


## Article

# Cinema Divina and Autotheory: An Interview with Marilyn Freeman

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**Abstract:** This is an interview with moving image artist, writer, and contemplative practitioner, Marilyn (M) Freeman by artist, Cat Auburn. They explore Freeman's contemplative filmmaking practice, 'Cinema Divina' and the relationship of Freeman's life, artistic practice and research interests to autotheory. Autotheory is widely held to be the coalescence of autobiography with theory (or philosophy) within a work of art or literature, often with an aim towards offering social or cultural narration and service. The impulse to collaborate on this interview came from Auburn's encounter with Cinema Divina during an online group contemplative session facilitated by Freeman in February 2022. This interview covers Freeman's development of Cinema Divina, such topics as Freeman's theory of Vertical Dissonance, the risks of working autotheoretically, mysticism, interior life, the hierarchies of knowledge production and the potential for what Freeman calls 'the illuminated space' to create radical opportunities for personal transformation. Ultimately, this interview establishes that Cinema Divina can be seen as an autotheoretical practice that uses contemplative practices rooted in *lectio divina*, a meditative prayer ritual of early Benedictine monastics, to theorize through Freeman's embodied, lived experiences and artistic outcomes.



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**Cat Auburn:** M, you have developed Cinema Divina as a contemplative practice by which you create short films 'for shared contemplation' (Freeman 2020a, p. 257). This process ultimately opens up what you call 'the illuminated space'<sup>1</sup>. You have been very open about the fact that viewership by a participating audience is necessary to the completion of any Cinema Divina piece. This is an idea that emerged from your engagement with Toni Cade Bambara's concept of the "authenticating audience"—the community of people in whose service a filmmaker engages as a cultural worker (Freeman 2020a, p. 200). To provide context for our discussion in this interview, would you please describe what your practice of Cinema Divina is as you have developed it? Can you please describe 'the illuminated space' and the importance of it within your life and practice?

**Marilyn Freeman:** Cat, first, thank you for inviting me into conversation with you to reflect on my work in the context of autotheory.

In Cinema Divina, I blend my creative practices of writing and media arts with contemplative exercises into films which I then offer as a social art practice. Said most simply, Cinema Divina is an ever-growing offering of short films I make through and for contemplative practice. Cinema Divina films are autobiographic, lyrical, essayistic meditations on personal experiences, social issues and ideas I'm reckoning with at any given time. Formally, my films are also experimental and reflexive, disrupting the conventional seamlessness of image and sound, and complicating the boundaries between literary and media arts.

The inspiration for Cinema Divina came to me years ago in a flash early one winter evening in a parking lot outside a Benedictine monastery where I'd just received a private introduction to the ancient process of reading sacred texts, *lectio divina* or sacred reading—a mystical way of cultivating a direct experience of the divine.

*Lectio divina* is a contemplative technique that can be traced to Jewish mysticism and is a common spiritual practice today especially among Benedictines—monastics and lay monks following The Rule of St. Benedict. In order to experience an unmediated connection with the divine, practitioners read sacred passages slowly and repeatedly through a series of four increasingly meditative steps—*lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, *contemplatio*, or, for simplicity, read, reflect, respond, rest.

I'm guided by those four simple "r" words when I make Cinema Divina, when I work through each aspect of my creative process—writing, shooting video, recording audio, and audio-visual editing. It's a structured but fluid way for me to bring increasing awareness to all parts of my work, from making through screening.

For the social art practice of Cinema Divina, which consist of screening events, I re-imagine *lectio divina* in today's audiovisual vernacular. I guide a participating audience through a ritual of four increasingly revealing viewings structured around the four steps of *lectio divina*. I hold the space for reverent silences, and invite reflective writing, sharing, and listening.

As I write in the opening of *The Illuminated Space*, "[W]hile the making of art is often a solitary endeavor, I believe the realization of the work requires communion: the engagement of others—audiences, readers, spectators, skeptics and seekers" (Freeman 2020a, p. 17). And this is true for me with Cinema Divina. The work is most fully realized when it is shared with, screened with, and contemplated by others.

I often work with what I call a participating audience, that is, people who come open-hearted to a Cinema Divina event, intending to engage, and to be affected by the object of the communal contemplation (the film I've made) and by the other participants' experiences.

