ancestors: an illuminated video

Ben Spatz, Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel

ABSTRACT
This video article consists of three repetitions or cycles of a single audiovisual fragment. The underpinning fragment is just longer than three minutes. In the first cycle, the video fragment is presented with only subtitles added to clarify the recorded dialog. The second cycle augments the first by adding a set of textual ‘illuminations’ that provide the basic details of what is happening and begin to reveal the interactive dynamics at play in this recorded moment. In the third cycle, yet another layer of textual illumination is added, this time bringing to bear a range of critical scholarly sources that link the dynamics of the moment to larger contexts of history, memory, and nation. An accompanying research statement defines the form of illuminated video and imagines its possible futures. Together, the video and the statement are conceived as a teaching tool, introducing some of the potential that video editing brings to the analysis and publication of embodied research.

KEYWORDS
Practice research; embodied research; video annotation; theater laboratory; Jewish identity; diaspora studies

In the breaking of the songwork, something else appears.

An epistemic object: (Catina 2001) not the song, but the histories and identities that are present in the room, as they manifest in relation to the song.

They’ve seen more...

“This is the paradoxical power of diaspora. On the one hand, everything that defines us is compounded of all the questions of our ancestors. On the other hand, everything is permanently at risk.”
(Boyarin and Boyarin 2002: 4)

Please see the online full text version to access the Video, or the video can be accessed via the supplemental material tab: https://doi.org/10.1080/14794713.2021.1880140

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Research Statement

Over the past few years, I have begun to develop an approach to the digital annotation of audiovisual documents generated through embodied research, which I call ‘illuminated’ video. This approach is informed by the Motion Bank and Research Video projects, as well as by the Journal of Artistic Research and my own Journal of Embodied Research, but it responds to the particular needs of a research process that is grounded in psychophysical body/voice practice and committed to learning from recent critical theories of embodiment and identity. In particular, I have wanted to pay close attention to the formal relationship between audiovisuality and textuality and to foreground the provisional authority of the embodied practitioner in the process of annotation, which in this context is simultaneously a mode of analysis and an act of creative ‘writing’ through editing. Illuminating video in this sense is the careful placement of textual annotations onto pre-existing video material, using video editing techniques to create a meaningful relationship between textual and audiovisual layers. This process in some ways echoes existing practices of writing ‘on’ the self, such as those developed over decades in performance art (Schneider 1997) and video art (Jones 2006). Yet I understand the relationship between these layers as more than aesthetic or compositional. For me, the placement of textual annotations onto audiovisual material is a mode of hermeneutic analysis, an act of critical interpretation, as well as an intentional reversal of the prevailing relationship, in Europe and its post-colonies, between writing and image. Historically, illumination, ‘from the Latin illuminare, “to enlighten or illuminate,” is the embellishment of a manuscript with luminous colors’ (Brown 1994). My proposal for illuminated video reverses this epistemic hierarchy: Here, textual annotations illuminate a primary audiovisual text.

