



Response to Reviews of *Ghosts of the Future*

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Filmmaker's Response

Special thanks to *ACME*'s editorial collective for accepting this submission in the format of a film. My sincere thanks also to Reviewers E and B who engaged supportively with *Ghosts of the Future* in the spirit of critical scholarship. Rather than making the minor, mainly technical changes, recommended by reviewers, I have agreed with *ACME* to respond here. Reasons for this are elaborated below, when I address feedback from Reviewer E. Let me begin, though, with Reviewer B whose feedback enhanced my own epistemological understanding of *Ghosts of the Future*, providing fresh food for thought. Noting the contrasts between the audio and visual 'tone' of the film and its cataclysmic focus, Reviewer B extends that to: 'the mundane academic submission to a journal and the sense conveyed of all that surrounds us being tinder dry paper that at any minute could be burnt to a cinder'. Reviewer B, in fact, extends the notion of 'incandescence' that is central to the film's methodology to illuminate the wider temporality and geography of not only academia but everyday life itself: 'the rising at 5.30 am to fit this (watching the film) in before waking the kids for school and the day of work beginning'. Though I struggled with the phenomenological approach that I adapted to filmmaking as field research - forced stillness and intense concentration on place as a lens on the world and on ourselves - I think Reviewer B has nailed how powerful that might be.

Reviewer B raises two critical points relating to my existentialist conceptual approach. Firstly, Reviewer B struggles with the term transcendence, finding it almost impossible to shake off the association that: 'can represent all those aspects of religion, thought and society that seek to draw us away from being present to



each other, that seeks to suggest there is somewhere else than these relations'. While recognising that Simone de Beauvoir's definition of transcendence is definitively worldly, Reviewer B rightly highlights not only a problem of terminological perception but also of the individualism often assumed to be a central tenet of existentialism. Reviewer B takes this up elsewhere: 'Do we need more than existentialism's crucial emphasis on us each as individuals?' If indeed we do, then Flynn, for one, is clear that existentialists have always addressed 'the social ills of their time' (Flynn, 2006, p.102). Moreover, existentialism's commitment to relational collectivity manifests via the political actions of its adherents, notably Jean Paul Sartre, perhaps even more so than through its theories (Flynn, 1986). Similarly, the 'collective agency' in *Ghosts of the Future* manifests via what academic seminar blockade participants are doing rather than the film's narrative. In a standard academic format, I would change the article to emphasise that relational collectivity.

In a parallel vein, Reviewer B does note that the 'harsh sound of fossil fuelled vehicles' signals that they are 'as much a signature of the Anthropocene as nuclear weapons'. Again, in a standard revision I would state that link explicitly. Although *Ghosts of the Future* does not pretend towards being art in the sense of either creative skill or beauty, it does harness imagination and is intended to be 'appreciated' visually and on an emotional level as well as rationally. This, I suggest, remains problematic for social science and is surely one reason why our journals do not very readily make space for alternative formats (see, for example, Fuller and Askins, 2007). Returning for a moment to transcendence, Reviewer B provides a tantalising insight into the potential of further exploring the space-relational dimension of this archetypally temporal existentialist notion. As the film exemplifies, Angie Zelter embodies the spatialization of transcendence which blockaders at AWE practice, insistently stepping out of place and so out of order (facticity). In most instances, such practices certainly depend upon collective/relational agency in addition to that of the individual.

Reviewer E's feedback is mainly technical, to do with film-making and editing, 'aimed at making it more accessible'. The main points are length – 'it needs to be a good bit shorter' – and audibility – 'I missed a good bit of the text until I could read it'. On audibility first, rather than attempt technical edits to address something that other viewers have not had difficulty with and in the process, perhaps, detracting from an emotional/sensual appreciation of *Ghosts of the Future*, say by the imposition sub-titles, the script is published alongside the film. On the technical aspect of editing more generally, I must confess to being at the limit of my technological capacity: I am an activist para academic (Waldrop & Withers, 2014); I have no institutional support, including no technical support; I borrowed the camcorder for just one day from Glasgow University via my comrade Kye Askins; I edited the film using free ten-year old software on a ten-year old laptop. Even where I might like to make some of the minor edits suggested by Reviewer E, then, as it stands the film is technically the best I can do. In a parallel

vein, certain scenes that Reviewer E quite correctly expected to see in the film, most pertinently the academic seminar blockade itself, are not there because I had other responsibilities to fulfil during action at AWE - as a participant in the seminar, as a legal observer and as a street choir member- which precluded filming.

On the non-technical aspects of editing, including length and making the film more accessible, I can respond to Reviewer E's feedback. At the heart of the minor revisions suggested to facilitate accessibility is a tension between the 'poetic' or 'arty' and a social science predilection for clarity, indeed quite strictly ordered clarity. Without lapsing into pretension, this demand for greater facticity may be antithetic to the existentialist ethic of transcendence that is not only the film's central argument but also serves to define the style in which that argument is presented. This is not an excuse for a lack of clarity but rather a suggestion that such clarity may sometimes impinge on imagination, creative enquiry and our emotional understanding. Moreover, where accessibility demands the slickness of any standard format, it may also resound a through-going cultural oppression, 'a degradation of existence into 'in-itself', as de Beauvoir has it. Discomfiting lengthiness and stillness, background noise and 'clunkiness', the intense concentration on place, is essential to the 'incandescence' of the film's methodology that Reviewer B picked up upon and extended. Finally on this aspect, consider Patti Smith's performance of Bob Dylan's 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' at 2016's Nobel Prize for literature ceremony. That performance would have lacked a dimension – an emotional power – without Smith's nervous mistakes, her drying up. Drawing entirely no comparison with the art of either Smith or indeed Dylan, *Ghosts of the Future* would have a different emotional impact were it edited to be more systematically structured. This extends to a couple of specific 'cuts' that Reviewer E suggested for the film: though such scenes may not contribute to the central argument, they may constitute something vital in how that argument is made and understood.

