Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 24, 2022, pp. 168–74
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.12

"Left to My Own Devices, I Probably Could": Reflections on Inclusive Pedagogy and Gender Equity During Melbourne's Pandemic Lockdown

Victoria Duckett and Liz Baulch

Abstract: *Developing Heide Schlüpmann's 2013 article, "An Alliance Between History and Theory", we argue that the home provides the historic and theoretic foundation for cinema's sense of perceptual play, and that it is also a contemporary and productive site for feminist filmmaking. Using our reflections as educators who experienced distance teaching during the Covid-19 lockdown in Melbourne, we explore how working from and within the home unexpectedly revealed new pathways to feminist pedagogy and progress. We reflect on how the home became a site of creative play, where women were forced to make movies with what they had at hand. The mobile phone or prosumer camera became, in this context, a device to be technologically exploited and used in film production. Linking this to wider developments in smartphone use in filmmaking today, we argue that 2020 was a year in which the home was not necessarily a site of entrapment.*

Figure 1: House play: film production in lockdown. Photo courtesy Liz Baulch.

When students were forced into their homes in 2020 and 2021 because of Covid-19 lockdowns in Melbourne, we noted a change in their engagement with technology. Students were forced to navigate new ways of making film in the context of a sustained stay at home. There were no crews of undergraduate students making work; each individual had to shoot their own film and tasks on an iPhone, an android mobile phone, or a DSLR, assisted by weekly classes and seminars, as well as a series of instructions and links online. The domestic space, becoming a place of observation, experimentation and filmic play, was newly central to teaching and learning. The home became newly cinematic, both as a site for the literal making of film assignments, and as a place where creative, perceptual play was encouraged and even enabled. This paper reflects on the experience of teaching filmmaking from a distance, at home, and during lockdown. It draws on German theorist and feminist Heide Schlüpmann's 2013 article, "An Alliance Between History and Theory". In this article, Schlüpmann focuses on the transitional cinema of the 1910s. In simple terms, this transitional period saw the cinema move from expressing a more exhibitionist mode of display to the longer narrative development of screen content. Schlüpmann argues that, instead of historicising film in terms of canonical "Great Men" (as directors) and in passive reception (where meaning lies in the "text" of the film itself), we can today review this transitional period of the cinema in terms of feminist agitation and advocacy.

Taking into account the development of film narrative through editing, as well as the increased presence of women in the cinema theatre, Schlüpmann proposes that feminist agitation is regarded in terms of play and fun. As Schlüpmann explains, women were mothers enabling children to play in the home and they were wives facilitating sexual play with their husbands at home. Women were also, as we know, marginal observers to outside, external patriarchal institutions, whose reality they could not experience as citizen-participants. Because of this collective mix of female "play" residing in and emerging from the home, female experience and perception in the early twentieth century was remarkably cinematic. Women, in other words, enjoyed an abstract and fragmented perception of the outer world; inside the home, in contrast, they skilfully navigated an array of realities and perceptual possibilities. Women playfully mediated their social surroundings and their changing place within this. What is refreshing about Schlüpmann's argument for us today, particularly as film teachers rewriting assignments for the changed reality of lockdown, is not only the central role she brings to female spectators as participants in film history, but the fact that feminism emerges playfully in the space of the home.

"An Alliance Between History and Theory" is important because it also theoretically expands the ways we can insert women into film history and discussions of film today. Schlüpmann argues that theorists of cinema divide and fragment film history into teleological periods or movements, and that these fail to take into account how women enjoyed watching film, and how women enabled the cinema's playful fragmentation of reality. As Schlüpmann states, film theory has been traditionally driven by a "dichotomous way of thinking". Separating the looker from the object that is looked at, the film narrative from the cinematic reader, and the film artist/director from the spectator, film theory has hierarchically determined how and who creates meaning with film. Play, in contrast, is "a mediation, an intermediate zone" that allows both film and the audience to find their place through dialogue and exchange. In Schlüpmann's view, the cinema is best conceived in this way: "Its origins, the bourgeois home; its technical prerequisite, film. Its historical realization, the entrance of the actress in film and the female audience into the cinema" (18).

