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WRITING & EXPERIMENT: THE VIDEO ESSAY AS CREATIVE PRACTICE

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The video essays contributed here from University College Cork (UCC) in Ireland, came out of a class called *Writing & Experiment*, part of our Masters programme in Creative Writing in the School of English. This course is a laboratory of expanded poetics. It asks questions about the multiple ways in which writers and artists work with visual and digital cultures, embodiment, voice, performance, sound, video and architecture. Most of the writers who take this class have little or no experience of such experimental transdisciplinary practices. For many, the introduction to embodied practices, collaborations with architects, and an assignment to make a video essay, moved them into uncomfortable ground. But often, such profound questions about form and meaning, produced thoughtful, vigorous and engaged work, which re-worked territories of practice in relation to creative writing. On the whole, these are writers more at home writing fiction, memoir or poetry. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the students who take this class, learn powerful things about their ability to collaborate, about the impact of listening to one's body, about the aching potential of their writing in the space of the moving and still image. Hearing their writing spoken, speaking it themselves, or gifting it to others, is a wonder. Bookish writing (as opposed to writing for theatre, film or TV) is a genre of paper and screen, and giving it aural presence, brings it into the world in a shockingly different way. Vicki Callahan was a Fulbright Scholar at UCC during the Autumn Semester 2015. She was a wonderfully enabling, positive presence, and came into this class to introduce digital editing, and talk about the kinds of work she did with her students at USC. In particular, she introduced the idea of the MEmorial, after Gregory Ulmer. [1]

They looked with the eyes of writers. They wound narratives from found things, but listened to their beating hearts. And when the images moved, so their writing did too, meeting its layers and grammar with their own.

My students did not spend their semester researching digital media, the moving image or editing techniques. Nor did they have a grounding in the idea of the video essay or multimedia-based scholarship, before we introduced their final project. Does this matter in relation to the work they produced? How does this work compare to those students who were embedded within discourses of digital scholarship in their graduate classes? I train artists across disciplines in the process of making creative work. I have a particular interest in interdisciplinarity, and whilst this includes the disciplines of theory and criticism, this was not the focus of my *Writing and Experiment* class. This is relevant, because whilst we did read some critical essays, the focus was on making practical work, anchored in creative writing and meeting other arts disciplines. Laura Rascaroli suggests the essay film might best be defined by its *reflectivity* and *subjectivity*, as well as its *heresy* and *openness*, with a particular emphasis on the first person, – the single authorial voice.[2] In such broad brush strokes, the writing and making of creative work in different arts disciplines, does not seem so profoundly different to the film essay. The idea of using the video form to propose an argument is a claiming of the space between arts practice (in this case film) and written theory. The specific version of this proposed by Ulmer (the MEmorial), and introduced by Vicki Callahan in my class, grounds these general categories into the specific call to make something in a multimedia form, which asks the individual student to locate her / himself in relation to a broader political / social issue. We offer three examples from this class here as a way to tangle thought between and through disciplines, and as a way to listen/view/experience the specific performances they compose, but also to ask broader questions about creative composition and the positionality of the artist / activist in the contemporary world.

The three students whose work is represented here, had not worked with editing moving image/sound before taking my class. Beth Buchanan, Tadhg Coakley and Rosi Lalor made MEmorials that, I felt, engaged with the form of the video essay and the specific example of Ulmer's MEmorial, in ways which were distinctively creative and provocative. The MEmorial

