

CHAPTER 6 –THE FUTURE OF FILM AND VIDEO PRODUCTION IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

Now that I've provided an in-depth look at the various approaches to making moving images that count as scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition and at how feminist filmmaking enriches our practices, I wanted to share the story of my own filmmaking journey to provide an example of one of the many possible trajectories we can take to becoming lifers and casual offenders.

My first experience with the filmmaking process came during my undergraduate days at Ohio University, where I befriended two Latina filmmakers, Ana Luzardo Flores and Patricia Perez, and acted in some of their films. I was more fascinated by the elaborate and syncopated way in which everyone on set did their job than by the technology, which was utterly over my head. This was the 90s and film students were still using costly 35mm stock, so that even with free crew labor from fellow students and free equipment from the university, short films cost thousands of dollars to complete. I admired my friends' aplomb and pursued an MFA in Creative Writing instead. Still, my husband and I watched thousands of films, all the way from silents to whatever was screening at the theaters each week.

In 2008, during the first semester of my Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition at Purdue, my professor Shirley Rose asked me if I knew what subjects I wanted to study as a rhetorician. I surprised myself when I quickly answered, "Film. I want to study film." She replied something like this: "We're a production field, so if you want to study film, you should make films." I nodded, but all I could think of were those faraway Ohio University film shoots. Weeks later I discussed the possibility with my mentor and future dissertation chair, Patricia Sullivan, who reassured me that I'd be able to make films and videos digitally and put me in touch with her husband, Peter Fadde, who, among other things, teaches film and video production at Southern Illinois University. Peter kindly suggested a camera and tripod for me to purchase. I did so using some of my fellowship funds from Purdue.

I flew to Venezuela, my home country, during Christmas break that year and spent seven days filming 17 women and men as they discussed the Venezuelan middle class's fascination with breast implants. That May, Peter and Pat invited me to audit one of his filmmaking courses at SIU. They not only made it possible for me to audit the course but they found a generous Salvadorian family who let me stay with them for free for the two-week duration of the course. As I worked alongside Peter and his students, I learned that I'd done a lot of things poorly in terms of framing, sound, and lighting. Four of my interviews were so badly shot that I was unable to use them. I managed to rescue the others through Final Cut Pro's editing tricks. The interviews were wonderful, even if the technical aspects were not, and, as I mentioned in earlier chapters, I've been able to use the resulting short documentary,

“PERFECT,” in various ways toward tenure and promotion. I have yet, however, to screen it without apologizing for its technical shortcomings.

Based on my work on “PERFECT,” Cristina Kirklighter invited me to create companion videos to *Listening to Your Elders*, the book project she, Steve Parks, and Samantha Blackmon co-edited about the history of NCTE’s Caucuses. Determined not to repeat the mistakes I’d made with “PERFECT,” I used my newly developed filmmaking expertise at various conferences while interviewing rhetoricians about their involvement in the caucuses. Although better than “PERFECT,” the five resulting short documentaries suffer from sound and lighting issues, in part because of the complications that arise when filming in hotels around rhetoricians’ busy conference schedules and in part because of my limitations as a filmmaker at the time.

I then decided—foolishly—that I was ready for the big leagues and jumped into making *Vanishing Borders*. Working with a crew when I had never been a member of one was a bold, not entirely advisable choice. The shoot was exhausting and chaotic, but as I worked with my crewmembers, I realized the value of feminist filmmaking in relating to not only those in front of the camera, but to those behind it. I developed my version of feminist filmmaking as I navigated making a film under stressful circumstances while aiming to treat everyone in ethical ways and valuing their contribution, which, being an impoverished graduate student, I couldn’t pay for. It was later, through my work on *agnès films*, the site I co-founded supporting women and feminist filmmakers where many of the interviews featured here originated, that I realized that what I did in New York was what my fellow feminist filmmakers had been doing for decades.

It took me five years to complete *Vanishing Borders*. In the meantime I had two children, wrote the dissertation that inspired this video book, and was hired for my job at Michigan State. Not finishing the film sooner bothered me for years, but I’m glad, in spite of all the pain and headaches it caused me, that I set out in blissful ignorance to make a feature documentary in the middle of my Ph.D. The process of making this film helped me experience feminist filmmaking and theorize what it can offer our field.

