Arts practice based research PhD proposal – initial proposal

This practice led research project aims to explore and develop methodologies around computational film making, experimental film and artist essay. My plan is to engage with methodologies including film collage, speculative fiction and writing practices, and how these practices are mediated through the use of technology. I am interested also in what affordances are enabled through use of computational methods like generatively co-authored text and film footage, and programmatic video editing.

The proposition upon which this project is based is that while there is wide use of the tropes of artist essay and documentary film as part of computational arts practice, there could be more significant critical understanding of how these tropes function in the context of a technologically engaged practice. While there has been widespread adoption of these motifs through use technologies like generative text, footage and voice performances, there is has been less discussion of what these factors activate in combination with each other, in critical computational art writing. I would like to understand how computational techniques and tools inform and influence the visual motifs or operational images of the artist essay film, particularly in the context of work by artists like Rebecca Baron, Hito Steyrl, Heather Phillipson and Beth Fox.

My primary focus will be on developing a body of work responding to my research questions, and building on my existing practice. I will focus on use of autoethnographic techniques, practice-based writing techniques like writing to prompts, algorithmic thinking, and my work with experimental film. In particular, I will begin my considering my arts council funded project 'Wyrm', a series of works including an experimental artists essay film, on the subject of the Lambton Worm, a myth from my hometown of Washington in the North East of England, which engages with creative coding as a method of producing footage, film collage and speculative fictioning.

My research will explore:

- Generative editing, and algorithmic and computational techniques for assembling and reconfiguring time based media and raw footage.

- The artist's essay as a medium, and how one can approach experimental, reflective, and self-reflexive approaches to filmmaking.

- Documentary practices and the selection or curation of ephemera, or archiving otherwise. I am interested in documentary practices as a way of describing histories, understanding what's the boundary between history, speculation or fantasy, veracity or fidelity.

- How we might blend observational, performative, and autoethnographic methods.

- Archival processes, habitual technologically enabled self-documentation and identity construction, for instance through social media, photography and self tracking devices.

- How visual media and computational tools shape representations of self and place, through gps, geolocation google street view and computer vision.

- Programmatic archiving through, generative editing and storyboarding. I am interested in developing methodologies for structuring, organising, and dynamically editing footage, thinking about how we could place images in relation to each other to make meaning and create or trouble taxonomies.

Research Questions & Aims

1. How do computational tools and techniques mentioned above inform the methodologies of experimental filmmaking and the artist essay film?

2. What are the conceptual and aesthetic implications of generative and algorithmic approaches in film and experimental documentary practices? What are ethical responsibilities of using these forms?

3. What are the ethical and epistemological concerns of computationally co-authored texts and speculative imagery in documentary and essayistic forms?

4. How can the intersection of creative prose, found footage, interview, and creative coding inform a new methodology for generating and complicating, computationally driven documentary/experimental film practice?

Expected Outcomes

I aim to produce:

- A thesis that integrates creative and reflective writing techniques, critically reflecting on the creative and technological methodologies developed throughout the project.
- A methodological framework for long-form practice, offering strategies for integrating computational tools with experimental film, documentary, and artistic research. This could take the form of a speculative handbook or guide which other practitioners could build on, situating and defining new terms to describe these practices, and developing a making process which could be applied to a variety of situations.
- An artist film(s) presented through screenings or exhibitions, showcasing the practical application of these methods in a finished body of work, therefore developing an embedded toolkit, prototyping through methods as practice.