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## **Exploring Uses of Networked Images in Desktop Documentary**

**Steffen Köhn and Lillian Dam Bracia**

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# Exploring Uses of Networked Images in Desktop Documentary

Steffen Köhn in conversation with Lillian Dam Bracia

## Abstract:

The following piece is a discussion between filmmaker and visual-media anthropologist Dr. Steffen Köhn and artist, curator and visual anthropologist Lillian Dam Bracia, both of whom presented their work at the Data-Stories Confestival in Volos in 2019. In their conversation, held online on July 14, 2020, they assess the potential of the desktop documentary genre for contemporary ethnographic filmmaking and as a new research and dissemination method for digital anthropological research projects. This interview has been edited for clarity. Links to images, video and supplemental material have also been added.

**Please see HTML version for accompanying video content**

## I. Explaining ‘desktop documentary’ as a genre: Multimodal uses of networked images

**Lillian:** So, Steffen, I was thinking we could start with what makes a desktop documentary? I’ve seen that recently there have been many films using desktop aesthetics, so I think it would be good for us to discuss “what makes a desktop documentary?” Recently, for instance, I’ve seen a lot of found-footage films<sup>1</sup>, but can these necessarily be considered desktop films? So maybe we can start by talking about the different genres of the desktop film. How does it work as a documentary, as an ethnographic film, as machinima?<sup>2</sup>

**Steffen:** I guess it’s debatable, but for me a desktop documentary is a film that is “shot” without the use of a camera, but with screen recording software. And the documentary element for me would be that it is about real stuff and real people. I mean, there’s been a series of horror films using this kind of desktop aesthetics, but the desktop documentary, for me, is about real-life online social phenomena. I would also distinguish desktop films from machinima. For me, a machinima is a film that is also made camera-less, also based on a screen

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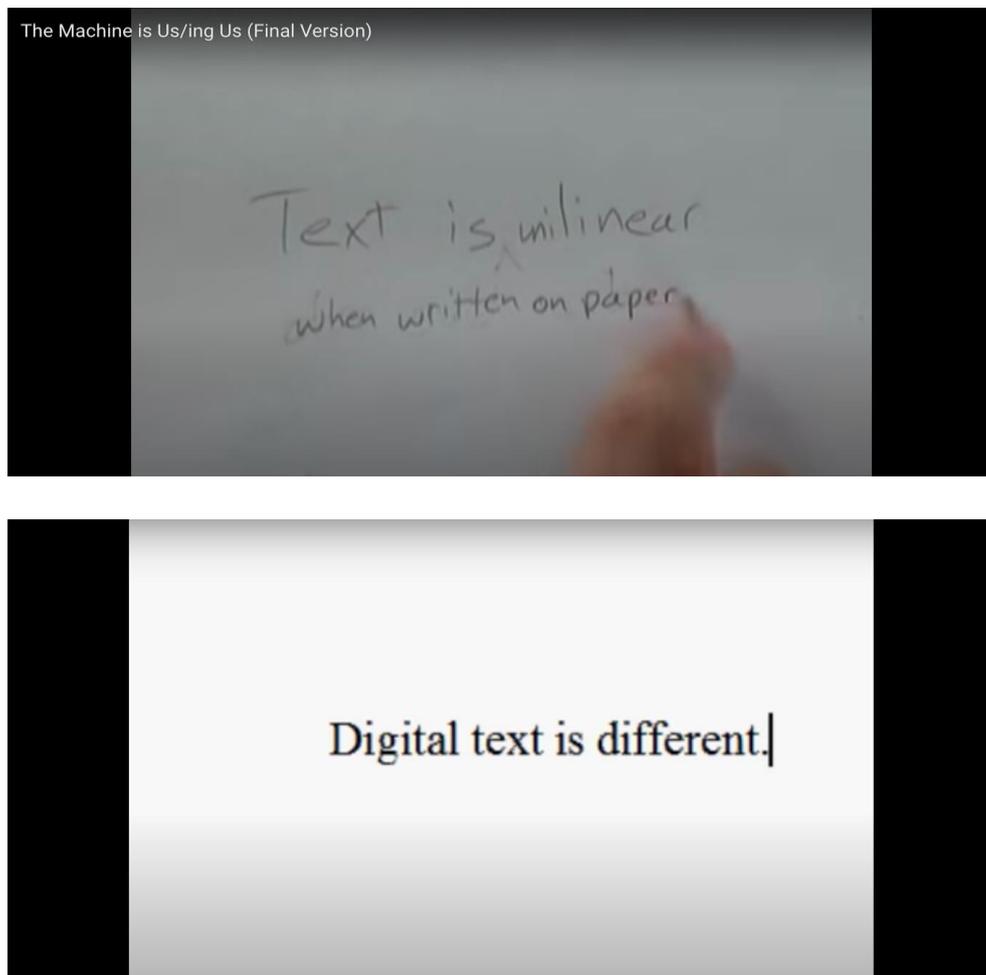
<sup>1</sup> Some examples of recent found footage films include [Kotlovan](#) (2020), [Sand und Blut](#) (2017), [Noah](#) (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Machinima are short animated films made using computer game engines. The word is a portmanteau of “machine” and “cinema.”