Using materials from the 2017 AHRC project ‘Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Songwork,’ I have published two co-authored, peer-reviewed video articles exploring the form of illuminated video (Spatz, Erçin, Mendel, et al. 2018; Spatz, Erçin, Gatt, et al. 2018). The present work differs from these, both in its use of repetition and in the simplicity and apparently mundane quality of the underpinning video material. This video, ‘ancestors,’ consists of three repetitions or cycles of a single audiovisual fragment. The fragment, lasting just over three minutes, is one of 308 short video clips that were collaboratively selected, titled, and published during and after the Judaica project as the Songwork Catalogue. Spanning six months, from May to October 2017, the clips in the Songwork Catalogue show the project’s core research team – myself, Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, and Agnieszka Mendel – working first alone in empty theater/dance studio spaces, then joined by a series of guest artists and practitioners, and finally at a range of different sites and venues in the United Kingdom, United States, and Poland. While many of the selections in the Songwork Catalogue involve dynamic physical action, singing and vocal improvisation, exploration of physical objects, and site-specific visual contexts, the one explored here – which, in the Songwork Catalogue, is titled ‘conflicting associations 1’ – is notable for its lack of dynamism. Not only does apparently little or nothing happen during these three minutes, but I am not even singing. Furthermore, having been recorded on just the second day of the team’s studio work, the camera operation is rough, with the image wobbling and the audio track interrupted by unintended clicking sounds.
Despite these technical, practical, and aesthetic limitations, I am fascinated by this video clip and have presented it on several occasions at conferences, attempting to draw out through verbal analysis what may not be clearly evident in the audiovisual material itself. In the clip, I appear seated on the floor, neither singing nor moving, speaking in short phrases. This is not because of an overall lack of interest or availability, as the rest of the Songwork Catalogue demonstrates, but because I have become ‘stuck’ in this moment, paralyzed by a series of requests and suggestions given to me by Agnieszka, who in this moment has taken on the role of director. Moreover, the reasons for this stuckness are not merely interpersonal but, in my interpretation, can be linked to our national and cultural backgrounds and identities and to our different orientations towards Jewishness within the context of a project that explored contemporary Jewish identity through experimental practice. This video fragment is interesting, in other words, partly because it comes so early in the process, before a deeper understanding or shared language emerged within the team. In a standard rehearsal process leading to a public performance, this kind of moment would likely be considered at best a glitch in communication, at worst a serious problem needing to be overcome. Such a moment of early misunderstanding and miscommunication would not usually be recorded at all, except in a project like this one that implemented continuous video documentation from the beginning. Yet, there is something valuable, or at least worth examining, about this apparently ‘failed’ interaction between performer and director. The recording is ‘raw,’ not only in its videographic quality, but also in the interactive dynamics between myself and Agnieszka. Our relationship is fairly new and in this moment we are unable to find the kind of common ground that would later allow us to work creatively as performer and director. As a result, the video document, for all its flaws, may reveal certain aspects of performance practice that are no less important for rarely being seen.

I have constructed the video article ‘ancestors’ so as to gradually reveal several layers of meaning and significance, which I perceive to be present in this moment of broken songwork. In doing so, I hope to actualize audiovisually the sense in which songs and other embodied materials can function as epistemic objects, with what sociologist of science Karin Knorr Cetina calls ‘the capacity to unfold indefinitely’ (2001, 190). Performers for whom performance is a long-term, exploratory practice understand very intimately the way in which matters of identity, culture, nation, and politics, as well as knowledge, subjectivity, and interpersonal power may be at stake in micro decisions, actions, and affects that circulate between bodies. As Katherine Profeta writes, describing work led by choreographer Ralph Lemon, such issues ‘bubb[le] up easily from just below the surface of the daily work’ undertaken by performers in spaces of embodied research. Yet critics and spectators who focus on public performances may not be aware of the complexity and subtlety of such spaces, while those who wish to undertake such research often come up against tremendous economic constraints. My intention, both here and in the larger project of which this publication is part, is to find new ways of articulating the value and potential of embodied research as an experimental process that far exceeds the circulation of performance ‘works’ (Goehr 1992) in the public sphere. In fact, many of the most interesting moments of intersubjective and intercultural encounter never make it onto the public stage. In some cases, this is because they are too dynamic, too affectively charged, and too unrepeatable to be sustained through the pressures of production. In other cases, as seen here, it is because the unrepeatable significance of a moment has little
performative manifestation at all. Rather, it is the absence or failure of performance that reveals undercurrents of meaning.

To elucidate the ‘bubbling’ and ‘unfolding’ dimensions of experimental practice, this video presents the same short fragment three different times, each time adding another layer of textual annotation. In the first repetition or cycle, the fragment is presented in its raw form, supplemented only by (white) subtitles to clarify the words spoken by Agnieszka and myself. Even without any additional context, I suspect that the visible tension in my body, and the stark differences between Agnieszka’s suggestions and my responses, point to some of the issues that arose unexpectedly in that moment. The second cycle augments the first by adding a set of (blue) textual illuminations. These not only provide basic details about what is happening, but also begin to analyze some of the dynamics that have caused a breakdown or halt in our exploratory practice. In the second cycle, I focus on the relationship between performer and director and the way in which a moment of misunderstanding or aesthetic conflict can be laden with meaning. I also link these emergent dynamics, through a few key quotations, both to the dramaturgical complexity of theater and dance devising and to the more general structure of experimental practice, including in the sciences, where the breakdown of established tools and techniques may demand a shift in perspective that ultimately reveals new epistemic objects. Finally, in the third cycle, a further layer of (red) textual illumination is added, this time bringing to bear a range of critical scholarly sources to examine how the dynamics of the documented moment relate to larger frameworks of history, memory, and identity. Here I draw upon the broader critical and political context of the Judaica project, citing contemporary theorists of Jewishness to show how the conflict of associations that arises here goes beyond the personal and points to issues that are central in theorizing the construction of (Jewish) diasporic identity.