Each Cinema Divina film serves "as a vector for mindful attention, transporting a participating audience into deeper awareness of their own thoughts, emotions, intuition, and insights" (Freeman 2020a, p. 257). Through the guided screening, participants co-create the meaning of the piece with their own awareness and imaginations. Those who engage in this practice draw from their own source—their own lived experience, ancestral wisdom, faith tradition or their sense of interconnectedness, or desired boundlessness—for insight into experience and feelings such as vulnerability, resiliency, gratitude, love, wonder, and courage. Making Cinema Divina films is a way for me to cultivate, and to offer others, the conditions to be wholly present and feel infinitely connected, if only for a moment.

Which brings me to the illuminated space.

In media art, you can deliberately engage the dialectical nature of its material elements (image and sound). In making Cinema Divina films I work to disrupt the illusory marriage of image and sound generally produced in conventional movies. As graceful as cinematic conventions are, as much as I love the satisfaction of a narrative film and as much as I love the well-constructed arguments of a documentary, I love even more the liberated wonder of the poetic wormholes that open between image and sound when dialectical tension is made apparent in time-based art. When an audience engages consciously and wholeheartedly in that opening between image and sound, their attentiveness to their own discomfort, surprise, confusion, or curiosity, they can turn that space into a restorative realm—one that is healing and imaginative. That's the illuminated space I'm talking about. I've encountered this space (and fostered it) as a media artist and through guiding communal screenings with audience members who participate in Cinema Divina.

I'm not aiming to seduce an audience into passive engagement. Cinema Divina films are not conventional movies. I make films that unsettle predictable movie watching. I work purposefully with the material differences between image and sound to cause enough dissonance in audiences that they become most aware of and concerned with their own

thoughts and feelings. “Awareness turns dialectical tension into a field of possibility where you can travel back and forth and vertically through thick and gnarled narratives—a site in which to reckon with the complexities of being alive and to become ever more conscious, creative and open hearted” (Freeman 2020a, p. 20).

**CA:** I see your Cinema Divina practice as being autotheoretical. Autotheory<sup>2</sup> is widely held to be the coalescence of autobiography with theory (or philosophy) within a work of art or literature, often with an aim towards offering social or cultural narration and service (Fournier 2021, p. 6; Wiegman 2020, pp. 7–8). Importantly, I would suggest that Cinema Divina enacts a form of autotheorizing which occurs through the vehicle of your artistic practice. This is evident in the way that your filmmaking utilizes your autobiographical voice and embodied life experience to create new theories of filmmaking processes, and to further theorize other subject matters. An example of this is described throughout your book, *The Illuminated Space* (Freeman 2020a) in which your filmmaking practice theorizes trauma through the metabolism of personal trauma and goes on to expand upon trauma theory developed by others. Do you see Cinema Divina as an autotheoretical practice?

**MF:** I do see Cinema Divina as autotheory in practice.

It was Leigh Gilmore who liberated my autotheoretical impulse with her book, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*. Gilmore begins, “[ . . . ] with the premise that women’s self-representation describes territory that is largely unmapped, indeed unrecognizable” (Gilmore 1994, p. 5). Among many investigations, she interrogates conventional ideas of genre, identity, subjectivity, truth-telling. In the chapter, ‘Policing Truth’, she reflects on the life and writing of Julian of Norwich by examining how the authority of medieval women mystics was marginalized due to gender, then rescued in the context of mystical experience.

Mysticism and autotheory are quite alike, it seems to me.

I think of autotheory metabolizing the raw riches of autobiographic material mined directly from personal experience, fortifying that experience with somatic wisdom and liberating it from a capitalist patriarchy into original artifacts—writing, art, new ways of imagining evolved ways of being. Meanwhile, mysticism engages direct encounter with the numinous, defying the religious patriarchy in which access to the divine is prescribed in doctrine and requires mediation by the ordained. Mined from personal experience, fortified with somatic wisdom and liberated from dogma, like autotheory, mysticism metabolizes the raw stuff of individual experience into wonder, wisdom and transformational artifacts—writing, art, revelations and visions.

I create Cinema Divina films through a process of contemplative writing, filming, audio recording and editing. This is a creative practice to embrace and experience consciously what bell hooks describes as “the eternal principle that love is all, everything, our true destiny” (hooks 2001, p. 77). Through deep self-reflection and mystical practice, I aim to be personally transformed through my filmmaking. Increasingly, I am transparent through my voiceover within a piece, about being transformed while making the film. That is, I acknowledge the thing I’ve been wrestling with that brought me to make the piece in the first place. It is through ‘making’ that I reckon my way into some insight. *All the Courtesy of Love* (Freeman 2020b, Figure 1) is an example of this. I had found myself chafing at extending to others the most basic hospitality. Honestly, I knew I could be more kind-hearted. So, in making what became *All the Courtesy of Love* (Figure 1) I turned my contemplative creative practice to reckoning with my ornery self. The film is an original artifact of metabolized personal stuff, a contemplative autotheoretical process.



