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A screenwriter's *Reality hunger*

Abstract:

'A screenwriter's *Reality hunger*' contributes to contemporary debates about what it means to write in a digital era. David Shields has described his book *Reality hunger* (2010) as an *ars poetica* for a burgeoning group of contemporary writers and artists injecting reality into their work. Media scholars suggest that, as we move towards multimodal writing incorporating text, images and sound, the spaces of the page and the screen are becoming more like each other. As a form, the essay aims to ask questions, to probe and test ideas; 'thought does not advance in a single direction, rather aspects of the argument are interwoven as in a carpet' (Adorno 1991). This essay extends David Shield's argument to consider writing for the screen. It draws on key thinkers from the history of screen media and the author's own practice to consider the relationship between words and images in the writing process. Whilst there is a long history of critics using the essay form to think through ideas, the form has found new resonance in the shift towards more fluid digital environments in which text, images and sound can be cut, pasted and reassembled relatively easily. 'A Screenwriter's *Reality hunger*' employs the segmented essay to open up new possibilities for scholarly writing, developing an argument through the essayistic modes of accretion and layering. It takes up the idea that writing increasingly has a design element and invites readers to construct meaning in the spaces between text and images.

Biographical note:

Kathryn Millard is a writer and filmmaker. Her award-winning films include feature dramas, arts documentaries and essay films. She is Professor of Screen and Creative Arts at Macquarie University, Sydney.

Keywords:

screenwriting – essay film – segmented essay – nonfiction film – multimodal writing – David Shields

Introduction

This essay was inspired by David Shield's *Reality hunger* (2010). I read Shield's manifesto with a strong sense of recognition. As a writer and filmmaker, I have moved away from the industrial screenplay to embrace the more open processes of the film essay and 'thinking cinema'. As Cesare Zavattini asserted, life is infinitely richer and more complex than the screen stories we tell about it. 'A screenwriter's *Reality hunger*' is my own manifesto-in-the-making – part of an ongoing investigation into what it means to write across various kinds of screens in a digital era. It takes the form of an assemblage of quotes – both text and video clips. 'A screenwriter's *Reality hunger*' juxtaposes musings on my practice as a screenwriter with those of others who write with text and images. From 1920's Russian Esther Shub, one of the pioneers of the compilation film, to contemporary investigative filmmaker Errol Morris.

1. 'The cinema's overwhelming desire to see, to analyse, its hunger for reality, is an act of concrete homage towards other people, towards what is happening and existing in the world' (Zavattini 1953: 2,64).

2. [Random 8](#). (Millard 2012)



Early morning light. Crossing a bridge. Driving away from the city.

V/O, NARRATOR

I was looking for the inside story,

I tracked down data,

Pored over records,

Called in a few favours.

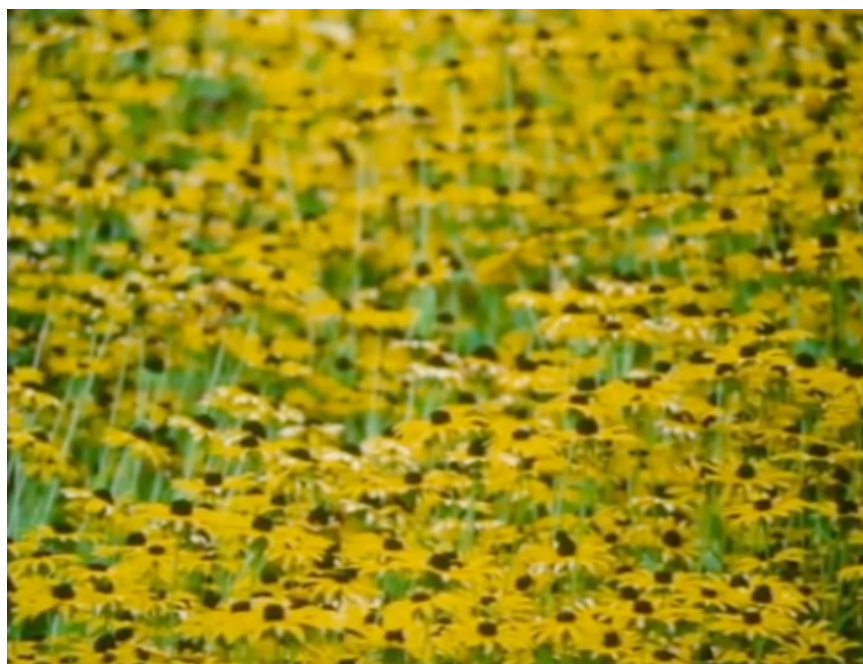
I was burning the candle at both ends.

