



# JOURNAL OF AUDIOVISUAL ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 2022

## **Ark: A Return to Robson Valley**

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42:16

### **Introduction**

*CineWorlding* (MacDonald 2023) is a portmanteau of cinema and worlding. Worlding, as Donna Haraway (2016; 2008) and others have noted, is a rhythmic, vibrational, entangled in-folding, a matrix (matter, mother) where emergent worldings contribute to the ongoing complexity of a totality. By contrast, cine-ethnomusicology has been oriented by a “documentation paradigm” (Norton 2021: 123-125), where cineworlding is oriented to

worldings of which music and cinema production are contributing forces. Traditional ethnography is too committed to reductive Humanism and has been overcome by more than a century of well-known and well-read critique. There must come a time when the weight of this philosophical critique overcomes the theoretical and methodological function of ethnography. The evidence is readily available: neither subjects nor objects are clearly distinguishable, autonomous, rational, fully reflexive, or discernable. Technologies (techne/technics) are not separable from the knowledges that they produce, nor are transparent recording mediums. The complicity of ethnography and colonialism is well-known. What might constitute cine-ethnomusicology must therefore be an open question, and an important one. Cineworlding has no intention of turning its back on the original mission of ethnography to understanding difference. But instead, it is interested in pushing this question beyond the habitual notions of cultural, racial, or ethnic difference which are all identitarian, that is, reductive Humanist constructs. There are other ways of thinking Otherness in psychic/conceptual, social, technological, and environmental ecological registers. How might cine-ethnomusicology develop cinematic means with this study? Subjecthood is not the enemy of cineworlding, but fixed identities are not living subjectivations, cultural becomings, subjects complexly infolding with the more-than-human. Cineworlding is not interested in pinning down the rules of culture but instead, to entangle with Other ways of worldings besides what bell hooks has called Imperialist White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchal worldings. Worldings are not, in and of themselves, free of forces of oppression; worldings are entangled at many levels where a struggle for futurity is at stake. Ethnomusicology oriented alone to traditional concepts of musicology or cultural anthropology, to the normalization of the nation-state, culture, tradition, or genre (for instance) is oriented only to the past. Transhumanism, on the other hand, is explicitly oriented to even more advanced and integrated forms of bio-techno-capitalism and galactic colonization. These too are worldings. It is my hope that as cine-ethnomusicology develops, we have space for re-thinking our theories and methods beyond interdisciplinarity, towards yet-unknown forms of transdisciplinarity and ethico-aesthetic practice.

What follows is a fictional conversation with a reviewer about the cinematic research-creation film *Ark: A Return to Robson Valley* (MacDonald 2022, dir.) published in this first issue of *JAVEM*. The purpose is to begin to discuss the value of fiction/neorealism in knowledge creation. The title and form of the essay riffs off of Brian Massumi's (2008) "The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens: A Semblance of a Conversation." In this *conversation* I am addressing comments from both reviewers, though playfully use the name *Reviewer 2* to make a point about what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call conceptual personae from "What is Philosophy?" that: "names are intrinsic *conceptual personae* who haunt a particular plane of consistency" (1994:24). Authors quite often make jokes about the critical nature of *Reviewer 2*, and some will possibly have an affective response to the name, which may open further the space I am trying to

flow through with this essay. In working with Massumi's article, I resonated with this footnote: "I would like to thank Arjen Mulder for creating the context for this conversation by formulating the opening issues. I would also like to apologize to him for his becoming a fictional character in the course of the subsequent exchange. Any grumpiness that character might have displayed is in no way a reflection on him but only of my own combativeness with myself." Thinking with Massumi helped me realize that critical comments from both reviewers of *Ark: A Return to Robson Valley* could be turned into a conceptual personae called *Reviewer 2* who would then become a partner for thinking through the tensions between cinematic research-creation and audio-visual ethnomusicology. I hope that if either reviewer reads this work, they will forgive me for this little drama. I really appreciate the work that these reviewers have done and the thoughtful questions they posed. This dialogue has created a proposition for a lot of thinking-feeling with these concepts. I would also like to thank the editorial team of JAVEM for asking me to write a response and to agreeing to this little fiction, I hope this does the work we hoped it would.

