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"Being Open to Possibilities That We Can't Know Yet": An Interview with Catherine Grant

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Catherine Grant was a keynote speaker at the seventh annual meeting of the Association of Moving Image Researchers. The event was co-organised by the Communication and Society Research Centre (CECS) of the University of Minho, Braga, where it was held in May 2017. Her talk on that occasion was about the audiovisual *portrait-homage* and what it can do to contribute to film star studies. This interview took place afterwards, away from the hustle and bustle of the conference. She is very much the same academic I met more than a decade ago as a student and teaching assistant at the University of Kent. Given how passionate she is about interdisciplinary cinema studies, one might think that her academic life was just starting — as if it's impossible to maintain the same level of enthusiasm after years of hard and influential work. As her career developed and she has looked for new ways of creating and sharing knowledge in the expanding territory of combining images and sounds, she has constantly started over, not from scratch, but afresh. That is why changes in research focus and institutional affiliation abound in her career. As this conversation was held, she was about to move from the University of Sussex to Birkbeck, University of London, to take up a position as Professor of Digital Media and Screen Studies. It was the right time to reflect on the past and to discuss the future.

Image 1: Catherine Grant

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Moving to Birkbeck

Aniki: This will be an interview mainly about your career and contributions. I was thinking that we should begin with the present. You're moving to Birkbeck. Is this a good time to look back and look at what you've done?

Catherine Grant: I think so, because what I'm moving into at Birkbeck is something slightly different, and when you do that it makes you think about how the things you have done before have led to this. Is there some logic? If there's a logic that you could find then that's a nice thought to send you into the future.

The job is a post in Digital Media and Screen Studies. So, for the first time in a long time, I'm not going to have "Film Studies" as a phrase in my job description. That's a moving on for me because I've had that association for a long time, not just in professional jobs, but also in voluntary internet-based work like *Film Studies for Free*. I'm not going to change my Twitter names or Facebook pages! I'm going to carry on with that identity. But this change made me think that *Screen Sudies* is a more logical description for what I do now. For example, I've always been open to studying television and I've often written about or referred to television, although I've never formally contributed to television studies. I'm a very keen television watcher. What I've been doing for the last years has been a version of Screen Studies. I've been very interested in different forms of audiovisual content. That, together with the work that I've done in digital media, again more informally, like setting up websites, is something that I've long been interested in. I first set up a website in 1996; it clearly has been quite a big part of my life. But just out of curiosity, as a practitioner and user in all of these different forms I have been very focused on film and Film Studies as an academic discipline and I am still committed to an interest in that. I just think that Digital Media and Screen Studies is a much more honest label for what I do now, and also one that will allow me to expand and move into further new areas.

When I look back, I can see it's what I've always done, from the earliest choices that I made. I've always picked particular subjects that had possibilities for different forms and focuses of study. I started out in Modern Languages (French and Spanish). When you study Modern Languages, you are studying lots of different things. You are studying how to speak and write in multiple languages that aren't necessarily yours. In the degrees that I did, you're also studying the context, history, countries, and if you study Latin America as I did, then that is *lots* of countries and cultures. I studied linguistics, phonetics, etymology — those kinds of subjects. I also studied literature. In a way, that was the aspect I was most focused on in my undergraduate degree. And so I can look back and see that I've always embraced many subjects, areas, and

been confident about different types of methodologies. I was always able to face without fear the idea that you have to learn something new in order to be able to study something. So as I move into Digital Media and Screen Studies, I think that whatever I don't know now maybe in five or ten years, I'll know. I'll be able to adapt to the way that things change. Hopefully!

Aniki: Is that more of a teaching or a research job?

Catherine Grant: I'm going to be a Professor, so I guess it's going to be about research and teaching leadership, as well as teaching and research...

Teaching and Research

Aniki: I'm just asking because I think your focus over recent years has been more on research output and publishing platforms—and perhaps less on teaching.

