate and what it would enable in terms of knowledge. The research and education work presented in this article must be reflected regarding the broader question of such a documental episteme, of what the documental allows us to know and overcome.

A state of art: originality as the stakes of animals

The poet and academic Billy-Ray Belcourt (2015: 9) claims that 'decolonization is not possible without centring an animal ethic [because] settler colonialism is invested in animality and therefore re-makes animal bodies into colonial subjects to normalize settler modes of political life'. Belcourt (2015: 3) proposes:

> … a 'politics of space' to conceptualize the ways in which settler moves to knowing and/ or constructing animal bodies and/or subjectivities (re)locates animals within particular geographic and architectural spaces. The insertion of animal bodies into specific industrialized, colonized, and vacated spaces (such as (factory) farms, urban apartments, and 'emptied' forests) is therefore *the* gesture through which animality is made intelligible and material in the settler imagination.

Recognising that 'decolonization is always and only rooted in lived experiences of indigeneity, in *unbecoming* a site of settler colonialism', Belcourt (2015: 3, emphasis in the original) argues that 'colonial animalities are inseparable from the colonized spaces in which they are subjected and laboured. Here, a decolonial animal ethic must also be a land ethic insofar as the repatriation of land to Indigenous peoples would logically require a re-articulation of animality' (Belcourt, 2015: 3–4).

In the research project De-Doc-Donkeywork, the concept 'decolonising' refers to documentary art practices, on the one hand, and to the global crisis for donkeys, on the other hand. The first concerns the capacity of documentary art practice for *unbecoming*, to use Belcourt's (2015) term, a colonised site, that is, a site of Western spatial politics of exploitation. Following the radical argument of Belcourt (2015), we must ask what the 'indigeneity' of documentary art practice would be, as one that opposes settler colonialism and becomes a decolonised documentary art practice. The second concerns the capacity of such a 'decolonised' documentary art practice to become 'decolonising' and make the global crisis for donkeys *unbecome* a site of 'settler colonialism', that is, to answer the question 'How do we look at animals?' from an ethical position, which surpasses the documentary perspective.

The project proposes to examine the term 'occupation' as a practicable variation of the term 'settlement' for art-practice-led research, in as much as it inherently contests the indigeneity of the occupant. The conceptual advantage of the term 'occupation' is that it allows adding to the Euclidian and Cartesian concept of space, and the politics that this historically involves, a *topological* concept and politics of space. This extension enables dealing with non-geographical fields, such as discourse, aesthetics or, specifically, documentary art practices, in terms of contested territories. At the same time, however, it challenges the very idea of indigeneity in as much as it would need to be determined in terms of continuity, connectedness and convergence, rather than being bound to a location or 'land' that can be mapped and fixed metrically. This amounts to an open question: To what extent can 'origin' or 'indigeneity' be thought of as 'originality' in decolonial studies?

As academic and film-maker Jyoti Mistry (2021: 3–4) has claimed in this journal, Walter Mignolo's 'approach of defining decolonization in terms of artistic practices and its relation to knowledge is a necessary complement to the reparations approach sought by Tuck and Yang', the latter being an approach that 'recognizes what is distinct and what is sovereign for project(s) of decolonization in relation to human and civil rights based social justice projects'. Mistry (2021: 4) argues that 'A decolonial proposition, and its potential in film education, is a way to delink, unlearn and create space for aesthetic practices … in

films that are articulated from the position of the colonialized subject, and to recognize utterance instead of representation.' What needs to be delinked are the 'structures of capital and its representative forms', if they are not to be 'fortified' as 'settler knowledge' (Mistry, 2021: 4). Although critique of capitalism and decolonial thought are by no means identical, the inherent link between capital/knowledge and settlement, between capitalism and colonialism, needs to be accepted to be able to cope with the burden the Western Subject bears altogether.

The proposition of 'originality' as the stakes of animals can therefore not be identified with the gesture that Belcourt (2015: 3) describes (and rejects) of inserting the 'animal body' in the 'emptied forest', through which animality is 'rendered intelligible' in 'settler imagination'. For Belcourt (2015: 9), 'thinking through animality as an infrastructure of decolonisation [that] re-positions animal bodies as agents of anti-colonial resurgence' can help in liberating Indigenous peoples from their ties to 'colonial mentality and reality'. As such a decolonial animal ethic infrastructure, Belcourt (2015: 8) – himself an Indigenous Subject – proposes 'a re-centering of animality through Indigenous cosmologies and epistemologies'.

