



*Sal Brown and Martin Wood*

**Interview with Martin Wood:  
A Filmmaker's Journey into Research**

Questions by James Rowlin

A line of flight is something that pushes back or constitutes a form of resistance against the confines of modern life, be it social, psychological or physical. *Lines of Flight* (Brown & Wood 2009) teases out a relationship between twentieth-century economic labour in England's metropolitan north, the world of mass-culture that people inhabit today, and solo rock climbing – ascending a rock face without using any ropes, harnesses or other protective equipment – on the outcrops and crags at the margins of what are now termed the inner cities.

The film is punctuated by quotes from poetry, literature and philosophy. Footage explores the industriousness of modernity and asks critical questions about the postmodern present. Shots of mills and works and an out-of-town retail park with its familiar “brand-scape,” counterpoised with the wild upland countryside, urge an embodied spectator to engage individually with the film and reflect on the same subject matter the filmmakers are musing about. Climbing then becomes a political act and soloing its purest expression. *Lines of Flight* has received exposure and prizes at international film competitions and was a category winner at the IAFOR Documentary Film Award 2014.

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**Watch *Lines of Flight* by Sal Brown and Martin Wood**



**1. Please tell me about the concept of film essay and – as you envisage it – of *Lines of Flight*.**

According to Laura Rascaroli (2008), film essays can encompass all the functions that written text can display: to record, reveal and preserve; to persuade or promote; to present arguments; and to analyse or interrogate. One way to think about the film essay is as a new type of intellectual activity, one that is able to express thought through fostering bodily sensation.

In *What Is Philosophy*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) demonstrate that art – and to me the concept of film essay – is concerned with the “force of sensation” (216). In this sense, art/film thinks with sensations. Of course, this does not mean that written language is not “active,” intellectually and emotionally.

In his brief history of *Lines*, Tim Ingold (2007) provides us with some useful insights into the aural power of writing. He explains that while we might read musical notation, the intention is always to “experience the music as such” (Ingold 2007: 11). He describes how poets exploit “the sonority of the spoken word” (12) to achieve precisely the same effect.

If it is the case that we read with our ears, then we can also feel with our eyes. In fact, this multisensory experience is why certain film essays produce in the spectator the immediacy of social intercourse, in the present tense. The emphasis on producing an intellectually and emotionally active relationship challenges the very notion of representing experience using facts, logic and reflections made possible by the literary essay.

An important dimension of the film essay is therefore to remind each spectator that they are engaging with the filmic materials so as to interact with the work. They are supposed to do more than simply gaze upon on-screen “reality.” As an example, *Lines of Flight* gives the audience both cognitive and emotional information to help or challenge them to think about

broader principles than the concrete instance that the film depicts. It also expresses possibilities and forces that an individual spectator can link up with, become part of.

Following Nigel Thrift (2008: 12), our aim was to go “into” the moment and work outwards from there, and as a force to “inject a note of wonder” back into research. Our idea was to evoke a reality effect, one that plays between rationality and physical reactions, to enhance the insights and knowledge gained from research. Grounded in an aesthetic sensibility, the film invites the viewer as an individual to think, to feel and to question the experiences of the people on screen in the light of their own; taking in the meanings that it is trying to illuminate and create.

## **2. Can you discuss the research component in detail? Is a “plot” or narrative akin to an argument? What value do moving images, affect and emotion have to empirical research?**

Can films, videos and other types of media presentation embody research? I believe that a good many forms of output, whether physical or virtual, textual or non-textual, visual or sonic, static or dynamic, digital or analogue, may properly be thought to be doing research. Why then are there so few cases of films and videos counting as research? One answer is that, if the narrative carries the burden to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem, then, it can be argued, it is not the film itself that is imparting a point of view but what is filmed—the narrative content.