Catherine Grant: I think that's a good observation. It worked out that way slightly by accident. I was a very committed teacher up until about a decade ago and was also always interested in introducing new programmes and degree programmes. Certainly in the last ten years I've been also interested in research that has a very practical application, including in teaching — my work on the video essay as a form and what might be its role in film and screen studies, for instance. But I haven't been teaching in classrooms that much. In fact, in the conference yesterday, somebody asked me about teaching and I had to say that I've been teaching the teachers rather than teaching the students, mostly, in the last years.

But I do love teaching. In fact, there were various points in my career where I had other possible choices about careers that I could have made, and one of the main reasons I've remained in academia was because teaching was so important to me. The contact with students was something I always found energising, generating new ideas and directions. Often when, perhaps most especially when, you're compelled to teach on subjects that aren't necessarily the ones you would choose, but you have to cover them because they need teaching, I have found those experiences some of the most amazing ones I've had. Some ideas come out of them, even entire changes in direction. Indeed, my move into film studies came from such a moment when, in my first lecturing job in Spanish and Latin American Studies, I had to teach film from a country I'd never studied before. Indeed, at that point, I'd never studied film before in a formal sense, and suddenly being compelled to do that and having such a wonderful experience made me think that this was what I wanted to do. So, teaching has often been very important for me; it's an activity that I greatly enjoy because I like talking to people,

listening to students, and compelling them to explore things in groups.

Aniki: Is it fair to say that you're interested in the pedagogical uses of research, particularly video essays?

Catherine Grant: Yes, I definitely think that's true. I like conventional teaching as well, where you have a body of knowledge to impart to students and they have to learn it and learn how to move around it and apply it and think for themselves within it. So, I'm very interested in that kind of teaching and I think that's still the basic framework for all the teaching I expect I'll be doing. But, increasingly, I've been interested in challenging the ways in which we learn. I guess that interest goes back a long way as well.

As a language teacher, you know very practically that the only way that students can learn to speak or write a language is by being exposed to intense linguistic input, ideally a kind of immersive situation in which they are surrounded by this language they don't understand. And then the students have to be subjected to *forced output* (it's a brutal phrase, I know!) — you have to *make them* try to communicate in those immersive situations. I find that a really brilliant model for learning generally. So, for me, it isn't only about knowledge, it's actually about modes of communication and immersion. I think that in film and screen studies teaching — audiovisual studies teaching if you like — that works as well. Immersing students in an environment of different kinds of moving images/sounds and different ways of communicating in moving images/sounds, and then compelling them, in subtle ways, to begin to communicate in that immersive situation, has been very effective and also very enjoyable for students and teachers.

Aniki: I was listening to you talking about a different language and I was thinking that is perhaps one of the aspects of video essays: this idea that you can put someone in contact with a kind of experience, a mediated experience, of a language that we don't know. It's not really a language, but it's an articulation between images and sounds that we don't really know.

Catherine Grant: Exactly. It's a communicative situation in which you can have communicative and uncommunicative experiences and, of course, it has all the qualities that the audiovisual has as a mode — duration, sound, visual elements, plus combinations and conjunctions of all three of those things, and other elements as well. How can you speak Spanish unless you are put in a position in which you learn what it's like to speak Spanish and have to speak it in that situation? The metaphor of cinema as an audiovisual language has been greatly studied and it's been said to have many problems as a notion — and it does have many problems. But the notion of language may be fitting for the audiovisual in general, less as a set of grammatical rules, vocabulary/lexis and certain combinatory

possibilities, and more as a communicative situation that produces further situations. The digital methods that we use nowadays to create audiovisual media texts do feel very immersive.

I haven't got much experience at all in analogue filmmaking, but I'm not sure that it felt like this. It feels like the digital surrounds us and when we're working with an interface or a laptop computer with an editing programme, then that feeling of immersion is pretty powerful. And the feeling of needing to do something with it is both full of possibilities and quite daunting—unless you have to or are compelled to.

Aniki: How do you see the changes that are occurring in education and the increasing importance of open access publications, particularly for the future of the humanities and the study of art and culture.

Catherine Grant: Well, it's something that I'm concerned about and interested in. Moving to somewhere like Birkbeck makes me think about it.

