

From reality to form: a genealogy of film diaries and video diaries



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Media Arts and Communication

— Abstract

This thesis explores the narrative, aesthetics, and technological qualities of autobiographical diaries in cinema. Tackling the lack of comprehensive historical research on this topic that goes back to the early years of film, I aim to conduct a genealogical study of ideas and practices that fostered the origins of this diaristic form. Based on this knowledge, I also intend to trace a cohesive set of characteristics for it by analyzing and comparing films of this nature created before and after the 1960s, considering this decade a turning point for diaristic filmmaking. To realize these objectives, I will conduct a historical review that seeks the precise moment of the emergence of a film mode that resembles the literary diary to understand how this transition happened and the technological and aesthetic paradigms of the time. In parallel, I will investigate how cinema's evolution led to an (audio)visual language that operates as the written one and, thus, created the conditions for making diaries in this medium. The driving force of this discussion is the montage, supported by the theoretical review of authors whose

proposals for cinematic writing can relate to the technical and narrative logic of film diaries — namely, Dziga Vertov, André Bazin, Alexandre Astruc, and Hollis Frampton. The following step is a literature review of film and video diaries so I can elaborate on previous definitions by connecting other perspectives within this thesis domain, such as enunciation, point of view, and the relationship between memory and vernacular imagery — allowing me to elucidate how subjective and objective space-time intertwine in this form of diary. Finally, I will draw on the two modes of audiovisual diaries proposed by Lee (2015) — perceptual and retrospective — to conduct a narrative and visual analysis of a corpus of films that span decades of cinema history before its formal recognition in the 1960s, as well as promote a comparative analysis between them and well-known film and video diaries. The expected outcome of this thesis is to both expand the domain of film and video diaries and provide coherent theoretical principles that can underline further investigations.

Research questions

Is there a correlation between the adaptation of the literary diary to cinema and the evolution of film technology as a means of writing?

What narrative modes allow to embody the filmmaker's subjectivity in visual diaries?

How does montage articulate the perceptual and retrospective forms of diaristic filmmaking: by creating or restoring reality?

What are the aesthetic effects of vernacular narrative imagery in film and video diaries?

What films pioneered the diary form popularized in the 1960s?

What apparatus, theories, and practices fostered the development of autobiographical diaries as a particular form in cinema?

— Methodology

The thesis is a theory-based, qualitative, and exploratory investigation. The first section consists of a bibliographical review of the montage paradigms in cinema history, so to lay the basis for a technological perspective on film diaries. The review also includes concepts of literary diary, memory, vernacular imagery, enunciation, and point of view — which allows connecting the apparatus of diaristic filmmaking with narrative structure and aesthetic effects. Next, a literature review of film and video diaries research will be combined with the previous theoretical assertions to outline a set of characteristics for this mode of cinema. Those will be used as categories to conduct a visual and narrative analysis of films produced before the 1960s that may be considered precursors of the diary form. Finally, a comparative analysis between this corpus and selected film/video diaries after the 1960s will allow drawing an evolutionary line that illustrates this genealogical investigation.

— Contributions

1. Outline the history of film diaries and video diaries, as well as identify a group of characteristics that allow considering them a specific and cohesive form of expression in cinema.
2. Expand the discussion around the comparison between cinema and the written language, as Vertov, Bazin, Astruc, and Frampton envisioned.
3. Offer a solid theoretical basis for future investigations about the evolution and adaptation of diaries to new social phenomena and technological tools.
4. Further proposals that require critical and theoretical revision — such as the horizontal montage, defined by Bazin, the little-explored essays of Frampton, or the concept of vernacular cinema.

Lee, Ming-Yu (2015) *Diary film in America and in Taiwan: narrative, temporality, and changing technology*. PhD thesis, University of Glasgow.



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