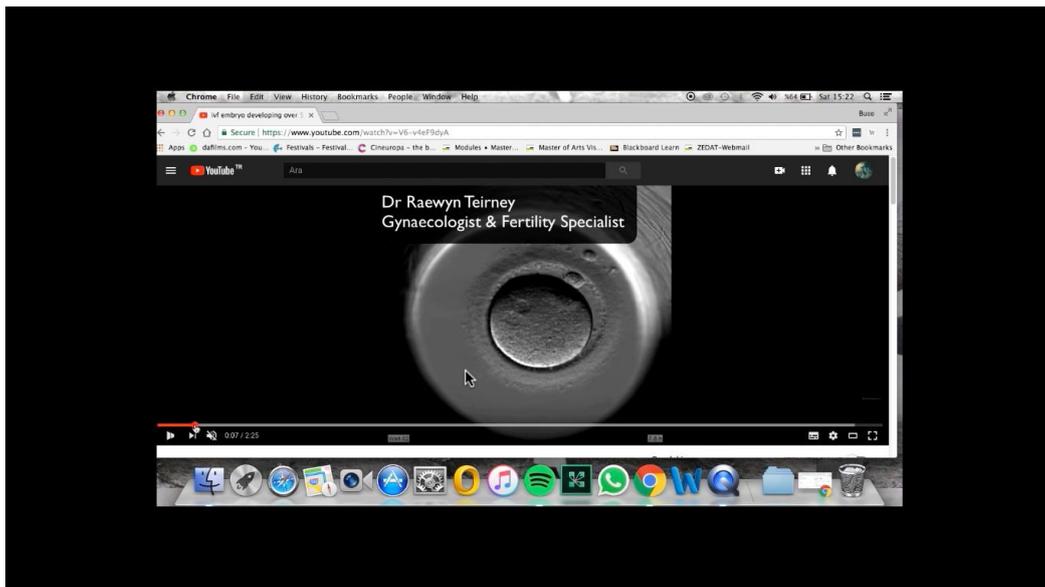
recording but using some kind of in-game video engine to create imagery. I think there are also documentary machinimas and even ethnographic machinimas. I would probably see machinima as a very specific sub-genre of desktop documentary. That would be my definition.

**Lillian:** In the sense that you do show the interaction of you as the user and the laptop or desktop? Or not?

**Steffen:** I would argue that a desktop documentary could also, for example, just document a researcher's process. I've seen a lot of desktop documentaries that share a lot of characteristics with essay films in the Chris Marker tradition. For me, an ethnographic desktop documentary could also be located on the researcher's desktop, showing how they browse Facebook, social media accounts, Facebook profiles or groups, maybe reflecting on the kind of material they encounter.



**Figure 1:** Stills [The Machine is Us/ing Us](#) (2007) by Michael Wesch



**Figure 2:** Stills from [Circa](#) (2018) by Buse Yildirim

**Lillian:** And to call it ethnographic film or desktop documentary, I see the lines very blurred. I mean, I see that in the end it really depends on the intention of the filmmaker—whether he or she is, I don't know, working from anthropology or what his or her background is? What are your opinions on that?

