A process of somatic filming
a Video essay by Dominique Rivoal

Abstract:

This video essay explores the development of a somatic method of filming, where the filmmaker observes themselves as a sensing-moving self while engaging in a durational, site-specific practice with another mover. For the past six years, mover Claire Loussouarn and filmmaker Dominique Rivoal have returned monthly to Hackney Marshes, engaging in an ongoing dialogue with this dynamic, ever-changing landscape. Through an embodied approach to filming, this essay examines the interplay between the marshes, the mover, and the self, exploring movement as a form of relational inquiry. Additionally, it introduces camera-witnessing, an adaptation of the witnessing method from Authentic Movement, which cultivates sensory awareness, kinaesthetic empathy, and dual awareness of both self and mover. By attending to movement, the filmmaker has deepened their sensitivity to different types of motion, intention, and relational dynamics. This essay shares these insights, inviting viewers into a nuanced exploration of movement, presence, and embodied filmmaking.

Transcript:

Introduction

My research is a movement-based experimental film practice that explores the shared dyadic and relational space between a filmmaker and a mover. This essay reveals the process behind developing a somatic method of filming, in which the filmmaker observes themselves as a sensing moving self, while engaging in a relational sited practice. For the last six years, mover Claire Loussouarn and myself, Dominique Rivoal, as a filmmaker, have been returning monthly to the site of Hackney Marshes to correspond with this dynamic, ever-changing space. Throughout this durational and iterative practice, I have experimented with various somatic methods of self-awareness to navigate being perceptually present with

the marshes, the mover, and myself. One of my key methods for cultivating self-awareness is the practice of witnessing from Authentic Movement, a holistic movement practice initiated by Mary Stark Whitehouse and developed by Janet Adler. This practice cultivates sensory awareness of movement and kinaesthetic empathy in dual awareness to self and mover. My research adapts this method into a technologically enhanced mode of witnessing, utilising the camera's unique affordances and limitations to enable camera witnessing in this outdoor context.

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How might somatic and dyadic methods inform ways of filming?

How can the camera operator navigate remaining with self, mover and context?

Part one: Filming as a somatic practice

Claire comes from a lineage of Amerta movement originally taught by Suprapto Suryodarmo and Sandra Reeve. This improvised, non-stylised movement practice is typically practiced outdoors, with the aim of cultivating a heightened environmental awareness. With our combined approach of Amerta and Authentic Movement, we began to work intuitively, without a plan or a script. This first day of filming in September 2018 marked the beginning of an ongoing investigation, during which we returned each month for six years to correspond with the marshes and each other. Initially, my goal was to explore the relational dynamics at play between the filmmaker and the mover, using a dyadic format to create a dialogue. However, as our dialogue progressed, I realised that the marshes were not merely a passive backdrop for our dancing. The marshes were an active, integral third partner in this collaboration.

1.1Relating with the Marshes

Recognising the embeddedness and the situatedness of the filmmaker-mover dyad marked a significant milestone in my practice. From then on, I began to enframe our dancing as part of nature rather than in front of it. Hackney Marshes was once a lamas land where livestock grazed. In 1905, local residents gave up these grazing rights, dedicating this land for the purpose of an open space in perpetuity. This allowed Londoners free access to this ancient grassland. Managed by a park authority, Leyton Marsh, the specific place where we film feels untouched, with most plants growing from the original seed banks in the soil.

To open myself to the more-than-human aspect of the marshes, I slow down and tune into my body's innate receptivity, establishing ways to be affected by what I perceive. I engage in reciprocal touch, peripheral vision, and actively listening to the marshes, focusing on receiving guidance from the marshes through sound and sensation. Inspired by the insights of movement specialist Hubert Godard (2006), I also maintain an awareness

of my own weight to enrich the reciprocal exchange between touching and being touched. During the development of this work, I prepared myself with warm-up exercises using various practitioners' scores, such as Mary Overlie's' 'Walk and Stop'' and Barbara Dilley's 'Five Eyes Practice'. These scores supported me to become more conscious of the way I move and perceive the marshes. Eventually, it came to me that I was avoiding certain parts of the marshes that included houses to represent an idealised version devoid of human structure. With this insight, I was able to let go of a romanticised portrayal of the marshes towards a more genuine connection with them.