I concede that a film cannot do research merely by recording arguments being stated on-screen but I would say that it can present arguments by virtue of its plot or narrative. I admit that this does not distinguish film from the form or the content of any novel, play, or other narrative art, but, just as written text encompasses everything from rough notes taken on the hoof to meticulously transcribed interviews, to wonderfully evocative accounts to laser-like theory and analysis, I think film can and should occupy the same range. We should integrate it into our research practice just as we have integrated well written and interesting text (Rascaroli 2008).

Accepting the widest range and types of research output helps us to recognise and employ a different kind of narrative, one which we do not need to textualise because it engages with what is outside the frame of text. Where we judge certain film outputs to embody research in an independent manner – independent of a separate written text – we can say that, following Bergson and Deleuze, we are already processing the world cinematically and that this is thinking (e.g. Sinnerbrink, 2011).

Drawing on Deleuze’s (1989: 151) claim that film can enact a “shock to thought” provides us with a basic explanation of cinematic thinking. What interests Deleuze about film is that it adds something to ideas so that they come to take us over, or move us (Deleuze and Parnet 1987). Films evoke senses that trigger emotional or cognitive responses. For Deleuze, visual sensations constantly enter into, or in some way merge in a direct fashion with the film world, so that the visual image and the viewer’s experience become exactly the same (Deleuze 1986). It is this pre-cognitive level of sensations that gives certain (cinematic) films their power, a power that makes demands different to the linguistic, whether written or verbal, but that are no less demanding.

Bergson (1991: 58) also explains the correspondence between sensation and understanding when he writes that “there is no perception without affection,” no event without experience.

This can be understood easily in reference to *Lines of Flight*. Its expressive qualities produce emotional or cognitive responses that viewers experience as a result of direct sensory engagement. As a film doing research, it thus comes close to Deleuze's "shock to thought."

### **3. What claims, specifically, are made in this film?**

It is important to note that the idea of film as research does not end in a univocal work. It is not a question of what can be gleaned from our film or what specific claims it makes. Film as research is not confined to the expression of an explicit intention on the part of its makers (Wood and Brown 2012).

Claims perpetually exceed their own limits, especially when these are imposed *from without*. Whatever our film's evaluative intentions, it needs a viewer to engage individually with it using non-verbal thinking/feeling *from within*. In a certain sense, if we characterise a claim as being focused on a single authorial point of view that everything gets sucked in towards, *Lines of Flight* is anti-claim.

In much the same way, Roscaroli (2008: 35) writes that film adopts:

a certain rhetorical structure: rather than answering all the questions that it raises, and delivering a complete, "closed" argument, the essay's rhetoric is such that it opens up problems, and interrogates the spectator; instead of guiding her through emotional and intellectual response, the essay urges her to engage individually with the film, and reflect on the same subject matter the author is musing about.

Roscaroli, like others who claim the film has its own mode of research presentation, understands that it is not enough for the genuine film essay to offer "clear-cut answers." The filmmaker must "ask questions" that call upon a spectator to participate in the reflection.

Of course, the design elements or the visual devices a film deploys to communicate ideas and engage active responses in the viewer are undeniably important. For example in *Lines of Flight*, one does not need to be a free soloist or even a rock climber, or indeed a participant in any one of the interesting proliferation of lifestyle sports that nowadays display the same fluid "streaming" (Kwinter 2001), to be intoxicated by on-screen depictions of climbing as a "release" or a "fantastic", "almost an aesthetic", or "meditative" feeling or "way out" of "the normal run of things". The viewer need only identify as someone who suffers the perennial psychological, social or somatic distress of bearing with a 40 hours a week job that has been drained of its content or otherwise requires them to complete their work tasks energetically, or to display a cheerful expression during service transactions, to be able to recognise themselves. Hence, while the text is an open field, our provocation and evocation is clear.

However, in order to make it convincing, this qualitative feeling should not only be found in the film but must also be "read" or interpreted by the viewer. Our sequencing of shots and use of narration and music invites the spectator to go beyond specific claims and to wonder about imaginary or actual lines of flight elsewhere. Thus in the film, we strive for immersion rather than mere appraisal or contemplation on the viewer's part. The more we enable this involvement, the more we succeed in the self-reflexive perception, like that described by Bergson and Deleuze.