CUT to a videotape in motion. It fills the frame. The sounds of a recording device. Click. Click.

3. Long before I made this film, I worked as a fetcher in the Special Collections section of Sydney's Mitchell Library. (I was getting together the money to make my first film.) I ran down flights of stairs with request slips, located dusty volumes, and brought them upstairs to the Reading Room. Below the Library was another world. Floors made of ice-green glass that revealed yet more layers below. As if the world's knowledge had been laid out in a vast underworld of dimly lit corridors, tunnels and exits. I dreamed of escape.

4. A researcher with special privileges had set up his desk in the middle of Maps. The complexity of Maps and their cataloguing system was legendary – a Fetcher sent there might not reappear that day. As for Map Man himself, it was rumoured that he had been in sub-basement two for several decades already. Geographically challenged, I palmed off Maps request slips on my colleagues. Offered to track down Picture Collection items instead. The world depicted in light and shadows, coloured inks, photographic grain – that was my territory.

5. [*Parklands*](#) (50 seconds).



‘Instructions to police officers concerning the keeping of diaries. General entries will not be accepted. The object of visiting places must be recorded. Movements must be arranged so that different inquiries may be combined. Impressions may be usefully recorded. And even matters of a not strictly official nature that may be of interest to the service. The mere entry ‘visiting’ or ‘patrolling’ is insufficient as it is almost impossible that a vigilant officer whilst in the pursuit of his normal duties will see nothing worthy of closer notice’ (Millard 1996).

6. My father was often first on the scene. He was a detective. Arson, Homicide, Major Crime. There he was in our family photograph album, in suit and hat. But stranded in someone else's lounge-room – not ours. Pointing to the evidence. At first glance, these crime scenes looked everyday. Domestic interiors in black and white. Carpets. Venetian blinds. TV sets. Pots trailing with indoor ivy. But if you looked more closely, he was pointing to blood stains on the wall.

7. I was at a film event. Looking for some company. Mavericks and fellow travellers. As I tried to give all the film talk – about stories and plot points and formulae and 'elevator pitches' – the slip. Contemporary screenwriters and filmmakers were oddly silent. (Wim Wenders excepted.) I did the only thing possible. Pulled out a book. Began to read.

8. 'The question today is, instead of turning imaginary situations into "reality" and trying to make them look "true", to make things as they are... Life is not what is invented in "stories" ... '(Zavattini 1953: 2,65).

9. 'We write now with images and sound as well as text' (Koman 2005).

10. 'I use all sorts of fragments of the past to examine the present' (Obrst 2012).

11. *Pictura*. In Medieval times, when libraries first appeared on the scene, the lines between words and pictures were blurred. To read was simply to bring pictures to mind.

12. Los Angeles is being buried by its own projections, its own nightmares that it keeps producing. The loss of reality drove me out of Los Angeles, because the movies were more and more about nothing ... The more they were CGI-made (computer generated imagery) the more they were digitally produced, the less there was anything that you could touch, the less sense of place was there, the less reality was actually there (Wenders 2012).

13. 'I wanted to glean images as one jots down travel notes' (Varda 2001).

14. 'I am interested in the drama of things we happen to encounter, not those we plan' (Zavattini 1953: 2, 69).

15. A painter starts with a blank canvas and builds a world, a photographer starts with the messiness of the world and selects a picture' (Shore 2007: 37).

16. [1930's Russia](#) – but we could be anywhere. Black and white images of people reading books in a library ('Russian in library' c. 1950s).



17. 'He would collect some images that for some reason mean something to him; obsessed him: a landscape, the face of an actor, a photograph cut from a newspaper. Then he would show these to me and ask... Is there a scene in that?' (Geuens 2000: 89).

18. Italy. 1953. A novelist by the name of Zavattini got himself mixed up with the neo-realists. Scripted some films – *Bicycle thieves*, *Miracle in Milan*. Zavattini was looking to inject more reality into cinema. Ideas tumbled from his pen. He advocated a new form of cinema: the *film inchiesta or inquiry*. Filmmakers were to be detectives, shadowing potential stories and characters. *Film lampo* (or lightening films) would re-enact events from daily life. Zavattini took to the streets, filling notebook after notebook with photographs, interviews, and observations. He was often sighted with notes spilling out from his pockets.

19. 'If you hear a story and you think, "Wow, that would make a great movie!" That's when the "uh-oh" reaction should pop in. And you might start thinking about how life is messier than most stories' (Cowan 2011).

20. 'It was time for me to think a lot more about the first phase of inquiry – that of the imaginative logic of discovery – which in the case of anthropologists and many writers and creative types, such as architects and filmmakers, to state the obvious, lies in notebooks that mix raw material of observation with reverie... Notebooks are alive, they involve a way of knowing' (Tausig 2012: 1–2).