**Steffen:** Well, I think in this sense the distinction is the same as in all kinds of film or documentary film. I think the desktop genre is no different. I think the “traditional” documentary film also has the same problems distinguishing if it's ethnographic or not. I think a good, well-researched documentary for which the filmmaker has really immersed themselves in a particular social lifeworld definitely has some ethnographic qualities... and I think beyond that it's more about how the filmmaker positions themselves, right? If they work as anthropologists, it's their goal to produce something of ethnographic or anthropological value. But for me, it's really about the degree of immersion. For me, the ethnographic quality

derives from this deep form of long-term immersion... and maybe also from the ethical concerns or responsibilities because I think that's also something visual anthropologists have thought a lot about. Even though ethics in documentary filmmaking are a big issue as well, I think visual anthropologists have very specific forms of ethical questions, concerns and approaches.

**Lillian:** And, moving on to the next point, how do you think the desktop documentary or ethnographic film ties into this—creating new sorts of 'data-stories' and anthropological research? Do you think it serves multimodal ethnography—I mean, in its form and the purpose of the researcher?

**Steffen:** Yes, *for sure*. I mean for me it's a best-case scenario, ideal use of multimodal anthropology because what draws me to this sort of genre of documentary filmmaking is that I feel, in particular in my research (I'm doing research about digital culture in Cuba), a lot of the research material I gather *is online*. So, I'm participating in Telegram and WhatsApp groups, I'm looking at Facebook public profiles, I sometimes I even interview people via chat, particularly now during Corona times. So, for me, it just makes sense to make something audiovisual out of all of this material I'm collecting, not just translating it back to written text, but using it as an expressive form in itself, working in this digital native form. So, what fascinates me with this genre is also that documentary filmmaking or visual anthropology always have this urge of creating or producing more images. We, as filmmakers, are used to adding more and more images to this already huge visual archive that already exists in the world, and I feel that a good desktop documentary can actually be a way of analyzing and making sense of all this visual material that is already out there, or that our research participants produce themselves on a daily basis. So, for me, this idea of searching, curating and contextualizing all this visual material that our research participants already produce of and for themselves is actually a very interesting new role for anthropologists.

## II. Desktop aesthetics in mainstream media, digital culture and desktop films: Examples from *Data-Stories* and beyond

**Lillian:** I read your text "Screens as Film Locations"<sup>3</sup> where you wrote about your film [Intimate Distance](#) (2014) and, in general, about desktop ethnographic film. I like how you mention this aspect about 'spatial montage', because it's very different from how traditional films or documentaries are made. You write that it "moves away from the temporal montage of conventional cinema in its logic of replacement with its logic of addition and coexistence." That was very clear in the films that we saw in the *Data-Stories* Confestival. You come from this filmmaking background and you also did anthropology. How has this process of moving towards desktop documentary been for you as a filmmaker? Did you feel like you could incorporate both the traditional form of cinema and desktop documentary, or was it a

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<sup>3</sup> Köhn, S. (2020) "Desktop Documentary: Screens as Film Locations." In: *The Routledge Handbook of Ethnographic Film and Video*, ed. Phillip Vannini. Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 267-277.

completely different sort of experience working with screencast footage? I was just wondering whether it's very different for you as a filmmaker?

