A MANI-PEDI-ANTI-COUNTER-FESTO FOR A QUEER SCREEN PRODUCTION PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In this audiovisual essay, four practitioner-academics seek to identify and address the need to reimagine queer screen production. Traditional heteronormative storytelling dominates the screen production landscape, necessitating a challenge to create more inclusive and diverse narratives. Through the creation of a manifesto essay film, the researchers collectively reflect on their creative practices, synthesize their approaches, and develop a new vision for queer screen production. The result demonstrates the value of embracing: sustainable practices, queer kinship-making as filmmaking, alternatives to hegemonic forms, queer shame, queer failure, eternal adolescence, and the disruption of the ever-forward momentum (among other approaches). Manifesto-making as a method encourages creative practitioners to question the status quo of screen production contexts and strategies, and to think critically about the storytelling norms in broader creative practice. The researchers argue that such an approach can enable creative practitioners to pave the way for new, innovative collaborations and contribute to a more inclusive and diverse creative landscape.

Keywords: Queer screen production; Creative collaboration; Creative practice research; Screenwriting; Filmmaking.

AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

In our film, *a mani-pedi-anti-counter-festo for a queer screen production practice* (Black, Kelly, Munro and Taylor, 2022) we enact the 14-steps of a manifesto we have developed for a queer screen production practice. Inspired by the "utopian form" which, as Sara Ahmed contends, "is a testimony to the possibility of an alternative" (2010), we strive as she does to critique the slavish obsession with happiness that favours dominant narratives; blinding us to alternative, and less oppressive, ways of living, ones that are queer, feminist, antiracist and subversive. The 14-minute audiovisual essay, an assemblage of archives, previously produced screen works and made-for-purpose material, responds directly to our *FESTO* as a tool of collaboration. We include footage of our online collaborative methodology in order to make *manifest* the aims for queer practice that embrace "kinship making" (#6) and "the richness of embarrassment" (#9). While to embrace inflatable pool animals (#8) may seem overly specific, we believe that not only does this chime with the Realpoetik Manifesto's aims to celebrate "the performative, the playful, the adventurous" and claim "a space for the frivolous alongside the serious" (Wilkinson and Alizadeh, 2012, n.p.), it proved to be a uniting motif.

For us, this prompts a question: what forms of cultural production, such as screen production and filmmaking, might disrupt these normative *happy* narratives through a critique of hegemonic forms? How can our methods challenge the heteronormative markers of success and happiness, or what Elizabeth Freeman calls "chrononormativity" (2010)? For this audio-visual essay, through our individual queer screen production practices (screenwriting, mobile media, documentary and narrative filmmaking) we collaborate to test the possibilities for disruptive queer methods that "might not make the alternative possible, but aims to make impossible the belief that there is no alternative" (Ahmed, 2010). As Jack Halberstam argues, "If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity" (2011, p.1). In using our *FESTO* to guide our practice-based research, we emphasise queering process and form over the primacy of queer content, so often the marker of what makes a screen work queer. In this way, we move 'beyond textual analyses of finished screenworks, typically found in fields such as cinema studies and feminist film theory' (Taylor et al 2023, p. 51) to instead examine the development and production processes.

While there are many ways to structure a *FESTO*, we chose statements over questions, positive over negative framing and active over passive verb-age. As with 2010's *Guerilla Girls Guide to Behaving Badly* we urge a queer practice to embrace its position as "an outsider [...] Look for the understory, the subtext, the overlooked" (Deepwell, 2014, p. 104). Constructing the appropriate manifesto means challenging the word itself. Though etymologically the *man* in manifesto is not gendered[1], we strive to mess with the very nomenclature and queer the exercise - hence, our (mani-pedi-anti-counter-) FESTO:

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1 From Latin, "make public"', from manifestus "obvious"

1. Embrace the possibility of failure
2. Embrace disruption of the ever-forward momentum
3. Embrace a collapse of past present and future
4. Embrace sustainable practices
5. Embrace the possibility of an alternative to hegemonic forms
6. Embrace filmmaking as kinship-making
7. Embrace interspecies relations
8. Embrace inflatable pool animals
9. Embrace the richness of embarrassment
10. Embrace queer shame
11. Embrace more failure
12. Embrace delinquency and eternal adolescence
13. Embrace the imperfect image
14. Embrace queer space