On the adopted notion of incandescence itself, Reviewer E picks up upon an aspect of the phenomenological approach that also disturbed me. This is not at addressed in *Ghosts of the Future*, but must be in this submission to *ACME*. Reviewer E notes that 'nameless standard indigenous people are a bit problematic'. Thus expressed, this particular problem is traceable to Lopez's original account of the grizzly bear feasting on the caribou carcass (Lopez, 2015): he does not identify or differentiate the 'indigenous people' who are his travelling companions and *de facto* source of data. Another aspect of the problem is Lopez's appropriation, valorisation and representation of indigenous knowledge to make his own argument, i.e. for the understanding that can be gleaned from staying "in the moment" and not rushing to turn experience into language or substituting abstraction for presence. That said, the notions of incandescence does seem to serve very well as a spur to transcendence or at least the recognition of oppression and it merits further research.

Postscript

Just prior to the publication of this article, I got the chance to respond to ‘the final responses’ of the reviewers, whom I now know to be Sara Koopman and Justin Kenrick (again, many thanks). Here, I will take that opportunity, though briefly. First off, publishing an article alongside the reviews and the author’s response to those reviews is a format that is rewarding for the author and, I hope, for reviewers and readers too. The reviewers’ final responses have changed somewhat, but I don’t think it would be illuminating to track minor discrepancies within my original response to them: the gist remains coherent. Justin (Reviewer B) has added comments on ‘active forgiveness’ that stand for themselves. However, there are a couple of methodological points in Sara’s revised response that I feel I should address.

The first concerns Sara’s expressed hope that academics will increasingly be able to get funding to hire film-making professionals to ‘get the word out’ about their research. Although this is less of an option for a wholly unfunded activist like myself who still seeks to contribute to the academic project, I generally share this hope. In the case of *Ghosts of the Future* and possible future academic work in the same vein, however, it misses the point of the phenomenological methodology: I learned most from this piece of work by doing the filming myself; the filming is part of the epistemology. Connectedly, with respect to Sara’s expressed doubt about whether academics will have the time and patience to sit through a whole 20 minutes of slow and experimental film, I would echo the call by Alison Mountz and her co-authors ‘to slow down and claim time for slow scholarship and collective action informed by feminist politics’, explicitly an ethics of care (Mountz et al, 2015). Reflecting my own experience, academics who watch the film may find they learn most when occupying the ‘awkward’ space-time of patience and experiment. Empathy and care are epistemologically key here.

My second point concerns the nature of scholar or academic activism. *Ghosts of the Future* represents my attempt to research politically with/in a social movement that is taking direct action (see, for instance, Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2015). If the film is in some ways an academic failure, as Sara fears, it is surely an activist flop. A film made during the same action, a revealing companion piece (Broughton, 2016), suits activists’ political purposes much better, as evidenced by the network’s subsequent referral to it for use in the continuing campaign against Trident replacement. If *Ghosts of the Future* is too slow and experimental for hard-pressed academics working in neo-liberal universities, it seems it is also a conceptual step too far for activists who seem more comfortable with a morally certain epistemology that has been tried and tested – but that has failed politically - and a dramatically more familiar form, not to say propaganda. This is not in any sense ‘sour-grapes’, but rather a margin note to emphasise how difficult it is for academics/para-academics to engage with social movements and to produce research that is relevant to them while also challenging their orthodoxies in order to, potentially, unleash new strategies of resistance.

Finally, a point on one aspect of the length of *Ghosts of the Future*. Aware of the set timeframes for YouTube videos, Ted Talks and formats like video abstracts in academia, as Sara mentions, I made the decision not to edit the film down. To have cut the film ‘to fit’ seemed to me a betrayal of its internal existentialist logic. Without lapsing into artistic pretension, the film’s length becomes an integral part of a through-going engagement with an existentialist transcendence in the research. In some sense, to have made the film fit a stock format would have constituted a degradation of ‘freedom into facticity’, as Arendt put it, even an act of oppression. Hence, I paid to post the film on Vimeo rather than edit it down to free-posting YouTube length. As a film submitted as a paper to an academic journal, *Ghosts of the Future* already didn’t fit. If ACME had rejected the ‘experiment’, I had no other notion for an academic outlet. Social science accounts of social practices such as activism may always miss something of the ‘art’ that is in play if they are confined to quasi scientific analytical frameworks and stock presentation formats. In this view, academia may be in danger of lapsing into and being limited by immanence: human geography could get stuck in a very frustrating place.

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ⁱ This list includes both work referred to explicitly in the 'Response to reviewers' and work that influenced the film itself, whether referred to explicitly in the 'Narrator's script' or not.