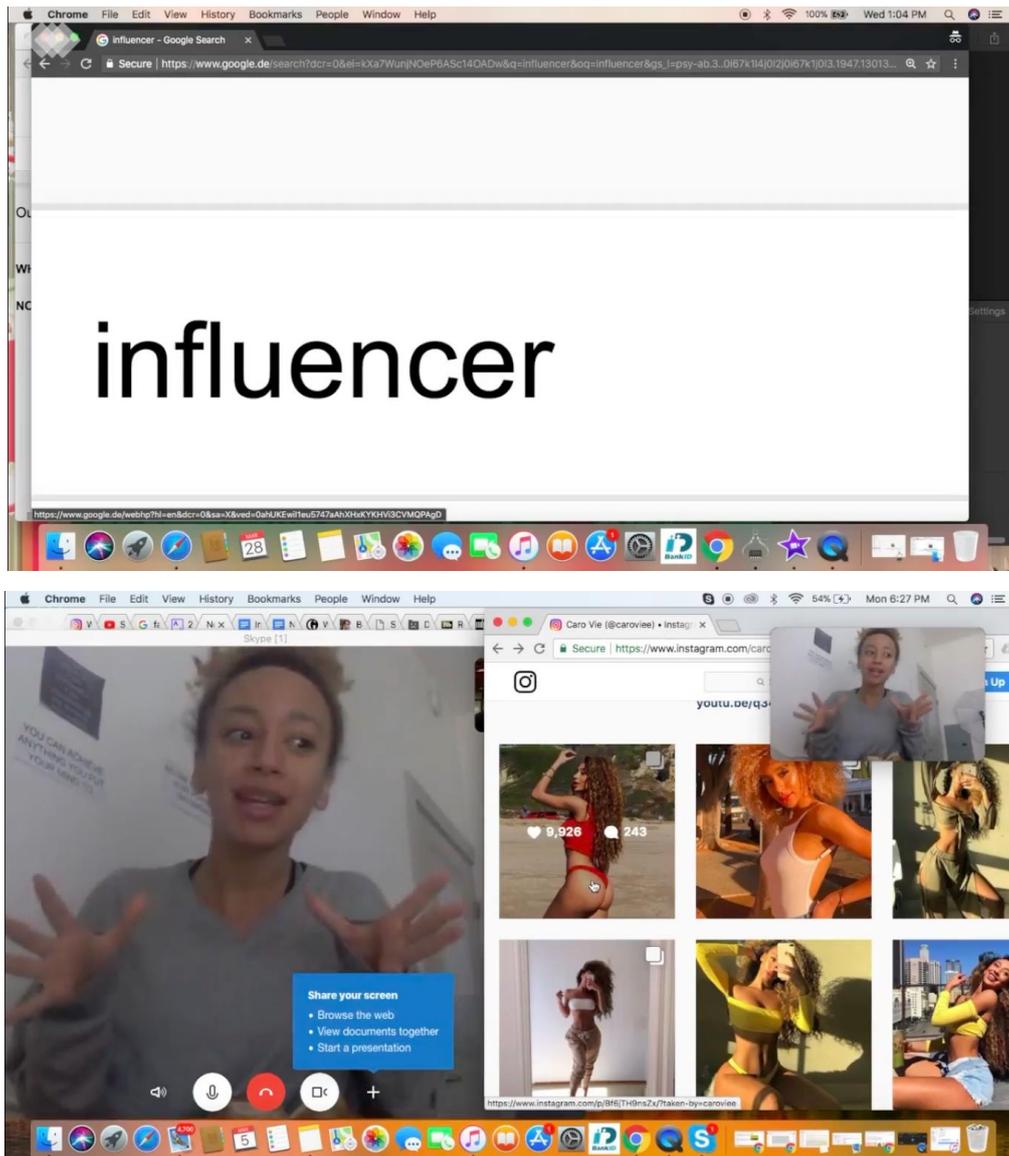
**Steffen:** Well, to answer the first question this idea of spatial montage that you quote is actually not my term. It's an idea from Lev Manovich's book *The Language of New Media*<sup>4</sup> about the aesthetics of digital culture—also about almost 20 years old. I have always been fascinated by audiovisual grammar or audiovisual language and how it develops. So, for me, it felt quite organic to incorporate this in my cinematic aesthetics and, for sure, we are not the only ones doing this. I mean, if you look at modern TV series or filmmakers, this idea of spatial montage is very, very present these days. Think, for example, of [House of Cards](#) and how SMS text messages are represented as little boxes, as a sort of an image overlay. So already this is a form of spatial montage, and I think now, also with Instagram being such a prolific and important medium, how we consume images also has changed a lot. How do *you* feel about this, being almost one digital generation younger than me? Do you feel Instagram and the Internet changed how you consume film or how you consume media, or how you think about film?

**Lillian:** Definitely. I definitely see that in almost all series that I'm very hooked on right now, almost all of them portray how you cannot separate this digital life because it's so integrated and embedded in everything we do today. Like in [Dear White People](#)—I'm not sure if you've watched it on *Netflix*—it's full of that. Almost all the series, like [Insecure](#) on HBO and all the series I'm into, always show the text messaging or how people are interacting with social media all the time and, like, how it's just part of their lives. But for me, I feel like in my generation, I compare myself to my sister who's younger and really grew up on the Internet all the time and, for me, I feel like my generation is in this in-between stage cause I mean we got Facebook in 2004, but I only got an account when I was like 16 or 17. And I also see how important it is to have a presence on social media nowadays, but for me I'm just not that kind of person. So, to me it's very strange to see how people show everything on social media today and how it always seems like they are recording everything. It's almost like if it's not recorded it didn't happen or something and, I don't know, maybe I have a bit of a judgmental view on it personally, but it's definitely interesting—especially when talking to my sister about it, who seems to have her whole life on social media, for example.

