

Through the viewfinder a pink sky (working title)

Word count ~ 1300 without references

1. Overview

1.1 Memoir

1.2 Documentation of practice

1.3 Critical Reflection

2. Organization

3. Milestones

4. Keywords and References

1. Overview

In the graduation proposal I note the reason for making a documentary film about home. *The making of this film has enabled me to articulate loss, transcendence and new beginnings.* I also write, in the same paragraph, what I will now consider a statement for my thesis.

I have been in search of form, just like I have been in search of home. [In the process I have realized] what was once topical and typological have given way to the existential and spiritual.

My thesis will detail this *search of form* towards intellectual and existential belonging. To that end, I have chosen to weave together three strands of texts, namely: 1) *memoir* - mourning for loss and disorder 2) *documentation of practice* - practicing as living and finding the order within and 3) *critical reflection* - inquiring as (gestation of) belonging to the subject of inquiry. The strands share a conceptual parallel with my reasons for making the film project, i.e. *articulation of loss: memoir, transcendence: practice, new beginnings:*

critical reflections. Concrete connections between the film and the thesis become visible in *documentation of practice*. (See 1.2)

For the organization of the strands, I have taken inspiration from *The Argonaut* by Maggie Nelson. I will interweave the strands of texts via specific configurations of paragraphs/paragraph transitions. (See 2) I intend to write for both an audience within the Piet Zwart Institute and one outside of the academic institution (whom I will reach by publishing or self-publishing).

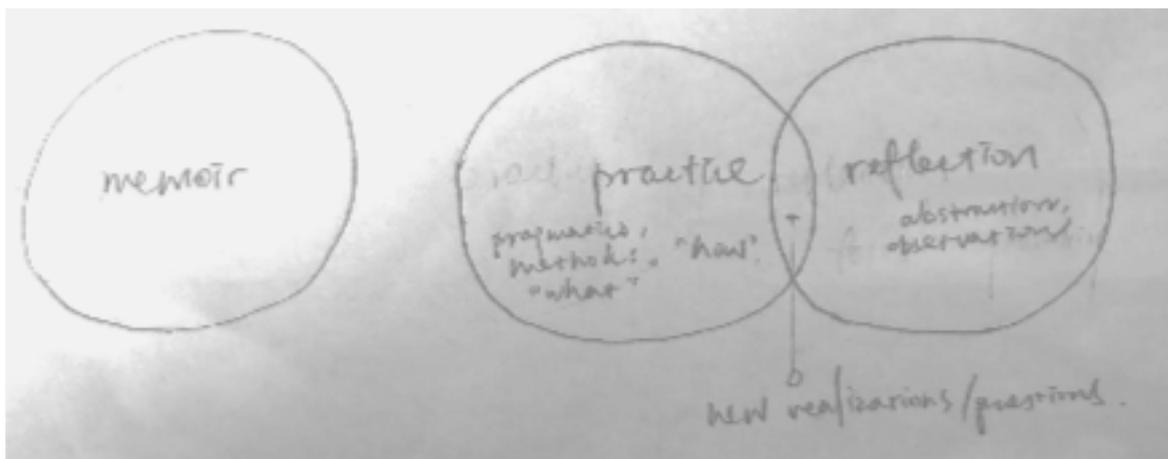


Fig 1. Three strands of text

1.1 Memoir

Despite having lived there for nearly a decade, I had to leave the US due to visa regulations in 2016. My rootlessness coincided with a stroke my grandfather suffered. The man who named at birth and who gifted me a DSLR camera when I was young was now immobile.

I was good at English before I knew it would be the language of home. Shortly after moving to the US for college, English became my primary language for writing, thinking and dreaming. My madarin Chinese and Shanghainese, so-called mother tongues, retrograded.

Alas, what I chose and indeed came to love, I lost. My travels and affliction after the US led to my decision to move to the Netherlands and enrol in the Lens-Based Master's program. I brought with me a 35mm film camera owned by my grandfather, who — come to think of it — never told me what happened to him during the Cultural Revolution. *Did he point his camera to the pink sky so that he did not have to look at the sanguine violence dripping around him like melting iron? Through the same viewfinder, I squint my eyes at the lowland clouds. Is this my home now?*

1.2 Documentation of practice

I elaborate on an essay I wrote during my first year at PZI. *If the repeated act means anything, it spreads existence — and the anxiety, contemplation, peace thereby — across the most mundane tasks.* In this strand, I expand on the methods and decision-making in my filmmaking practice.

Unlike text, a medium I have been familiar with since adolescence, filmmaking is new to me. In the first year of the Master's, faced with the influx of new production-based knowledge, I inflicted a penance by refraining from the methods/skills I had as a writer (especially scriptwriting). This resulted in a sort of suffering in my research, as it was filled with epistemological uncertainty, a love-hate relationship with chance and blind faith.

However, through the methods I developed during the first year, I have become a metaphorical host or guest for each film shoot. I foster trust, ease and comfort. I remain humble, curious and listening. Meditating on the new discoveries from and insufficiencies of my previous approach, I decided to incorporate my writing knowledge as I continue to develop my voice as a filmmaker. It has become clear that filmmaking has cast new light on how I write, both creatively and critically.