is a form which eschews the general and anonymous, for the specific and engaging. In their creative writing practice, Coakley and Buchanan work primarily in fiction and memoir, and Lalor in poetry. They are a mix of nationalities (one Irish, one North American, one British). Despite these differences, all three video essays are powerfully personal, documenting and evoking (respectively) the wonder of the moment; the repression of women within organized religion; and what it is like to be a highly sensitive person. Only Coakley writes a text to compose his MEmorial. Buchanan uses a series of provocative questions, which she has written and then recorded herself reading, as one of the spines of her video essay. Lalor's composition is entirely composed from personal and found video footage, and the texts within it comprise her 'writing'. Lalor is a poet, and the ways in which she edits this piece, and uses her own body performatively within it functions, I believe, as a poetic structure. The agendas proposed here are emotive, heartfelt, even whilst they differ in form and tone. Gaining technical fluency quickly was a challenge for most students in this class. We learnt a new language of 'ripping' audio or video from other sources (with citation), as a compositional tool. And whilst this was new for most students, composing creatively was not. These video essay compositions are made particular by their use of first person text, spoken or on-screen (Buchanan and Coakley), and by the use of their own body in moving image (Lalor). The written and visual texts which engage the personal body in discourse, combined with found/ composed moving and still images, comprised video essays which had a distinctive poetic (Coakley and Lalor) or declamatory gesture (Buchanan). In the second part of this essay, I offer a closer analysis of each of the video essays.

***MEmorial to the Moment*, by Tadhg Coakley**

Tadhg Coakley's four minute *MEmorial to the Moment* is both a *description* of appreciating the everyday wonder of ordinary moments, as well as an *enactment* of doing so. In this sense it is *performative*; it does something at the same time as speaking about the need to do it. [3] This performativity is part of why the video essay is so moving – it's because it takes us through a process of taking time to pay attention to the ordinary, as well as describing the need to do so. Coakley does this through two distinct registers – his introduction, which is a written voiceover spoken by himself, overlaid on found video footage of a robin singing. The song of the robin is a central motif in his written/spoken

introduction. At this point, the entwined sound is just the narrative voice and the robin's song. As we shift to the main part of the MEmorial, Coakley brings in piano music, and shifts the image to stills, overlaid with short written texts. He orchestrates the simple structure of still image, music and fading up and away of written text with care and gentleness, and the result is a haunting, moving composition. The lyricism of the music allows images of the everyday (taken by Coakley) and his simple phrases to 'float'; it emotionally elaborates the text/image juxtaposition. Coakley's choice of phrases were edited down in the process of making this work, where he learnt by a process of trial and error that complex sentences overwhelmed the screen space, and did not allow for the careful collaboration of still image, music and text. What he has composed allows breathing space and time for us to enter into its contemplative space. It is understated but profound. As Tadhg noted in a commentary on our collaborative work site for *The Ciné-Files* project:

> I had initially written a script for the images that was longer: (To nasturtiums in Winter, against the white wall by my garden. To sunlight through my bathroom window in the morning, on the folds of a towel, transforming it into a beggar's cloak in a Caravaggio painting). But when I saw the result I knew that it was wrong: the text was dominating the screen, rushing the eye, detracting from the emotional impact of the photos and music and disturbing the slow contemplative rhythm of being in the moment that I was seeking.

Interestingly, Tadgh's original focus for his MEmorial was climate change, that great gape of a huge political and social agenda. He was eventually too overwhelmed to make something that met this in a few minutes of video essay, and so chose to focus on the moment instead. [4]

***Be Brave*, by Beth Buchanan**

Beth Buchanan's video essay *Be Brave* is a critique of women's role within religious practices and is the most overtly political of the three works from UCC. It's also the one which makes the most extensive use of found footage. *Be Brave* begins with a video clip of a baby laughing. We won't know until the end of the piece, that this is Buchanan's niece, and