## **The Conversation**

### ***Journal of Audiovisual Ethnomusicology (JAVEM) Reviewer 2:***

In your new film *Ark: A Return to Robson Valley* (2022) you employ a non-linear structure that combines documentary footage from a never-completed 2009 film about music festivals with new fictional footage recorded in 2019. With the interleaving of two different approaches into a single work, viewers encounter a film that appears to be a documentary but which we know is not wholly so. This structure is relatively unique in filmic works about music festivals, both large and small-budget projects, the majority of which take a documentary approach, interleaving on-site footage with formal interviews. Do you think that this approach needs to be made explicit in the film itself, perhaps using the title cards already present in the film's opening?

### **Michael B. MacDonald, filmmaker:**

The opening title cards do say that my attempt to make a film about music festivals failed. What it doesn't say is that what failed from my perspective was the "documentation paradigm." As Barley Norton (2021) has pointed out, cine-ethnomusicology has tended to treat cinema as a collection of field data that may be edited into a film. That's certainly how I started to make films. But I very quickly ran into a problem with this approach. I couldn't make the film I wanted to make that way, at least not a film that got to what was most interesting about the research. It required

exploring what cinema can offer research and what research can offer cinema, and that took many years to learn about cinematic research-creation and then to return to the festival to try again.

In *Cineworlding: Scenes of Cinematic Research-Creation* (MacDonald 2023), I am exploring *Critique Enthusiasm* (71) with the documentation paradigm by presenting other cinematic forms that I think open up new kinds of questions while also embracing a critical pedagogy of/in cinema resonant with Harbert's *critical cinema of music* (2018, 246). I really like what the viscosity of critique does to the concept. It is both there and not there, struck out so that we're supposed to not see it. But we can't help but see it and try to figure out the force that strikes it out, and the lingering impact of its just-stricken-out presence. And then attaching it to *enthusiasm* produces a kind of montage that is not quite sure of the role of critique. In *Critique Enthusiasm*, there is a kind of *becoming* happening in the interstices between the words that I hope avoids naiveite, that cinematic research-creation is not just play for its own self-enjoyment, but play that is about thinking-feeling. I think this gets to the heart of my work, explicitly the switch in my language from cine-ethnomusicology to cinematic research-creation and the new kinds of questions this approach opens for cine-ethnomusicology. So to answer your question, I don't think it's possible to include a title card that will do this because what I am trying to say is not textual; it is cinematic. But to make this approach clearer, we need more context.

What came up for me in my dissertation research on music festivals back in 2006-2009 was something that I did not have the method or conceptual language for yet: *semblance* (Langer 1953, 45-68). For Langer, semblance is implicated in the virtuality of experience – “to understand how an advancing line begets the illusion of growth really involves one in the whole subject of created appearance” and “raises the final issue of form and feeling in art” (1953, 65). In my approach to a critical cinema of music, I am investigating how cinema's visual-images and sound-images create semblance. The study of semblance is not just a study of art, however. It opens ways of thinking about perception and also what could count as ethnography. To make the virtualities of semblance poetically experiential. For Massumi, “semblance is another way of saying ‘the experience of a virtual reality.’ Which is to say: ‘the experiential reality of the virtual.’ The virtual is abstract event potential. Semblance is the manner in which the virtual actually appears. It is the being of the virtual as lived abstraction. As used here, ‘semblance’ is free of the connotations of ‘illusion’ in Adorno's and Lacan's uses of the term” (2011, 15-16). So semblance is not just a study of art and cinema, but it is a study of virtuality in perception, the study of how sound-images produce

a *semblance* of time, growth, becoming-community etc. in music worldings. Cinema can become a way of vectoring the virtualities that emerge in research, quite literally projecting them onto a screen. The virtualities of these becomings require thinking-feeling for the virtualities, these operative forces working through sound and music worldings. I think Massumi's *semblance and event* (2011) is a powerful and as yet underexplored avenue for cine-ethnomusicology that perhaps may induce cine-ethnomusicologists to operate in another register. A register that moves beyond, or perhaps inside, of language. In this way, the addition of a title card to alert viewers *to the virtualities of semblance*, works against the project in an important way. It assumes that what we are exploring can in fact be contained by text. What I take from Langer and Massumi is that semblance works by the force of *poetics*, in the spaces beyond and within propositional language.

