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Netnographic Cinema as a Cultural Interface

By focusing on the notion of "interface", this journal issue invites an actualization of the debates sparked by Lev Manovich's 1997 essay "Cinema as a Cultural Interface",[1] a text that he later included in his reference book *The Language of New Media*.[2] This article contributes to this collective agenda by reflecting on the light that Manovich's theoretical proposition — to consider how the cinematic language became one of the basic means by which computer users access and interact with digital images, sounds and texts — sheds on a corpus of contemporary films that, for reasons I will expose below, I propose to identify as "netnographic" documentaries. These films are experimental nonfiction works that rely exclusively or principally on the appropriation of online contents (texts, images, videos or sounds, found on various online platforms), which the filmmakers re-edit so as to represent cinematically the social interactions in a given online community. Examples of such films include, to name only a few: all of Dominic Gagnon's recent films, most notably *of the North* (2015), which appropriates YouTube videos uploaded by members of different Indigenous communities inhabiting regions close to the North Pole; Grégoire Beil's *Roman national* (2018) and Shengze Zhu's *Present.Perfect* (2019), two films entirely made from screen recordings captured from different livestream applications in France and China; and Chris Kennedy's *Watching the Detectives* (2017), which documents the manhunt via the Reddit forum after the Boston marathon terrorist attacks in 2013, in the form of a silent slideshow, which the filmmaker transferred onto a 16mm film.

In bringing together netnographic films and Manovich's understanding of cinema as a "cultural interface", I am pursuing a double goal. On the one hand, I argue that Manovich's

1) Lev Manovich, 'Cinema as a Cultural Interface', *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2015), pp. 221–251.

2) Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).

theoretical framework offers an original way to approach this contemporary filmmaking practice, allowing specifically for a problematization of its cultural implications. Symmetrically, I also hope to show that focusing on these films can enrich our perception of what "cultural interfaces" are and what they do — thus allowing for an expanded understanding of Manovich's theory. This article is organized in three sections. First, I present briefly the notion of "netnographic" cinema, so as to expose the broader conceptual context of my explorations into this filmmaking practice. Secondly, as a way to acknowledge how these theoretical considerations have emerged from, and in return informed my own practice as a netnographic filmmaker, I propose a comparative analysis of two netnographic films made with the same original material but adopting almost opposite formal strategies for exploring this material cinematically: Penny Lane's *The Pain of Others* (2018), and a film that I made in response to her film, entitled *Watching the Pain of Others* (2019). Finally, I reflect on the resonance between netnographic cinema and the notion of "cultural interface", as defined by both Lev Manovich and Indigenous researcher Martin Nakata.

Ethnographic Filmmaking in the Digital Age

In order to introduce the notion of "netnographic" cinema, I first need to underline that the films that I propose to gather under this umbrella term have not been produced in the context of a research in social sciences, nor are their makers academic researchers. They are experimental films made by artists and are primarily distributed in the international film festival circuit. They thus do not belong to the corpus of ethnographic films in the most restricted sense, which according to Jay Ruby should ideally be only produced by "professional anthropologists, who use the medium to convey the results of their ethnographic studies and ethnological knowledge".[3] Nonetheless, I argue that it is productive to interpret the common gesture of these experimental films — to document an online community by appropriating and re-editing media produced by members of that community — in the light of the history of criticism and theoretical literature about ethnographic filmmaking. Therefore, I do not use the expression "netnographic cinema" as an ontological category designating a new genre, the borders of which I would claim to define assertively. My proposition consists rather in superimposing the idea of "ethnography" to these singular cinematic experiments, like an abstract figure drawn on a tracing paper placed over the films, as a way to observe what it may reveal from their respective aesthetic dispositifs. This approach was directly inspired by Catherine Russell's *Experimental Ethnography.* In this book, Russell revisits the history of experimental cinema in a search for "colonial and postcolonial forms of looking and documenting".[4] Referring to ethnography in relation to a corpus of films that were not identified as "ethnographic" by their makers nor by contemporary spectators is not an issue for her, as she argues that:

3) Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 1.

4) Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 18.

> Especially in cross-cultural viewing situations, many films take on ethnographic aspects, as "ethnography" becomes less of a scientific practice and more like a critical method, a means of "reading" culture and not transparently representing it.[5]

She writes that "ethnography provides a critical framework for shifting the focus from formal concerns to a recognition of avant-garde filmmakers' cultural investment and positioning".[6] It is a similar approach that I adopt when I propose to refer to these contemporary experimental films as "netnographic" films, i.e. ethnographic films depicting Internet-based social interactions. Far from suggesting that these films are effectively works of anthropology, I use the term to draw attention to the cultural positioning of the filmmakers in relation to their subjects, and to invite close readings of the ways in which this positioning informs and can be read in the very form of their films.[7]