1.2 Relating with self

I become acutely aware of how tired I am from carrying the heavy camera. I lie down and tune inward. I close my eyes and listen to the enveloping sounds, sensing the impression that I make on the ground. The coolness of the earth and the soreness of my lower back become apparent. As I rest my head more fully, I surrender my weight to the support of the land. In this moment of relating to self, I breathe with the camera resting on my front body. Then a spontaneous transition occurs, I sense an energy coming from the ground. My boundary of self and earth dissipates. As Linda Hartley, teacher of Authentic Movement, writes, an energy to move fast, to explore, to be alive.

'We may have a direct experience of energy moving through and within the body when internal narrative and image-making cease, and the mind rests in the moment, present to the fullness of all that is.' (Hartley, 2015)

When I sit up and open my eyes, I have no idea what is inside the frame—an arm, a leg? I am at a pre-verbal level, experiencing what Barbara Dilley calls 'infant eyes', seeing the world in motion from a still place, simply enjoying movement and shapes without labels.

1.3 Relating with the mover

Each month we work for about an hour. This duration enables us to sustain an openness and concentration that would be challenging to maintain for longer and in everyday life. We always work in silence and never give each other instruction to achieve a special effect, using orientation, proximity,

movement and attention as an embodied form of communication. We each write our personal reflection after a filming session. This diary and notes have been informing both the research and the editing process. From the start, the mover mentioned how the presence of the camera witness enabled her to enter a movement exploration mode deeply, providing a safe container in a public space. However, Claire does not perform for the camera but considers its presence as just another element in the space.

Working together over an extended period has heightened my awareness of my framing habits. I prefer to match Claire's level; filming her from the ground when she is lying down and standing up with her. However, I now find myself in the uncomfortable position of filming Claire from above. I fear that this perspective may perpetuate the 'male gaze', a concept coined by Laura Mulvey, which makes me hesitant to look at the female body from this angle. Anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall expresses how filmmakers are sometimes afraid to look, explaining that mental concepts can at times screen us from the world. 'One has the impression that many filmmakers are afraid of looking' (MacDougall, 2006 p8)

This time I am able to sustain my gaze, witnessing both my fear and the invitations of the textures present in the frame. This leads me beneath the surface of meaning that I project onto the image. David MacDougall also notes that framings can reveal fluctuations in personal engagement and complicity with the subject. In this moment, I am able to be in close relation with Claire because I feel particularly open to her. Prior to this filming session, we had both expressed a difficult communication, which restored the flow of relating. The theory of 'Mind Clearing' (Berner, Whieldon), upon which some of this research is based, explains that a withheld communication between two people may create a distancing barrier. Often, what is left unsaid accumulates to produce a density that may lead to a conscious or unconscious sabotage of the creative process. As a way to further articulate moments of heightened connection between myself, the mover, and the marshes, I am employing the concept of 'correspondence' conceived by Anthropologist Tim Ingold as an alternative to intersubjectivity and described as a 'togethering of the world' (Ingold, 2017 p41).

The concept of correspondence suggests that to correspond is to move together in time and space as individual agents, in a parallel process in which, over time, a transformation can take place. In this moment, I perceive the mutuality of this encounter and how Claire's willingness to be seen invites my participating presence in her experience. Despite my own physical instability, I sense the directness of my attention, an unflinching witnessing in these frames.

Part two: Relating with and through technology

2.1Equipment

After two years of meeting, the plan for creating a four-screen video installation began to take shape. And from then on, we incorporated an ambisonic microphone designed to capture immersive spherical audio alongside the camera's mounted microphone. This addition significantly enhanced the quality of our audio, enabling me to continue filming solo, without the need for a sound recordist. Depending on the conditions, I alternate between automatic and fully manual settings to control the light. On a day like this, when the light is constantly changing, I manually adjust the light, resting my finger on the aperture control.