While the content of the video addresses both performer/director relations and the politics of contemporary Jewish identity, its form attempts to reveal the complexity of meaning that can be at work even in apparently simple moments of practice. In this context, the fact that the underpinning video material is of low videographic quality, and that my behavior in the clip is neither virtuosic nor even really active – if anything, I embody here a kind of resistance for which professional actors and dancers might face criticism – underscores my argument about the potential of illuminated video as a form of publication for embodied research. When considering the future of video annotation, I propose that we further explore how widely available and relatively basic technologies can be appropriated in unexpected ways, to unpack the epistemic density of embodied research practices. While the camera we used in the Judaica project was a fairly expensive (prosumer) model, we did not begin the project with any videographic skills to speak of. Similarly, no great skill is required today to add textual annotations to video. By foregrounding formal and hermeneutic relations between audiovisual and textual layers, I hope to push back against the still dominant desire for visually compelling video documentation that captures polished performances, often using multiple cameras and professional videographers. On the contrary, some of the most interesting moments are those that barely count as performance and which one might not initially even think to record. Moreover, especially in a research context, it will sometimes be more interesting to learn what the practitioner whose body is traced by the camera
wants to say about the recording than to situate that material within the overarching vision of a directorial or choreographic project.

My hope is that the form of annotated video is just getting started and that its future will be more devoted to experimentation with the possible relations of video and text – perhaps questioning or even overturning what that relation has been historically – than to generating polished documents that extend the legacy of the proscenium spectacle. I also want to point specifically to the field of possibility suggested by the juxtaposition of textual and audiovisual layers within a single video file. In my experience, multimedia works published as academic research tend to locate video materials within a dominant textual framing, either as video inserts or appendices to a written article or through the extensive use of voiceover. On the other hand, video art and screendance rarely treat the insertion of text into video with the kind of epistemic weight that academia gives to the written word. There is then a significant potential for topological relations between text and video that remains to be explored. In order to foreground this relation, I will avoid here any further written explanation of what unfolds and bubbles up in the video. There is surely more to say about the (non-)appearance of (jewish) ancestry, diaspora, and identity in that moment of practice, but to explicate it here would be to enfold the video within this written statement. Instead, I would like to propose that illuminated video, as a form of publication, offers a unique opportunity to continue and expand the radical deconstruction of performance undertaken by postdramatic theater and dance, destabilizing even more profoundly certain dominant assumptions about what constitutes a performance event and distributing the results of that destabilization more widely than could previously have been imagined.

**Video Transcript**

**ancestors**

**an illuminated video**

[abstract]

‘The everyday viewpoint, it would seem, looks at objects from the outside as one would look at tools or goods that are ready to hand or to be traded further. These objects have the character of closed boxes. In contrast, objects of knowledge appear to have the capacity to unfold indefinitely. They are more like open drawers filled with folders extending indefinitely into the depth of a dark closet.’

Cetina (2001, 190)

‘Frequently work on a tricky flight of dancing would spawn yet one more involved cast discussion about the dancers’ reasons for dancing, the tensions between individual and group, the notion of “freedom,” the residues of colonialism, or the connections between dance and spirituality. These topics bubbled up easily from just below the surface of the daily work, because they were so often implicit in the reasons for which one moved this way instead of that.’

Profeta (2015, 204–205)
First cycle:
Raw video with subtitles

Second cycle:
Conflicting associations

Third cycle:
Powers of diaspora

It is the second day of studio work, at the start of a six-month project.

I am working on a song, but I am not singing.

Agnieszka, the director in this moment, is from Poland.
I am a north american jew.

Why are you denying them?