However, the decolonial project is also a processing of the Western Subject's burden of post-colonialism (as linked to post-slavery and post-communism). The re-centring of animality through Indigenous cosmologies, while valid for the Indigenous Subject, risks only recalling traditional and ceremonial animal–human relations for the Western Subject – something that needs to be exceeded, according to Belcourt (2015).

To extend Mistry's (2021) argument, referencing Mignolo's emphasis on aesthetics, towards a reflection of how (art-)practice-led research is brought into education, it seems useful to look at Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. When Spivak (1988: 292, 293, emphases in the original), as a post-colonial intellectual, examines Jacques Derrida dealing with the question 'how to keep the ethnocentric Subject from establishing itself by selectively defining an Other', she writes: 'As a European philosopher, [Derrida] articulates the *European* Subject's tendency to constitute the Other as marginal to ethnocentrism and locates *that* as the problem with all logocentric and therefore also all grammatological endeavours.' Spivak (1988: 293, 294, emphases in the original) underlines the importance of the fact that Derrida articulates this as '*Not* a general problem, but a *European* problem', and praises his 'sustained and developing work on the *mechanics* of the constitution of the Other', rather than on its '*authenticity*'. How to de-marginalise and re-centre the Other, then? Spivak (1988: 294, emphasis in the original) writes: 'Derrida does not invoke "letting the other(s) speak for himself" but rather invokes an "appeal" to or "call" to the "quite-other" …, of "rendering *delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us".' Beyond writing, this call to the 'quite-other' is at once the rendering delirious of originality as the stake of animals in a (new) image, and the rendering delirious of our practice(s) and research in the context of education.

A state of own art: practice at work

Drawing on the background of my architectural education and practice, my work to an important extent consists in building installations in public spheres and interventions in the built environment (Figure 1).

This spatial practice draws on architecture formally and conceptually, but critically also in terms of production, management processes and use. Hence, the work of art also happens or is enunciated in the design, planning, tender, documentation and so on of what seemed to be minor supportive practices. The work of art cannot be located: its location is both divided and multiplied, or, to use Peter Osborne's (2013) proposition for art's current condition, the work of art is 'anywhere or not at all'. Its condition could also be described in W. H. Auden's (2005: 34) words as 'a way of happening, a mouth', containing and spreading the word. The political awareness of this happening of art shines through in every aesthetic manifestation of practice, not just in a final object.

Consequently, the practices of studying that are necessary for artists' PhDs should always be reflected as an aesthetic manifestation of their work of art, including reading, discussing and writing. Although the documentation of my artistic practice, mainly with a camera, has always been an inherent

Figure 1. Hardliz, R. (2021) *Exit Strategie IV.* **Scaffold and light installation at StadtKunstFest, PROGR Bern, displaying the title 'Galleria di Berna' of the exhibition at the Stadtgalerie (Photograph: D. Aebi)**

part of that practice, it was through my PhD that the use of the camera shifted towards the centre of my attention. When documenting the practice of studying with the camera, the sheer presence of the camera made me do other things than I had planned. The spatial relation between the camera and the activities of my studying body became the focus of my research. I started to use rotated cameras first, then rotating cameras, and I explored how I would respond to this through my practices of studying. When the camera is not following the action, it manifests itself as stakeholder. In whatever way the actions relate to such a camera, this relation becomes sensible in the recorded image (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

In the work with animals, this relation seems to be similar but just the other way round. This time, it is not the camera that is not following the actions, but the animal subject that is not following the camera. As bizarre as it may sound, during the shoot of the film *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), the director Robert Bresson 'was terrified of the idea of a "trained donkey"' (Bresson, 2016: 167). Bresson (2016: 167) 'did not want him to be professional', and he treated the donkey as if it were a lay actor, keen to make it not act, but to behave as a donkey. 'What that meant', Bresson (2016: 167) recounts, 'was that … the donkey didn't do a thing I expected.'

After my PhD, my aim was to bring the filmic experimentation of the relation between the camera and my body into relations with others. This reinforced the role of the 'director' and allowed for an enquiry of *collaboration* as related to the camera. How would director and protagonist work together using a camera that does not follow actions?