Additional foley sound is added in post-production if needed. In this clip, I alternate between placing my eye against the viewfinder, which allows me to focus more intently on the mover, and looking at the camera through the LCD screen. This allows me to stay perceptually present to my surroundings. In this instance, I use the zoom to come closer to the mover. In echoing her movement, I make visible a transfer of affect between us.In preparation for the installation, I also began filming four perspectives of the marshes before Claire's arrival, using this time to slow down, ground myself, and attune to the interplay between inner and outer landscapes. In this clip, I am wearing a GoPro camera on my chest to document the filming process. Recording!

From the start, I use long takes to anchor the human perspective of my dyadic approach in real-time and space. The long take holds space for movements to unfold while also simplifying the synchronisation of image

and sound in post-production. The mounted microphone usefully captures nearby sound when it's not too windy. An important aspect of filming handheld, in the emergence of the moment, is to find stability while holding the extra weight of the camera. Sometimes, for short periods only, I suspend the camera from its strap, extended from my neck, allowing me to view the image through the LCD screen while also maintaining stability. I also sit on the ground to be comfortable while holding the camera for extended periods, especially when filming close-ups. At other times, I simply stop looking through the camera and rest it against my centre, vaguely aiming it toward the mover. I have noticed that by allowing my weight to drop, I receive feedback from the ground on how to adjust my posture between earth and sky while accommodating the extra weight of the camera against my centre. Working blindly with the camera rather than chasing images is an act of trust—one that invites chance and the emergence of the moment to shape the frame organically.

2.2 Editing and presenting

When presenting the installation, we wanted to recreate the sense of a wide, open space, allowing audiences to roam freely and, in a way, shape their own edit of the work. This sense of agency—the ability to move within the space—is central to a work that is relational at its core. We edited the material together, drawing from our diaries and memories. It was important to weave together the filmmaker's external gaze with the mover's first-person experience, creating a fluid dialogue between the two. This co-editing process required a degree of surrender as we navigated our differing intuition, muscle memories, and the reality of the footage itself. Yet in this exchange, something far richer than our individual perspectives emerged, deepening and enriching the project. The visual experience was enhanced by a surround audioscape, further revealing layers of connection between Claire's movement and the sound of the marshes.

Part three: Attending to camera movement

As we returned to the marshes after the installation, we continued to value the process of encountering for its own sake, embracing its autotelic nature. Through this ongoing practice, I was able to further refine my approach to filming as a somatic practice and begin to develop the distinct features of my camera movements.

3.1 Four types of camera movement

Vivian Sobchack identifies four kinds of movement in moving pictures, each of which resonates with different aspects of my somatic filming practice. The first is movement within the frame—the motion of the subject or elements inside the image. More often than not, very little camera movement is needed to highlight a relationship between elements, allowing the interplay between the mover and the environment to unfold organically.

The second is movement between images, achieved through editing. This is a perceptual shift between the image we initially see and the reservoir of images stored in our minds. These invisible movements can be suggested through montage, activating the viewer's associative mind, where meanings emerge through juxtaposition. The third type is optical movement—the zoom or focus shift—which is the camera's own motion. While optical movement is useful, it is invisible to the mover. In my dyadic approach, I prefer to use actual physical movement to reinforce the reciprocity between the camera operator and the mover. The fourth and final type is camera movement, which Sobchack describes as 'the bodily motion of the camera itself.' This is where my practice of somatic awareness comes into play.

In my work, the camera's recording of motion—both across its lens and through the movement of its operator—is supplemented by my own internal tracking. By internally sensing my movements, I investigate my evolving relationships with the mover and the environment. The idea of becoming more conscious of the source of my movement is inspired by Mary Starks Whitehouse, the originator of Authentic Movement, who herself made a distinction between movements directed by the ego—'I am moving'—and movement arising from an unconscious source—'I am

being moved.'In observing my camera movement within somatic filming, I've identified several key features that shape my own practice.

