Guest Editors’ Introduction

**Post-Screen Experiments**

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This themed issue presents a selection of contributions from the *Post-Screen Cultures/Practices* symposium held at London South Bank University in June 2016. It inaugurates what will become a new tradition of publishing an edition of the journal based on the annual MeCCSA Practice Network / *JMP* Practice Symposium. The 2016 symposium sought to explore the changing nature of our contemporary engagement with emergent screen-oriented technologies. The overarching theme to emerge was that the current moment is in some ways similar to the earliest days of cinema – a time of vibrant experimentation in which, while rejecting the fetishisation of technology and technological determinism, artists and media practitioners are grappling with emerging media forms and new technological contexts in order to harness their potential.

Setting the tone for the continuation of the discussion, Jill Daniels, one of the plenary speakers at the symposium, examines the experimental use of found footage by documentary makers, analysing her own film-making practice as well as that of Chantal Akerman from which it draws inspiration. The digital era, Daniels argues, has opened up new prospects as well as bypassing many of the practical and financial problems associated with using archival material. Part of what is new, Daniels shows, is that new technologies and practices are blurring former boundaries between film created specifically for different screens and settings — ‘the black box, the white cube, the mobile phone and the laptop’. Today’s more fluid media ecology allows new opportunities for experimental film-makers to discover fresh aesthetic possibilities, new meanings and new viewing experiences. A particularly unusual extension of the screen is described in Olga Venetsianou’s contribution, which traces the history of the cinematic projection system from early experimental film through the ‘Expanded Cinema’ artworks of the 1960s, drawing on Paul Virilio’s theorisation of the screen as recording a ‘lost dimension’ in its translation of three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional image. She explains how this history has inspired her own architectural practice, involving the innovative and unusual use of design principles based on ‘Expanded Cinema’ in an urban residential environment, understanding the occupants as viewers of, or participants in, the visual experience of their own home.

While Venetsianou’s approach to this architectural design challenge could be considered a form of ‘augmented reality’, other contributors engage with related debates about the possibilities afforded by the blending of the medium of virtual reality (VR) with film. As a storytelling medium VR is in its infancy. Yet it appears to offer the potential to satisfy a growing mass-appeal for unique, individualised immersive experiences. Its recent rebirth, with the launch of affordable stereoscopic head-mounted displays (including Google Cardboard, Samsung Gear VR and Facebook’s Oculus Rift) for the consumer market, has resulted in this nascent medium being taken up more widely as a tool for research and experimentation. Using narrative transportation theory as a bridge between filmmaking and VR, John Mateer explores the potential of adapting traditional film directing methods, used to promote ‘suspension of disbelief’, within cinematic VR. Analysing the opening Omaha Beach landing scene in *Saving Private Ryan*, he examines Steven Spielberg’s directorial choices and the various techniques he employs to guide the attention of the audience and transport them into the story world. Recognising the challenges of directing the gaze in a 360-degree VR film environment in which the viewer can look in any direction, and where the rules of continuity editing cannot be straightforwardly applied, Mateer considers established compositional techniques (including audio cues), and discusses how they might be utilised to guide the viewer’s gaze and thus enhance ‘presence’ in cinematic VR. He argues for the adoption of ‘organic’ directing, where the production methods employed serve to consistently maintain the internal logic and coherence of the story elements.

Immersive and interactive storytelling may be the latest buzzwords within the entertainment industry, but Eirini Konstantinidou offers a highly original speculation on the future of cinema, exploring how VR can affect human memory, create ‘artificial memories’ and thereby blur the boundaries between reality and fiction. Rather than attempting to theorise practice, she engages with existing critical and cultural theory on memory, identity and technology focusing on themes of ‘postmodern schizophrenia’ and ‘cyborgization’, and illuminates this theory through her research-led film practice. Using VR as a metaphor for memory, her experimental science fiction film-essay *Mmemophrenia* (the practical outcome of this process) is a filmic depiction of the workings of memory and its inherent properties, envisioning a future society where film achieves a complete simulation of reality, and ’artificial’ memories are generated that take on a life of their own. In adopting this approach, Konstantinidou attempts to create a two-way dialogue between theory and practice, harnessing practice to generate new insights and knowledge rather than simply embodying that knowledge.

A neglected aspect of VR is sound, although in film sound plays a vital role in enriching our cinematic experience by reinforcing diegetic realism. Referencing cinematic audio-visual theory centred on sound-image relations, Angela McArthur examines the treatment of sound in VR. Highlighting what is distinctive about this medium – namely spatial sound without a bounding frame, capable of directing the viewer towards points of interest by placing sound both relative to the viewer and to its visual source – she questions current practices in spatial sound design, which tend to focus predominantly on fidelity and diegetic realism in the interest of presence. Instead, McArthur points to the importance of aesthetics in the design of spatial sound in VR, and the need to consider the complex, multi-modal nature of perceptual processing and subjective experience. She presents an ‘experimental palette’, derived from a number of disciplines (including theories of embodied cognition and acoustic sound), as a set of speculative creative strategies for exploring the potential of sound in VR; these include experimenting with controlled and systematic sound-image incongruence to rupture viewer expectations, and the use of compositional techniques such as source-bonding and surrogacy.

If virtual or augmented reality has emerged as a key contemporary arena for dynamic experimentation with new modes of storytelling and meaning-making, another is surely the online world of networked culture. Exploring this territory, James Morris reflects on three collaborative experimental projects undertaken at Ravensbourne — working with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the London Symphony Orchestra, and universities in Singapore and Malaysia — to consider the digital disruption and reconfiguration of traditional media forms. Although the projects involve a reworking of older forms into new online media, Morris argues that this process is better understood in terms of Lev Manovich’s idea of ‘hybridisation’ rather than the more established notion of remediation. The Web is the ‘perfect vehicle’ for hybrid media content, he suggests, since all online media are translated into ‘data and algorithms performing functions on that data’, in a process of potentially infinite reconfiguration and recombination. Gaia Tedone grapples with the challenges that such limitlessness presents to researchers and curators, recounting her own methodological innovation in the field of the curation of networked images. The case-study experiment she presents is described in fascinating detail, telling the story of how a process of tracing the online circulation of a commercially-produced t-shirt image appropriated into an artistic context unexpectedly led to its re-commodification. The theoretical consequences for how we think about the curation of networked images are drawn out as a reflexive method of ‘online critical tracing’: a process of mapping how networked images shift and change as they move across different economic, political and cultural contexts online.

Taken together, the articles capture some of the current concerns and preoccupations of artists, media practitioners and practitioner-researchers. Unlike the early debates of the 1990s, which were dominated by the prediction that the new era of digital technology signalled the death of traditional media (i.e. photography), the contributions in this issue foreground the ‘boundary work’ that is underway, for example, between film and VR. Engaging with wide-ranging theoretical perspectives, the contributors develop novel if at times speculative approaches to practice in response to the frenetic, fast-paced technological change we are experiencing. The diverse strategies on offer reflect a desire to acquire new knowledge and understandings, and discover new modes of communication through practice.