Moments from Patrick Kelly's short video essays *What's With Your Nails?* (2019) and *The Trouble* (2021) can be observed in the *a mani-pedi-anti-counter-festo*, demonstrating how queer filmmaking might embrace "sustainable practices" (#4), "the imperfect image" (#13), and "filmmaking as kinship-making" (#6). The hyper-accessibility of the smartphone empowers filmmakers to work with limited resources, exploring how lo-fi everyday moments can be juxtaposed on film to accentuate existing (or create new) meanings and relationships. Various clips demonstrate the aesthetic of smartphone video fragments captured on a whim during everyday moments (Berkeley, 2014); walking home from work, traversing a rainbow pedestrian crossing, or interacting with others on a dancefloor. A mixture of horizontal and vertical mobile video leads to the creation of unexpected, imperfect images and effects, such as the blurred rainbow crossing colour scheme moving around the screen at different rates. An unobtrusive camera allows filmmakers to capture moments recorded "in the close and intimate detail that only friendly relations between filmmakers and subject can produce" (Juhasz and Gund, 1995, p. 24). As we see a drag performer embrace a friend and producer, the camera draws closer into their embrace. In these ways, smartphone devices allow for efficient, low-impact, and meaningful queer filmmaking.

Queer feminist filmmaker Angie Black pairs creative practice-led research and queer theory to produce work that investigates themes of queer identities and sexuality, but also that the film process is in itself unstable and queer. Many of Black's films engage with most points from *a mani-pedi-anti-counter-festo* but embracing; "the possibility of failure" (#1), "interspecies relations" (#7), "Queer Space" (#14) and "filmmaking as kinship-making" (#6) resonate the loudest. In this work Black chose to draw from three films; *Low Sleazy Dive* (Black & Caon, 1989) a camp short film with pool inflatables made on 16mm film remnants at film school, *The Five Provocations* (Black, 2018) a feature film about grief and identity that disrupted the form, invited risk and the unexpected and *Weedling* (Black, 2023), a short film about a gender non-conforming teenager forced to save their spirit plant and themselves from an unsafe home, at

the risk of leaving their mother who can't protect them. Borrowing from eco-feminims, interspecies relations offer connections to animals, plants, nature as alternative relationships to the heteronormative and western traditional family units. Black employs her queer family and friends to ensure a filmmaking environment of fun, trust and respect that contributes to a safe queer space on and off the screen. When thinking about queer space, we can borrow from Celine Sciamma's (2020) concept of "desire scenes", as a creation of idealised space of what we want to see on screen. Feminine spaces that tackle serious themes with humour and silliness, tenderness and lightness of touch that allow women and queers to have agency.

Taylor's contributions *queer* screenwriting conventions at three key levels: formatting, structure and function. Standardised elements of the screenplay form are repurposed (#5). The *transition*, aligned right and used to suggest how one scene will move into the next, is used as a tool of visual rhythm for inserting puns and asides. Dialogue is comprised almost entirely of punctuation, as an exercise in decentralising language and experimenting with a page's negative space. This builds on previous scriptwriting-as-research expanding the function of scene headings beyond production functionality (Taylor, 2018). The scenes and sequences are devoid of the turning points and rising action demanded of mainstream screen storytelling (#2), and these deliberately stunted character arcs are reflected in the reclamation of homophobic and transphobic slurs deployed as character headings (#12). The film, by including written scenes in the assemblage, confounds the role of the script, whereby "once the film exists, the screenplay is no more" (Carrière, 1995, p. 148). Aligning with queer "practices that refuse both the form and the content of traditional canons" (Halberstam, 2012, p. 2), these scenes are constructed by using devices of screenwriting software, such as voice assignation and read along options, and screen recording the results. Effectively the screen production workflow is disrupted, and usually invisible collaborative mechanics exposed.