Why is it productive to relate the above-described contemporary filmmaking practice to the history of ethnographic cinema? I propose a brief case-study. The film *Present.Perfect,* directed by Chinese-born, Chicago-based director Shengze Zhu and winner of the most prestigious prize (the Tiger Award) at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2019, is entirely made of videos that the director recorded from the three most popular livestream platforms in China. The images have been turned into black and white, and the chat window in which the online viewers could interact with the streamers (the "anchors") is left off the cinematic screen [Fig. 1]. Except for these modifications, the appropriated

Fig. 1: Still from *Present.Perfect* (Shengze Zhu, 2019)

5) Ibid., p. 23.
6) Ibid., p. 17.
7) The word "netnographic" is a convenient portmanteau word coined by Robert K. Kozinets in *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2010). However, the term has mostly been used in the context of marketing research, which is not the field in which I wish to contextualize my own work. I therefore kindly ask the reader to accept that the term is invested here with a different meaning than when first introduced.

images are allowed to play at length, mostly unedited. Sequence after sequence, one gets to witness snippets from the lives of several anchors as they stream from their workplace, walking down the streets where they live, or from the intimacy of their homes.

In an interview, the director explained that she wanted to explore "how people who feel isolated in real life can find support and community online".[8] Her use of the word "community" can raise questions, especially in the context of a discussion about ethnography, because much has been written about the use of that term in reference to the online environment. As early as 1993, Howard Rheingold defined virtual communities as

> social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on […] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.[9]

The evolution of digital platforms and the diversification of online interactions has since required a complexification of this definition. It would require more space than I have here to expose the details of the recent discussions on these matters; the fact that a film like *Present.Perfect* only shows the streamers, silencing the voices of their audiences without acknowledging that the vast majority of their spectators (the "lurkers"[10]) would never interact with them, should nonetheless prevent us from stating that the film straightforwardly "depicts the online community" defined by the use of these streaming platforms. In fact, most of the social practices that surround these platforms are left off screen. Nevertheless, Shengze Zhu seems more interested in depicting the anchors' desire to belong to a group than in producing a comprehensive description of how these platforms operate. *Present.Perfect* can therefore be perceived as a portrait of an imaginary, ideal community that both the streamers and Shengze Zhu herself seem to fantasize about, and which her film enacts for the duration of the screening.[11] In that sense, *Present.Perfect* can indeed be described as a film "concerned with the documentation of [the] culture" of a community — albeit virtual in many ways — which according to Catherine Russell is a defining component of the practice of ethnography.[12] In another interview, Shengze Zhu also declared:

> I've always been interested in seeing the world through the eyes of others. I want to know how people see their world, their perception of the world. The virtual streaming community is just like this — it unfolds itself through the lenses of different people from distinctive backgrounds.[13]

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8) Becca Voelcker, 'Interview: Shengze Zhu', *Filmcomment*, 1 February 2019. Online: <https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-shengze-zhu/>, [accessed 20 April 2020].

9) Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Addison-Wesley: Reading, 1993), p. 5.

10) Na Sun, Patrick Pei-Luen Rau, and Liang Ma, 'Understanding lurkers in online communities: A literature review', *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 38, September (2014), pp. 110–117.

11) For a definition of "community" by a subjective sense of "belonging together", see James Brow, 'Notes on Community, Hegemony, and the Uses of the Past', *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 65 (1990), pp. 1–5.

12) Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 34.

13) Daniel Eagan, '"Shows of Women Who Eat Bananas Seductively are Banned": Shengze Zhu on *Present. Perfect*', *Filmmaker Magazine*, May 17, 2020. Online: <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107526-shows-of-

This declaration of intention is very reminiscent of Bronisław Malinowski's oft-cited definition of the goal of ethnography: "to grasp the native's point of view, his [sic] relation to life, to realize his vision of his world".[14] In that sense, films such as *Present.Perfect* can be perceived as the ultimate realization of a dream that many ethnographers have pursued over the course of the 20th century: not only make a film about a community, or with the participation of that community, but produce a movie that would show the way that this community perceives and represents itself. This dream was perhaps never better articulated than by Jean Rouch, who in 1974 wrote:

> And tomorrow? Tomorrow will be the time of color video portapacks, video editing, of instant replay ("instant feedback"). The dreams of Vertov and Flaherty will be combined into a mechanical "cin-eye-ear" and of a camera that can so totally participate that it will pass automatically into the hands of those who were always in front of the lens.[15]

In this informed prophecy, Rouch connects the possibility of a truly participatory form of ethnography, in which the subjects would be able to manipulate the camera themselves, to the development of new, highly mobile technologies. In her prolific work on what she calls "indigenous media", Faye Ginsburg has later studied how the emergence of video cameras, and later the democratization of digital technologies, have indeed led many communities to develop their own practices of media production and distribution.[16] And as André Gunthert has observed, the proliferation of these highly mobile cameras has also "encouraged autophotography";[17] owners of smartphones tend to use them both for documenting what surrounds them and for filming themselves. For this reason, the media that online communities produce and exchange show not only how their members perceive the world but also how they wish to be presented to the world. Compiling these media into a feature film can therefore appear as the ideal, most truthful and non-biased way for an ethnographer to represent that community (both its image and its gaze) on a cinematic screen.