I’m satisfied with the way *Vanishing Borders* looks, unlike my previous film work, but that’s because I worked with a crew. I want to also create high-quality footage when I’m the one holding the camera. I have spent years fine tuning my filmmaking skills. When my oldest son, William, was born in 2011, I realized that there was no better subject than his ever-changing face. Over four years later, I have two faces my camera follows around. Out of necessity at first, and later out the thrill of working with someone you love, I taught my husband, Nate, cinematography, and he films most of the footage for projects that require that I be on camera. As Nate and I capture our lives, we learn to make the kinds of images we have always

admired by filmmakers like Agnès Varda and Jane Campion. Lately William has developed an interest in capturing images himself. He's already thinking about light and movement. Who knows where someone for whom filmmaking is developing alongside language will go with his moving-image work as he grows older. I can't wait to find out.

Besides working with my husband and children, having a community of filmmakers to collaborate with at Michigan State has made my years behind the camera finally coalesce. From fellow faculty like Peter Johnston, to graduate students like Shewonda Leger, Anne von Petersdorff, and Erin Schaefer, to undergraduates like Lindsey Spitzley, Sarah Shaw, and Olivia Hacker, collaboration has enriched and liberated my film and video production practices. Filmmaker Marie Ullrich writes:

I think we need to help each other. There's this scarcity mentality telling you that if one person succeeds, it takes away from the success *you* could have had ... It's especially dangerous—and maybe even especially alluring—for women, because our opportunities have been so restricted for so long that it might seem ... like we have to distance ourselves from other women because of the scarcity of resources. But that's dangerous thinking and it's bullshit. You can't make a film in a vacuum.

Lifers and casual offenders are also a small group provided with what at times may seem like limited opportunities. However, we, too, cannot make and publish our films and videos in a vacuum. Through mentorship and by practicing the ethics of interdependence with each other, we can transform the field and create new opportunities for everyone.

As my Michigan State mentors and I tried to make sense of what I needed to do in order to get tenure, we decided that in spite of having made *Vanishing Borders*, I should write a book. The fact that *Vanishing Borders* is a general interest—not an academic—documentary, and as such doesn't directly add to the field's knowledge, would have made my tenure case tricky to argue. It took me months to work through my resistance to the idea that the documentary I'd been making for five long years wasn't enough for tenure, especially given the endless hours and learning that had gone into it. Once I came to terms with it, however, I was thankful for the chance to make this video book because it has helped me articulate how my own and my colleagues' moving image work fits into the conversations unfolding in our field today. As those conversations continue and as more and more rhetoricians turn to film and video production, I hope we may begin to consider feature documentaries and other major moving image projects, whose shape we can't yet imagine, as having the same value as a peer-reviewed book.

On the first round of reviews for this video book, one of the reviewers wrote that since other fields have already been working with and theorizing moving images

“perhaps it is rhetoric and composition that is coming late to this party. What, then, will be the fundamental and significant contribution of our field to the scholarly work in these media? Is there something that we can bring to those who have been negotiating film production in other disciplinary domains?” (Review #2). As I read her question I laughed to myself. I have spent a lot of time telling you what film and video production can do for Rhetoric and Composition, but I haven’t explicitly spelled out what Rhetoric and Composition can do for film and video production. Jamie “Skye” Bianco asserts that “video is not an enhancement but a particular form and shape” of rhetoric. How, then, are we playing with this form of rhetoric in order to contribute to the moving image work done in other fields? I have hinted at these contributions, but I wanted to state them here as a way to wrap up the arguments I’ve made throughout this video book:

1. Rhetoricians are willing and eager to make films and videos. Even though we don’t have a large scholarly output yet, lifers like Bonnie Kyburz, Sarah Arroyo, Bahareh Alaei, Jamie “Skye” Bianco, Geoffrey Carter, Robert Leston, Todd Taylor, Bump Halbritter, Jody Shipka, Jacqueline Rhodes, Jonathan Alexander, and myself have published a number of pieces in and about the medium. We’re committed to making it work and I believe our numbers will grow. Whenever I publish or present moving-image work, a number of colleagues—all the way from graduate students to more established scholars—contact me with questions about beginning their own filmmaking journeys. The interest and the willingness to work are there and film and video production by rhetoricians will grow with the proper mentoring from lifers in particular.