For this contribution, Munro conducted an autoethnography of her filmmaking practice, drawing on Sarah Ahmed's idea of queer as an orientation (2006). In a clip from *All the Things* (2021), a voice-over lists a rollcall of events: small, large, global, personal, embarrassing, futile, profound, queer, banal, repetitive. If the neoliberal self should always be striving forward, refining, succeeding, progressing, kicking goals, what does it mean to, quite simply, not progress according to identifiable markers (#2). And yet, rainbows, cacti, holidays and beaches punctuate the flow of events, producing an analogue to life's otherwise normative milestones. In another clip, a man in chaps jogs up the red carpet to the stage, and drops to his knees to shake his white arse. This sequence, from the musical documentary *The Rise of Leatherman* (2008), embraces the transformative power of shame and song (#10) in telling the story about the first Mr Leather competition in Melbourne. This film also demonstrates filmmaking as kinship-making (#6) through the ongoing collaborations formed between those involved. And in segments from

Closer Than They Appear (2015), a film told in 17 chapters, Halberstam's treaty on failure is evoked (#1). As Halberstam reminds us "all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner" (2011, p. 120). Through this compilation film of failures, we are also reminded that as filmmakers, we must play with, and along the edges of our own multiple identities, to fuck up, and to discover new ways of making and being together.

In this audiovisual essay, we four practitioner-academics embrace the manifesto as a creative practice method to propose a (mani-pedi-anti-counter-) FESTO for our hopes of what queer screen production is/could/should be. We ask what might a screen practice that challenges aspirational heteronormative storytelling do in the world, as we demonstrate how observing the manifesto's ideals in our existing practice might set the grounds for new creative collaborations.
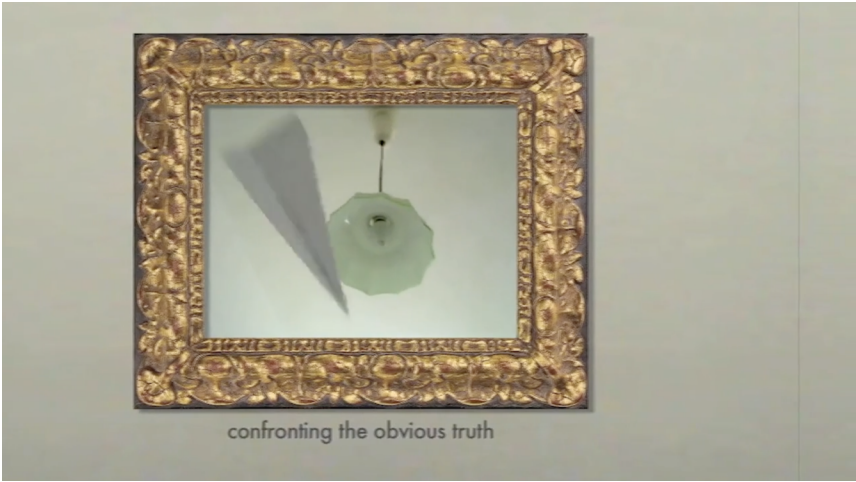
confronting the obvious truth