During the shoot of the film *Unoccupied Territories (part one): and here I am* (Hardliz, 2021), I worked with the actor Ahmed Tobasi from the Freedom Theatre of Jenin Refugee Camp in the West Bank of Palestine. The film was documenting the play *And Here I Am*, written by Hassan Abdulrazzak (2017), in which Tobasi performs himself and his life (childhood; the Stone Theatre; intifada; the Freedom Theatre; career as an actor). In this documentary work, I attempted introducing a donkey as a representative of the missing audience in the theatre. It was very easy for me to guide the donkey inside and outside the

Figure 2. Hardliz, R. (2014) *Ornament as the Science of Passionate Disinterests*. **Still from video. London**

theatre so it could get used to it. However, when I wanted to direct the donkey to the correct position in the shot, it bucked and resisted. I had to shoot the scene with the donkey standing in the position chosen by the donkey, hoping that the footage could be used for the film in some way. Unfortunately, I was unable to integrate the material in a way that would make sense. Ultimately, the stubbornness of the donkey may have saved me from overdoing the visual complexity of the film by generating too much distraction. As it is now, without the donkey, viewers focus on the actor and his acting, on the moves of the camera and on the sound – the three constituent elements of the film (Figure 5).

The point of the donkey was to introduce a witness. Whether real as donkey or virtual as representative of future spectators of the film, the state of the witness here cannot be interpreted in the sense of an 'emancipated spectator', as Jacques Rancière (2009: 23) critically explored it:

> To dismiss the fantasies of the word made flesh and the spectator rendered active, to know that words are merely words and spectacles merely spectacles can help us arrive at a better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in.

Rather, we need to explore the shifts that neoliberal governance has produced, forcing us to be accountable as stakeholders, even when passively experiencing a spectacle. Irit Rogoff (2013: 47) observes that 'our understanding of infrastructure [as] properly functioning structures that serve to support something already agreed upon' has significantly shifted, and she thus proposes to 'reflect about what the absence of infrastructure does make possible'. Following Rogoff (2013: 46), we can think of the 'shift from consumer to stakeholder' as a shift from spectator to witness. The witness is still a spectator, but one with stakes. Spectators become witnesses when through the spectacle there is something at stake for them, when they are touched.

In the film *Unoccupied Territories*, the donkey as an absent witness corresponds to the invisible centre of the film, the nodal point of the camera, which is the virtual germ of any future audience in a cinema. Positioned on the division line between stage and auditorium of the Freedom Theatre, the camera rotates constantly on its vertical axis, with a speed of 7.5 minutes per full rotation. The actor Tobasi is forced to find a way of engaging with the rotating camera. This is not a task he takes on by himself.

Figure 3. Hardliz, R. (2016) *Chauvet III (or Cave of Forgotten Dreams).* **Still from video. Pont d'Arc**

The camera creates a coalition between me, as the film-maker, and Tobasi, as the protagonist of the film. We attempted to rewrite, or rather recompose, the play so that it would fit the circular movement of the rotating camera. The fact that at times the actor follows the movement of the camera generates a strange feeling of nausea in the spectator, a feeling that is related to both the play and the political state to which it refers. At the nodal point of the camera in the centre of the theatre, the affects that are generated by the rules that the occupation puts on the ground in Palestine may become sensible to the viewers.

Sensibilities of absent 'donkey' knowledges

What is at stake in a work that draws on animals – and specifically on the global crisis for donkeys – for an exploration of decolonising approaches to documentary art practices? How do we look at animals?

According to palaeontologist and cineaste Marc Azéma (2010), prehistoric cave paintings of animals must be considered kinetic due to their precise depiction of animal movements. More than 40 per cent of the animals represented on the walls of prehistoric caves are in motion. This percentage of animation is constant both geographically and historically, and thus it is not a question of style; rather, it

**Figure 4. Hardliz, R. (2016)** *Lascaux V (or The Birth of Art).* **Still from video. Lascaux**

forms an essential component of Palaeolithic art. According to Azéma (2010: 453, my translation), these animated animal drawings, by interacting, define 'the terms of a stammering visual grammar'. From the first image on the walls of the Stone Age, 'graphic narration' or 'narrative figuration' is born, which marks the beginning of 'writing and of all the current visual media', Azéma (2010: 453, my translation) writes.