**Figure 1.** *All the Courtesy of Love* (2020). Digital film still. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/9841426/video/391018843> (accessed on 26 September 2022).

The making of each Cinema Divina film begins with some idea or angst or conflict or inspiration or heartache or astonishment or rage or hope or desire or experience or *something* arising from whatever is going on in my life. Once identified, specifically or generally, I film (shoot video) with that *something* in mind. I'm not looking for a visual representation of that *something*. I'm not looking for visual evidence. When I say I film with that *something* in mind, what I really mean is I film with that *something* in my heart. As I film, I see what is in the frame while paying attention to that *something* in my heart. Is there resonance between my heart and what I'm capturing on film? Is there friction? Conflict? What's happening in the space between what I see and what I feel while filming? I continue to film that way; I gather a lot of footage.

While recording audio I listen for resonance with or discordance to that *something* in everyday sounds—whether it is sounds of the natural world or sounds in my kitchen. Sometimes I hear a resonance or discordance in my imagination or in my body. That was the case with *Waking in Real Time* (Freeman 2018, Figure 2)—a meditation on America's betrayal of women during the U. S. Senate hearing on sexual assault allegations made against Supreme Court Justice nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, by Dr. Christine Blase Ford. I originated sound for that piece by messing around with the audio. I recorded random snippets of everyday sounds, sampled some needle-drop track I have in my music library, slowed it way down in the editing process, reversed it, layered it. I layered in and slowly increased the volume of an industrial hum from the Port of Olympia. I laced that with mangled audio vestiges from the senate hearing. I peppered in sounds of women at the hearing, shrieking and wailing. I tried one thing after another until the sound I was making resonated with what I heard in my aural imagination and with what I felt in my body: a kind of burning rage.

I begin writing with that *something* foregrounded. My writing tends to result in a few minutes of voiceover. But arriving at those few minutes requires hours of contemplative writing. For nearly every film, I start my writing on index cards, generating sometimes dozens of cards. And those cards may give way to dozens of handwritten or computer-typed pages, following any inspiration or tangent or surprise that may arise. This writing is self-examining. I am dowsing for *what's going on in me*. What am I feeling? What am I trying to work out here? Why does this even matter? What else does this something have to do with?





**Figure 2.** *Waking in Real Time* (2018). Digital film still. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/9841426/video/308935653> (accessed on 26 September 2022).

I am digging and curious and admitting and wondering and reckoning and ultimately, mining film-by-film, piece-by-piece, some personal mystery or direct experience or incomprehensible predicament or persistent memory or complex trauma or irrepressible delight or a combination of some or all these states and more. Mining for understanding and accountability and compassion and reconciliation and transformation—mining for inner truth. Mining for my own embodied wisdom, for my own insights. To me, this is autotheory.

In practice, those few minutes of voiced autotheorizing are transparently self-questioning and self-aware. My films are nonfiction but not conventional documentaries. The vulnerable autobiographic subjectivity of my voiceovers juxtaposed with footage that neither dramatizes nor illustrates what I'm saying is a reflexive mode of self-representation that, for me, facilitates autotheory in practice.

Reflexivity is the disruption of cinematic illusion. When I unfasten the seemingly seamless of image and sound, that's reflexive. The audience is aware something is not quite right—meaning not quite normal. It's uncomfortable: *Wait a minute, why am I not seeing the hospital room? The windmills? The broken lilac bush? Wait, what?* Unsettling cinematic expectations in that way helps facilitate my transmission of autotheory to audiences, participating audiences, in particular.