Birkbeck has an unusual kind of *ethos* because many of the people studying for degrees are working and have full-time jobs. So the degree has to work around that basic situation in order to enable those students to have the same access to higher education that students who aren't working can have. It has the advantage of not being just about teaching in the evenings, or doing some long stretches of teaching at various points. It might be about some of the emergent notions in teaching some people are scared by, and in their worst neoliberal forms we all ought to be scared of them. Concepts such as "flipped learning", in which students have to do preparatory work beforehand sounds pretty horrible. But flipped learning has been used as a very interesting method of knowledge transfer, a way of getting students to use knowledge before they enter the classroom where they can continue to use it. It's a sort of preparation for applied learning. Applied learning is often what can happen these days in the classroom. In a way, it's a very positive development. Because rather than assuming that everything can be done through a MOOC [Massive Open Online Course], in which the students may never be in a real classroom, these other models are very attached to the idea of face-to-face learning and communal experience.

This is something we've always tried to embed when studying media forms — and obviously this is also true about cinema. A fundamental part of students' learning about cinema, both in its historical form and a set of future possibilities, has to do with experiencing it in a projected space, preferably with other people, so that they get some sense of communal viewing. That sense of communal learning through viewing is still very important to me, I wouldn't want to get rid of it. But, obviously, I'm someone who has

embraced and been fascinated by other forms of knowledge transfer or knowledge 'availability' online, and I've been very open to the kind of things happening as people share their expertise and research in online platforms.

Aniki: That's quite important because it makes us aware of the connection between education and democracy. And we can certainly defend that position if we value, develop, and encourage high-quality research projects with reputable scholars in open access.

Catherine Grant: Yes. I completely agree with that. I'm very attached to the idea of rigour and certainly one of the things that I've been doing in the last few years is trying to establish rigorous publication platforms for non-traditional forms. That is, trying to develop language about those forms — understanding about them, about the ways of evaluating, comparing — I suppose truly as a way to be able to justify the inclusion of these forms in what we're paid to do for a living and what students are required to do as part of a broad humanities education.

Rigour is very important, but I'm always a little bit more open to things that aren't eventually as rigorous. It seems to me that unless we can be open to those things we'll never know what we can let into that category of the rigorous later, or even what our understanding of the rigorous is. Our understanding of the rigorous is often deployed to exclude things that may be rigorous, but that people don't want to include in that category because they're too much trouble. I've certainly felt that in the hostile way that some academics were considering the internet in the 1990s. But there were emerging forms, not full reflections, in the area of cinema and audiovisual studies. Think of the way that film scholars like David Bordwell set up blogs where they really wrote differently. Bordwell always developed accessible ways of writing, but his writing at his blog is even more accessible because it had to directly attract an audience that had plenty of other places to go to read about film online.

So I'm really interested in how embracing possibilities opens you up to changing your own work and from then on, possibly changing the way that we do things more widely. It does seem to me that there's a place for shorter form writing, and that there's place for a wide variety of audiovisual practices, and an even bigger set of possibilities open for the combination of all of those things and more traditional academic content. I think what journals like *Aniki* are doing is brilliant, because there are quite varied forms coexisting in this journal. There's a very rigorous selection of new articles, then there's the thematic dossier, interviews with scholars, reviews. I suppose printed journals have often combined all of those forms and sections, but there's something about the elasticity of the online

that's different, for instance, the fact that you can easily have long pieces.

One of the first things I edited for a formal online publication was for the inaugural issue of *Frames*. I thought about what I really wanted to see at that moment (2012) in film and moving image studies in the digital era. I just wanted to see lots of reflections: 40 pieces by people who I've contacted from all over the world. That was something fascinating. We did actually have ten peer-reviewed articles out of that 40, but the other 30 were all shorter reflections, including audiovisual ones. We could have not elicited this real variety of work and said at the outset that we didn't want other kinds of views, but if someone did a study of how those pieces have been used and cited and referred to, they might find that the informal pieces have been as useful to knowledge as the formal, peer-reviewed ones. So, in allowing a greater space for this work that doesn't have to be judged as formally rigorous (or even as 'original' because originality is another standard that people use to close things down at times), we included work that can challenge some of the things that we hold dear, even if I also understand the need for rigour, originality, and significance at the centre of scholarly work.

