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Young (Woman) Filmmaker(s)

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This 9 minute and 28 second video essay, prepared for the conference 'Teaching Women's Filmmaking,' takes a literal approach to the conference theme. Using the film *The Souvenir* (Joanna Hogg, 2019) as an inspiration, the video essay explores the unexpected generational overlaps between learning to become a filmmaker as a young woman and then later teaching young women filmmakers in the university classroom. This personal video essay explores the process of becoming a film director through learning and teaching by valuing a pedagogy of, in Hogg's words, 'one's own breath.'

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Research Statement

This video essay, prepared for the conference “Teaching Women’s Filmmaking,” takes a literal approach to the conference theme. Using the film *The Souvenir* (Joanna Hogg, 2019) as a palimpsest, the video explores a young woman in the process of becoming a film director. Inspired by Hogg’s own experience in film school, the video essay filmmaker, Katie Bird, uses *The Souvenir*, “Caprice” (Hogg’s student film from 1986), and *The Souvenir*’s making-of documentary to explore Bird’s own experiences as a young woman student filmmaker in the early 2000s. The collage of first-person accounts, written visually and sonically over one another, produces a series of questions about how these encounters with one’s own past and present creative work-flow allow for another approach to teaching not just women’s filmmaking, but the next generation of women filmmakers. Using Hogg’s own emphasis on uncertainty, discomfort, and learning (as a kind of a breath), the video essay celebrates the creative possibilities in returning to the mindset of a “young (woman) filmmaker” at any age.

The video essay interrogates what the filmmaking process means to women and why aspects of hesitancy and sincerity should be given equal weight as confidence and charisma. Rather than proficiency or expertise, the film *The Souvenir* emphasizes learning through mistakes, this video essay thinks about how young filmmakers learn through comparing their own experiences to the experiences they are trying to film, to learn through the art of messy copying. Rather than making nearby, this video essay use *The Souvenir* to make again.

Background and Context: *The Personal and the Institutional*

I take from Joanna Hogg's 2019 film *The Souvenir* a depiction of the young woman filmmaker, Julie (the film's protagonist played by Honor Swinton Byrne) who is caught up in the process of becoming both an adult and a filmmaker. The primary plot of the film centers around Julie's failed romance and a lover's tragic death due to complications from drug addiction. But it wasn't until I read Rebecca Mead's profile of Hogg in *The New Yorker* (2019) after I watched the film that I learned that *The Souvenir* is a biographical reimagining of Hogg's own life during her time as a young film student. This detail has now been well-documented in the literature on Hogg and reinforced in Hogg's sequel *The Souvenir: Part II*.¹ I wanted to see *The Souvenir* as a film within a film composed of the rare and discrete scenes of Julie alone, Julie at film school, and Julie working on her films (which is about 35 minutes of the film's runtime). By refocusing my attention on these moments, I was able to flesh out how much of Julie's discomfort is also Hogg's tenderness towards her former self. The post-card isn't the film's only souvenir: the diegesis is populated with Hogg's own apartment memorabilia, film equipment, and most notably her own student film projects and photographs from that period (the early 1980s). Seeing so much of Hogg's literal stuff, her material emotional baggage from that crucial time, allowed me to confront my own perceived failures or missteps as a student filmmaker with a renewed kindness. In subsequent re-watchings, dissected intimately within the timeline of video editing software, I came to see Julie as a young woman trying to figure out her life, her desires, her creative voice. I saw Julie as I saw myself as a filmmaking student and as I now, a filmmaking teacher, perceive students in my film classes.

Like Julie, I attended a film school where the production classes were almost exclusively taught by men and the majority of production students, particularly in the technical classes, were men. I learned much earlier how to nod, smile, and listen, than I did how and when to assert myself on-set. Collaborations were often uncomfortable, as I felt uncertain in the knowledge of what I had to offer others. Only years later, upon having lunch with a former classmate, did I realize how infrequently the women in our classes spoke to each other, how rarely we learned from other women filmmakers as teachers, and how few films we studied were made by women. The collective arguments about filmmaking, so often celebrated by women filmmakers outside of mainstream industrial film production was not part and partial to my education, nor does it seem was it integral to Julie's.