On the other hand, appropriating media produced by an online community can also be understood as reactivating what has over time been identified as the more problematic aspects of ethnographic filmmaking. According to Catherine Russell again:

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women-who-eat-bananas-seductively-are-banned-shengze-zhu-on-present-perfect>, [accessed 20 April 2020].

14) Bronisław Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Boston: Dutton, 1961), p. 25.

15) Jean Rouch, 'The Camera and Man', *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*', vol. 1, no. 1 (1974), p. 43. Cited in Jay Ruby, 'Speaking for, speaking about, speaking with, or speaking alongside: an anthropological and documentary dilemma', *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 44, no. 1/2 (1992), p. 53.

16) For a theoretical examination of that phenomenon, illustrated by the study of indigenous media groups in Central Australia, see Faye Ginsburg, 'Indigenous Media: Faustian Contract or Global Village?', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1991), pp. 92–112.

17) André Gunthert, 'La consécration du selfie. Une histoire culturelle', *Etudes photographiques*, vol. 32 (2015). Online: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3529>, [accessed 20 April 2020].

> The ideal ethnographic film is one in which social observation is presented as a form of cultural knowledge, but given the colonial context of the development of anthropology and its ethnographic branch, this "knowledge" is bound to the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and mastery implicit in colonial culture. The history of ethnographic film is thus a history of the production of Otherness.[18)]

The films that I identify as "netnographic" can be said to participate in this "production of Otherness" in two ways. First, the embedding of the appropriated, formerly interactive media in the cinematic dispositif produces an alienating effect. Once labelled as cinematic objects and projected onto a big screen, the images pulled from the Internet exhibit their "poorness",[19)] in a way that turns them into the mediatic "Other" of cinema itself. This idea can be illustrated by another quote of Shengze Zhu, who justified her fascination for livestream images by the fact that their makers:

> are not trained filmmakers or cinematographers. It's based on instinct in a way. They had no idea what aperture is or how to compose and frame an image. […] And because they don't know the rules, they can be very creative.[20)]

Online images are considered as mediatic "Others" by the professional filmmaker; one can then argue that to reframe them in a cinematic context amounts to extending this perception to all viewers, who are invited to appreciate their specific qualities with reference to how much they differ from other cinematic images. This quote also hints at the second dimension of the process of "Otherness production" that I argue is constitutive of this filmmaking practice: these films rely not only on the confrontation between two forms of mediatic practices — the legitimate art form of experimental cinema and popular new media — but also on the distinction between two groups of people. On the one hand, the people "out there",[21)] namely the members of the depicted online community, who are looked at, often without being given a chance to watch and criticize the finished film (for instance, Shengze Zhu confirmed in an unpublished interview that she chose not to send a full screener to the anchors whose images she appropriated in her film).[22)] On the other hand, the people "in here", experimental cinema lovers and professional festivalgoers, who watch the film from the safe vantage point of their cinema seats.

It could seem that my argument leads to a univocal dismissal of the practice of netnographic cinema. Yet my intention is very different. Because they have all been produced in the 21st century, at a time when awareness about identity politics and post-colonial theories has been widely spread across the intellectual landscape of the film industry in gener-

18) Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 34.
19) I am referring to Hito Steyerl's term "poor image", which characterizes the impoverished yet potentially liberating existence of low-resolution images in the online space. Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux journal*, vol. 10, no. 11 (2009). Online: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>, [accessed 20 April 2020].
20) Eagan, "Shows of Women Who Eat Bananas Seductively are Banned".
21) Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waves Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 35.
22) Personal conversation with the filmmaker at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in January 2019.

al and documentary cinema in particular, the films that I propose to call "netnographic" cannot be suspected of having been produced without any consideration paid to the ethics of cultural appropriation. It is impossible to imagine that today a filmmaker could appropriate media produced by members of a community to which she does not belong, make a whole feature film out of these media, and never question her relation to that community and the cultural implications of her creative project. Shengze Zhu herself has explained how these considerations informed her own production process, how eager she was to represent respectfully the anchors whose images she had appropriated, and to give credit to the different forms of labor that had gone into the production of their livestreams.[23] Therefore, my approach does not aim at revealing hidden aspects or unconscious biases that would have informed the production of these films, nor to argue that they are necessarily and automatically unethical. Conversely, I argue that it is precisely the fact that these questions are now on every filmmaker's mind that makes it so interesting and productive to observe how each of them negotiates the processes of "Otherness production" that cannot help but be part of their aesthetic project.

