

# “Mandatory Training”, Online Teaching, and Dialectical Space

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**Abstract:** *In this piece I reflect on my video essay “Mandatory Training” (Patrick Tarrant, 2021), produced during the COVID-19 lockdown, which juxtaposes online filmmaking pedagogy with compulsory institutional e-learning modules on “Fire Safety” and “Equality, Diversity and Inclusion”. Through the pairing of recorded audio from the training with images sourced from mid-twentieth-century Bolex magazines, the work critiques the bureaucratisation of discourses on equality. Central to the essay’s formal approach is the productive role of software-generated auto-translation errors, which introduce disruptions that destabilise managerial language. Drawing on concepts of interpassivity and Deleuzian deterritorialisation, the reflection contends that these glitches create a dialectical space not achievable through simple juxtaposition alone. Rather than offering corrective commentary, the errors operate sensorially, exposing the ideological poverty of corporate training discourse and its colonisation of collective political space, while foregrounding failure as a generative force within practice-based research.*

Sequestered at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, I delivered online teaching to undergraduates about techniques of editing and montage. And despite not being on campus I was still required to complete mandatory training e-modules on Fire Safety, Safeguarding, and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI).<sup>1</sup> These two experiences of education are brought together in a video essay called “Mandatory Training” (Patrick Tarrant, 2021), which provides an autocritique of the bureaucratisation of matters of inequality at work and home.<sup>2</sup>

The e-learning modules present various scenarios to test our understanding of how to behave in the workplace. Ambivalent as I may have been about this task at first, the training modules did at least provide some much-needed social interaction during the lockdown and I took comfort in the instruction that if I failed a module focused on issues related to gender or race I could just keep repeating it until I passed. Burnished by my inevitable success, I decided to record the audio output.

I paired this audio with images taken from old Bolex brochures and magazines which I filmed with a Bolex camera. To facilitate this filmmaking, I needed a transcript of the audio, so I ran the audio through some software that, by chance, introduced translation errors like “Equality, Diversity and Illusion” and “Birds on Paper”. It is in these kinds of errors that the video essay finds its voice and its modality of autocritique. In one of the original training scenarios, a character, speaking in a pronounced working-class accent, is asked to explain what “equality of opportunity” means. Her reply: “it’s about favouring minority groups like black and disabled people to boost their numbers”. But when errors are introduced, “favouring” becomes “five-ring” and “minority groups” becomes “monarchy groups”. Hence we end up with: “it’s about five-ring monarchy groups like black and disabled people to be in numbers”. Note the emergence of “monarchy groups” at just that moment when your employer was trying to swindle you into believing that when we think of racism, we think of the working class, *not* royalty.



**Figures 1 and 2: The film pairs audio from mandatory online training modules with images from old Bolex brochures and magazines filmed with a Bolex camera.**  
**“Mandatory Training” (Patrick Tarrant). 2021. Screenshots.**

When one male character asks a colleague to stop saying demeaning things like “dumb blonde and stuff like that”, we get the message. But the disparaging remark is more likely to be encountered in decades past, and so the lesson operates at a safe distance, reminiscent of the 1960s Bolex magazine that proffers “Sky, Water and Blondes” as a chapter heading (Church). Another header reads “Critical Camera Work” (Wong). If only these two sections had been brought together into some kind of dialogue! More importantly, what if contemporary training in EDI could do more than try to coach us on how to speak to colleagues who use expressions like “dumb blonde and stuff like that”?

Doing mandatory training modules in the home is particularly disturbing since it extends the surveillance logic of the Office for Students into the home office (or kitchen or bedroom).<sup>3</sup> Their fictions of care, fake accents, and a branching, faux-interactive aesthetic put one in mind of Robert Pfaller's notion of "interpassivity", or delegated care. Mandatory training modules invite us to believe that the commitment to equality that is institutionally demanded of us is achieved through our labour and thinking, when it is effectively performed in advance through the modules themselves. Pfaller writes that interpassivity involves delegating "*passivity* to others rather than *activity*" (2). In that vein, our institutions delegate to us their own passivity in the face of the challenge to achieve equality in the workplace—and we are all poorer for it.

One way of thinking about my film's ambition to deterritorialise the language given to us at home and work is to focus on the complex space between my two media, between word and image, and between two clashing forms in a dialectical configuration; in part because it is not true that simply bringing clashing forms together is intellectually productive. In the present case, it was only the addition of a third parameter—auto-translation errors—that made the essay articulate. Without it, the training modules would simply appear to be scolding the publishers of the Bolex magazines from the comfort of the twenty-first century, leaving the ideological work of the training intact. Another advantage of the translation errors is that they intervene on that knotty configuration whereby the steady stream of wrong answers not only makes us feel good about ourselves but also serves to disguise the pedagogical wrong-ness of the whole project.

Software glitches ignite the figural potential of the constricted space between the two representational worlds on display here, potential that is neither inscribed in them nor foreseen by them. The figural, Dudley Andrew writes, "mark[s] out a difficulty in the path of meaning" (158), in part because it is activated in the space between language and image, or between the letter and the line in Jean-François Lyotard's terms. It seems to me that there is an obvious difficulty in the path of meaning created by the mandatory training modules in the simple sense that the ostensible purpose of the training seems at odds with the meaning it actually "gives off". At times one wonders what language it speaks? When presented with actors, multiple choice quizzes and the overarching threat implied by the word "mandatory", do our sympathies lie with the letter or the line? Although the dated ideologies of the Bolex magazines seem to articulate a different problem to the contemporary training modules, the training modules effectively ingest the bad ideology of those magazines and their ilk as a foil to mask their own limitations. "Mandatory Training" activates the figural potential of error and failure, deployed in the discrepant space between two inter-implicated communications strategies to excavate a new path through difficulty and towards meaning.

The failures of language presented in "Mandatory Training" function as something more than commentary since they target the senses as much as the sense. We might think of them less as language than labour, the work of trying to understand why we can't understand. Nor do we need to think of these errors as filling the otherwise productive space of the dialectic with the correct answer (a move that would obviously deprive that space of its potential) because their figural form keeps instability alive. These failures do, however, hint at the poverty of the language used in the training modules as well as the evident strain that goes into trying to make the medium do what it seems incapable of doing. Finally, these failures also exist as a by-product of the particular labour of this video essay; the labour of deterritorialising the language of managerialism and the visual language of consumption *at the same time*. Perhaps it is only when we are squeezed from *two* sides that our individual intrigues become political, in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's terms (17), the training modules or the magazines alone serving only to remind us of

our individual alienation. But, as already stated, simply bringing them face to face also fails to produce a political effect; they really must be squeezed to reveal their connectedness. What we see in the corporate approach to inequality in the workplace is a colonisation of the space that might otherwise allow for a collective response to such matters. Instead, the problem of inequality is reduced to a pre-digested formulation to be consumed by a subject whose success is promised up front, forestalling any reflection on the causes of inequality in the workplace in the first place.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mandated by law for all higher education institutions and their staff in the UK, among other organisations.

<sup>2</sup> The film is available to view via my website ([patricktarrant.com](http://patricktarrant.com)).

<sup>3</sup> Independent regulator of higher education in England.

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**Patrick Tarrant** is a filmmaker, writer and educator who explores landscape, portraiture and propaganda. Patrick developed a hybrid filmmaking method that brings digital video and a 16mm film projector together to produce depth-defying effects and is currently writing about the illustrative use of images in expressive and essayistic modes of nonfiction filmmaking.