2. Rhetoric and Composition is expressly open to pedagogical discussions. Our only two print books on the subject of making moving images, Halbritter’s *Mics, Camera, Symbolic Action* and Arroyo’s *Participatory Composition*, explore pedagogy’s intersections with film and video production. As we continue to theorize how filmmaking helps us teach and learn, our field will bring valuable insight to pedagogical conversations about filmmaking.

3. Rhetoricians have for decades been at the forefront of embracing digital scholarship, and though we haven’t paid as much attention to film and video as we should, we have strong support systems set up for digital scholars. From robust mentorship to using the ethics of interdependence to transform departments into digital-friendly spaces, our field is uniquely positioned to nurture digital production. That willingness to embrace the digital is clear in our publication venues. There are currently eleven online journals based on Rhetoric and Composition where we can submit our film and video work. That number will keep growing. Malea Powell, Cindy Tekobbe, Phil Bratta, and myself are spearheading the creation of *Constellations*, a new online publication space dedicated to Cultural Rhetorics. I will actively seek film and video content for *Constellations*, as I currently do for *Present Tense*, and as Patrick Berry, Selfe, and Gail Hawisher do for *Computers and*

Composition Digital Press. Not only are there a significant number of peer-reviewed venues in Rhetoric and Composition willing to publish films and videos, editors and reviewers are willing to be flexible and creative in the ways we review digital scholarship, as the editors and reviewers for this video book have been.

4. Our field's sustained embrace of digital technologies results in lifers and casual offenders taking complex and rich approaches to film and video production. Through video essays, remixes, academic and general interest documentaries, experimental pieces, and animation, we are exploring a variety of production modes for moving images. Moreover, we are creative in our approaches to getting our work to others, publishing standalone and supporting videos, screening our work at film festivals and public libraries, and sharing it online. We also use print to write about our filmmaking processes and to theorize film and video production. With this pluralistic and daring range of approaches to film and video scholarship we are pushing the boundaries of what the moving image can do in academia and beyond. As the number of lifers and casual offenders increases, this culture of innovation will only continue to grow.

5. Rhetoric and Composition is excellently poised to embrace feminist filmmaking as our approach to film and video production. Our field has a longstanding commitment to social justice and many of our moving image projects, like Shewonda Leger's "Fixing the Standard," John Scenters-Zapico's *Generaciones' Narratives*, and Casey Miles's "The Gender Project" address issues like race, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, a number of rhetoricians like Selfe, Hawisher, Bianco, and myself make connecting feminism and moving-image production one of our scholarly goals. As I have shown in this video book, lifers and casual offenders like Arroyo, Alaei, Leston, Carter, kyburz, and Shipka use principles of feminist filmmaking to make and/or argue for the value of their moving image work. My hope is that this video book will make that practice even more widespread in Rhetoric and Composition and beyond.

6. Rhetoric and Composition is a growing field. Unlike some fellow disciplines in the Humanities, there is a decent—although not ideal—ratio of Ph.D. graduates to new jobs in Rhetoric and Composition each year. If we train more of our graduate students in film and video production, these newly minted lifers and casual offenders can take those practices to their departments as they start their academic careers at institutions around the country. They can then use the ethics of interdependence and mentorship to transform their departments into places that nurture and value digital scholarship.

It is for these reasons that I am hopeful about the future of film and video production in Rhetoric and Composition. I'm eager to see how lifers and casual offenders who are working today and those who will no doubt join us in the coming years blend feminist filmmaking with our field's rich and audacious approaches to making moving images. I do believe we'll make Alice Guy-Blaché proud.

WORKS CITED

FILM AND VIDEO

“aguamiel: secrets of the agave :: on water” by Jamie E. Lee Adela C. Licona. *Youtube*, 2015.

“Anomalous Composition: A Horror in Video” by Robert Leston. *Kairos*, 2013.