1.3 Critical Reflection

I make observations on the process of image-making in text and film and make an attempt to clarify the relationship between image and meaning. My main inquiries are:

How does an image move someone?

Perhaps by a different measure, how does an image embody meaning?

When does an image evoke empathy?

These inquiries are informed by my own practice as well as readings of feminist film theory. A longitudinal reading of Laura Mulvey's essays published from 1975 till 2015 has affirmed my position to maintain a subjective, almost radically personal, approach — by observing how my own memory, narrative/narrativity and aesthetics (*appearances*, as John Berger calls it) interconnect. For the scope of the thesis, I neither participate in nor criticize the discourses that hinge on psychoanalytic, Marxist or Perician/Lacanian frameworks.

My practice in filmmaking has made me more aware of how I use words to construct images. As such, I will investigate two kinds of scenes. First, those that I have created in my films: for example, the activity of coffee-making in my graduation project and the hands in my short film *Seek* (2019). Second, those that have resided in me over the years and that I rewrite for the memoir, including: a cabin I have never visited, lemons and the sky from my childhood. These lead to more specific questions:

Am I translating the voice of a writer to that of a filmmaker?

How do I convey meaning: with language or with image?

How does each procedure of filmmaking (composing an image, blocking a shot, editing) express, interpret or change a feeling?

I will refer to close readings of films and theories that have helped me further these lines of thought. As I write out this part of the thesis, I hope to define my personal grammar within the poetics of film.

Note: I would like to discuss with Natasha how much abstraction I can — or rather, should — reach within the given word limit with integrity. I have noted the following discourses as relevant, but have not read much of them: life writing, autotheory, phenomenology, new materialism (Deleuzian), haptic visuality (Laura Marks).

2. Organization



Fig 2a. Memoir as the spine

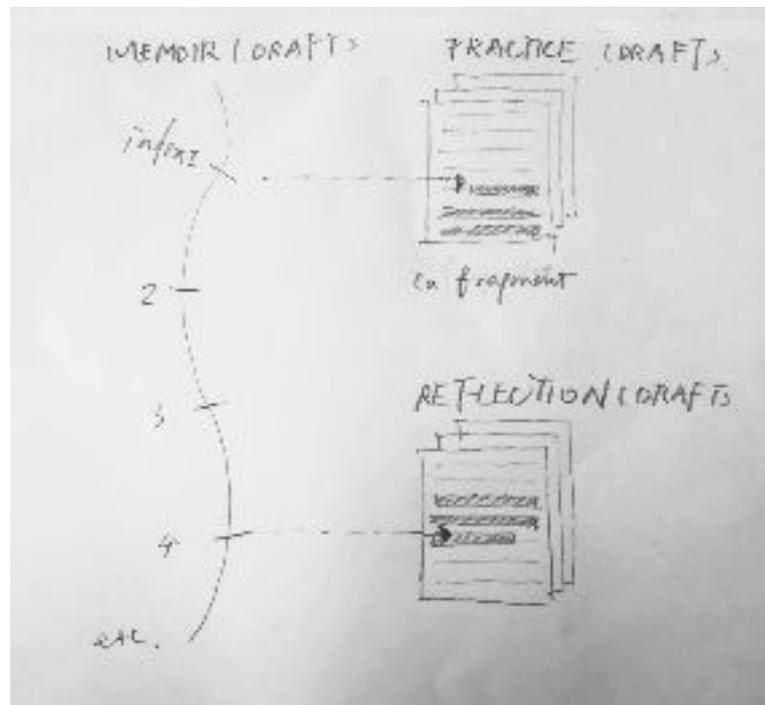


Fig 2b. Memoir and the indexing of the other texts

In the generative phase, I use the memoir as the spine of the thesis. The memoir sets the tone, mode of address and pace for both narrative and critical writing. I have noticed transitions in the memoir that can flow into a

fragment from the other texts and have been marking those. The marks become preliminary indices for reading and re-reading references.

To weave the text together, I have been paying close attention to the configuration of paragraphs. I have noted a few strategies Nelson uses and intend to implement similar ones, such as:

- direct transitions from personal memory to critical observation from one paragraph to another, manifesting a process in which *memory provokes thought* (p60, Butler)
- leveling of non-critical writing (own or from others) and theories (own or from others) in the same paragraph when the boundaries between feelings and thinking are porous (p55, Bellamy)
- equalizing own critical thoughts and those from others in the same paragraphs, creating a nebula of equally significant observations (being a friend to a theorist, rather than a disciple, p48, Carson)

3. Milestones

I hope to complete a rough draft of the memoir with the indices and a portion of reflection by the end of November, seeing these are new texts I am developing. For the deadline of the first chapter (12/12), I plan to deliver more complete drafts of the memoir and reflection. I plan to work on the update of the text on practice once my graduation project solidifies more.

4. Keywords and References

Keywords

Memoir: *memory-image, exile, diaspora, loss*

Practice: *grief, self-understanding, longing, loneliness, care, ritual*

Reflection: *narrativity of image, affect evoked by memory, aesthetics as bond (between the self and others)*

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