Teaching Film During Covid-19 Lockdown in Melbourne

We develop Schlüpmann's idea that early cinema enabled a participatory, first-wave feminist experience of playful perception. We bring Schlüpmann's observations to bear on our reflections on the new learning and teaching conditions in Melbourne during the lockdowns that began in March 2020, and that were still in place at the end of second semester in October 2021. In our view, teaching film from the home enabled a similarly "transitional", fluid, mobile, and playful cinema to emerge, at least through our own pedagogic practice, and through our students' (both male and female) submitted assignments. In this period of change, domestic play was reframed and newly re-presented to audiences through our requirement that students make smart-phone films for their class assignments. Across a range of different units—a first-year introduction to filmmaking class, a first-year film history survey class, and a more advanced third-year Australian film history class and a graduate narrative filmmaking workshop—we asked our students to make films from home. Time limits were always given; these extended from a minimum of fifty seconds to a maximum of six minutes. We call these our "*haus*" films, after Schlüpmann's provocative article. If we were to think of these assignments in terms of a teaching manifesto, we would place the home as our spatial limitation, with the smartphone as the technological "limit" of the camera (more on this below).

When we decided to focus our teaching on the smartphone, we had a body of relevant films that students could watch. We were excited, for example, by the work of filmmakers such as Victoria Mapplebeck, who skilfully uses the iPhone to explore and explode domestic space in such celebrated works such as *Missed Call* (2018) and *160 Characters* (2015). The more literally explosive work of feminists such as Chantal Akerman also interested us, particularly her student film, *Blow Up My Town* (*Saute ma ville*, 1968). The peripatetic and often humorous gaze of Agnès Varda in films such as *Cléo from 5 to 7* (*Cléo de 5 à 7*, 1962) and *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, 2000) was also important to us. We traced the fragmentation that Schlüpmann perceptually locates in the *haus* and in the playful thrill of our female experience of film through the shifting forms of Varda's individual shots, which are often also viewed kaleidoscopically through women and the home.

While there was much material we could draw upon, it was not made in lockdown conditions, and was emerging from established makers abroad. Our situation was specific to remote teaching and filmmaking in Melbourne, where online learning and domestic space interconnected to become a powerful leverage for classroom change. On the one hand, this paper is therefore about what we had to do as two film teachers faced with roughly a week to "transition" our students online. On the other hand, this paper is also a theoretical provocation that draws upon our aim to agitate our own thinking as teachers. Schlüpmann locates the famous Danish actress Asta Nielsen as her example of a woman who mediates public and private spaces through her use of film in the teens. As a cofounder of the Kinothek Asta Nielsen in Germany, Schlüpmann has spent productive decades demonstrating that Nielsen (and other women, working in other genres and periods of film) make history "accessible through the experience of the film" (Kinothek Asta Nielsen). We instead focus on the work of our students, experimenting with teaching in the home today. We ask: can the cinema re-emerge, via the smart phone and through online learning, from the home as a site of feminist play?

Looking Back: A Note on Context

As educators who teach film at Deakin University—a university that is aligned with regional visibility, inclusive pedagogy, and is one of the pioneers of online learning in Australia—we would ideally present our student films made in pre-Covid times as case studies in equity and diversity. The reality of what we face in the classrooms is, however, quite different. In filmmaking classes, women often stand back and let men direct group tasks. In introductory film history classes, where "feminist film" is a specific topic of study and where reading lists demonstrate the fact that women have not only made film but entered the academy as scholars—we are routinely returned assignments with male scholars and film directors cited as the only authorities available. The inverse is not true. That is, we are never returned assignments with only female directors and female academics cited. Moreover, and perhaps more worryingly, if a student decides to explore film from a feminist angle, it is rare to find a filmography and bibliography offered as evidence of feminist agency or capacity. There appears to exist a genuine ignorance about women's pioneering role in film history (and in twentieth-century film more generally), and a blindness to what might be included in discussions of female filmmaking. Important roles such as acting, editing, scriptwriting, cinematography etc. are often elided and overlooked in our student assignments. It is the director who is usually isolated and recognised as a film author, and this enabling author-director is usually male. This is the backdrop to our reflections on the change that the pandemic brought to our students' work.