Conventional, mainstream movies (examples being *The Power of the Dog*, 2021; *Spotlight*, 2015; *The King's Speech*, 2010; *Postcards from the Edge*, 1990; *Casablanca*, 1942; *It Happened One Night*, 1934) are made to appear seamless and to move audiences forward along a dramatic line. By contrast, Cinema Divina films aim to move audiences deeper by disrupting the smooth impenetrable surface of typical movies with unexpected couplings of sound and image. I aim to create tension between sound and image. Dialectical tension. Those couplings in Cinema Divina are evocative and invite audiences to make their own personally relevant sense or meaning of the dissonance or tension they experience; and, when engaging a Cinema Divina piece in a communal participatory practice, to be moved by the experience others share, co-create meaning with them. While conventional films operate through a seamless, forward-thrusting horizontal narrative, Cinema Divina films operate through a dissonance created by varying degrees of discord between image and sound, which I call 'Vertical Dissonance'. A spaciousness arises when audience expectations are interrupted, however abruptly or subtly, and audience members find themselves in

their own thoughts, memories, and feelings about themselves. Vertical Dissonance seeds audience self-awareness.

Just as I serve as the primary text—the auto-content, that is myself as maker, subject, and narrator—of Cinema Divina pieces, those who engage the films in contemplative practice become their own text in a reflexive hermeneutic process. They become their own source for emotional, somatic, intellectual, imaginative, and spiritual wisdom. In this way, through the contemplative screening process, an autotheoretical practice is conveyed to the participating audience.

**CA:** It seems that this way of working is revealing of your interior life. Are there any risks that you have encountered whilst working autotheoretically?

**MF:** If the work doesn't feel risky in some way when making it, that's a clue I haven't gone deep enough. It's a clue that I'm not done.

At the same time, not every risk I feel when creating is a risk I invest in explicitly; sometimes a risky feeling is an indicator that I haven't quite reached the place I need to in myself or in the piece.

In 2011, I was writing 'On the Form of the Video Essay', a curatorial essay for *Tri-Quarterly's* inaugural video essay suite which launched in January 2012. I was inspired by Adorno's 'The Essay as Form', particularly this line from it: "The essay's innermost formal law is heresy" (Adorno 1991, p. 23). What I saw then as an ascendant incarnation of Adorno's heresy rang true to me regarding the video essay. The video essay holds no reverence for formal order. "There is the lack of hierarchy and the conflated tweaking of the written word, the recorded word, ambient sound, music, low-resolution images, high-resolution images, hand-made images. There is no primacy. The video essay does not privilege literary text over image, nor image over text, or either over sound or vice versa" (Freeman 2012).

Ten years earlier, so now some twenty years ago, I turned my research energy rather suddenly from Buddhism to Catholicism when I realized, as an adult I had never looked deeply into my own childhood faith. I'd tried to leave it behind. I had little understanding of the myriad ways that Catholicism had impacted me. Shaped me. Damaged me. Enriched me. So, by the time I wrote 'On the Form of the Video Essay', my own work making video studies, video essays and installations structured around the church's Seven Holy Sacraments and the Baltimore Catechism had taken me into a deep, personal exploration of Catholicism.

The Baltimore Catechism (Tan Books and Publishers [1933] 1977) is a series of texts written for American Catholic children. It serves up doctrine through dozens of lessons organized as questions and answers. I was well into my forties before I realized I'd been given not only all the answers, but all the questions. My child mind was trained to memorize answers as inevitable truths, answers to questions imbued with absolutism. For example, the very first question/answer exchange in the very first lesson of the very first book in the Baltimore Catechism series goes like this:

Q. Who made the world?

A. God made the world.

The questions are brilliant in a tyrannical way. *Who is God? Does God see us? If God is everywhere, why do we not see Him? How shall we know the things which we are to believe?*<sup>3</sup> I was five years old when that formal indoctrination started, which coincided with the onset of sexual abuse. Prior to developing Cinema Divina, I made a series of video studies attempting to express somehow the madness and terror of growing up with religious programming. When I think about risk, I think about *Confession Diptych* (Freeman 2007, Figures 3 and 4)—a creative artifact of personal, spiritual, and artistic breakthroughs issuing from my series of video studies. Through odd couplings of the moving image and sound in *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4), I essentially liken the Catholic Church to a carnival ride. I recall a screening of it in the Haybarn at Goddard College in Vermont,

one of America's most pedagogically progressive communities of interdisciplinary artists. After the screening, colleagues pulled me aside to tell me in a whisper that the piece "is dangerous." "Be careful." They were warning me, expressing their own fears and concerns for me of reactions to the film that I might encounter. When I think about my colleagues' fear and warnings in the context of autotheory, I wonder, what can an artist call into question about the patriarchy, personally, without putting oneself at risk? In *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4), I express metabolized personal reckoning with the lived experience of my childhood faith in a pair of four-minute videos, and that scared my colleagues, setting them on edge to the point where they felt compelled to warn me. What has been the impact of their warnings on me? As a result, I've shared *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4) very selectively. So, how much I'm willing to risk, with any given piece, is an ongoing balancing act.