**Steffen:** At this point, I'd like to ask you a bit more about your desktop documentary [Influencer](#) (2018) that you made about your sister. How did you develop the visual grammar for the film and how did you gather the material with her? Did this form of making a film on this topic (instead of the classical research article) make sense for you? Or did you feel that there was something you couldn't quite convey? Or that text would have helped you more maybe?

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<sup>4</sup> Manovich, L. (2001) *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge & London: MIT Press.



**Figure 3:** Stills from *Influencer* (2018) by Lillian Dam Bracia

**Lillian:** Of course, it was definitely a challenge for me in many ways because it was the first time that I was actually doing a film. I was very excited to try it that way, as a desktop documentary. I mean, at first, I designed my research in terms of certain questions I wanted to ask her about this division of offline and online life because for me, personally, there's still somewhat of a division. But for her, I mean, it was very clear that for her it's, like, "It's not that everything I show is *true*, but also it's not that it's *not true*. Who I want to become is portrayed *online*. This inspires me in my life outside of my online persona." So, it was very interesting to hear her talking about that and then going through those images again, and by myself in my research, and seeing how the material fits—or contrasts to—what she was saying. But also talking to other people who see her online, like one of her followers. But for me, actually I discovered I could draw the connections more easily only much later as I was experimenting in the editing and just trying to fit certain parts of audio that resonated with the images somehow, and then reading articles about social media. For example, I start the

film with a quote about social media influencers—with a definition. By the end, the picture was forming more...but it was really very accidental—a lot of the findings and connections...I found out through the editing, really. But, of course, there was a certain time pressure to deliver something. In the end, I felt that the video medium was great for me, but if I did have more time, I think I could have elaborated in a better way, maybe. But it was really interesting.

**Steffen:** I think an aspect that I find really interesting is that when we talked before you mentioned the question of professional versus amateur filmmakers. I kind of always felt like this distinction doesn't make lots of sense to me in terms of filmmaking because all this new digital technology has had such a democratizing potential. Nowadays, with a good and fast laptop you can produce and post-produce films at a level that ten or twenty years ago was only possible with this kind of huge machinery and lots of people involved. So, it's also really interesting with this desktop film genre that it's even more accessible than classical filmmaking, and has become something that almost all of us do as we're curating our own Instagram accounts, publishing Insta stories... It's kind of a mode of doing or communicating with audiovisual media that feels very natural to everyone these days.

**Lillian:** Definitely. I mean the amateur aspect that you don't necessarily have to have a film school training perhaps. You can access so much on YouTube. You can access tutorials on how to make films. So the line becomes very blurred between amateur and professional. And then there comes my thought that in terms of radical film, that the desktop genre is radical because, like you said, it's become more accessible to create those kinds of films and the process of creating those films is sort of a radical act as well. Maybe not radical act, but the form in itself has some radical qualities to it, I think, in the sense that you are re-appropriating content that you find online and you are creating new meanings. It's not that the traditional film doesn't also do that, it can of course also do that, but I think the desktop documentary makes you confront digital content so embedded in your everyday life that it has this quality to make you reflect upon it more and draw new connections. For example, you mentioned Kevin B. Lee's film, *Transformers the Premake* (2014) in your article "Screens as Film Locations" (2020), which I thought was very relevant.

**Steffen:** When you mentioned radical filmmaking, I started thinking about whether as a category it makes that much sense to me in this context. For me I still believe in the neutrality of documentary filmmaking, but of course the term radical filmmaking has a lot to do with the Third Cinema movement from the 1960s and 1970s (Glauber Rocha, Carlos Mayolo, Ousmane Sembène). I was reminded of Julio García Espinosa's idea of an imperfect cinema and the idea of the amateur.<sup>5</sup> That kind of also implies a sort of appropriation of the technology, even if you're not a professional. I think, in this sense then, definitely desktop documentary can be a radical mode of filmmaking because just with the technological means you have with your smartphone in hand, a laptop and access to YouTube, basically everybody

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<sup>5</sup> Espinosa, J. (1979) "For an Imperfect Cinema." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 20, 24-26. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>