Aniki: You certainly can find room for that and more flexibility online as well as combined in those different forms. You can demand rigour, but at the same time accept more speculative work, work that's written in a different way — in a shorter form, perhaps.

Catherine Grant: Yeah.

Image 2: audiovisual essay *3xSTELLA*

[in]Transition

Aniki: Can you talk a bit about the *[in]Transition* project? Because that clearly challenges past and current of doing film scholarship.

Catherine Grant: Yes. Around 2011, I got in touch with Christian Keathley, who by that time had written a brilliant chapter that was published in Andrew Klevan and Alex Clayton's book *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* — the first serious study of the emerging genre of audiovisual essays in film criticism from the perspective of someone who's also a maker of video work. By 2011, I was one of the scholars making things in that context online, but certainly critics like Matt Zoller Seitz, Kevin B. Lee and so on were very prominently doing this kind of work. Christian was looking at what was emerging, and asking questions about it for future scholarship. Alex Clayton knew of my work and told me that I should talk to Chris. And so I did, and he sent me his chapter and that started a dialogue in which we've been engaged very enjoyably and fruitfully for the last seven years. Very early on we started talking about the need for a journal, but if we had set one up on our own we might have wanted it to have a quite narrow scope because we had a shared interest in *particular* forms of videographic work. We did understand that it might be better to be more, not less, inclusive.

Then there was a series of interesting coincidences. Drew Morton, who's one of our co-editors, was also talking to the MediaCommons platform about a video essay journal. At the same time, Will Brooker was about to take over as editor of *Cinema Journal* and he had a really great vision for a whole panoply of associated online forms in which work that would be normally kept in the subscription-only journal — that's the revered *Cinema Journal* — could appear online in more informal open access publishing — something like ephemeral and short form content. They were thinking that a video essay publication ought to be something that *Cinema Journal* could explore. I don't know how people overheard what other people were thinking about this project, but Drew and I were actually put in contact by, I think, MediaCommons and *Cinema Journal*. I said I'd love work with him on this, but asked to bring Christian on board.

So, the three of us founded the journal. We were compelled by certain things. One was the need to host the journal at the MediaCommons website. That's been wonderful, but it has the consequence that the journal takes the form of a MediaCommons website rather than the form that, if we had unlimited funds and expertise, we might have created on our own to showcase work. But then you wouldn't have so much writing accompanying videos, for example. Because of the template, we had space to fill. We had to

have a similar understanding of contents as that of MediaCommons websites like *In Media Res*. But, right from the beginning, it was brilliant to have the support of both MediaCommons and *Cinema Journal*. One of the difficulties that such a project would have from the outset would be earning attention and 'respectability', or some kind of advanced esteem, without us doing anything. So, obviously, this was a really great set of sponsors. Beyond that, they really trusted us. We have two project managers, who've been part of the project from that stage: Christine Becker, who's been the brilliant online editor for *Cinema Journal*, and Jason Mittell, who'd been teaching video essay work at Middlebury and was very interested in it and in experimental, non-traditional forms of publishing. Jason published a draft of his book *Complex TV* online and in an open access format so that people could comment on it. He's very committed to, as I was, open peer review. So it was a kind of dream team!

It was really great working with Drew, who had come from perhaps the most excellent audiovisual essay graduate programme in the US, which is the one that Janet Bergstrom runs as part of the cinema studies programmes at UCLA. Drew had been one of Janet's students and learned a very rigorous, explanatory and argumentative form of scholarly videomaking at which she's brilliant. He's also very open-minded. His PhD was on the remediation of comic forms in films and so he was very interested in crossover media and media convergence.

Chris is more of a cinephile film scholar, but also studying the concept of cinephilia in great detail. He authored a brilliant book on that subject.