regardless, this baby's chuckle is so earthy, spontaneous and embodied, it's hard not to smile when you hear/see it. We start with pleasure. This is followed by another little girl, this time a toddler, turning the pages of a Bible, pretending to read its pages, whilst a cat settles its hindquarters close by. These are intimate, domestic and relaxed images of young female children. Gradually, Buchanan layers an audio design on top of these images. The clip of the baby ends with a surprising, but still gentle 'shh!' In this juxtaposition of personal memoir clip and the act of silencing, Buchanan performs her critique as a repression of bodily female pleasure – of joy. The clip of the child reading the big Bible, speaking a repetitive echolalia, performs reading without reading, but prefigures the authority of religious written text over female bodies – something we'll return to later. The Bible is partly on the cat's rear quarters, as it shifts about to settle to sleep, and the little girl plays at reading the big book, a project she will always (symbolically) fail at, but in such resistant reading, there is also pleasure as well as a snuggling cat. [5] These first two images inscribe femininity as joy, as relaxed and playful. They prefigure adulthood, and public spaces (in this context) of religious exclusion. The jouissance and intelligence in these opening images, shift then into another image of a young child, this time in a public space, on a stage preaching. She repeats 'just praise the word of God' in verbal language that's difficult to understand, but luckily there are subtitles. It's darling as well as unsettling, and such concern is elaborated in the gathering sound world, whose hushings and shushes are increasing. After the triplet of clips of young female children, we shift to the second section of the piece – a series of clips from the Irish poet Elaine Feeney performing her poem *Mass*, combined with still images on a religious theme with voiceovers of questions written and performed by Buchanan. This forms a distinct section of the video essay. The inclusion of this young female Irish poet, and specifically the poet performing her own words, inflects the MEmorial with the specificity of Buchanan's current context – Ireland, and Catholicism in particular. Elaine Feeney is a secular poet, known for the powerful performances of her work, as well as her published poetry. *Mass* is a satiric critique of the Catholic mass and its place in Irish culture. Whilst Ireland is rapidly secularizing, it remains a recovering Catholic theocracy, in which women have a minor role, except as worshippers. Feeney's critique is written as well as performed; there is a mass for everything, as if the Catholic mass is Ireland's salve for all eventualities. Feeney's poem is an ironic litany, an endless repetition of what there will be a mass for. Her performance of this poem is urgent, immediate, even angry. It echoes the

repetition of the sacrament in religious ceremony, here specifically the Catholic catechism. Interestingly, Buchanan, whose religious faith is important to her, chooses this poem, not because it critiques religion, but because it critiques women's exclusion from religion. She makes Feeney's critique personal by splicing the iconography of women and religion, with questions about the place of women in religion; 'Is the only way I can be good is by becoming a virgin mother?; 'Why do you think me unclean?'; 'What made me unworthy?' Towards the end of this section, another voice is added to the soundworld – a voice which says 'shame'. As the first clips of men enter the ME-morial, they voice the embedded nature of religious misogyny – of the Bible's call for women's silence, of men's apparently God-given right to be leaders. The sound world also escalates, a bell calling time, and the sound of chains are added to hushings and cries of 'shame!' Buchanan continues to ask questions in voiceover 'How do I know what God is calling me to do?' As the soundworld crescendos, a mature woman – Sister Marlene, says "The bishops were surprised that we would not agree with them, and that we would not be obedient to their analysis." Over this and partly obscuring it, Buchanan asks 'Why do you ask for my advice, but ignore what I have to say?' This interplay of found video, voiceover, and accumulative soundworld comprises a specific performative dialectics in this MEmorial. The authorial interrogative motif forms the video essay's spine, and here at its peak, there are on-screen written questions which join other questions lost in the sonic cacophony. Other video clips of diverse women preaching – an African American female priest dancing her worship, a Caucasian tattooed woman miked-up near a pulpit. Men start shouting, Beth's questions are drowned; she performs silencing. There is an image of a woman in what looks like a hijab, which suggests the the Islamic faith. There is a breath in the middle of the video essay as the sound of a door slams, the sonic cacophony ceases, and the screen goes white. The tone of the MEmorial changes, and what follows is a clip from a documentary about Malala Yousafzai, the teenage activist for education, famously shot in the head for her work. Yousafzai is counterpointed by three tween vloggers encouraging girls to 'be yourself!'; 'Live your own life!'; Never forget your dream!', before we return to a clip of another mature woman finishing a public speech: 'So somehow our church has to find a way to go beyond the rhetoric (sorry Michael I'm nearly done), and to find ways of giving women a real voice and role, and here's a few suggestions . . .' But she is cut, and so we never hear. Instead we reach the video essay's conclusion as Sara Bareille's feelgood ballad *Brave* swells above images of women demonstrating, of