**Figure 3.** *Confession Diptych* (2007). Digital film still: the inside of Freeman's childhood church paired with manic carnival ride audio.

My work is vulnerable. That is to say, from *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4) to the current Cinema Divina film I'm working on (*Waking in Real Time, Again*, about the stripping away of reproductive rights in the United States), I am vulnerable in my work. Honestly, at every Cinema Divina event I facilitate, I am vulnerable. For example, I am openly queer. And while there continues to be terrible risk in being queer, the risk for me in not being open and not imbuing my work with queerness, would require lying and that would be far more dangerous. To lie would be self-mutilation. Where there is vulnerability there is risk. Being vulnerable in the work is my commitment to the work, to the participating audience, to the possibility of reckoning, to healing, to love. My vulnerability is intrinsic to and in service of the work.



**Figure 4.** *Confession Diptych* (2007). Digital film still: A manic carnival ride paired with tinny audio of devout singing audio.

**CA:** M, you have stated that you are “interested in [the] reciprocal relationship between [your] lived experience and [your] creative practice” (Freeman 2020a, p. 19) and that your “primary way into making a film is to find a personal, autobiographic connection to a subject” (Freeman 2020a, p. 150). As autotheory describes a relationship between the autobiographic voice and its engagement with theory, can we speak about the construction of your autobiographical self (or selves) and how these operate within your various personal and creative practices?

**MF:** Hmm . . . ideas of selves . . . auto-theoretical selves . . . the authentic self . . . The ‘authentic self’ is an idea I understand best in the context of ‘an interior life’.

Let me refer to bell hooks for a moment. In her chapter on ‘Divine Love,’ in *all about love*, she writes, “love is everything, our true destiny . . . I affirm these beliefs through daily meditation and prayer, through contemplation and service, through worship and loving kindness” (hooks 2001, p. 83).

I love that—*love is everything*. And for me, cultivating an interior life fosters that *everything*, fosters that *love*—in my heart, my work, my relationships, my life—all of it.

I’ve had a handful of experiences that were so extraordinary, so infused with love and completely outside of ordinary time, I’ve come to think of them as fully embodied mystical experiences. I conjure those experiences in my daily contemplative practices (practices in addition to *lectio divina*). For some time now, I’ve been doing a daily meditation I call contemplative rest—a practice I adapted from centering prayer which was popularized in the 1980s. I’m distracted by centering prayer’s foundational reliance on the Christian idea of God and words like ‘consent’. So, I unburdened that process to something more generative for my own practice. Contemplative rest is quite simple—for eleven minutes at least once a day, I bring my mind to my heart, usually close my eyes, and silently offer these words, “I rest in love”.

As soon as I say those words, I summon everything I can remember about those embodied mystical experiences. I recall details about them: the place of the experience,



where I was in the location, the various and simultaneous perspectives I experienced, what I saw, what the air felt like and the light, what was happening. I recall everything that happened in my body. In contemplative rest I conjure the physical sensations of those experiences in my chest, my shoulders, my legs, everywhere. Once I'm flooded somatically with a reawakened feeling of love, I kind of freefall in it.

In the Cinema Divina film *How Long Will You Sleep* (Figure 5), I invoke the three most prominent of these mystical resources by recalling the places the experiences occurred. Here's an excerpt:

You think—you think you know  
a thing or two about love.  
and then  
in afternoon sunlight  
in that hospital room  
in the living room  
on that hundred-acre prairie farm  
there you are  
in the heart of everything  
for a fleeting unforgettable moment  
you are  
in the filmy air of eternity

(Freeman 2019)



**Figure 5.** *How Long Will You Sleep* (2019). Digital film still. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/9841426/video/341917264> (accessed on 26 September 2022).

With practice, presencing myself somatically in contemplative rest—resting in love—opens a deep place where ordinary time (Chronos) fleetingly gives way to eternal time, sacred time (Kairos). My personal issues and concerns relax and give way to flickering, tingling shimmers of aspen trees and seagulls and the sky and rowing and Anne and outer space photos and this, then that and suddenly and increasingly I feel connected to everything and made of the same substance and at once, both unbound and wholly held in love.