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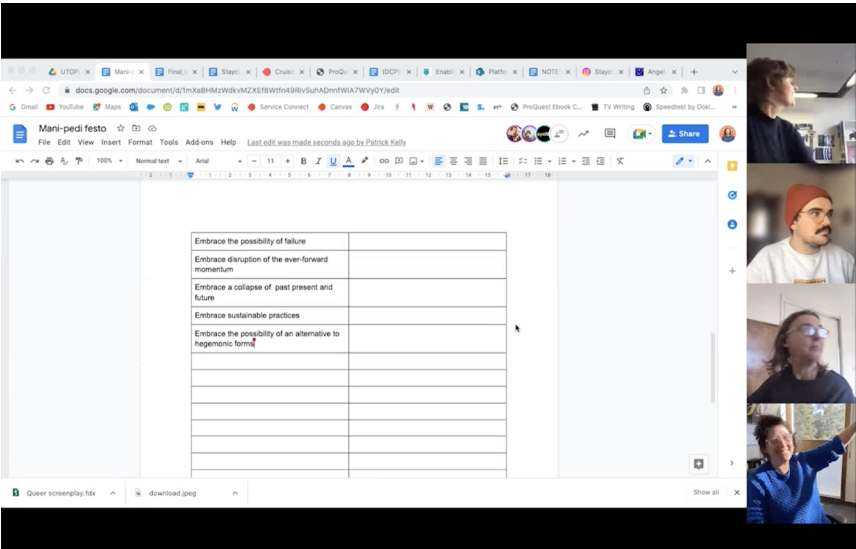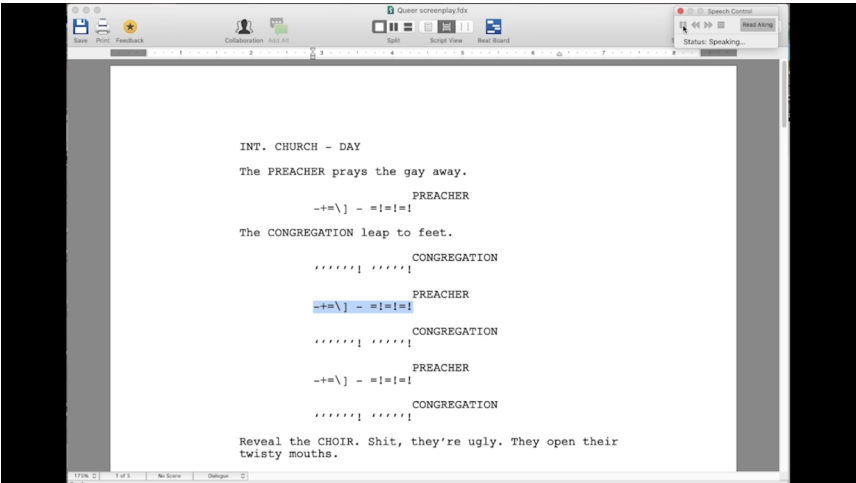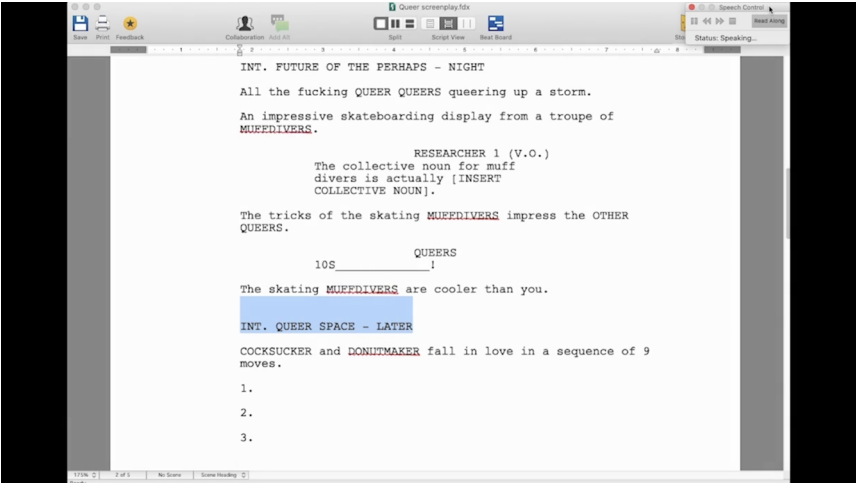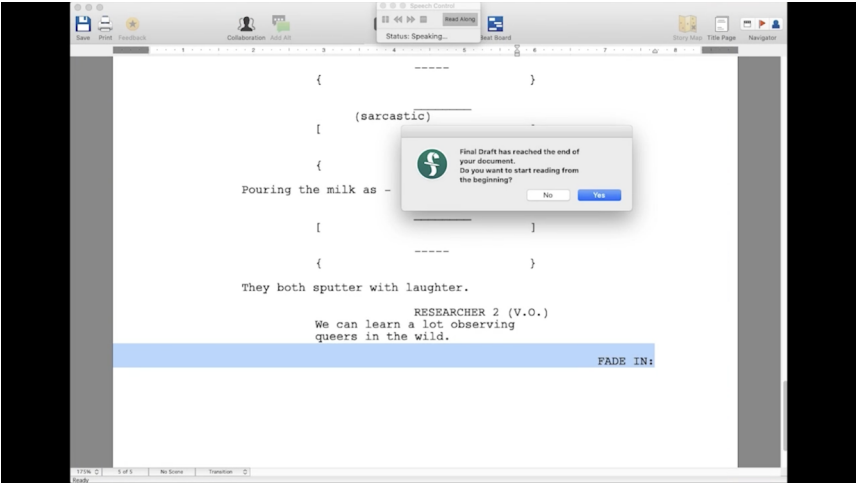
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