Bareille playing the piano and singing, ending finally with the image of the baby we began with, and the words 'For my niece, Clara.' This MEmorial packs a lot into a few minutes. This MEmorial sweeps up emotion and analysis in the weaving of questions about why women are so often excluded from the church. Intelligently and sensitively composed, from a baby's chuckle to the understated 'shh!' *Be Brave* allows the viewer to shift from the enchantment, of the intimate and individual, to the wider world. The political point about the silencing of women is made performatively through this deceptively simple technique. The video essay stages what it means to silence female voices – a closing down of joy, intelligence, verve and sorrow. The careful audio editing of a looped 'shame', combined with the bell calling time, works metonymically to punctuate the narrative with a layer of name-calling and temporal urgency. Combining video footage of the church performing its power in relation to women, with her own voiced questions, Buchanan braids her voice with the others we hear. The rising tumult of this audio, which transitions into what sounds like a riot, leads into the big tone shift at three mins. This is structurally interesting, and the final section works as an inspirational medley of affirmation, starting with the juxtaposition of Malala Yousafzai and tween vloggers.

***Highly Sensitive People* by Rosi Lalor**

Rosi Lalor's *Highly Sensitive People* begins with a home video of children playing, peering closely into the camera's eye, overlaid with a voice explaining the characteristics of highly sensitive people, and then illustrated by a baby crying ('we cry easily'), lonesome looking monkeys, a film clip of more peering close ups from *Jaws*, and another home video clip of a small boy singing about animals, and then realising they die when you eat them. The titling of the MEmorial comes in here, with an elaboration – *Highly Sensitive People – Our Gifts, And Challenges*. This combination of domestic home video, with its playfulness or blurry qualities, and extracts from professional films, makes the beginning of this video essay eclectic but rooted in the personal. This introduction also acts as prelude to the first footage of Lalor's 'selfie' video of her walking in the park, making faces, as the narrative voice continues, and another layer of song comes in. This isn't obvious to anyone who doesn't know Lalor's songwriting/performance, but this is also Lalor, and so she arrives in the MEmorial with a curious visual performance of gentle gurning, and the lyrical ache of her

song. Her visual performance here is gentle and humorous, a sort of 'goodness! There's nothing I can do about being highly sensitive, but it sometimes sucks.' Another narrative voice joins the explanation, as a rapid tumble of stills of rain on car windows accompanying the phrase 'things can get really jammed up, how do you undo your patterns?' More clips from film and television show scenes of domestic upset, the back of a breathing body. 'Part of the process is to accept those feelings' as we move to footage of Lalor's own drawings /writing, and a memoir clip of her playing with a small boy. 'And we all know as sensitive people that there is energy that is taken up by being so observant and processing everything so deeply.' Here Lalor returns with another selfie video, this time a close up of her face, sometimes with lipstick, sometimes not. She tilts her head from side to side, moves her eyes simply from left to right, in a curious, understated performance. This is followed by another collection of mostly personal and amateur video clips. Images of water echo the narrative voice talking about embodiment and water. The continuity of Lalor's haunting song is also fluid, as it gives the MEmorial an aural space of gentle yearning amidst images of watery things – Lalor pouring water on children in a paddling pool, a man walking behind a waterfall, oil floating on water.

This MEmorial is a gentle and intelligent composition about what it's like to be a highly sensitive person. Its lyricism is tempered with Lalor's understated, humorous presence in the work, and its tone is both haunting and endearing. For a project which is about a powerfully personal trait, it's remarkably without ego. Lalor makes a work which dramatises her own experience, through quirky camera shots of herself which puncture the self-consciousness we so often see when women represent themselves on camera. Her use of clips made specifically for this video essay, as well as found clips of herself, tangles time and meaning. She's here making faces, but there she is at her birthday, and there again smiling. She also makes her experience plural by carefully editing found footage from popular culture and domestic video. This combination of visual imagery, the voices of the two women explaining aspects of being highly sensitive, and the song she sings make a touching and original MEmorial. Rosi Lalor is a poet, and its possible to see something of this here, even though none of her poetry is literally present. There is a poetic sensibility to the gentle composition of narrative clips, song and information, made aurally into a single thing by the watery imagery floating on a song called *House of Water*.