If animations and movements represented on the walls of prehistoric caves – which at times stunningly resemble contemporary cartoons – are indeed the origins of writing, then, using a term from the title of Azéma's (2010) publication, writing could be seen as an 'illusion of life'. Moreover, the reliefs of the cave walls are indicative for the comprehension of the paintings. The drawn animals are not only animated by abstracted juxtapositions and superimpositions of drawings. The surfaces of the rocks, and images placed on opposing walls, animate them as well. This becomes immediately evident to every visitor to a cave when the moving lights of torches make the animals on the three-dimensional rocks seem to move.

If we consider the interplay of eye, memory and painting hand in prehistoric art as an apparatus equivalent to a camera, then documentary art practice can claim prehistoric art as an originality that can be reanimated. The camera itself, however, is an additional element that marks the violence of intrusion and coloniality. Living in a world intruded by the humans, we must learn to turn these intrusive apparatuses against themselves, not to destroy them, but to root us in lived experiences of indigeneity, creating the reconciling and critical images of a decolonial existence.

The aim in the case of the documentation of the global exploitation of donkeys, however, is not information, denunciation, intervention or even solution. Rather, the aim is to create a sensation that can

Figure 5. Hardliz, R. (2021) *Unoccupied Territories (part one): and here I am.* **Still of unused scene from film. The Freedom Theatre, Jenin Refugee Camp, Palestine**
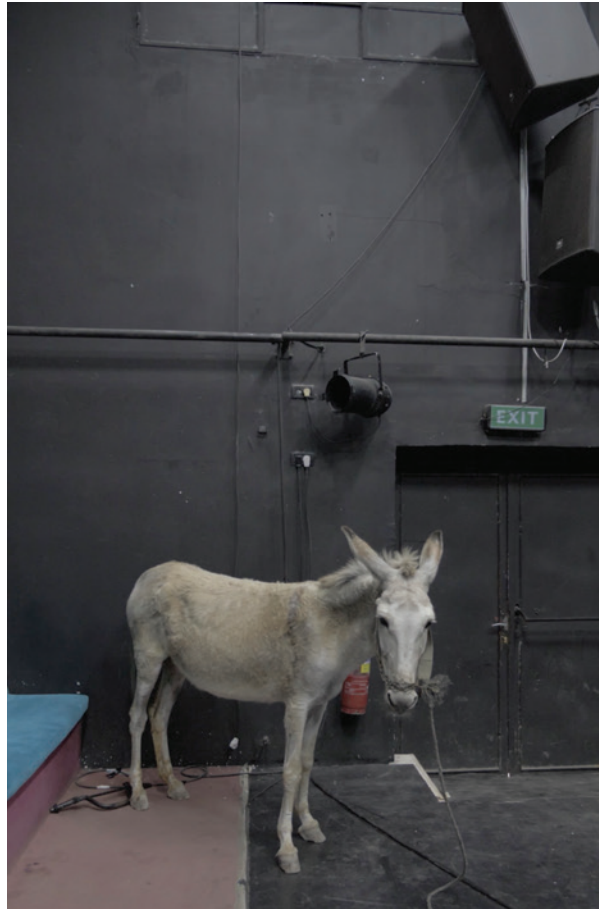
affect the viewers in a way that forces them to think (or to abandon a way of thinking): to find images that force us to think 'donkey' anew.

Animated camera – camera conductor

Reality-related approaches in film-making traditionally use the camera in a particular way, ranging from Dziga Vertov's (1984) *Kino-Glass* ('camera eye', 1919) to Alexandre Astruc's (1992) *Camera-stylo* ('camera pen', 1948). A significant conceptual extension of this tradition, to which the research project can be methodologically related, lies in the practices of artists such as Michael Snow or the directors of the Dogma 95 Manifesto, in which the camera as a stakeholder is given conceptually decisive influence on both the filming process and the filmic result. Often constrained by a fixed set of rules, these cameras generate a scan of actions rather than following them. In this sense, they are comparable to CCTV and its implications. Regarding the conceptual set of rules that often guides such cameras, and that provides them with an appearance of autonomy or indifference towards the actions happening around them, I propose to call them *animated cameras*. Regarding the affordances of an animated camera, which is how the camera can be used and what it allows or forces you to do, I propose the concept of *camera conductor*. Since the camera does not necessarily relate to its environment, the concerned stakeholders must relate to it. This creates lines of flux between stakeholders and the camera that translate on to the line of flux between the resulting image and the spectators. The camera conductor is thus a conductor in the sense of both conductor of an orchestra and conductor of resonances.