And I'm a kind of maverick who's been making video essays in a prolific way and am open to many different forms. What I've drawn on was the knowledge I gained about being an online publisher and film scholar, and being open to possibilities that we can't know yet. The worst thing that a journal like ours can do, in my view, is to close down those possibilities too soon because of a pressure to be 'scholarly'. Of course, we wanted to be rigorous from the beginning, but also we wanted to create an understanding of rigour across the generic or the aesthetic possibilities of video essays. So you can be rigorous as an explanatory film scholar and have footnotes on your video essay. Or, in another approach, you can engage with avant-garde traditions or other traditions and see what happens. Much valuable work can come from these possibilities.

We very quickly established that we wanted to have a peer review system, but we also knew we wouldn't be able to employ that right away. So for the first year, we curated content in different ways. In the first issue, we immediately started writing about why

we'd chosen the videos that we'd chosen to publish. Then, other people were invited to be curators and cast their eye around what they were seeing emerging online. One of the people who was invited to do that, and did it brilliantly, was Chiara Grizzaffi who was writing her PhD thesis in Italy on the online video essay. She finished the PhD and she has now published the thesis as a book in Italian. We needed another editor because it was too much work for three people. She was the ideal choice to come in and joined us so now we are four.

The peer review process was started after a year, and the open submission video essays began to be published. We've had an amazing range of work, but not anything that's really long. I think the longest video is about half an hour long, except, maybe, for the desktop documentary we published by David Sorfa that was longer than that and almost like a one-take work. As a heavily edited piece of work, Irene Gustafson's video essay *Facing the Subject (On Observation)* was a substantial film that I actually curated as part of the essay film festival. So we've had tiny, crazy comparisons and surreal meditations, people using this form as something very alive on the web to study other work in a scholarly way, and much more personal reflections. We've had a really wide range of work. One challenge has been finding peer reviewers to review that work. It's been a challenge because you need to match peer reviewers very closely, just as you do with written scholarship. We've generally handled that quite well. People find it challenging both to have to write peer reviews about audiovisual work and also to commit to sharing their views in public in the open-form peer review. Even when the work doesn't get published because we have rejected it, the reviewer's name is still known to the person whose video has been rejected. So there's a sense in which it's very different from classical peer review. That just means we've had a very active role as editors, and one of the active roles we've played is to encourage and support peer review as well as video essays.

Quite a lot of the recommendations that reviewers (or we, as editors) make is not to change the video, but the statement. It's very difficult for editors to intervene with revisions to video work. We can easily intervene with revisions to written work if somebody doesn't do what they're asked to do. The very obvious result is that the editors can do it and then the authors can decide if they want their work published in that copy-edited or altered form. That usually happens. It's not a problem. It's part of the process. But we can't make video authors make the changes. We can certainly choose not to publish their work, but that's quite drastic! I think if they didn't make substantial changes we wouldn't publish their work. Yet, if the ideal changes are quite minor, maybe it makes as much sense to change the accompanying statement. So that has maintained the rigour of the review process, but because of the open

nature of our publication, it also reveals something that's true of all academic work: that it's all *perfectible*, it's not perfect. Once you have the ability to acknowledge that, it's liberating. Suddenly you can just make a statement saying: "I understand the point the reviewers were making, but actually I don't think I can do anything about that." There are all sorts of reasons why somebody might not be able to alter something and one of those reasons is technical. Programme files are notoriously difficult to update in certain ways. If you made a piece of work years before, you may not be able to go back and get those programme files working again. The editors certainly don't have access to the programme files, although maybe in the future that could happen. But I also like the idea that peer reviewers can ask for something *ideally*, in the first instance. And then, when they have it explained to them that it might be difficult or tricky to change the nature of the video, or that there are timing issues, they also understand that their advice as peer reviewers are not god-like decrees, but instead just advice from one person to another. Of course, we are 'experts', but an expert doesn't know or determine everything. This whole process has had these unexpected consequences. Transparency means that certain things aren't done, or are done, in this field that would never happen in a closed-system peer review on written work, I think. I like this experiment!