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Look away from the printed page, and look back again; the written word remains. There it is, available to visit, to toy with mentally, to read and read again, to re-work, to re-visit, to wonder at its intimacies, its proclamations, its turning ache. I understand the plural possibility of digital text, but I'm talking about the grubbiness of thumbed pages, or the pristine pleasures of the new book, I'm talking about touch. Written poetry, fiction, memoir can sometimes have the presence of affective object. A talisman. Most of the graduate students taking *Writing & Experiment* at UCC in the Fall of 2015, have books as their goal; their own published novels, life writing, poetry. This is important because this kind of writing has a different relationship to time and space than other kinds of writing. Amongst other things, they have physical presence in the world – you can put them on shelves, throw them into bags. Clearly, we can burn moving images onto DVDs and put them on shelves (burning books has a different history), but my point is a different one; writing in the space of the moving image brings words into the temporal logic of performance. I can play, and then re-play. There is a difference between re-read and re-play — something to do with time and performance, and the agency of the reader/viewer. We watch video, we listen, we read. Sometimes we do all three. How does your culture value watching film/TV as opposed to reading a book? Does that tell you anything about this culture? Who makes those judgements? How do *you* value these things? Does it matter? To whom and how? How is meaning made, and how might you make it? These are the kinds of questions we ask in my graduate class, and these are the kinds of questions my students grappled with in the making of their video essays / MEmorials.

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I write this a few days after the UK (the country of my birth) voted to leave the European Union on a surge of anti-immigrant feeling. Hate crime is on the rise on its shores, and the global political map is changing. There was never a more critical time for artists/activists to engage with the world in the first person, to use whatever media necessary to make our voices heard. What I find in these MEmorials is a crafting of emotion into something general and communicable. I find heart, but I also find form which communicates this without resorting to saccharine romanticism. This is work which places thinking emotion at the heart of their message, work which is intelligent about resonance, about time. Work which has learnt quickly about the space of the moving and still image, and the evocative space their

writing might have within it. Digital media is so powerfully the currency of contemporary communication that it is the dominant fluency, a fluency which effects these students' ability to step up and make work within its spaces. For me, these video essays confirm the importance of the form for critical address, but it also reaffirms my belief in the importance of the artist/activist across creative disciplines, and how our media/arts background informs the ways in which we make work, how we compose, communicate and change our world.

Notes

[1] Gregory Ulmer, *Electronic Monuments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 140.

[2] Laura Rascaroli,"The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," *Framework the Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 2 (2008): 34-39.

[3] On the performative see, J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[4] "My initial topic for this video was climate change. I think I understand what Ulmer is about, and the inclination to pick something big was tempting. In fact what I picked, climate change, was too big. Not so much intellectually – it's not difficult to understand mass misery and starvation and despair among the poor and weak of the world, but I couldn't take the emotional impact. The mind can envisage what the soul cannot endure. So after writing my script I scrapped it and went to the other end of the spectrum. From a planet to a microcosm. To those small slow moments that we can miss if we don't pay attention, but when accumulated, can enrich our lives and help us to turn up for them." Tadhg Coakley, cited from the collaborative site used for the video essay class. Accessed 07/01/16/.

[5] I refer here to that body of (mostly French) feminist theory which articulates the textual as a powerfully patriarchal construct, which 'she' cannot enter into, because it cannot articulate her profound alterity. It also suggests the revolutionary potential for a *feminine writing* ('l'ecriture feminine'); writing oriented around a different paradigm, that might resist / re-work / re-articulate female pleasure and embodiment as powerful intelligence, and whose registers are poetic, political, and inspirational. For more on feminine writing,

see Hélène Cixous, *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron [Brighton: Harvester. 1981 (1975)]; Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1986); Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 1986); Ruth Salvaggio. *The Sounds of Feminist Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

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