4. **The film is punctuated with lines and striations, both literal and figurative. After seeing the imagery recorded for the film, did you discover any lines (of flight) that you had not previously perceived? If so, did this offer any unexpected insights into the relationship between the forms of the landscape and the city, and subjects' attempts to escape?**

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) start by saying that in our attempts to negotiate with the world around us, we have to be careful. They warn us there are no absolute escapes and that in this pursuit we might fail and simply destroy ourselves, turning the line of flight “into a line of death” (229). *Lines of Flight* offers insights here because it concerns the various prospects for freeing ourselves and the threat of falling back, both literally and figuratively.

Practically speaking, we wanted to get a suggestive set of discussions going about lines of flight that have the potential to disrupt, by slipping out of the categories established by the world, the relations of local traditions to a more general history, and to foster abstract thinking to concrete and material realities. We can look at each of these connections from the point of view of “assemblages.”

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest that everything is an assemblage—in a nutshell, the fluid connections between things. The relationship between these connections can be an assembly in the vaguest sense, as in the incorporations of the capitalist phenomenon or the social roots of globalising processes. Alongside this, the assemblage can also be corporeal or bodily (“material” or “machinic”, in Deleuze and Guattari’s language).

For instance, the social structures and the geography of production portrayed in the film are rooted in European industrial politics from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which led factory owners to re-examine craft-dominated trades, and, above all, to specify clearly the rational conditioning of labour that continues even today. But the assemblage is also capable of putting these relationships “to flight” in new and unexpected ways. Let’s say, the stone mined from quarries was formed into the buildings people now toil away in, toil that burdens them, and toil that compels them back to stone of the quarries.

From the point of view of *Lines of Flight*, a corporeal or bodily assemblage is both an intermediary and a stopper for the intermingling of very different kinds of things. These concretise at a given moment but can be realised differently under a changed state of affairs. Therefore, the question becomes what forms of escape did *you* find in the interplay between horizontals and verticals—including, most spectacularly, the bodies themselves climbing and going both up and across? What passions and compassions did the visuals (especially the lines themselves) evoke? What “intensities” ran from the film to your own life? What “lines of flight” did you, as a viewer, follow?

5. **Philosophy. A narrative seems to emerge that free solo rock climbing is not about danger or “thrill seeking” but ritual, repetition and even routine. To what extent is this analogous to Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus*? Climbers, conscious of the absurdity of modern existence, revolt against societal norms yet ultimately find happiness in repeated action?**

Existentialists might describe the revolt against societal norms as a situation in which someone asks why there is being, why something exists. People agonise over how to progress from absolute emptiness to universal fullness, imagining that the human condition has some inherent

purpose or underlying design, rather than an irresolvable view of existence that writers like Camus describe as “absurd”.

Camus talks, sceptically in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, about the perpetual effort to give life a meaning, but eventually to accept the fact that it completely lacks significance. Camus's understanding of absurdity is best captured in the image of Sisyphus condemned to push his rock up the mountain, watching it roll down, and then descending after it to begin all over again, in an endless and futile cycle.

From one point of view, the same problem informs the debate on the role of free-soloing in *Lines of Flight*. While reflecting on their experiences as individual spectators, some viewers describe the free-soloists in negative terms. Like Sisyphus, the actions of the climbers to ascend the rock face and then descend to begin all over again, in an endless cycle, lead some to question whether their behaviour already implies the idea of absence, or of nothingness.

Seen from another perspective, I think the source of the problem is false. When we encounter the “absurdity” – some call it the insanity – of free-soloing, the impulse is to see the activity merely as it looks: selfish “thrill-seekers” trying and failing to lead and sustain a full and genuine life in a way that seems to necessitate a sort of “flight” in an attempt to escape who they are. But I see the climbers less pessimistically. I interpret the free soloing as a way to understand a life that is genuinely “lived” rather than as a representation of absolute emptiness.