Image 3: audiovisual essay *THRESHOLDS (For Tobe Hooper)*

Changes in Scholarship

Aniki: I've got two follow-up questions. You're describing a very different way of doing film (or screen) scholarly research and so my first question is: how has the academic community received or responded to this kind of change? Has it been open to it? My second question is: how has this change shifted the way all research

and scholarship around these topics is done? Because it's one thing to think of a scholar as a kind of writer, but once you think of them as a kind of filmmaker or editor you're making them closer to their subjects of study. In a way, you're bridging that gap. I find that quite interesting.

Catherine Grant: I'd start by answering both questions with the same observation, which is that, for me, it isn't an either/or situation. It's not that we are writer-scholars of whom a portion will become filmmakers. Maybe a very small portion will make that total transformation. What I see actually happening is kind of what happened to me: Instead of being a scholar who's only expected to write my research work, my own expectation is that I'm a multimedia producer of my research outputs. The other thing I would say is that I don't see video essays just as a mode of expression and so I don't see myself as a filmmaker or an artist. Well, maybe I'm more of an artist, perhaps, because I see the practice of art as a research process, an exploratory process. My main interest in these emerging forms has to do with them being research processes. Yes, I do end up with a video often at the end (sometimes I don't finish them, but mostly I do finish the videos that I've started), and so there's a finished piece of work. But for me, as important, if not more important, is the process that leads up to it. I guess I'm also interested in how this hasn't led to me writing less, but to writing more. Because I'm much more compelled to write about what I'm finding through these forms than I would be if I were to sit down to write something that had no audiovisual component as part of the research process. Actually, that's not the exact difference. I think all audiovisual work has a research process that involves audiovisual methods. What video does is materialise those methods in a different way from writing.

Aniki: I think a lot of video essays have some kind of screenplay, if one can call it that.

Catherine Grant: Yes, certainly one that you can write retrospectively, even if it's not written in advance. Anyway, I definitely see myself as somebody who has moved from a kind of mono-media approach to film studies or screen scholarship, to a multimedia and a multimodal one. That's what I'm proposing to my discipline. I'm not just saying that people should make audiovisual works, but that we should look at what can happen when we open ourselves up to all of these forms and procedures, and to different combinations of them.

Regarding your first question about the reception of that work: generally, in a face-to-face way, it's been very positive. I've had very few negative reactions that have been directly expressed to me, in writing or in conferences. Maybe people are too nice or are worried about hurting my feelings, but I don't think so. I think it's

been a very rewarding task or role for me to be in the position of the advocate. I've been more passionate about this than I've been about anything else in my academic life. I just try to communicate my enthusiasm for the form and the things I see it doing. And generally that's been very well received. I've had people take on my individual work and the claims that I make for it. There have been a few texts that argue that I'm too hyperbolic in my praise for this form and that it's much more limited in its possibilities than I'm claiming it is. Or people questioning some of the things that I'm finding in my work. Or people questioning the concept of material thinking that I've been using to underpin my work. And they do this from very knowledgeable positions — so if I wanted I could engage with those and take things forward. I've found that has been a way in which negativity has been expressed. But I'm not running to defend myself against these attacks right now, as I'd rather just carry on with experimenting and seeing where it leads.

In terms of the form as a whole, I think the most negative response to it was silence from some quarters. So there were very positive responses from *Cinema Journal* as I've said, and from people involved in very traditional forms of scholarship. One of the great surprises, of course, is that some of the most enthusiastic people have been some of the most inventive and foundational scholars in film studies, like Richard Dyer, Laura Mulvey (who has also made films), Pam Cook (a wonderful film scholar who had never contemplated doing any of this, but has been making multimedia work in recent years because of what she's seeing happening in video essays), and that's been amazing. But I did also detect a kind of silence, especially to begin with. What's been interesting is that the silence has been followed by people developing projects where video essays are possible, both in teaching and in grant applications, and now in publications. Certainly, it's now really wonderful to see all the online journals that are being set up and launched with an openness to publishing video material.