The video essay was not designed to explore these concepts sociologically, but rather observationally, reflecting on the ambient pedagogies of filmmaking I experienced and

¹ *The Souvenir II* (Joanna Hogg, 2021) is not referenced in this video essay or research statement as it was not in wide theatrical release in the US as of this writing.

those in the background of *The Souvenir*, as well as my students' loose understandings of how pedagogy informs their own filmmaking educations. My own experiences, while anecdotal, do echo much of the academic research on teaching women filmmakers in the classroom by Miranda Banks (2019) and Mary Celeste Kearney (2018). The pressure of gendered stereotypes often fuels a 'reticence' about equipment learning: as filmmaking professors Jennifer Proctor, River E. Branch, and Kyja Kristjansson-Nelson (2011) explained, 'Women students often hang back during technical demonstrations. Men actively take the opportunity to experiment with equipment while women remain observers on the sidelines.' Student filmmakers are also more regularly taught by white male professors than by women or male filmmakers of color. This imbalance can mirror sexist environments within the industry at large and discourage student filmmaking projects perceived as feminized; Kearney (2017) demonstrates this in more recent film classrooms, where 'examples of sexism on the part of male instructors include not believing women are knowledgeable or strong enough to use filmmaking equipment; dismissing female-authored or female-centered stories; and engaging in harassing comments or behavior.'

Looking back on the same period of film instruction that Joanna Hogg might have experienced as a film student, Michelle Citron and Ellen Seiter (1981) describe the production classroom as 'a learning environment generally hostile to women,' and they note how frequently women dropped out of film courses or never enrolled. These figures were the result of both a lack of women role models presented to students in film classes and the sexist nature of the industrial production hierarchies that were often reproduced in the classroom. Teaching female student filmmakers in the 1980s, according to Alexis Krasilovsky (1991), often required 'incorporating assertiveness techniques training' into the curriculum, and Krasilovsky further observes that 'female students who choose to work with other females or in mixed groups fare much better' than women working with entirely male crews. During my time in film school in Los Angeles in the early 2000s, these imbalances and erasures were status quo (a reflection of the nearby Hollywood film industry), and as a student I did not speculate on my gendered position within those spaces.

Only now in my role as a film studies and filmmaking educator, nearly 20 years later, do I recognize that Julie's isolation in *The Souvenir* is both structural and self-imposed. I have taught *The Souvenir* in my Women and Film course at The University of Texas at El Paso, where the women I teach don't necessarily see themselves in this main character: Julie is white, wealthy, privileged, and from a different country, culture, and time. Most of my students at our public, open-enrollment, Hispanic Serving Institution on the US-Mexico border self-identify as Chicana/o/Latinx/Mexican and about half are the first of their family to attend college or university. Very few main characters in US-based film and television are Latinx or Chicanx, and students often express frustration in general

about finding mainstream stories that reflect their everyday lives (Case et al., 2021). This lack of personal connection often encourages students to tell more personal and regionally specific stories in their own filmmaking, as Olivia Anne González has pointed out in their survey of filmmaking students: ‘Women of color, multiracial women, men of color, and white women—while possessing different levels of power and privilege—all expressed a desire to tell stories that explore and celebrate the experiences of their families, communities, or cultures, and challenge dominant narratives.’ (2020) There’s a lot of distance between Julie and a student in my courses, but in Hogg’s protagonist I still see many aspects of my students’ eagerness and desire to ‘tell their own stories’ or share their own perspectives. It’s with this renewed eye as a student filmmaker, seeking the personal through the copy, that I set out to make—with *The Souvenir*.