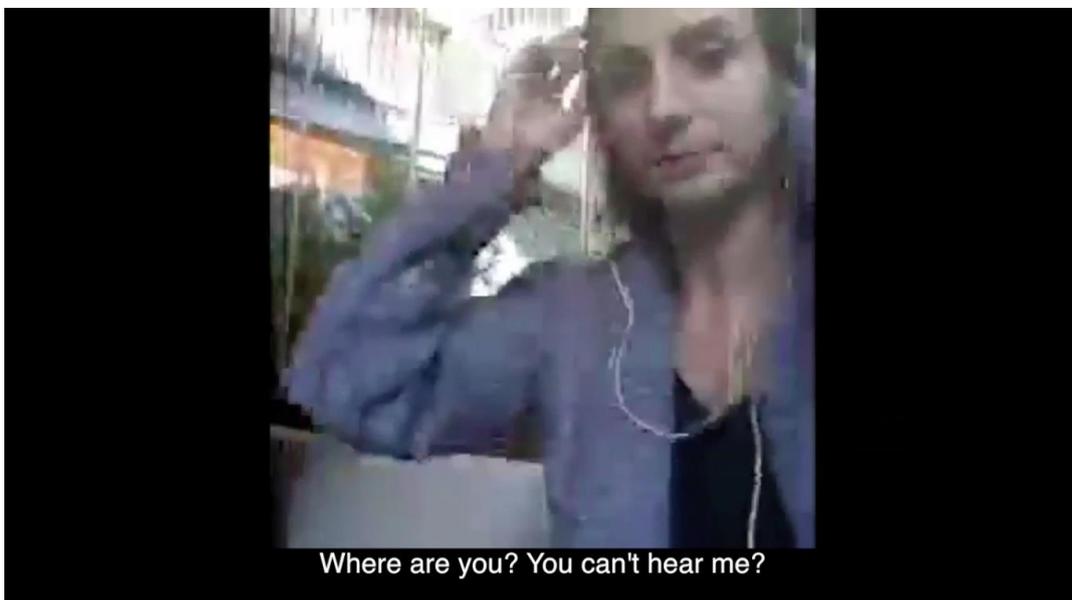
can create something that millions and millions of people may potentially see, foregoing traditional mass media gatekeepers or other kinds of gatekeepers like festival programmers. So, there's this kind of radical determination or potential of free dissemination in such kind of work that is also a very important aspect.

**Lillian:** I was thinking we might now talk a bit more about your film *Intimate Distance*<sup>6</sup> and the process of creating it, especially when we think of desktop documentary in relation to intimacy, sociality and exchange? I mean what was the process like? I watched it and I really enjoyed how it begins with the line and then the title *Intimate — Distance*. It just felt so real. I could totally feel what these people were going through, especially the long-distance relationship thing that is so common nowadays.

**Steffen:** I mean, I shot this film six years ago—before Corona, before Zoom and even before I had even heard the term 'desktop documentary'. I just had this idea. I was writing my dissertation. I had one chapter about the role of digital communication media on transnational family relationships. I was reading a lot of really fascinating ethnographic work about these Skype family reunions, but I really felt that textual ethnographic representation and retrospective interviews was not really the format for conveying something about my research participants' Skype use. I felt it would actually be more interesting to participate somehow as a researcher, but maybe also as an audience. So, I was looking for people who were open enough to share their Skype conversations with me. Also, I was interested in the fleetingness of it because people are producing audiovisual material live that is gone afterwards, so I thought it would be really interesting to document this kind of material. So, basically, I was asking friends of friends who live in such kinds of long-distance relationships. The deal that I had with all participants is that they would record their Skype calls themselves; they would actually choose what sort of material would go into the film and what not, so it was also sort of a collaborative editing process. I think that's the only way you can do such a film. This ends up being the curated image people give of themselves, but it still feels sort of private and intimate. That, at least, is what I hoped for...

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<sup>6</sup> The collaborative documentary *Intimate Distance* (2014, dir. Steffen Köhn) involved the recording of webcam conversations of three transnational families (living across Germany and Russia, Turkey, and Colombia) over a several-month period. The documentary is composed solely from footage produced through daily technology by the protagonists themselves, without the director's presence. The film reflects on the vicissitudes of contemporary digitally-mediated relationships and experiences of intimacy and distance.