Confronting a categorical difference: animal

When the donkey Balthazar in Bresson's film is taken to a circus to pull the keeper's hay trailer to feed the circus animals, we see a series of images along the path showing some animals in their cages: the tiger, the polar bear, the monkey and, finally, the elephant. The image of the elephant, which is a close-up showing only one of his eyes and the wrinkled skin surrounding it, makes clear that what we see is not just animals, but also animals looking and seeing. The donkey and each animal look at and listen to each other. In their sights, they share the sheer fact of life and existence.

For the film director Wim Wenders (2018: 3'15"), who identifies the scene with the circus animals as his favourite in the film, Bresson 'does everything so that both human and animal appear as the same creature, equally exploited, equally tormented, equally suffering, and when the gaze of this donkey, the gaze of Balthazar, rests upon the humans – upon you as well – then you know yourself being looked at'. You suffer the donkey's sufferings; you witness the donkey witnessing you.

In the research project, the eye(s) of the donkey and the camera both share the role of witness. However, the animal eye, as opposed to the independently moving camera, is not indifferent to the actions. Even if it can be said that the spectators infuse the mechanical camera recordings with passion, the documentary as such remains indifferent. It is the transmission of affects that animates the documental apparatus. The forces at play in the animal–protagonist–camera relation, with an animal as an additional layer of complexity, turn this project into yet another fundamental research exploring a *ménage à trois*: animal witnessing protagonist, protagonist witnessing camera, viewer-via-camera witnessing animal, and vice versa. This spatial constellation allows the investigating of the spatial politics of animal–human–machine relations.

Education 2: new apparatuses of image production

Within this theoretical and practical research setting, the work with students and the outputs of experiments conducted with them inform methods and contribute to verifying assumptions and defining new goals. In October 2021, a teaching opportunity in the master's film programme of HDK-Valand, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, allowed for an exploration of different approaches to the research based upon the students' understanding of the De-Doc-Donkeywork enquiry. The students were asked to develop and test modes of an animated camera, and to expand the perceptions of documentary forms. An animated camera is described as an indifferent or autonomous camera in varying contexts, and in essence it is a camera that does not follow the activity as determined by the film-maker or subjects. The possibilities of animated cameras are numerous, and they include fixing the camera to something mobile, placing the camera in an odd position, setting up arbitrary camera angles that can be multiplied, and playing with the camera's automatisms. This invitation to students and their collaborators aimed to pose a rethinking of their position vis-à-vis the camera. The perceptions of documentary forms are shaped through an invention of reality. Documenting an animal complicated these collaborations and perceptions. Practically, it forced the students to reconsider their relations to these animals and their positions of observing.

The brief to the students was a two-pronged approach to expand the idea of reflection inherent in the work with an animated camera. The first task was to produce material from an animated camera, and the second was to create a 'behind-the-scenes' film as an essay or camera-stylo exercise. Both tasks had to be produced simultaneously; that is, the process of the reflection on the documentary form had to take place at the time of the filming. The aim was to capture both the students' individual projects and their respective research and production conditions. Importantly, both elements had to be produced in the same media, and an explanation of the film was to be avoided.

Postcards from the future

With the relatively small group of international students at the film school of HDK-Valand, who all had practical experience in film-making and related fields, we engaged in an assignment for one week that

encompassed all aspects of the De-Doc-Donkeywork project. In a certain way, it can be said that the assignment was a simulation of the project itself, with some practical adjustments scaling the task to accommodate it within the structure of the education context. It could not be assumed that the students would be able to travel to Africa or China to do an exercise, nor would all of them have access to donkeys. Timeframe and budget were drastically different. Therefore, the question was generalised, and the animal–protagonist–camera relation was to be explored by means of an animal of the student's choice and the means they had at their disposal. Moreover, it was up to the student to define how an indifferent animated camera was to work regarding the chosen constellation.

Consequently, on the one hand, the students were flooded by the amplitude and complexity of the project contained in the assignment, including a dense referential framework of theoretical texts and related films. On the other hand, they were left with wide scope and openness regarding the choices that they could make. With this openness, the assignment produced a force not unlike an animated camera, in as much as it produced a seemingly insurmountable momentum that could only be matched by leaving one's own presumptions and conventions behind.