“The Choric Slam Tilt: Unpinning the Table” by Sarah Arroyo, Bahareh Alaei, and Amy Loy. *Itineration*, 2016.

“Conflict Transformation - Healing Through Art @ The Living Well, Baltimore MD” by Reuben Green. *Present Tense*, 2015.

“I am Josephine Miles: A Digital Reprocessing” by Trisha N. Campbell. *Computers and Composition Digital Press*, 2015.

“LiteracyCorps Michigan: Liberty C. Bell, Educational Sponsors” by Bump Halbritter and Julie Lindquist. *Youtube*, 2011.

“One More Video Theory: Some Assemblage Required” by Sarah Arroyo and Bahareh Alaei. *Present Tense*, 2015.

“Other People’s Lives: A Projection” by Jody Shipka. *Enculturation*, 2012.

“Pavomania” by Ana Luzardo Flores. VHS, 1997.

“The Rockaways: Hurricane Sandy + 45 Days” by Jamie “Skye” Bianco. *Vimeo*, 2012.

“Shooting Signifiers” by Cynthia Haynes. *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, 2015.

“status update” by bonnie kyburz. *Enculturation*, 2010.

“Swarm of Vitalities, Swarm of Affinities” by Adela C. Licona and Karma R. Chávez. *Peitho*, 2015.

Take 20 by Todd Taylor. Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007.

Techne by Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander. *Computers and Composition Digital Press*, 2015.

“Testimony” by Robert Leston. *Enculturation*, 2011.

Vanishing Borders by Alexandra Hidalgo. DVD, 2014.

“Walking in the (Electra)City: A Fevered and Frivolous Spectacle” by Justin Hodgson. *Kairos*, 2013.

“WIDE-EMU 2013 - Ypsilanti, Michigan – Saturday, October 12” by Geoffrey Carter. *WIDE-EMU*, 2013.

“My Writing Process” by Vanessa Rouillon. *Computers and Composition Digital Press*, 2012.

NOTE

Unattributed footage throughout the chapter by Alexandra Hidalgo. Additional photography by Nathaniel Bowler, Lindsey Spitzley, Jefferey Ivey, Megan Grabill, and Gustavo Cardier.

Behind-the-Scenes footage of *Vanishing Borders* by Michelle Mueller.

Thank you to NCTE and to participants at 2011 Conference on College Composition and Communication. I feature the business meetings of the American Indian Caucus, the Asian/Asian American Caucus, the Latina/o Caucus, and the Queer Caucus from that year.

Thank you to Lindsey Spitzley, Jennifer Sano Franchini, Shewonda Leger, Erin Schaefer, Matilda Washington, Gina Washington, Kristin Bowler, Seda Bowler-Tunick, Isla Bowler-Tunick, Shane Wynn, Fiovdaliza Volenik, Shanele Alvarez, Priyanka Lobo, Yoelis Rivas, Nathaniel Bowler, William Hidalgo-Bowler, Jefferey Ivey, and Than Thein for letting me film them camera in hand. Thank you also to Sarah Shaw, Peter Johnston, Anne von Petersdorff, Olivia Hacker, Marla Koenigsknecht, and Taylor Neverman, who appear here editing.

Sound editing by Alexandra Hidalgo and Sarah Shaw.

SOUNDTRACK

“Tarnished Copper” and “88”

by Podington Bear

Downloaded from soundofpicture.com

ALPHABETIC WRITING

Arroyo, Sarah J. *Participatory Composition: Video Culture, Writing, and Electracy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2013. Print.

Bianco, Jamie “Skye.” Personal Interview. 6 June 2012.

Halbritter, Bump. *Mics, Cameras, Symbolic Action: Audio-Visual Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. Anderson: Parlor P, 2013. Print.

“Hidalgo Review #2.” 2015. *Microsoft Word File*.

Hidalgo, Alexandra. “Marie Ullrich.” *agnesfilms.com*. agnès films, 26 May 2015. Web. 10 June 2015.

Scenters-Zapico, John. *Generaciones’ Narratives: The Pursuit & Practice of Traditional & Electronic Literacies on the U.S./Mexico Borderlands*. Logan: Computers and Composition Digital P/Utah State UP, 2010. Web. 17 May 2015.