21. The neo-realists were veterans of the Second World War. We were veterans of Pitch School. The money to travel to film markets – and rustle up the finance to make your film a reality – often comes with strings attached. Whole days spent in conference rooms as you practice distilling your script to a 60 second pitch. Different cities – but the same drill. We are given photographs of people who can green-light projects. Told to study them, keep a look out. Ethics are not entirely neglected. ‘Is it okay to pitch to a commissioning editor in the toilets at midnight? A bit the worse-for-wear after the opening night party?’ I eat far too many conference mints. Slowly unfold the cellophane. Try not to attract too much attention. Sip water. Check my meeting [schedule](#). 24 pitches in two days.

22. The spaces in a segmented essay are like the blackouts between scenes in a motion picture, like the fade-out/fade-in, the imageless transition between disparate sequences of images, the slow dissolve that introduces a flashback, the crosscutting to parallel events... This is what the spaces say (Root 2011).

23 [Random 8](#)



Mist drifts through a pine forest. The sun behind trees. Female narrator.

‘I’m working on an open case. For some it’s done and dusted – wrapped years ago. But something’s not quite right. Nothing I can put a finger on. Not yet. I review data. I look for the cracks in the story. As the investigator’s manual says ‘a cold case nearly always involves a trip down memory lane’ (Millard 2012).

24. Esther Shub pretty much invented the compilation film in 1920’s Russia. Shub took on a young apprentice called Eisenstein. Taught him a thing or two about montage. This is her take on the ‘cinema of fact’: ‘Life is so complex and contradictory in everyday situations that it continuously creates dramatic conflicts and resolves them unexpectedly in the most extraordinary ways’ (Petric 1978: 4, 449)

25. 'Collage works not just by putting one colour against another but also by putting textures together, so that a rough porous bus ticket might sit next to something silvery' (Ondjaate 2007).
26. An essay takes an idea for a walk. An **essay film** takes an image for a walk.
27. 'Photography in a digital environment involves the reconfiguration of the image into a mosaic of millions of changeable pixels ... Rather than a quote from appearances, it serves as an initial recording, a preliminary script ... everything in a digital world is constantly on the shuffle – being reordered and reassembled, from mp3 files on an iPhone to the pixels in a photograph' (Ritchin 2009: 17–18).
28. 'My pictures depict moments or events from obscure, *unswept* corners of everyday life' (Dufour 2012).
29. When I go out with a camera, I don't have a plan or even know what it is I am looking for. But I do go out every time with a question. It's the same question that photographers (and writers) have always asked: How is this world? And, what are the new ways to find that out? (Graham 2011)
30. 'Essay films ... are the product of a twisting a priori unmappable *mental* journey. They unfold through skeins of accumulation, one thing after another, allowing for sudden excursions, unexpected epiphanies, and reflective pauses' (Arthur 2005: 68).
31. 'I try to let the film think. Literally, I write a line, and then I go to the editing table and try and comment on it with images. Conversely, I try to bring words to the editing table. I have both my typewriter and my editing table in one room. ... I have made a form of writing out of filmmaking' (Elsasser 2004: 188).
32. 'There is a kind of thrill when you head out into the world. You don't know – can't know – what you're going to find out' (Morris 2011).

33. *TV in box endures shake test*' (30 seconds) ('TV in box' 1960s).



A TV is plucked from the factory floor. Male Narrator.

'In the meantime, another packaged set is taken off the line on the way to the hiping room. What happens next shouldn't happen to a TV set! But it does ... Vibrating at 250 cycles, 250 shakes a minute, the set is given a jostling that's equivalent to a 5000 mile road trip. And a rough one at that.'

34. I am hooked on ephemeral films – the category into which a grab bag of industrial and training films are placed. In the world of ephemeral films, everything is slightly heightened. The automobiles too shiny, the houses too neat, the conversations awkward. Their performers are caught in a half-light as they pretend to be teachers, shopkeepers, businessmen, *problem* housewives, *problem* teenagers. Ephemeral films teach us how to live. Ordinary citizens act out scenes. 'Well, Bob – Yes, Jane?' Gazing into the middle distance, the luckless actors deliver their lines. But the teleprompter of history keeps turning. *All* films are ephemeral.

35. 'The ephemeral and easily malleable online photograph ... can be increasingly considered an expression of a particular point of view, a commentary on events more akin to writing than it is a definitive rendering' (Ritchin 2013: 10)

36. 'Reality beats all the rules, as can be discovered if you walk out with a camera to meet it' (Zavattini 1953: 2, 68).

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