To create a situation that would allow the students to gain a natural distance from their own projects, and to enable them to revise their work from a renewed perspective, the initial assignment was counterweighted with an additional text- and image-based assignment that required that the students write/create a *postcard from the future*. This was meant to provide a means for reflecting on the work through other media and themes. As a precisely defined and highly codified cultural asset of communication, the postcard was a way to further connect the readings that described 'futurity' as a 'position from which to speak', and to allow for a moment of reflective and creative distancing. Finally, the students were asked to rework their initial submissions for the last day of the workshop, and to draw on the feedback and insights from the previous days' classes. Although this final assignment was very demanding – a tour de force for most of them – it turned out to be a turning point, allowing them to discard conventions that they had inherited from film and documentary practices.

One of the projects made a careful choice of location to transmit the same condition of suffering and witnessing as in Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar*, but in documentary terms. The film was set in a museum of natural history where visitors encounter the glassy eyes of padded animals in vitrines. The setting allowed a variety of camera positions exploiting all kinds of camera–glass-eyes relations – and distances. In this example, the camera is animated in a rather conventional documentary way, but inspired by the possibilities of the museum as a documental context.

Within the spectrum of the possibilities of animated cameras, a camera mounted on the neck of a dog efficiently made the superposition of the dog's and the viewer's sight evident. It is clearly and obviously not the actual sight of the dog. Nevertheless, the camera's movements move with the running dog or with the breath of the resting dog, giving us a sense of 'being with' (Haraway, 2008: 3) the dog, a faint idea of what a dog's perspective might be. An affective bridge from the viewer to the experiences and the suffering of the dog becomes built into the experience.

Another student made a radical decision regarding the animated camera by selecting original footage from a CCTV camera and adding a sound file. The idea of the seeming indifference of an animated camera here is related to the totality of all existing CCTV cameras. We are inevitably related to the forces of CCTV, and choosing such footage rather than creating one's own is a way of redirecting their forces. The chosen footage shows divers cleaning a sea aquarium, and the marine animals surrounding them. Some of the fish seem to be interested in the divers and their activities. It is a typical overview perspective from a top corner of a room, and the image quality is poor. From the inside of the aquarium, the empty visitor space in front of it is illuminated through the water. Suddenly a child approaches the aquarium from the bottom left of the image, puts their hands on the glass and stares inside. What is the child looking at: the animals, the divers or both? We suspect that for the child the animal–human differentiation is not yet intelligible. The film uses our capability to compassionately identify with the child's position. Therefore, the film's method can be described as a way of regressing to originality by passionately regaining a juvenile position and perspective.

Some of the students courageously produced material during their struggle with the brief, and the theoretical, political and ethical postulations it put forward. The result of one student's work first showed his younger brother with his camera and his dog in a car, enwrapping the image in a theoretical explanatory narrative by the author, thus taking the assignment far too literally. This student managed to free himself from his own biases through a radical re-edit of the filmed material. Footage of the barking dog in the car was slowed down to such a degree that it became impossible for us to distinguish the sound from an accordingly decelerated recording of the human voice: as if the dog were speaking. The student filmed this footage from his computer screen, thus creating an operative distance from the dog that invites further questioning of the relation between the subject-viewer and the animal.

The variety of strategies at work in the responses – choice of productive context, animal as support of camera, working with existing or found footage, post-production (or avoidance thereof), automatic recording and so on – and the respective outcomes add to the research project in furthering our understanding of what defines decolonial approaches, and how they enable certain epistemic shifts through which we can look at and think about the world anew.

Giving up 'I think that…'

All the students managed to work with apparatuses of image production in a way that turned them against themselves. The cameras did not just show images as if they existed outside of the camera's own contingent reality. Rather, the cameras functioned as transmitters of forces because they were set in a very specific context, because they were mounted on a dog's neck, because their images were used in poetic ways or edited to do something else.

Under such circumstances, the experience of teaching the workshop was one of mutual and persisting destabilisation. I realised how hard it was to explain the task, but I also realised that it was not a question of explaining the task better. Rather, my own task was to bear the struggles that the students had with the task, and thus to support them. This 'bearing' took different forms: providing ourselves with detailed insights about our work and background; close readings of provided referential texts – for example, Rogoff's (2013) text on the concept 'curatorial', or Cammaer et al.'s (2018) text on the crisis of documentary media; watching and experiencing Michael Snow's film *La région centrale* (1971) at the cinema together. More than transfers of knowledge, these were common experiences that worked as practices of *collaborative education*. How the research project was taken to the classroom, and how the students responded to the brief, both refrained from simply driving home an argument, but instead attempted to make the absence of specific knowledge(s) sensible.