One of the major battles has been mostly won, I believe, and that's the one on copyright, because none of us know whether or not copyright would ever be used against us. It hasn't really happened in these scholarly endeavours so far. But certainly one of the ways in which the debates about video essays were shut down was around a nervousness about copyright. So the fact that these emerging journals and new projects and grant applications are based on outputs that might be video essays is very encouraging. They're not using copyright as a reason not to do that work anymore. And they could, because we don't know, it could still happen. But they seem to have understood that this work isn't being attacked, and that we're using and can use fair use principles to produce it. The understanding about that has definitely increased over the last years. And for the humanities as a whole it connects to an earlier question

that you raised about 'how did I see this being used in teaching and other areas?' I think these are all really good developments. I think showing ourselves as open to the world outside is particularly important at a time in which we're under attack for our relevance. We're now pushed to have a more instrumental idea of educational approaches — giving people skills for the workplace and so on. And even on that very narrow-minded neoliberal basis, video and multimedia work also is really important. How can people use and understand the use of digital tools? Even if we have just that instrumental version of what education should be, that doesn't exclude the use of new methods in studying. It encourages their use. We have to hold on to our expansive, open, democratic commitment to critical education. By that I mean understanding everything that's at stake in our conditions of existence and some of those may be quite weird and unconscious as well as economic and structural. For me, the video essay and these developments in journals have been really promising for that kind of understanding, because they're experiential and immersive in ways that I don't really think we've seen education be before in the public sphere. It's been mostly an active/passive model of the teacher and the student. Whereas this is very much a democratic situation. With these new methods, teachers may not know as much as the people in their classrooms about them or about how to use them.

Image 4: audiovisual essay *The SENSES of an ENDING*

Technology and the Humanities

Aniki: What I find interesting is this combination of a use of technology that is changing how we teach and how we produce knowledge with the principle of open access. That means that you're using technology as a beneficial tool, for arguably good purposes.

Just think about the changes in the technology we use. I remember that when I started doing film studies, older teachers like Michael Grant told us that they used to watch films on moviolas. That's quite behind us now. Even if we don't all make video essays, we do show clips in classrooms and sometimes we repeat the projection of a clip and talk over it as a kind of live video essay.

Catherine Grant: I completely agree. I've said something similar, because I'm not interested in fetishising the video essay as something that's really so different from all of these other things that Laura Mulvey describes in her book *Death 24x a Second* about replay and pause with the DVD remote controller and so on. For me, it's equally an act or process of material thinking to create a clip, to do all that it takes to get that material. It's equally material thinking to create even a screenshot. We all know how that goes: you don't always get it the first time, not that exact moment that you want. So, for me, that's a form of material thinking. I used this a little bit in a kind of mischievous way in my talk at the AIM Annual Meeting, sort of to encourage people by saying that they're already doing this. If you can put a video clip into a PowerPoint presentation, you can put digital material into an editing programme. And if you can create an animation for that video material, like play on, click, or fullscreen, all of those commands are similar to the command base-system of non-linear software. It may feel a bit more complex, and possibly it is if you want to do complicated things, but people increasingly use Photoshop and vector-based software. It really wouldn't be a stretch for them to use video editing software. And this kind of software doesn't just have to be used to produce finished videos. It can be used, as I use it lots of the time — for film analysis. I may not want to make a video essay comparing this scene with that scene, but maybe I want to see how this scene and that scene look together, and compare the sound of those two scenes in close proximity and continuity.

Aniki: When you talk about combining different forms of scholarship, you're accepting that they're different. How different are they? Because it's quite different for us to think through writing, or discovering things while writing, and to select clips or images and combine them.

Catherine Grant: I see writing as an equally creative, generative, and exploratory critical process. I never write plans for my work — I write my work. I begin somewhere and it takes me somewhere else, maybe somewhere unexpected and that may require more research. But it's equally a form of material thinking. The difference is that the material is different. They may be equally virtual. The production of verbalised thoughts and audiovisual forms may be different, but they can equally lead to discoveries, insights, and more complex processes as well. So, I'm not saying that writing isn't material thinking: audiovisual material thinking is audiovisual.