**Reviewer:**

All of this is interesting, but I still have significant reservations about the potential of the fictionalized narratives to contribute to audiovisual ethnomusicology more than a purely documentary approach might. I don't mean to call into question the relative "authenticity" of the work, but it might be more valuable as a piece of audiovisual ethnomusicology if it were entirely documentary.

**MacDonald:**

Let me start by first thinking about "fiction," because that will lead us back to semblance and require, I think, that we exceed the documentation paradigm.

The approach that I have taken to my recent work has indeed used "fiction", but this is complex and is perhaps no more fictional than ethnographic writing. Since submitting *Ark* to JAVEM, I screened it in the community where I made the film and asked about the fictional element. The audience at first, didn't understand my questions and asked what part was fictional. When I explained that Kelci and Diana were actors playing themselves and that we made the contents of the scenes together in an unscripted improvisational way at the festival, the general consensus was that there was nothing fictional about it. It seems that one of the takeaways from this screening has to do with the idea of "fiction" itself and its relation to "realism." Something that I plan to think about in my next book is within the context of a poetics of cinematic research-creation (*Free Radicals*). Currently, I'm deep in thinking about what

fiction/realism means for audiovisual ethnomusicology and how it expands methods beyond the documentation paradigm.

I wonder what difference it would make for the viewer if Kelci and Diana were identified as actors, that the 2019 component is fictionalized? But I'm not even sure it is fictionalized. We lived the festival together and talked about what we'd like to comment on, how they might meet, what it means for single female-identified people to attend a festival alone, and why they would do so. Perhaps we could consider the fiction to be collaborative ethnography exploring cinematic poetics?

In 2018, I reached out to Kelci Mohr, who had recently completed a master's degree with a study on music festivals, to see if she would be interested in giving this experimental film method a try. Kelci had seen my earlier cinematic research-creation film *Unspittable*(2018) and was interested in how this might be applied to music festivals. Diana Pearson, who was initially going to be doing audio recording for the film, ended up in the film when we realized, that in order to externalize what after Félix Guattari has been called the conceptual/psychic ecology, dialogue could be valuable.

But now let's get to what might be understood as the love story between Kelci and Diana. As you may have guessed by now, it was not planned. In fact, and this is an important point, none of us expected this. When we finished filming, we had really no idea what the film was going to be about. Obviously, we knew it was going to be about the festival experience as we had moved through the festival together with the camera making scenes as they came to us, collectively improvising themes and dialogue and filming them. But we did all of this without a storyline or a plan. It was still unclear to me what the film was going to be about when I was working through the footage in the editing suite.



I returned to the 2009 footage I shot during my PhD research on music festivals to see what might happen if I brought these together. I played with temporalities in *Unspittable*, so I thought this might give me a chance to return to this idea. I was surprised by the fact that it was a perfect decade separating the 2009 and 2019 content. This was a happy accident that made it feel like this was an approach I could explore. When I was watching the 2009 content, I was struck by the story of buying the land. And of course, I would be, it is a ghost story. What a wonderful hook. It also poses a really interesting question about agency, where does the festival start?

When I first shot the footage of Kelci's trip from Nelson to the Robson Valley Festival, I did it so that audience could see the environment. However, in the context of the ghost story and the hippie journey in the 1970s, it produced a feeling of circularity, a *semblance of refrain*, because it followed the journey mentioned in the ghost story. Then when I was editing the 2019 content, I began to feel something happening between Kelci and Diana that I did not notice at the festival, a *semblance of love*.