I am taking this as evidence of what Rogoff (2013: 45) claims to be 'a question of sacrifice, of giving up a way of thinking', when we bring resources into communication in such a way that they allow us to find new ways of knowing. Tentatively, this might be understood as a decolonial method that goes beyond critique and creativity. The precise forms in which the final works of the students manifested themselves were secondary to the fact that the students had liberated themselves from non-scrutinised presumptions.

Decay of disciplines and documental knowledge

These epistemic shifts require testing regarding their capacity for turning the (potentially) intrusive apparatus of education against itself. When we bring practice to the classroom, entering the realm of education, it does not free us from the premises we have defined for our research and work, that is, in the film industry. Education cannot absolve itself from furthering the shift from representation to investigation. Although protected, the realm of education only provides another realisation of these epistemological premises.

The work with students creates a reflective condition. The relation between teacher and student is paralleled with the relation between the conglomerate of the teacher–student collective and the

educational object. Regarding decoloniality and the undoing of occupying settler moves, the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student must be questioned from the start. The calibration of methods with regard to the object provides consideration of the possibilities of decoloniality, which thus becomes indispensable and may divert education in unexpected directions.

So, we learn about decoloniality by teaching decoloniality, and by practising and testing decolonial methods in the classroom, that is, teaching decoloniality in decolonial ways. We learn about our practice and research, as well as about teaching.

Regarding future assignments in educational contexts, it is worthwhile taking the brief as a model to consider what has *not* been done in *teaching* when compared with the tasks given to the students. The students were challenged with a doubling-up of the filming project by a reflective addition and behind-the-scenes film. The teaching, in contrast, focused on teaching alone, without adding a reflective layer to it, at least not explicitly. Certainly, it can be said that some reflected and reflective methodologies were in place. For instance, the discussion of the submitted work was formalised and reduced to the categories of 'questions' and 'observations'; or, to put it from an opposed point of view, 'suggestions' were excluded from the repertoire of possible responses because we felt that they were part of an intrusive apparatus. The students should be provided with a set of statements that would only reflect their work, without suggesting possible alterations, and thus they would be able to draw from it for finding their own ways of reworking their projects. Another methodology drawn directly from education in the visual arts consists in being present, rather than providing immediate answers. The lack of answers opens a *space for study* – a truly open space for study as a collective undertaking, and as a way of witnessing and giving account of oneself.

However, to ensure the collectivity of this study space, it might be helpful to double-up the teaching assignment as well, to equip it with a parallel task of producing a behind-the-scenes film, of documenting the documental approach. Bringing the documental to the fore of educational methodologies would simultaneously bring to the fore the notion of the 'witness', which is so central to documentary practice.

A voiding conclusion

As for myself, I can say that everything I am writing here would not have been possible had I not resisted the temptations of providing answers. The brief mainly put on the table my own research, its questions and its methods, including all lack and contradictions making it perform as an invitation to join practice. Apart from some clarifications, the students were forced to make this practice their own – or to propose a counter-thesis.

With a view to the decay of disciplines, concomitant with the dominance of neoliberal governance, we may conclude that the lack of borders and infrastructure enables a non-exclusive approach to both documentary practice and film education. If, according to Rancière, the borders between disciplines depend on separating 'those who are supposed to be human speaking beings from those who are supposed to be noisy animals' (Sternad, 2016: 208), then the lack of borders separating disciplines may enable a new way of looking at 'animals'.

Precisely this lack makes the ethos of a certain practice intelligible. We undergo a shift from disciplines such as documentary film (or architecture, curating, art practice and so on) to the epistemic specificities and potentials rooted in, or attached to, the respective ways of doing: the documental, the architectural, the curatorial, the artistic and so on. So, it is not a question of a disappearance of the disciplines; only their borders blur and make collective epistemic practice possible. At the core of such practice is never the production of this or that. Epistemic practice makes the absence of knowledges sensible, that is, a documental knowledge that enables ways of knowing animals as witnessing, thus unknowing our ways of making animals intelligible through gestures of insertion into colonising spaces – including documentary films.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

Au hasard Balthazar (FR/SE 1966, Robert Bresson)
La région centrale (CA 1971, Michael Snow)
Unoccupied Territories (part one): and here I am (CH 2021, Ronny Hardliz)

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