Teaching Technology

What do we do when the prosumer cameras students use in their first-year assignments are no longer available to them? When lockdown was announced in Victoria in mid-March 2020, we could not lend cameras to students. We decided to teach filmmaking through the smartphone camera, which we assumed every student would have access to, and which, in terms of technical capacity, is very similar to the prosumer camera. As mentioned above, we knew that significant films have been made with the mobile phone, and that phone-driven film festivals have produced remarkable work and garnered critical attention for over a decade at least (IMFF; SF3; Mapplebeck). We were also aware that popular writers such as *IndieWire*'s Kate Erbland recognises the importance of the smartphone to filmmaking, and expects this trend to continue. Finally, we knew that the smartphone was being theorised in terms of experimental cinema, within different cultural contexts, as well as within university pedagogy. Hence, Paola Voci discusses cellflix (mobile phone movies) in relation to emergent trends in filmmaking in China, and proposes that we follow Laura Mulvey in thinking of these films as "other visual pleasures". For Voci, however, this pleasure is not feminist, but parodic "lightness"—with this lightness associating the cellflix with Milan Kundera, and so with literature. More locally, Max Schesler in 2020 discussed making a smartphone film assignment his first assignment in an experimental screen production unit at Swinburne University (Dooley et al.).

It is technology and its availability—and not feminism or Covid—that drives this commentary about smartphone use. As producer Adam Gee, cofounder with Victoria Mapplebeck of SMart, the first London International Smartphone Film Festival recently stated, "All you need is the vision and the talent. It is not a question any more of being able to afford the right equipment or securing a big distribution deal" (qtd. in Thorpe). As we note above, our online classes during the pandemic asked students to make film with their mobile phones and

followed traditional thinking in presuming access to this technology. However, unlike director Sean Baker, who decided to use a mobile phone for *Tangerine* (2015) due to budget constraints, when our students began their work with the phone it marked a significant break from their experience of traditional on-campus learning, and not a situation they chose. A series of related questions emerged: what could they shoot? How would they adapt to the new constraint of the home? How, in other words, would students work with the technological constraint of the phone and the physical constraint of the home?

Understandably, most students submitted works that focused on the shared themes of entrapment and isolation. Some students provided reflections on habits and actions (cooking, reading, watching/looking). Others used horror and/or special effects to provide the context for imaginative escape: we leap into shifting realities, see objects magically transform, or we are offered short illustrations of a world that contains no temporal or geographic logic. We see, in these films, new forms of play. The home is no longer bourgeois nor specifically maternal or female. It is instead a shared site that is newly visible, inhabited in flexible and changing ways. The home became our students' shared reference; it was both a site of personal play and (through screen sharing on Vimeo and Zoom) also part of the public imagination. The distinction that Schlüpmann establishes between the sensual and intellectual possibilities of male participation in the world, and the imaginative play of women in homes, were blurred by our students (both male and female) making works in and about the home.

In addition to filming the home as a creative and free perceptual space, we also saw student work renew their engagement with sound. Sound was recorded on external mics, and became an aspect of production that was given much attention. Recorded dialogue, foley, narration, sound effects, and even the occasional use of Dolby Atmos, ensured that the imaginative play of the house was also an aural play. Whereas Schlüpmann theorises the home in spatial terms that slide easily into discussions of editing (that is, changes to a film's visual or perceptual point of view), our students used sound (and, of course, silence) to playfully expand the space of their home. Lighting was used in a similar fashion: to accentuate the walls, doors and windows—the boundaries of the home—but also to reveal and revel in these confines. Extradiegetic meaning was therefore brought to a shot through exposure control, saturated colours, the expressive use of shadows, and/or the movement of (and switch between) two or more light sources. Other effects such as slow/fast motion and the visual layering of images were also employed. Frequently, these functions also further developed the idea of playful perception located in Schlüpmann's *haus*. For example, what it might mean to be or stay at home was worked through light-hearted parodies of film genre, so horror films slid easily into comedy. In some memorable examples, self-narration on film meant that a lampshade was dressed as a protagonist, or that a cardboard cut-out stood in for physical presence.