**Figure 4:** Stills from [Intimate Distance](#) (2014) by Steffen Köhn

**Lillian:** Definitely. Even though the process was collaborative, as you said, there were some parts that I thought: Wow, they were so open to share that with you...especially the parts with the couple when things get very intense at some point.

**Steffen:** I actually feel that since I made the film, people have begun sharing so much more online these days...I feel I've seen Insta stories that are way more intimate, weirder, stranger, more private, more revealing, more exhibitionist than anything that is in that film.

**Lillian:** True. Sharing vulnerability is a *thing* today. People do it a lot.

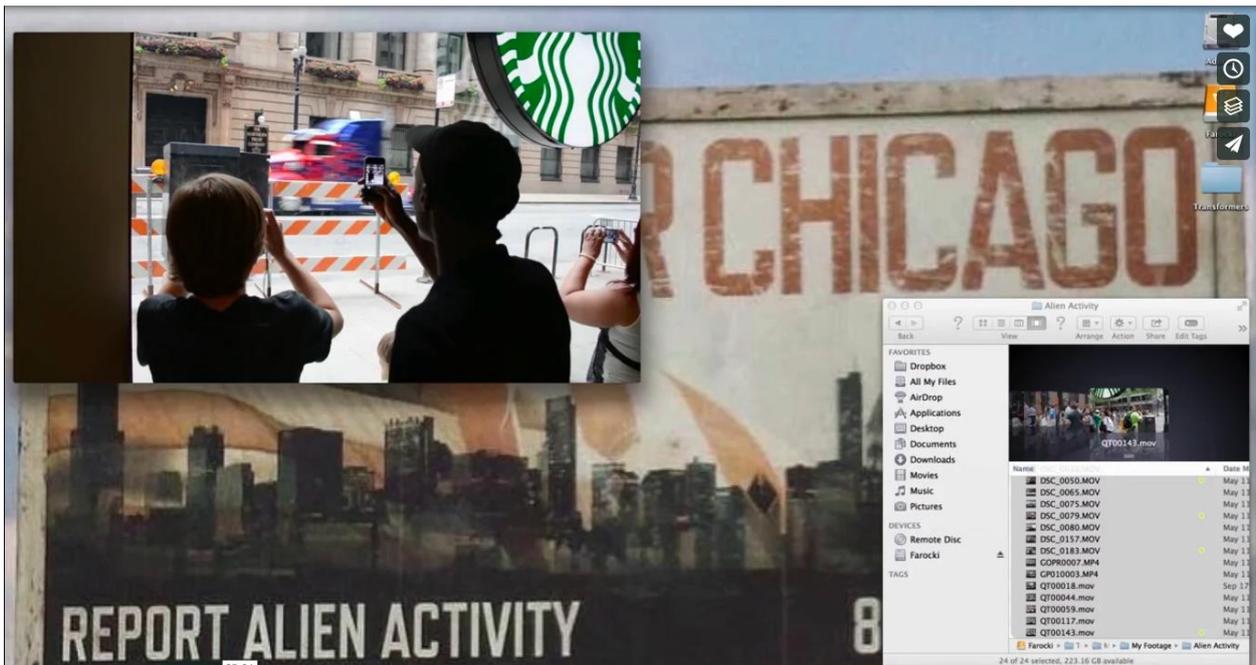
### III. On the dissemination of desktop films

**Lillian:** So, I think we can move to talking more about the dissemination of desktop films, visibility, environments and audiences. I realized that many desktop films are accessible online. Even films like that of Kevin B. Lee are online, although they were also shown at the Berlinale Critics' Week. So, what's your opinion particularly about the environment in which a desktop documentary is screened? Do you think there are surroundings that are more fitting for desktop films, or do you think they should try to reach as many people as possible and it doesn't matter in what context?