Isn't our authentic self our true self? Our most present, conscious being? Or beingness? Thinking of the true self in this way makes me think of Thich Nhat Hahn's interbeing<sup>4</sup>. Our interconnectedness as our truest being.

Contemplative rest and other contemplative practices I engage regularly in everyday life—walking, rowing, beholding, single-tasking—create the spiritually enlivened embodied conditions for my work, heightening and increasing my experience of Kairos. From that state, that boundless opportune atmosphere, I open my awareness to ordinary time when I turn to writing or filming or recording audio or editing, and I let the personal concerns of my various constructed selves arise, for these constructions are borne in ordinary time—Chronos. I take them up earnestly in my work—those selves and their concerns. To reflect on, to reckon with, to act on, to be affected by, to alchemize into offerings to kindred spirits. So, my self in ordinary time who is the lover, the activist, the agnostic, the sibling, the bereaved, the white person, the vegetarian, the scholar, the skeptic, the seeker, the poet, the healer, the filmmaker, the friend, the oblate, the rebel, the student, the sometimes she, the they, the them—these selves and others contribute to Cinema Divina, each with their own particular concerns and perspectives.

And the "I" who cultivates the conditions for Kairos through disciplined practices, who cultivates the conditions for summoning those embodied mystical experiences, it is that one, my most conscious being, who holds all my many 'selves' in love and in service of others through Cinema Divina. Love is everything, and as bell hooks writes, "Love in action is always about service" (hooks 2001, p. 216).

**CA:** Autotheory has the ability to turn the hierarchical power dynamics existent in philosophy, theory and scholarship on its head by prioritizing lived experience as a legitimate form of theorizing. M, your writing and films reach viewers through the lens of your love, your trauma, your relationships, experience of religion, anecdotes, and the work and lives of other folk. Importantly, in your book *The Illuminated Space* (Freeman 2020a) you offer insight into your creative practice and how you theorize through the reciprocity of lived experience and creative practice. This embodied theorizing is, to me, at the heart of autotheoretical practice. The example of your work with the dialectical space of trauma presents an intriguing case study of your theorizing through creative practice. How do you see this theorizing occurring within and developed by your creative practice? In particular, how do you use image and sound to theorize? I'm thinking particularly of something you mentioned earlier: your coining and use of Vertical Dissonance.

**MF:** I'll speak first to the ways I engage image, sound and theorizing. I mentioned *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4) earlier. It preceded the advent of Cinema Divina films and came together as I was somatically scanning for a particular affect, for a destabilizing feeling of disturbance. When I began working on what became *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4), I was thrashing around trying to creatively express the confounding, wild, upsetting feelings and memories arising in my reflections on and personal examination of Catholicism in the context of my traumatic childhood.

At the time I was living on the southwest coast of Washington State along the edge of the Pacific Ocean. The location draws thousands of vacationers in the summertime and there are all kinds of tourist sites there. Some sites are open year-round, including a sort of throw-back attraction with an arcade and old-timey carnival rides: a merry-go-round,

bumper cars, teacups, the octopus. It was offseason when I began filming a series of video studies and I was drawn back daily to that all-but-empty roadside attraction. I was drawn to an uneasy familiarity with those old-fashioned rides, to the aloneness of that creepy carnival atmosphere, to the loud mechanical sounds and trippy music of the rides operating like the place was jammed with people on holiday. This was before smart phones, and I'd begun experimenting shooting low-fidelity video with a point-and-shoot camera. I was in mad love with the easy and spontaneous cinematic access that camera gave me to everyday life. And particularly to that ghost-town carnival. That's the place where the *Confession* video studies emerged and ultimately, *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4).

*Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4) is two isolated videos of similar length, each about 4 min. Making it became a surprising and potent healing experience that inspired my theorizing about image and sound. The healing happened, most specifically, through audio-visual editing when in an experimental moment I paired handheld, secreted footage of my childhood church with manic carnival ride audio. And there it was—Vertical Dissonance. A clear and clashing dialectical tension. That heretical coupling of image and sound evoked the destabilizing disturbance I was after. With the second video, I paired the carnival ride visuals of me and my friend, Rob, spinning uncontrollably with a tinny audio recording of church goers devoutly singing a hymn.