Rather than follow Schlüpmann and speak of the feminist work on the actress on screen, or of the home being a playfully private space, we want to highlight the changes that our "*haus* assignment" engendered. From our observations, female students became newly playful in their homes as makers and (significantly) as film technicians. With their smartphone in hand, they were required to direct but also to become cinematographers, sound recordists, gaffers and editors. As newly mobilised independent makers, they demonstrated that Schlüpmann's theory of the *haus* overlooks and elides technical elements of filmmaking that help produce and promote cinematic play. Now that we tentatively head into 2022 and are organising a return to face-to-face projects with prosumer cameras, we have decided to retain at least one "*haus* assignment" under lockdown conditions. Accordingly, students will limit their crew to themselves, their

filming to the domestic space, their equipment to the smartphone, and to focus on at least one feature of post-production in their work.

References

Blow Up My Town [*Saute ma ville*]. Directed by Chantal Akerman, 1968.

Cléo from 5 to 9 [*Cléo de 5 à 7*]. Directed by Agnès Varda, Ciné-tamaris, 1962.

Dooley, Kath, et al. "Immersive Media Practices in the Classroom: Models of the Teaching Research Nexus in an Australian Context." *Media Practice and Education*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2020, pp. 241–60. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2020.1832829.

Erbland, Kate. "11 Movies Shot on iPhones, From *Tangerine* to a Charming Short by Michel Gondry." *IndieWire*, 21 Mar. 2018, www.indiewire.com/2018/03/movies-shot-on-iphones-unsane-tangerine-shorts-1201941565.

The Gleaners and I [*Les Gleaneurs et la glaneuse*]. Directed by Agnès Varda, Ciné-tamaris, 2000.

IMFF - International Mobile Film Festival. "About." filmfreeway.com/InternationalMobileFilmFestival. Accessed 20 Jan. 2022.

Kinothek Asta Nielsen. "About." www.kinothek-asta-nielsen.de/verein/aboutus.html. Accessed 10 Jan. 2022.

Mapplebeck, Victoria. "I Won a Bafta with my iPhone after Struggling to Re-enter the Industry as a Mother." *The Conversation*, 10 Sept. 2021, theconversation.com/i-won-a-bafta-with-my-iphone-after-struggling-to-re-enter-the-industry-as-a-mother-167560.

Missed Call. Directed by Victoria Mapplebeck, Little Dot Studios, 2018.

160 Characters. Directed by Victoria Mapplebeck, Tigerlily Films, 2015.

Schlüpmann, Heide. "An Alliance between History and Theory." *Researching Women and the Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives*, edited by Monica Dall'Asta et al., 2013, pp. 13–26, amsacta.unibo.it/3800/1/2_SCHLUPPMANN.pdf.

SF3 – SmartFone FlickFest. "About." sf3.com.au/about. Accessed 6 Jan. 2022.

Tangerine. Directed by Sean Baker, Freestyle Picture Company, 2015.

Thorpe, Vanessa. "Films Shot on Smartphones Herald New Age for Cinema, Say Directors." *The Guardian*, 9 May 2021, www.theguardian.com/film/2021/may/09/films-shot-on-smartphones-herald-new-age-for-cinema-say-directors.

Voci, Paola. "Quasi-Documentary, Cellflix and Web Spoofs: Chinese Movies' Other Visual Pleasures." *China's iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-*

First Century, edited by Matthew D. Johnson et al., Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, pp. 45–56. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501300103.ch-002.

Suggested Citation

Duckett, Victoria, and Liz Baulch. "'Left to My Own Devices, I Probably Could': Reflections on Inclusive Pedagogy and Gender Equity During Melbourne's Pandemic Lockdown." Dossier: "Addressing Diversity On and Off Screen in the Classroom", *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 24, 2022, pp. 168–74. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.12.

Victoria Duckett is Senior Lecturer in Film/Television/Animation and Associate Head of School, Partnerships and International, at Deakin University. She is author of the award-winning book, *Seeing Sarah Bernhardt: Performance and Silent Film*, and coeditor of the collection *Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives.* Victoria is an international educator who over the past twenty-five years has lectured in leading universities across the US, UK, France, Italy, and Australia.

Liz Baulch is a multi-award-winning film producer whose short- and feature-length work has screened widely on the film festival circuit, attracting international distribution and broadcast sales. She recently produced the feature film *Lost Gully Road*, which won Best Feature at the L.A. Femme International Film Festival 2018. Liz has taught film and television production in university settings for over fifteen years, and is currently completing a creative practice PhD at RMIT.