When watching the relationship between Kelci and Diana becoming something else, I began thinking-feeling *semblance*, the virtualities of love, their growing and becoming-together. This is witnessing the emergence of love *growing* in the festival ecology. What announces this emergence is what my students call *the feels* or *the vibe*, that is felt in the viewers' body. So this affect-event is not an observable fact, or can not even be said to be in the film exactly, because it is a semblance of love growing in our bodies as viewers, bodies entangled with the film. As Langer points out, semblance is the recognition of the virtual rhythms of livingness. In this case, the "seeing of love growing" is not "seeing" in visual perception so much as seeing virtualities: "It looks like we're falling in love", Diana said when watching the film for the first time. During the festival

experience, these affects were blurring or entangling with the affects of the festival, giving the entire experience a kind of intimate texture. So we see that affects are virtual. When the affect actualizes in perception, there is a kind of recognition of perception, a feeling inside of perception when we perceive the force we call affects. This feeling inside of perception is a special kind of event of thinking-feeling that suggests that we don't just watch films but enter into cinema-thinking, and these virtualities can produce a semblance of love, in this case.

So when Brian Massumi calls semblance the feeling of perception inside of perception, he is talking about a felt feeling of the event of perception at the emergence of affects creating a sensory doubling of perception. This is different from reflexivity, it's not a kind of "aha, I'm having a feeling about this," because that would mean you stepped away from the event and you're already working in the frame of concepts stilled and at a distance. Instead, this feeling-of-a-feeling happens inside the film's *minor gestures* (Manning 2016). Remember that Diana's statement revealed the feeling of love growing between two people (that includes them!), but this statement emerged from the semblance of love that is a potential or virtuality in the film. It did not emerge from a classic major event like a kiss or handholding but from a tangle of minor gestures over the lived duration of the film. When we are working with semblance in cine-ethnomusicology, we are thinking-feeling in duration, working in the percept affect area of the Peircean triad but in motion. And since semblance is an experience that is virtuality within the film, it is not deterministic, assured, or certain. This means that we are no longer making documentary objects that are read but instead innovating with percepts, affects, concepts in duration and within a technological ecology. We are watching these minor gestures pull on the other ecologies that require more study. I think we can see a relationship with the post-fieldwork treatment of the cinema documents here, but I think from a different and perhaps poetic orientation. This is what then leads me to argue along with Ben Harbert that we need to study cinema production in order to open up the possibility of a more exploratory cine-ethnomusicological scholarship.

Now perhaps more to the point about your critique of "fiction". Where is the literature that has tested nonfiction modes of humanities and social science inquiry to find it lacking? Certainly, there have been celebrated anthropological inquiries using fiction. Here I'm thinking about Michael Jackson's existential anthropology, and Jean Rouch's ethnofiction, recently elaborated by Sjöberg. I am unaware of a disciplinary decision in anthropology that these methodological experiments are inherently non-scholarly. Cinematic research-creation and recent works in music video as ethnography

are attempting to expand cinematic approaches to social science and humanities research methods, and it is here that we find the heart of the critique: the relationship between storytelling and realism, documentary and truth. The blurring between documentary and fiction film, which is indeed my intention, brings us into a poetic cinematic space that is interesting anthropologically and cinematically. This is the aesthetic-theoretical question of “realism,” a relationship between ethnographic film and *neorealism* that remains under-theorized though it has been in global circulation since perhaps the Italian neo-realists in Europe, and Ozu’s family drama in Japan. I would like to suggest that *Ark* is indeed doing “a critical cinema of music” (Harbert 2018, 246) by joining the confluences of neo-realism and ethno-fiction.

Dara Waldron (2018) has recently called this approach to blurring documentary and fiction “new nonfiction” film and has identified a lineage that includes: Abbas Kiarostami, Ben Rivers, Chantal Akerman, Ben Russell, Pat Collins, and Gideon Koppel. Is neo-realism a style or something deeper, something more fundamental about cinematic worldings in modernity? Jacques Rancière has recently noted in *Modern Times* (2018) that cinematic realism is a cinematic engagement with the proliferation of temporalities within modernity. *Ark* uses this approach to bring viewers in contact with an emergent festival temporality not as something liminal or outside modernity, but something consonant with the temporal productivity of modernity, and perhaps within the viewer, in the process of joining a cinematic journey.