Two Different *Pains of Others*

At this point of my article, I need to acknowledge that my perspective on netnographic cinema is informed by the fact that I am myself a practitioner of this art form. I have in recent last years directed several films that I would call "netnographic", and my interest in this practice is therefore both theoretical and very practical. This probably explains why I am less inclined to criticize the unconscious ideological biases that may have informed the production of films such as *Present.Perfect* than to examine the creative solution that their makers have designed to work around these biases. I also find that adopting the perspective of a maker allows for a more generous appreciation of this filmmaking practice, as it helps appreciating practically the challenges that it raises. Before I move on to exposing the announced rapprochement between this filmmaking practice and Lev Manovich's notion of cinema as a "cultural interface", I would like to offer an interlude in the form of a comparative analysis of two films — one that I watched and one that I made. Hopefully, this double analysis will add flesh to the theoretical skeleton constructed in the first part of this article, and offer useful insights into the practical decisions that netnographic filmmakers have to make when trying to negotiate their relation to the members of the community that their film depicts.

The Pain of Others is a feature-length experimental documentary about a skin disease called "Morgellons", the existence of which has never been acknowledged by institutional medicine. According to doctors, it is a delusional disease, a psychological condition. As a response to this denial of existence of the disease by professional doctors, a community has emerged on YouTube and other online platforms, where Morgellons patients (mostly women) document their symptoms and exchange tips about how they deal with this sup-

23) See for instance Becca Voelcker, 'Interview: Shengze Zhu', *Film Comment*, 2019; or Eagan, "Shows of Women Who Eat Bananas Seductively are Banned".

Fig. 2: Still from *The Pain of Others* (Penny Lane, 2018)

posedly imaginary illness. The film of Penny Lane is entirely made of videos found on YouTube: vlogs by Morgellons patients [Fig 2], and clips from television programs in which professional doctors explain their reasons for denying the existence of the disease.

When I first watched it, the film left a strong impression on me. The main reason for this was Lane's refusal to formulate a definitive answer about the "reality" of the disease. By juxtaposing the discourses of the patients and that of the doctors, and by carefully constructing her edit in such a way that neither one nor the other side would have the final word, the filmmaker delegates to her spectators the responsibility to reach their own conclusion about the films' subject matter.

I soon decided to make my own netnographic film, re-appropriating both Lane's film and other original media that I found online, so as to explore my spectatorial experience with this work of netnographic cinema. I saw this as a way to respond to Lane's implicit invitation that each spectator should decide for herself the meaning of the images that compose her film. I also hoped that exposing the complexity of my own responses to the film's imagery and multi-layered discourses would allow my viewers to reflect critically and performatively upon their own spectatorial mechanisms. Quoting Brad Haseman,[24] Catherine Grant writes that performative research can be described as:

> research performed in the same medium or mode as the subject of the research, that is — in the case of film, television, audiovisual artworks, or internet videos — *audiovisually*.[25]

24) Brad Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, vol. 118, no. 1 (February 2006), pp. 98–106.

25) Catherine Grant, 'The audiovisual essay as performative research', *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2016). Online: <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-audiovisual-essay-as-performative-research/>, [accessed 20 April 2020].

Here, the subject of my research was the spectatorial experience invited by Penny Lane's film; therefore, studying it performatively meant producing a new spectatorial experience, which would hopefully be critical and reflexive enough that it would allow my viewers to distance themselves both from the film and from my take on it. This resulted in the production of a 31-minute film entitled *Watching the Pain of Others*, which is available online.[26] I adopted for this film an aesthetic strategy that is very different from that of Lane's film; this formal discrepancy, and the two ethical stances it reveals, is what I would like to elaborate on here. I will especially focus on two aspects in which the films strongly depart from one another: the decision (not) to show the online interfaces in which the appropriated videos were originally embedded and the choice (not) to position ourselves as protagonists within our respective films.

As Richard Brody has remarked, Lane's film is fundamentally "observational".[27] Similar in that sense to *Present.Perfect*, the film appears as a linear edit of online videos that fill the cinematic screen, and are allowed to play at length, leaving a lot of time and space for the protagonists to express themselves on camera. Lane's own voice is never to be heard. Her editing style is somewhat reminiscent of the approach to ethnographic filmmaking that Roger Sandall and Colin Young conceptualized in the 1970s under the expression of "observational cinema", which aimed at documenting as transparently as possible the everyday life of the filmed subjects without imposing the filmmaker's interpretation onto the images.[28] Lane seems to have followed the lead of the photographer Garry Winogrand, who reportedly declared: "I have nothing to say. I believe the event is better than any ideas I could have about it."[29] Or, in Lane's own terms:

> If you think about the different varieties of found footage filmmaking: I wasn't making a clever collage. I wasn't juxtaposing two clips to create new meaning or making a supercut of the things that everyone always says in Morgellons videos. None of that was happening and that was very conscious because I was treading very carefully an ethical [line of what] I thought was okay to do and it felt important to accurately represent the content of these videos, so I wanted my editing to be as unobtrusive as possible.[30]

Overall, her film appears to be extremely respectful of the media it appropriates, allowing for an immersive and empathetic understanding of the lived experience of Morgellons sufferers. Conversely, I adopted for my own film a "desktop documentary" approach, which can only be described as an "obtrusive" editing strategy. This filmmaking style was

26) Chloé Galibert-Laîné, 'Watching the Pain of Others', *[in]Transition. Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2019). Online: <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/watching-pain-others>, [accessed 20 April 2020].