**Steffen:** Well, first of all, I think it's a very born digital format which I think works best online or on YouTube. Even though I sort of like the strangeness of seeing such films in the cinema, because it's a format that you usually watch alone on your laptop—on your lap probably. So, seeing this in that sort of communal space in a cinema can be quite interesting, even though the image or sound quality also works better on a laptop than a space that has been created for that sort of high-quality sonic cinema. An observation that I found quite surprising with Kevin B. Lee's film *Transformers the Premake*<sup>7</sup>, is that it was the first time that I saw a big film festival such as Rotterdam International Film Festival, accepting the fact that they weren't premiering the film. They were showing a film that was free for everybody to see online and normally those kinds of festivals are super picky. If you have your film online, they're never going to show it. But with this film they made an exception, which I find very, very interesting. Maybe it shows that there's been a shift in all the classical rules about festivals premieres and cinema runs... That this is really the start of a change somehow...and I mean, with Netflix that really sort of happens already. Premieres of films that don't even go to the cinema anymore.

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<sup>7</sup> *Transformers the Premake* (2014, dir. Kevin B. Lee) uses the desktop documentary genre to read the internet archive of Hollywood blockbusters and franchise action films against the grain. The "action" in this film is the dynamic process of critical deep dive into the mainstream movie database and explosive montage via the personal browser.



**Figure 5:** Still from [Transformers the Premake](#) (2014) by Kevin B. Lee

**Lillian:** True...and do you think that...I mean, maybe that is sort of a silly question, but do you think anthropologists could learn from non-academic filmmakers? Although it's not like if you're not coming from academia that you cannot create something that says something relevant that is very rich in terms of research. Do you think they could learn from each other?

**Steffen:** Of course!

**Lillian:** Also I mean in terms of anthropologists learning how to create story and montage and the like.

**Steffen:** Of course. I am always looking into the arts and at all kinds of filmmaking for inspiration and I think that's what anthropologists, what everybody, should do you know—see how or what kind of aesthetic decisions or aesthetic solutions people in the arts come up with, what they problematize. Of course, it's not confined to desktop documentary. I think we should always be open to experiments in representation from all sources.

**Lillian:** And now, in a time of increased social distancing, do you think cultural anthropologists may look toward desktop documentaries more? Do you think there will be a big shift now towards looking at this form of making ethnography? I remember how in studying visual anthropology, it was a separate *niche* of anthropology. I was curious whether in general the anthropological academia will also take seriously this new form of doing ethnography today?

**Steffen:** Good question. I'm not sure...at the moment it feels like visual anthropology itself within anthropology and then desktop documentaries are probably a niche within that niche. I mean, it always played a major role in our Master's in [Visual & Media Anthropology](#) at Freie Universität Berlin, in course work but also sometimes in the final MA thesis. I guess I don't know. I think we'll have to wait. During Corona times, all these research projects like mine had to be interrupted, and how people shifted to online in their research methodologies and what they do with all the sounds and the images they gather and record online... This is a question we can answer in maybe half a year or year or so... So, I was wondering, do you yourself have any plans of continuing to work in that form or use that form of aesthetics?

**Lillian:** I do. I'm currently working again on the [Limbo Citizen](#) project about migration and living in-between borders and because of Corona we're doing a lot of Skype interviews. We have an upcoming exhibition in October 2020 at the [Historisches Museum Frankfurt](#). I was thinking I really like the Skype format because it has its own recording feature/capacity. So I was thinking one day maybe I should do something with these films. Right now we are making an installation so we're not sure if we want to incorporate this visual of Skype in the installation itself, but maybe as another follow-up project as a short documentary film. I'm very curious how things will develop.... I was surprised at the number of desktop films or aesthetics at the Berlinale this year (e.g., [Kotlovan](#), 2020; [Alice Júnior](#), 2019). It was very nice to see. I think it's becoming quite trendy.

**Dr. Steffen Köhn** studied Social Anthropology and Film Studies at Johannes Gutenberg-University in Mainz and at Freie Universität Berlin (Master in Social and Cultural Anthropology 2006) and Film Directing at Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (dffb). He received his doctorate degree in 2014 from Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz. His areas of interest include theory and practice of ethnographic filmmaking, digital anthropology and the anthropology of media, mobility and migration, and material infrastructures. **Web:** [www.steffenkoehn.com](http://www.steffenkoehn.com)

**Lillian Dam Bracia** is an aspiring screenwriter, artist, curator and cultural producer based in Berlin. In 2019, she completed postgraduate studies in Visual & Media Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin. In the past she has worked as Programme Assistant for the 9th Athens Ethnographic Film Festival Ethnofest and for the 69th and 70th Berlin International Film Festival Berlinale. Most of her creative works deal with the topic of race and migration in a time of increasing nationalism, racism and xenophobia.