### **Reviewer:**

Let’s turn to the reveal of the film’s name in the final interview segment with the apparent founder where she says, “This is a destiny. I felt very strongly that I was being told to build an ark. ... For survival, something to survive the madness of our fucking consuming, destroying, life-denying culture. And I never, ever thought we would last this long.” This reveal enables viewers to reflect on the film in a new light, but there appears to be little in the 2009 or the 2019 footage that explicitly aligns with her insights. Do you think that this metaphor could have been developed more clearly and explicitly to help make connections between the 2009 and 2019 footage?

### **MacDonald:**

Great question. Your question also reminds me that I forgot to finish my thinking about the semblance of circularity, or *semblance of refrain*. I really like your observation

here, and it is indeed one of my questions. The relations between 2009 and 2019, and the relations between the metaphor *Ark* and what happens at the festivals. As I was living the event, I was well aware of the virtualities of the past festivals. This is a way of thinking that the virtualities, my field of vision, was haunted, if you will, by previous iterations of the festival. I don't mean this metaphorically. The festival site was so similar to the site in 2009 that it was drawing out memories that would populate my field of vision, like overlays. So the idea of keeping 2009 and 2019 separate was never a goal, how could it be? But also making the connections between them was not a major goal, as I initially had no plan to re-use the footage from 2009. It was only while at the festival that this became necessary. This is difficult to speak about, but I think the film does it better with the blurring of temporality that happens when watching the film.



You are right that when the metaphor of the ark is mentioned at the end, it sends the viewers imagination back to the beginning. Perhaps this is the experience of the *semblance of refrain* that I experienced at the festival. I think this gets us into the space that I wanted to explore, the uncertainty of festival temporality. What if festival temporality is not limited by the borders of the festival's major event but is instead deep and fractally proliferating relational temporalities within the minor? Not "a" temporality but a field of relating temporalities constituted by pasts and futures. Another way of saying this is worldings. The music festival creates what Erin Manning calls *enabling constraint* (2016, 88-91), which is a type of frame or sandbox for the

event(s). The restraints enable the proliferation of minor temporalities, minor gestures, minor events, so the *constraints* can be said to be *enabling*. The blurring of time that you identify was intentional. I had previously noted many times in my research that festival participants often talk about a different kind of “festival time” where the first day of the festival is like the next day of last year’s festival. The *semblance of refrain* is complex and kind of bewildering and something I need to think much more about, but it was something that we actually did without planning; it emerged from my experience at the festival. There is both a cycling history but also an overlaying of each cycle onto itself. But this is not all. Meeting Kelci in Nelson and then following that path from Nelson to Robson Valley, which, as it turned out, was well worn though not apparent to us in the beginning. So it is unclear from my perspective where and when the festival entanglements can be delimited both spatially and temporally.

But I also do not try to flatten time. I hope that an attentive viewer will note the difference in cinematic texture when moving between times (because of the different cameras and recording media), but there is a point where even for me, a kind of temporal blurring occurs, and it is meant to explore the possibilities of moving outside what I have called the “flat ethnographic plane of correspondence” that is part of the poetics of the documentation paradigm: the ethnographic present or the past always narrated from a stable present. Cinema, as noted by Bergson, Tarkovsky, Deleuze, and others, is a practice of light and time, and allows for a kind of affective attunement, or entrainment to temporality, and it seems not only unnecessary but perhaps, a missed opportunity, to think time too restrictively. If too much guidance is provided for the viewer, does it help make the film more accessible or just try to control something that is set free by cinema? A freedom that I think is closer to the lived experience of semblance than any narration can hope to attain. My hope is that the viewer “gets lost” in the blurring of temporality, to ask questions about festival temporality, to open the possibility for a viewer to experience the semblance of love and the semblance of refrain, the cyclical complexifying life of festival worldings.