3.2 The features of the ‘Moving Camera Witness’

1.Stillness

The first is stillness. The still position encompasses the subtle movement of breath, anchoring the subjective, living presence of the camera operator as an active dyadic partner.

2. Relational camera movement

Relational camera movement emerges in dialogue with the environment and others, responding dynamically to the motional world as it unfolds.

3. Intentional camera movement

Intentional camera movement is purposeful, deliberate action in which I consciously choose to move the camera. Vision asks a question, and movement offers a resolution. My movement opens new ways of relating and interpreting the unfolding phenomena. This often involves small, exploratory optical shifts in search of a frame before settling into stillness and presence. When I move with the camera, I am not as free as the dancer. It is as if I am preciously carrying my eyes and ears in my hands. In dyadic practice, it's important for me to be clear about my movement. This helps the mover to subtly orient themselves toward the camera.

4. Performative camera movement

I have also learned to recognize when my relational movement becomes performative—when I add volume to my camera work as an expression of my own inner world. In these moments, I may be echoing the mover yet also layering additional movement in a way that is both relational and performative. As Tim Ingold notes, movement is both a perception of the world and an expression of it. (Ingold 2000) Sometimes, I only notice my movement in retrospect, realizing that my hand has moved on its own

accord, responding spontaneously to my desire to see, bypassing my conscious tracking.

5. Being moved

In this moment, I was being moved.

3.3 Being moved

Returning to the everyday movements of the marshes over an extended period has also heightened my awareness of how I am being moved by different scales of movement—ranging from the vast disruptions of a global pandemic to the seasonal cycles that inform the way we move. Human interventions, such as groundworks and land management, reorganising my movement, while the smallest interactions—like the sensation of ants on my skin—demand an immediate shift in my stance.

Interestingly, I have also observed how the marshes themselves use human mobility to extend beyond their own boundaries—into the digital sphere through filmed images, their hitchhiker seeds cling to our clothes, dispersing into the physical world, as we unknowingly carry them to new locations. This interplay between landscape, movement, and correspondences further deepens my understanding of being moved—not only as a physical or emotional state but as an ongoing process of entanglement and exchange. One of the most important insights I've gained in applying the method of witnessing to my camera work is recognising the power of observing my impulses to move, to adjust, to seek a better angle—without immediately acting on these impulses. Instead, I remain still, holding the inner tension of 'staying with'...without judgment, in compassion, until my movement arises organically—invited by the event itself. In these moments, I am not merely recording but actively participating, moving, and resonating with the world.

Movement enables connection… Connection enables movement…

In my practice, I've come to understand that I want to use movement sparingly, to signify both to myself and to whom or what I am filming that I am moved, that a cohesive moment of correspondence is unfolding.

Concluding Thoughts

The features of camera movement that I've highlighted here resist fixed categorisations. Yet, they reveal how a camera can be fully integrated within a somatic practice to deepen an investigation of movement. The camera offers the possibility of choice both in the moment—by witnessing unfolding decisions in real time—and retrospectively, when reviewing the footage that preserves the correlation between the movement in front and the movement of its operator.

As a filmmaker, my practice has always been intuitive. However, by attuning to soma and tracking my own movement, I have become more considerate in my actions and I've come to a deeper realisation. All movements are ultimately relational. In witnessing my own capacity to be moved, I recognise the importance of finding stability both physically and relationally. This ongoing dialogue between seeing and being seen, between moving and being moved, lies at the heart of my dyadic practice. However, learning to suspend judgment, remain compassionate, and stay centered is a lifelong practice.

With Mover: Claire Loussouarn Filmmaker: Dominique Rivoal.

Installation soundscape and additional foley: Cesar Salazar Portillo.

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