Camus writes at the beginning of *The Rebel* (1984: 6) that, “To say that life is absurd, consciousness must be alive.” In effect, his recognition that consciousness must be alive, “amounts to saying that life has a meaning” (101). In the same way, what makes life worth living is a question that concerns Bernhard Stiegler (2013). He points out that “being alive” means passing through, and that mindfulness is only constituted by the qualitative links attaching one transitional spirit to another.

Stiegler elucidates this link, not as purposive-rational activity, essentially the arrangement and rearrangement of a definite number of stable elements, but as “an immediate area of experience” (20); a space which is in them and where “an art of living” (21) is developed. He argues that contemplating a world that exists independently of us always carries with it the possibility of self-destruction, associated with the idea that nothing matters (an inauthentic life). By contrast, the notion of a spirit of internalisation implies that we can invent a new way of life, one where living means taking care (living authentically).

I think we can liken the extrinsic relationship of separate numerical or physical existents to the whole array of traditional sports, in which the task is “to ‘master’ in the macho, form-imposing sense” (Kwinter 2002: 31). In contrast, the process of artful internalisation is without a doubt what characterises free-solo rock climbing. In the language of Sanford Kwinter (2002: 28):

Unlike more traditional (hunter-warrior model) sports, free-soloist climbers do not conceive of themselves as exclusive or “prime motors” at the origin of their movements; they rather track from within the flows, a variety of emerging features, singularities, and unfoldings with which they can meld.

This is the precise point to which the soloists in *Lines of Flight* draw attention when they reflect on the meditative, almost trance-like sense of sustainment, a ritualistic kind of performance art, that free-soloing can offer. They resist the suggestion that it is simply a “thrill-seeking” escape



from real life, or behaviour that emulates a consumerist model. While the system of production and consumption inscribes climbing in many respects: the criteria for “doing” the route, “fixing” the coordinates of the correct line; this exteriorisation doesn’t often convey the interior mood, the feel, the moment, the texture or the time of day that engages free-soloing’s “wild and free unfolding” (Kwinter 2002: 31).

A constantly renewing life is one of the ideas behind *Lines of Flight*. In contrast to the anxiety that, for existentialists, issues from the nature of our being-fixed, which ultimately starts from our extrinsic relationship with a ready-made world, we wanted to express, more or less satisfactorily, the intensive continuity that constitutes authentic human existence. In the end, perhaps, it not just *thinking* I exist that is important, but that I *feel* alive.

**6. The film’s full title makes mention of “everyday resistance along England’s backbone.” By referencing Deleuze and Guattari and your interviews with subjects, you make a critique of capitalism’s stranglehold on local communities. It struck me, nonetheless, that there is a wistful, almost nostalgic charm in the representation of these market towns – which owe their existence to industrial revolution-era capitalism. Could it be that film’s poetry softens its “intended” Marxist critique?**

The first thing to say is that we were interested in the ways in which lines and movements are opened up or blocked. Philosophically, we were concerned with becoming, change, movement, and being in our contemporary world – put simply, we wanted understand a local society by looking at the lines that compose it and the ways in which change is structured in it. I suppose the actual form this took was, broadly speaking, the Marxist account of society, as the dialectical relation between opposites.

The narrative explores the connections between people and landscape in the Pennines region of northern England – a low-rising mountain range, generally known as the “backbone of England,” which covers much of the counties of Derbyshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire, as well as encroaching upon the edge of Staffordshire, the north-east corner of Cumbria and western flank of County Durham, before sinking down to the north to merge ultimately with the lowlands of Scotland. It operates under the tension between the grinding toil of working life in the industrial-era, the profound alteration of urban spaces and the social consequences of what appears as globalisation in the present-day. It juxtaposes these with the activity of rock climbing, which, at least for much of the twentieth century, contrasted with the logic and economic flows of late capitalism (Wood 2016).