Written material thinking takes you away from the medium that we're studying. That's important as well. It's not like it's replaced by the audiovisual.

Aniki: I would like to return to the subject of the future and discuss it further. We don't know what the future is going to be, but we do know that multimedia technology is changing education. Therefore, it makes sense from an historical point of view that we've reached this stage of doing work like video essays and using digital platforms. Do you think some scholars may be perhaps scared that they're going to be forced to do those things? I don't mean now, but in the future.

Catherine Grant: Yes, I think that they may be worried — they'd right to be. And not because I'm certain that will happen or that those scholars might not find positive reasons for making the change (because it helps their work in their own way, for example), but because I do think that what goes on in institutions is likely to become more circumscribed, not more open. Especially, if we look at current political developments. It's quite likely that humanities education is going to become more of an instrumental field connected to training. Maybe a small number of elite institutions in any country might still be devoted to a kind of open education for the elites, but for everyone else it's going to be, maybe not straightforwardly vocational, but certainly skills-based. So it could be that the audiovisual is deployed in that way, determining what Screen Studies has to be. I've seen that happen with languages, the discipline I came out of. These used to be degrees that were very much in the mainstream of the humanities in all of its different aspects. Many language departments that offered that kind of education have been closed and those still existing are now simply training people to speak the language: business French or beginner's Mandarin. It's a much more instrumental version of what languages are and a very narrow sense of how languages should be taught, because it's all about the speed of skills acquisition. It could be that the audiovisual could be deployed in that way. I can't defend against that, but that wouldn't stop me from advocating on behalf of our increasing use of it for more considered, less obviously neo-liberal ends.

One of the things that I'd return to is this question about open access. Again, open access has been weaponised in the UK. It has been intrumentalised, when it's said that we have to publish our work in open access format and that it's all about measuring impact and tracking citations. That for me is the worst model for open access. For me, open access is just the ability for anyone to be able to click on a piece of academic work and read it, and benefit from it, and share it. And also, use it to generate more knowledge as a result. So, using that latter understanding of open access, it becomes even more important to be experimental and open if education becomes

more and more circumscribed within institutions — allegedly that's the place where the most important education will happen. That's a rather horrific scenario and it's possible that open access online platforms may help us to retain some sense of a community of scholars.

But I may not be completely positive about that either, because one of the arguments that's often used to counter what people consider as digital positivismo, like my supposed hyperbolic, ecstatic reaction to these processes, is that most of this software is made by companies and corporations. What is portrayed as a range of choices and open explorations is actually very constrained by the media that we're offered or sold. Lev Manovich has written very compellingly about this, although not as bleakly. For instance, the sense that Photoshop seems to offer a set of limitless possibilities to creative production. That's how the product is marketed, but ultimately it's based on a very rigid understanding of what you can and can't do. I would agree with that. But wasn't it ever thus? Isn't that what language was said to be by the structuralists and (to a lesser extent) by the post-structuralists: this set of rigid possibilities that imprisons us and in/to which we're subjectified or subjected. And yet we still have to go on, and we don't always experience our life as oppressed in that over-determined way. Maybe we're misrecognising the conditions of our existence. It seems to me that these processes, these systems of communications do allow possibilities for change, and the way that change happens is not always circumscribed by the fact that we're working with commercial products.

We may have a mixed future! I'd say that the key thing to do right now is to defend the space of the humanities.

Aniki: But that shouldn't be a task of humanities scholars alone, but of universities and the society as a whole.

Catherine Grant: Yes, I agree. But let's not hold our breath about that support. I think universities can do that and certainly state universities have a greater or lesser success record with that project. In my country, where we used to have very straightforwardly a state education system, that system has changed into one with very high fees. It's hard to see it as a state education system now in the current era of ongoing marketisation. We're looking at the very immediate closure of departments because of 'redundancies of staff' and all sorts of convenient excuses are being used, like the Brexit referendum result. They're not the real reason why these decisions are being made. To a certain extent, they're smoke screens. There's a sense in which closing down the arts as a space for critical thinking is a project that's been going on for the last 30 years or more.