The song is ‘Chad Gadya’ –
part of a traditional Eastern European Passover seder,
“a domestic service celebrating the ancient Hebrew exodus from Egyptian bondage” —
which I have learned from a recording. (Schwadron 1982)

Our different associations are more than personal.
At stake is the ‘figural Jew’:
an archetype with the potential to disrupt nationalistic discourses
and communitarian identities. (Hammerschlag 2010, 18)

I don’t trust them.
Why?
They responded to your song. They knew the song.

The director has invited me to sing along
with an imaginary community.

I hear in her words a desire for wholeness and community.
Beyond that, I hear the longings of post-genocidal Poland, a
“powerful nostalgia for the [country]’s lost Jews”
(Murzyn-Kupisz 2015, 141)

There are only some people that know that song.
They responded with the song.
They are probably friendly to you.
Maybe.
She expects me to feel an immediate closeness with the community suggested by this song. But, in this moment, I do not.

I think I recognize that nostalgia from my own country, where many white Americans have “envisioned Native peoples as idealized versions of themselves, as the embodiments of virtues lost in the Western world.” (Huhndorf 2001, 6)

I’m not sure.

Conflicts of association between actors and directors can become abusive. (Mudd 2010; Malague 2012) But this director is gentle.

I do not experience any easy sense of community through being Jewish.

For me, “Jewishness can and must be understood as an anti-identitarian project.” (Butler 2012, 117)

*Do you hear them? Or are they gone now?*

This is a moment of broken ‘songwork.’ (Tomlinson 2007) The meaning of the song is present, although it is unsung. Moments like this rarely make it into public performance.

No, I hear them. *Are they still singing?* Mm-hmm. [nods]

What are we investigating here? The song itself?

I see my skepticism, my struggle with the ancestors, as part of my Jewishness.

No, the archival bodies of the performers already contaminate the sterile environment, carrying their own stories, assumptions, memories, past training, and past performances. And so the proper subject for this nonsterile rehearsal room might become the embodied knowledge of the collaborators. (Profeta 2015, 72)
**Does it make you uncomfortable, that you hear them?**

Yes? You would prefer not to hear them?

**Well, maybe ask them to stop.**

[laughs]

**But do it politely.**

Because perhaps you will want them [to] come back.

**Don’t offend them.**

I think I’ve already offended them.

**Well ...**

In the breaking of the songwork, something else appears.

An epistemic object: (Cetina 2001)

not the song, but the histories and identities that are present in the room, as they manifest in relation to the song.

This is the paradoxical power of diaspora. On the one hand, everything that defines us is compounded of all the questions of our ancestors. On the other hand, everything is permanently at risk. (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002)

**We all do that from time to time.**

**I think they understand.**

**They are so much more wise than we are.**

**They’ve seen more ...**

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Session:

4 May 2017

Configuration:

Practitioner – Ben Spatz

Director – Agnieszka Mendel

Videographer – Nazlıhan Eda Erçin

**Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Songwork**

Arts & Humanities Research Council

University of Huddersfield

Urban Research Theater

[www.urbanresearchtheater.com](http://www.urbanresearchtheater.com)
Notes

1. Motion Bank: http://motionbank.org/; Research Video: https://www.zhdk.ch/forschung/sprojekt/research-video--549545; Journal of Artistic Research: https://jar-online.net/; Journal of Embodied Research: https://jer.openlibhums.org/. A forthcoming special issue of JER is dedicated to illuminated video. For a wider critical examination of the issues discussed here, see Spatz (2015, 2020a, 2020b).

2. There is a further association that arises from the interaction of multiple layers of textual commentary, which in the context of the project studied here might be called a ‘Talmudic Way of Thinking’ (Steinsaltz 2006, 262). I will address the relations between jewesihness, textuality, and critique at greater length elsewhere.

3. The Songwork Catalogue: http://urbanresearchtheater.com/songwork/.

4. The Judaica project developed a new embodied audiovisual research method, based on the circulation of roles such as director and performer. For a detailed account of this method, see Spatz (2020b).

5. The primary source of songs for the Judaica project was the Smithsonian Folkways record label, which includes ‘Judaica’ as a genre category. For the ethnomusicological background of the songs and my understanding of their significance in the research practice, as well as an explanation for why I lowercase the term ‘jewish’ here, see Spatz (2019).

6. For more on the topological relations of textuality and audiovisuality within video documents, see Spatz (2021).

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