In the face of such a clash, why should we conclude that the vision behind the film is of a wistful or nostalgic experience? Doing so belies a much drearier reality in a world to which, although places still exist, we cannot return. Work and life in the region, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, was brutal and unremitting.

At the end of the 1940s there was hope and expectation for a better world but many people still worked extremely long hours – eight till five, Monday to Friday, eight till two-thirty on Saturday. Cars were not widely available until the 1960s and it would have remained a major task to go climbing, even to the outcrops and crags almost on the doorstep. And by the 1980s, much pre-twentieth century building was run down or demolished. My own persistent memories, as a teenage job-seeker in the mid-Thatcher years, are of a particular social context

characterised by a struggle over work, the spirit of hopelessness for industry and striking miners and their communities in brutal confrontation with the police.

So, in our attempts to weave our memories and historical accounts into dreams, I don't think we should get sucked into the past. In the pursuit of this line, using Deleuze and Guattari's language, we might simply fall back on the structures and codes of society and ultimately destroy our passion for creation.

## **7. How do you see the film essay developing in the future? Do you think universities will be willing to credit such works as research?**

Recently, Australia's chief scientist sent out a clear message to university researchers: "give us ... stories that illuminate". He added, we "should paint vivid pictures. They're worth a thousand words." (Finkel 2016: 20).

Granted, he was talking to fields such as physics and medical science. But, in a world where visual cultural materials are constantly being (re)produced, he reminds us of the importance of practice-based/artistic research that will include, but not be limited to film and video, as a way of bringing powerful ideas to life. However, beyond the recognition factor, making films and videos as research raises a wide variety of contemporary issues, particularly those relevant to questions about its perceived worth and academic value.

The question of *form* seems to me crucial. According to Roscaroli (2008: 25) a scholarly film is a "form that thinks and thought that forms," holding us fast and daring us to think serious thoughts. As a multisensory method of communication, film has different affordances to written text and an effective use of the medium should take advantage of these. While film is not the answer to every research question and context, its significance in better understanding the full spectrum of human experience is hard to argue with.

Among film's key markers is the central role of "sensation," which is largely inaccessible to established research methods (Thrift 2008). Film's photographic qualities underpin its ability to communicate non-, or perhaps better, pre-cognitive experience. This ability is, of course, constructed through framing, lighting, editing and many other tools of the trade, but the temporal and spatial richness of what can be recreated as a sensation offers great potential to researchers.

A second term to designate film's dramatic quality is the focus on "affect." Thrift (2008) maintains that affect is a form of thinking in action: a different kind of intelligence about the world, but it is intelligence nonetheless. Likewise, Berkeley et al. (2016) argue that affect is an important part of the cinematic experience because it effaces the distinction between the image and thought. This connection lies at the core of the affective encounter that can give us a cerebral shock (Deleuze 1989), without which there is no research communication.

However, these indicators are a problem for the text-based economy of universities. They confound the traditional way of disseminating academic research in the established format. The risk in this situation is that academic researchers, even though they have become film and video makers – I note that more and more academic journals and events are now opening to films, videos and other types of media presentations–, are requested by their institutions and by national evaluations for career promotion to prepare and write good quantitative and qualitative



papers that reflect strong beliefs pushed by editorial boards of highly ranked journals, or risk scholarly excommunication by being declared “research inactive.”

Another reason that scholarly filmmaking is still in a state of flux is that, unlike the relatively standardised measures for assessing the quality of published papers, judgements about whether films and videos meet the definition of research are not fully developed. However, academics have already begun to develop a “critical visual literacy” (Belk and Kozinets, 2005: 134), which may assist them to evaluate film essays as easily as they now critically review a written discussion.

All in all, film presents distinctive challenges to researchers and a range of benefits for audiences and users at just the time when calls for research to have reach and impact have increased greatly. This, I believe, is not a minor task of science. It is our ethical responsibility to try to expand the possibilities of where we might encounter research, what that research might be made of, or be about, and improve the quality of expression to enhance public engagement and understanding. Things can only get better if we see it through.

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