27) Richard Brody, 'Highlights from the 2018 Maryland Film Festival', *The New Yorker*, May 2018.

28) Colin Young, 'Observational Cinema', in Paul Hockings (ed.), *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1975), pp. 99–114.

29) Quoted in Roger Sandall, 'Observation and Identity', *Sight and Sound Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 41 (1972), pp. 192–196.

30) Stephen Saito, 'Interview: Penny Lane on Keeping Up Appearances with "The Pain of Others"', *The Moveable Fest*, June 2018. Online: <http://moveablefest.com/penny-lane-pain-of-others/> [accessed April 20 2020].

pioneered by artists such as Nick Briz (*Apple Computer*, 2013) and Kevin B. Lee (*Transformers: The Premake*, 2014), and can be described as a sub-category of the cinematic genre that has grown to be called "desktop cinema". They are films that take place on the desktop of a computer (or even more recently, a tablet or a smartphone) and rely on screen recordings instead of filmed images. Examples of feature-length fiction films made in this style include *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014), *Searching* (Aneesh Chaganty, 2018) and *Profile* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2018).

As could be seen in Fig. 2, the YouTube graphic interface is entirely absent from Penny Lane's film; the appropriated videos play on the full screen, without any visual reference to their online origins (no title, no viewcounts, no URL). Conversely, I staged my research story on the screen of my computer and re-framed the appropriated material back into its original platforms. In showing not only the YouTube graphic interface but also my entire desktop, I tried to exhibit the multi-layering of frames and contexts in which all the media that I was analyzing were embedded: the videos of Morgellons patients, but also Penny Lane's film itself, which I watched on the online platform Vimeo [Fig. 3].

This made sense to me because I wanted to compare the intellectual and affective responses that were triggered by the same footage, depending on whether it was perceived as a YouTube video or as a cinematic sequence. Therefore, I hoped that the desktop documentary approach would invite a reflection on the influence of frames and graphic interfaces on the meaning of online media. In the context of this comparison between Lane's and my own creative decisions, it appears that this difference between our approaches was not as motivated by a disjunction between our respective ethical guidelines as it was justified by a divergence in our goals and interests for (or what in another context we would call our "research questions" about) the appropriated media.

Beyond this decision (not) to show the online interfaces in which the appropriated media was originally embedded, I also wish to comment on the fact that Penny Lane does

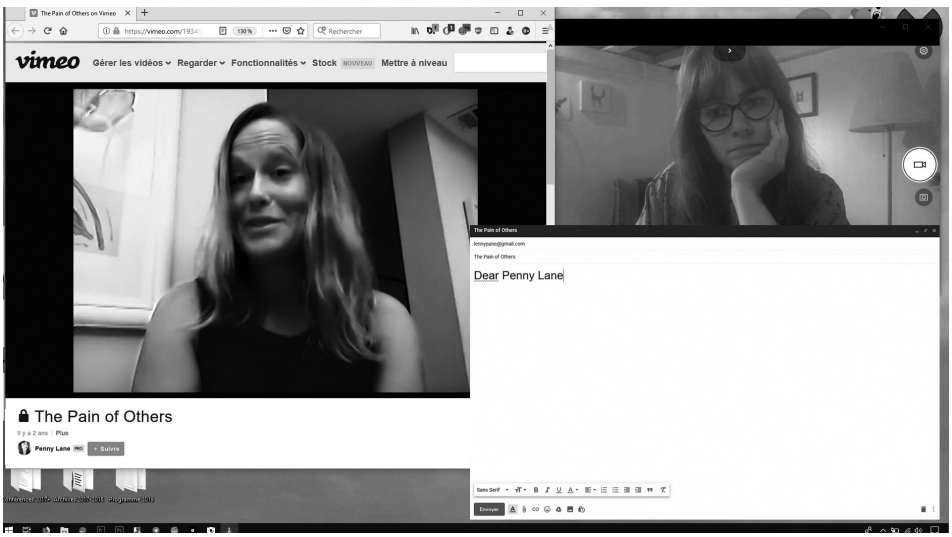

Fig. 3: Still from *Watching the Pain of Others* (Chloé Galibert-Laîné, 2019)