Method: “Breathing-With”

Early in the video essay, a piece of dialogue (a male filmmaking instructor speaking to Julie) is faded out, just as my voiceover fades in, transforming his advice into my own: “The most important thing, about learning in this situation is that you somehow make a connection between your experience and the experience you’re trying to film.”

While many video essays use videographic tools to better make sense of or to understand the source text in new ways (a videographic film analysis), this video essay takes creative liberties with *The Souvenir*: to connect my own experience to the experience I’m trying to make a video essay about. I intentionally read myself into and out of *The Souvenir*, extracting only those parts about production where I saw myself and my students reflected. I have chosen to erase parts of the texts superimposing its images with my own narrative, and to interweave its scenes of instruction with insights from my own classroom. I effaced seemingly crucial aspects of the film’s narrative by cropping and editing out—a lover, his guidance, his violence, her grief—to repurpose the raw materials of making and uncertainty in a radical way, to tell a different narrative using only these parts: a partial selection of Julie alone. To make the footage my own, to show what I feel when replaying the film through video editing, also centered the concept of filmmaking in my investigation. Julie’s creative trajectory is guided by her male mentors (as already highlighted in Feride Çiçekoğlu, Melisa Önel, Colleen Kennedy-Karpat & Fetullah Solhan’s video essay in this issue) and she is uneasy as a lone filmmaker in a creative practice that requires collaborations. But rather than explain away the source of Julie’s hesitancy, this video essay takes this discomfort (whether making as a student, revisiting one’s past through art, and learning new creative tools) as its central methodology. To make with the fear that one might be exposed, or found wanting. To wear earnestness on one’s sleeve.

I use the personal form of the video essay as a process methodology, augmenting what Catherine Grant has called “material thinking” (2014), into a feminist practice through my diaristic address. Rather than demonstrate expertise, I use the videographic as a space to work within my own hesitations and uncertainties about watching young women’s filmmaking as spectator and a teacher, to admit to my own messy process of learning (still) as a filmmaker and a student. Working explicitly with an all too personal approach is also an acceptance that taking up space in creative environments designed without women in mind can open up a particular form of vulnerability. Rather than treat this feminized cautiousness and hedging as a sign of weakness or a failure, I ask how such an approach allows for a different kind of artistic attention to one’s own body.

My methodology in making this video essay brings together two through lines. First, Hogg’s own words: “I’m still learning to breathe within cinema. And within *my* cinema, to let my work be hyperconnected to my own rhythms. My own breath” (Goi 2020). And, secondly, the male filmmaker Patrick’s advice in *The Souvenir* (played by Richard Ayoade), that filmmaking, like breathing, can’t be taught. In the video essay, learning how to breathe as a metaphor for embodied creative practice informs how I use voiceover to narrate ‘thinking with’ *The Souvenir* and how I propose reimagining my own ways of teaching women’s film and women filmmakers. Despite contemporary assumptions about accessibility to technology, many young filmmakers across gender identities don’t come ‘naturally’ to the camera or editing software. Rather, it is self-identified women and nonbinary filmmakers who are most readily able to admit the discomforts of learning to conform their limbs, breath, and movement to filmmaking apparatuses. They recognize that filmmaking technologies are something you need to train your body to breathe with, a foreign appendage that needs time to wear in. Yet many of the tools, techniques, and systems for teaching student filmmakers treat the process as something that should just ‘come to you,’ and not, as Hogg explains, something you’ll need to *learn* ‘how to breathe with,’ how to get comfortable in your own body and its orientation to the camera, to the editing tools, to the space of a film set. If filmmaking, like breathing, should come naturally or not at all (according to character of Patrick), what then is the value on insisting, like Hogg, that one finds their own breath or their own mode of breathing through cinema? Beyond splitting linguistic hairs, understanding breath as practiced primarily within one’s own body is also about developing a praxis of one’s own work, finding the rhythms and cadences of one’s own creative inhales and exhales. Learning to become a filmmaker is about learning how to become “natural,” not as an artist, but to become able to discover over time what’s intuitive to one’s own practice.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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