I am interested in using cinema to make the virtualities of time and relations visible, the semblance of love, a semblance of refrain. We first meet Kelci in Nelson British Columbia, and we follow her two-day drive to the festival. As I mentioned before, it is the same drive that was taken a quarter century earlier when the land was purchased. So there is that circularity in the film, we get to the end of the experience before the idea of the land as an ark gets introduced, another circularity. By this time, we might be questioning where the festival begins. Is it with the creation of the Robson Valley Music Festival, the purchase of the land, the attempted hippie settlement in the west as

a response to late modernity, or is it the conversation with the ghost relator? Is this a real story or a fable? What is the connection between the ark and Kelci and Diana's relationship? I don't think that it is possible for me to spell this out. I think it might be important for there to be a proliferation of answers from different viewers that might illuminate the proliferation of festival temporalities. These are questions posed by the film that open up a conversation about agency, about temporalities, and about affect and semblance, that is for me at least, the point of making a film.

To go back to what I was saying about cinematic research-creation, the filmmaking process generates questions that move back into research questions as well as cinematic or artful questions about the poetics of music films. I do not think that the film needs to close off questions or present itself as a definitive answer. In my cineworlding approach, I hope my films are propositions to think about music's entanglements and becomings. Perhaps the post-film Q&A offers an enabling constraint for a critical pedagogy of thinking-feeling music. I hope the film becomes a way of expanding what we think we know about cinema and music, about the visualization of music/sound and the musicalization of vision, opening new territories of inquiry and complexifying worlds. I hope that viewers ask the kinds of questions that we are discussing here. Is a music festival an ark? What is an ark? Might it be one? Do we need one? If the film inspires questions, then it has done what I wanted it to do. Its production and your questions have certainly inspired a lot of thinking-feeling for me.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/w/worlding.html> (accessed August 11, 2022)

<sup>2</sup> *Inflexions* 1.1 (May): 1-40. [www.inflexions.org](http://www.inflexions.org) (accessed August 11, 2022)

<sup>3</sup> We might for instance refer to Hugo Zemp's 1988 article "Filming Music and Looking at Music Films." *Ethnomusicology* 32, no.3 (autumn): 393-427 to see the difference between what I am proposing. I think cinematic research-creation takes the poetics of cinema production very seriously. This is not to suggest that Zemp didn't, but only to point out that there is, I think, a gap between Zemp's films and his theoretical discussion in this famous and often cited article. There is much more going on cinematically than is discussed. This can also perhaps be extended to John Baily's *Amir*, an absolutely gorgeous film that exceeds the documentation paradigm and remains undertheorized as a consequence, I propose, of the distance between film theory and ethnomusicology. Harbert's concepts of a 'critical cinema of music' recognizes this gap.

<sup>4</sup> I use the conceptual/psychic ecology here from Félix Guattari's idea of the three ecologies which I have expanded into four ecologies: psychic/conceptual, social, technological, and environmental in my book *Cineworlding* (2023).

<sup>5</sup> The idea that there is an event that entangles these ecologies together on screen and in the bodies of the viewers leads to technological ecological questions. The affects of love that provoke semblance are vectored through media and across time-space. Consider the way a songwriter uses words and sounds (percepts) that stir sound-image affects in receptive listeners. These listeners actualize the virtualities that gather around the percepts of the sound-image, actualizing them in their prehension, to use a Whiteheadian concept. How these musical percepts are visualized and vectored in the music video is a fascinating question. What is the difference between Ark and a long music video? The percepts are recorded in a media ecology in a separate time-space from the viewer and then these forces entangle with a viewer/listeners body in a media ecology in a separate time-space. How do we discuss this mobilization of forces that of afforded by, or vectored by media? These are fascinating questions that I do not have answers for, but I'm sure you can see how the questions proliferate.

<sup>6</sup> This marks a significant break from phenomenology where the experience of something is what counts. Process philosophy inverts this starting point. Phenomenology starts in consciousness where process philosophy starts with the world and inquires after experience as an emergent phenomena of the event and does not work out from the consciousness of experience to construct an event. The event will always have virtualities at larger and smaller scales that will exceed the actualized content of experience.

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A publication of the Society for Ethnomusicology, ISSN 2473-6422

[www.ethnomusicology.org](http://www.ethnomusicology.org)

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