not appear as a character in her own film, whereas I chose to present myself as the narrator of my research story. There is a long tradition of essay films being narrated by their makers, as well as cinematic autoethnographies in which the filmmaker appears on-screen.[31] The history of literature about ethnographic cinema is again a useful point of reference to reflect upon this approach. It is precisely for its apparent lack of reflexivity that the "observational" approach was criticized in the 1980s by authors who called for a "more self-conscious ethnographic cinema that acknowledged the conditions of its own making".[32] Considering this history raises interesting questions about Penny Lane's decision to adopt an observational approach for *The Pain of Others*, especially as she appeared on screen in her short documentary *The Abortion Diaries* (2005) and is currently working on an autobiographical essay film in which her voice should play an important narrative role.[33] Therefore, her decision to do neither of these things in *The Pain of Others* cannot be considered a default choice. For my own film, following the methodological recommendations of post-colonial ethnographers,[34] I decided that it was important to be as transparent as possible about the vantage point from which I was engaging with these media (which is informed by my gender, age, cultural background, education…), as well as to acknowledge my role as a participant in the online environment that I was documenting. Because so much of my film is about the attention economy of online platforms, and how far Morgellons YouTubers are willing to go to be visible within these platforms, it seemed important to acknowledge that my research was also contributing to that economy: my clicks were adding views to YouTube's counters, hence favoring the visibility of the videos that I was researching. This can be related to Christine Hine's observation that

> the online ethnographer is always, in some sense, a participant, in that in order to be present in online spaces the ethnographer has to use the same technologies that participants are using.[35]

But to me the most interesting dimension of this aesthetic dilemma (whether or not to become a protagonist of one's netnographic film) relates, once again, to its ethical implications. In the above-quoted interview, Lane declared that her decision to "stay out of it" was related to her considerations of what she thought was "okay to do" with the appropriated material. In other words, she favored a way of editing that she felt was most respectful of

31) See for instance in Nora Alter, *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); or the last chapter of Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

32) Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, 'Rethinking Observational Cinema', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2009), p. 541. For an early and oft-cited formulation of this criticism against observational cinema, see David MacDougall, 'Beyond Observational Cinema', in *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (La Hague, 1975), pp. 115–132.

33) Information about this ongoing project can be found here: Online: <https://catapultfilmfund.org/films/ConfessionsOfAGoodSamaritan/>, [accessed 20 April 2020].

34) Especially the above-mentioned book by Trinh T. Minh-Ha, but also other works such as Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

35) Christine Hine, 'Ethnographies of Online Communities and Social Media: Modes, Varieties, Affordances', in Nigel G. Fielding, Raymond M. Lee and Grant Blank (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017), p. 415.

the people who appeared in the media that she appropriated, which led her not to impose her own ideas or interpretations onto the footage. But the very same ethical concern led me to make the opposite decision. Instead of disappearing behind the footage, I chose to present myself in the same way that the Morgellons YouTubers present themselves in their videos: as a vulnerable, embodied, gendered figure, whose authority comes more from the authenticity of her voice than the scientificity of her discourse.

My objective is not to argue in favor of one or the other approach. I did not develop my own approach as a way to compensate for eventual limitations of Lane's film but precisely because I was provoked by the powerfulness of its observationality. However, I find it interesting that similar ethical concerns can lead to such diverse formal strategies, depending on both the makers' sensibilities and the epistemological framework within which they wish for their films to operate. I hope this serves as an exemplification of the importance to consider the aesthetic dispositifs of netnographic films in the light of the cultural positioning that they reveal. The final part of this essay will pursue this idea further, complementing the theoretical framework presented above with reflections inspired by a revisitation of Lev Manovich's classic article "Cinema as a Cultural Interface".

The Cultural Interface

Bringing the discussion back to a more theoretical ground, I can now expose the mutual illumination that I argue is produced by bringing together the corpus of netnographic cinema and Lev Manovich's notion of cinema as a "cultural interface". It may help to first recall briefly the scope and structure of Manovich's argument. In his 1997 article, the author develops the idea that over the decades cinema has contributed to the formation of a specific perceptive attitude which, despite it being historically linked to canonical works and to a specific technological dispositif (the projection on a big screen), it is now possible to exercise in other contexts, and in relation to other media objects. This idea is based on the observation of a historical tendency that makes "cultural forms" gradually dissociate from the type of "data" with which they were first associated. As an example, Manovich writes that during the 1990s, the computer stopped being a *tool* and became a *medium*, as it was no longer employed only to produce certain specific types of contents but had evolved to allow access to a wide range of "cultural data" (digital encyclopaedias, video games, digitized works of art, etc.). Manovich states that parallel to this evolution, it is possible to "see that the printed word and cinema also can be thought of as interfaces, even though historically they have been tied to particular kinds of data".[36] Specifying this idea, he adds:

> Today, as media is being "liberated" from its traditional physical storage media — paper, film, stone, glass, magnetic tape — the elements of printed word interface and cinema interface, which previously were hardwired to the content, become "liberated" as well. […] No longer embedded within particular texts and films, these organizational strategies are now free floating in our culture, available for use in new con-

36) Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, p. 83.

> texts. In this respect, printed word and cinema have indeed became interfaces — rich sets of metaphors, ways of navigating through content, ways of accessing and storing data.[37]

Since the exclusivity that linked the filmic object to the cinematic medium (defined in turn by the material medium of film, the cinema theater, the social practice of attending a screening) has been destabilized, and movies can now be experienced through the interface of a computer, Manovich argues that it is necessary to rethink not only what has long been called "film" but also what "cinema" has been and can continue to be. He therefore proposes not to consider cinema as a corpus of canonical works but as a way of experiencing audiovisual objects; as a certain "way of navigating" through images and sounds, wherever they may come from and whatever their material and technological format.

And what do netnographic films do if not invite us to watch online media *cinematically?* To mobilize, in front of images that were originally produced for online consumption, the specific "way of navigating through content", the focused form of attention that we have learnt in movie theaters? By appropriating online images and turning them into a cinematic work, netnographic filmmakers propose a "relocation"[38] of the cinematic experience. The effect of this relocation is that these media, which were meant to be encountered in the context of a networked computer-based or smartphone-based platform, are now perceived as cinematic objects. This is the first reason why thinking of cinema as a "cultural interface" is particularly relevant in the context of netnographic cinema. By definition, the term "interface" designates the limit between two (or more) distinct systems; the interface is a space of encounter between several domains with different properties, between which it conditions the possibility of exchanges and interactions. Because they approach online media from the tradition of experimental cinema, netnographic films explore in a sense the interface between the same two "cultural forms", whose interactions and respective influences Manovich was trying to map in his 1997 article. His goal was to describe how the language of 20th century cinema had shaped the media of the 21st century; netnographic films explore the opposite trajectory, borrowing audiovisual material that was originally produced in a "new media" context and shaping it into a cultural object — a film — that very much respects the conventions of 20th century cinema. But in both cases, what is at stake is the idea that cinema can usefully be understood as a perceptual mode that can be activated in relation to non-cinematic audiovisual objects, and therefore can serve an interface to engage with online media.

Yet there is another reason why it is productive to bring together netnographic filmmaking practices and Manovich's understanding of cinema as a "cultural interface". The first part of my essay showed that the main characteristic of netnographic films is that they explore the possible encounters between two different communities that have their own distinctive sets of media practices and cultural systems: the online community that the films depict and the community of their makers and spectators. I have argued that this as-

37) Ibid.

38) Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

pect of netnographic filmmaking invites a rapprochement with the oft-commented ethical and ideological challenges raised by the practice of ethnography, understood here as "an experimentation with cultural difference and cross-cultural experience",[39] which has historically taken place in colonial contexts. Yet already in his 1997 article, comparing the "interface" to a semiotic code, Manovich wrote:

> In cultural communication, a code is rarely simply a neutral transport mechanism; usually it affects the messages transmitted with its help. For instance, it may make some messages easy to conceive and render others unthinkable. A code may also provide its own model of the world, its own logical system, or ideology.[40]

Manovich underlines that interfaces are shaped by ideologies: adopting his model in relation to netnographic films therefore invites an acute observation of the ideological biases that inform not only the content of these films, but their very form. Therefore, thinking of netnographic cinema as cultural interface allows for the formulation of the following question, which resonates very directly with the questions evoked in the first part of my article: when online images are turned into an experimental feature film that will in turn be distributed at international film festivals, into what ideology is the appropriated media shaped? Or perhaps more importantly, into *whose* ideology is the appropriated media shaped?

This leads me to a second, perhaps lesser-known reference, that can usefully expand our understanding of what it means to consider cinema, and specifically netnographic cinema, as a "cultural interface". Martin Nakata is an Australian scholar from the Torres Strait Island who works in the field of Indigenous Education. In his 2007 book *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines*, Nakata in turn mobilizes the notion of the "Cultural Interface" (which he capitalizes) to describe the space in which Indigenous people live. He describes the Cultural Interface as a space where confronting and potentially mutually exclusive systems of knowledge co-exist; specifically, the cultural system that Torres Strait Islanders inherited from their ancestors and to which each new generation has made changes and the value system promoted by Western science, which still largely informs the institutions that govern their daily lives. It is obvious that Martin Nakata and Lev Manovich have conceptualized the notion of "Cultural Interface" in very different contexts, and had very different agendas in doing so; bringing together their respective theoretical models could therefore appear as an absurd exercise, insufficiently justified by the fact that they coincidentally used the same term to designate two very different objects. But because the issue of cultural appropriation is so clearly at the heart of the practice of netnographic cinema, I argue that conceptualizing these films as "cultural interfaces" requires to at least consider how that notion has been invested not only by Lev Manovich but also from the "standpoint"[41] of a researcher whose culture has been, and in different ways still is, the object of a process of colonization.

39) Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 18.
40) Manovich, 'Cinema as a Cultural Interface', p. 76.
41) Martin Nakata, 'Anthropological texts and Indigenous standpoints', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2 (1998), p. 3.

In his book, Nakata mobilizes the term "interface" as a substitute to the term "intersection", which he deems insufficient because it seems to describe a binary structure:

> Islanders in the Torres Strait […] operate on a daily basis in a space that is commonly understood as the intersection between two different cultures […]. This position is often represented theoretically as a simple intersection of two different and often contesting elements that give rise to a 'clash of cultures', a 'cultural mismatch', 'cultural dissonance' or the dominance of one culture over the other.[42)]

Conversely, the term "interface" is described as more appropriate because it suggests a more complex web of interacting agents:

> The Cultural Interface […] is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions […]. It is also a space that abounds with contradictions, ambiguities, conflict and contestation of meanings that emerge from these various shifting intersections.[43)]

Nakata warns against the simplistic perspective of thinking the cultural interface as a place of confrontation between two incompatible systems; instead, he invites the development of alternative conceptual tools that would allow us to break out from the dichotomous paradigm separating one community from another. Stressing the "multidimensional" and fundamentally "ambiguous" nature of the interface, he emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the specific ways in which the abstract "contradictions" between the two cultural universes it brings into contact (as well as the contradictions that exist within each of them) may be actualized in a given situation. In his view, only a careful attention paid to the details of the interactions that happen at the interface may capture the complexity of its structure.

Conclusion

Transposed to the study of netnographic cinema, the perspective of Manovich and Nakata makes it possible to formulate a firmer theoretical understanding of their interfacial structure. I argue that articulating Manovich's and Nakata's views allow for the formulation of the following three ideas:

1) Netnographic cinema can be understood as a cultural interface to the extent that it produces a space of encounter between different social worlds, between their systems of beliefs and knowledge and their respective forms of media expression.

42) Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines* (Acton: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), p. 322.
43) Ibid., p. 323.

2) As interfaces are never ideologically neutral, it is indispensable to question the cultural, social, and aesthetic values that inform how online content is shaped and transformed in netnographic cinema.
3) Netnographic films, like other cultural interfaces, are "multi-layered and multi-dimensional spaces of dynamic relations". It is therefore necessary to pay attention, in our analyses of these films, to the complexity of their aesthetic dispositifs, without simplifying them into a binary opposition between the filmmaker and the Internet users whose media are appropriated.

The double objective of this article was to reactivate Lev Manovich's theory of cinema as a "cultural interface" by bringing it in a dialogue with Martin Nakata's views on the same notion and to propose an original angle to approach a new, fast-growing filmmaking practice, which interests me both theoretically and practically. The expression "netnographic cinema" was proposed to designate that filmmaking practice, to underline how much it inherits from both the highest aspirations and the most difficult challenges of ethnographic cinema. Thinking of netnographic films as "cultural interfaces" (this notion being understood at the intersection between Manovich's and Nakata's models) works as an invitation to observe how their formal dispositifs are informed by, and in turn condition, the multilayered cultural relations between the filmmaker and her cinematic practice on the one hand and the depicted community and their media practices on the other. As a practitioner, I find that this theoretical framework raises compelling creative challenges, in that it underlines the importance of designing our films so that they acknowledge the complexity of their own appropriative dispositifs. As a spectator, I cannot wait to see what new strategies future filmmakers and artists will invent to address and displace these challenges.

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SUMMARY

Netnographic Cinema as a Cultural Interface

Chloé Galibert-Laîné

This article introduces the notion of "netnographic cinema" and contextualizes this contemporary filmmaking practice in the light of Lev Manovich's 1997 article "Cinema as a Cultural Interface". First, I present a corpus of contemporary experimental films that are entirely made of appropriated online media and argue that it is productive to interpret this new filmmaking practice in the light of the history of ethnographic cinema. The second part of the article offers a comparative close-analysis of two netnographic films made from the same online material, but adopting different formal strategies for representing that material: Penny Lane's feature-length *The Pain of Others* (2018), and a medium-length desktop documentary that I produced in response to Lane's film, entitled *Watching the Pain of Others* (2019). Finally, a third part articulates why such "netnographic" films can be understood as "cultural interfaces", as defined by both Lev Manovich and Indigenous scholar Martin Nakata. The results of the article are twofold: an original theoretical angle is proposed to approach a contemporary filmmaking practice, which is described from the perspective of a practitioner; and a classic article by Lev Manovich is revisited and actualized with considerations to recent developments in the field of Post-Colonial and Indigenous Studies.

keywords: Experimental Cinema, Online Ethnography, Lev Manovich, Cultural Appropriation, Videographic Research