I am a media artist who loves film theory. I love reading it and thinking about it; and, as it turns out, writing it. My experience of making *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4) was so affecting emotionally, creatively, intellectually, spiritually, I couldn't resist theorizing about it. So, *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4) initially inspired autotheorizing about Vertical Dissonance in my media art practice. That combined with recognizing Vertical Dissonance in my everyday life fortified my resolve to wholeheartedly articulate 'A Theory of Vertical Dissonance' in *The Illuminated Space* (Freeman 2020a, p. 96).

Since making *Confession Diptych* (Figures 3 and 4), I always mess with tension between sound and image, particularly when editing Cinema Divina films. In order to create the conditions for Vertical Dissonance (and consequently, the illuminated space) in Cinema Divina pieces, I put into practice what I call A Theory of Dialectical Editing: An Evocative Method (Freeman 2020a, p. 104). This is an editing mode that aims to interrupt passive engagement by bringing attention to the space between image and sound.

In making Cinema Divina films I savor the material difference between audio and visual elements. I rarely try to pair them in the sense-making method of evidentiary editing employed in conventional documentaries. Nor am I likely to marry image and sound in the perfected unions of narrative film's continuity editing. Though I sometimes borrow from both, dialectical editing is evocative, not persuasive, not illusory. I work in service of contemplative practice.

Rather than concealing the material difference between image and sound, dialectical editing exposes the space that's conventionally hidden between them. So, dialectical editing opens that space. Openings are inviting generative, uncertain and risky. Openings are risky because entering them requires vulnerability. Openings and vulnerability seed a transformative promise. For many years now, I've witnessed participating Cinema Divina audiences screen pieces that disrupt ordinary perception with just enough Vertical Dissonance to spark generative self-awareness. In the third stage of the social practice of Cinema Divina, *Oratio* (respond), the participants' arising experiences come to the foreground and fill that space, illuminated by their own self-awareness. The Cinema Divina film shifts into the background of participants' own increasingly complex feelings and realizations. This is an autotheoretical space, I think, a site for healing, insight, reconciliation, and liberation.

**CA:** I think that the boundaries of autotheory are currently slippery; they shift depending on its use as a genre, academic methodology, creative practice—or a mixture of these by different individuals and collaborations. Scholars have posited varied lineages for autotheory ranging from 1970s French feminist critique of autofiction (Lévesque-Jalbert 2020), through to Freud's autobiographical

development of psychoanalysis (Laubender 2020), and the “intersectional writing and performance art of many Black feminists and women of color” (Zwartjes 2019). Importantly, autotheory can be seen as an act of theorizing through embodied, lived experiences which subverts the existing power dynamics of knowledge production, particularly in academia. How does Cinema Divina engage with (if at all) the hierarchies of scholarship and theory?

**MF:** Honestly, the hardest part of writing *The Illuminated Space* was getting out of my head and out of the way of my heart the mostly male voices of received ‘wisdom’. I had written pages and pages referencing Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), “patron saint of the personal essayist” (Lopate 1995, p. xxiii); Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), Soviet film director and theorist known for *Battleship Potemkin*, 1925, and as an originator of montage theory; and contemporaries like Phillip Lopate (born 1943), American teacher, essayist and film critic. His anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, is either at hand as it is right now resting next to a half-full bottle of Brew Dr.’s Happiness kombucha, or within six feet of my desk, always. Writing *The Illuminated Space* meant quieting their notions and theories, and those of many others, quieting them enough to drop into my own heart, and behold my own work.

In that way, writing *The Illuminated Space* was contemplative. It wasn’t easy. But it was transforming and thrilling.

I reference Roland Barthes in *The Illuminated Space* with deep admiration, and I can’t hold back here; I love Barthes for many reasons but I’ll focus here on just one. I love the way, in *A Lovers Discourse* (Barthes 1978), Barthes notes references with acrobatic ease in the margin running alongside the text; names, sometimes initials, occasionally a title appears. Maggie Nelson deftly invokes the same technique in *The Argonauts*. It’s liberating for me as a reader. I can imagine how writing and citing that way could be liberating too. By the way, you will find wide margins in *The Illuminated Space* but not for citations. That spaciousness is an invitation solely for the reader’s imagination.

**CA:** Following on from ideas of autotheoretical embodied theorizing—you share an anecdote of processing emotion through an embodied video editing practice in *The Illuminated Space*, in a section called ‘The Body Knows’ (Freeman 2020a, pp. 130–31). When I think of ‘embodied’ art practice, my mind almost always heads towards performance art. It’s fascinating to see you engage with embodiment through moving image and I wondered if you could speak more to this?

**MF:** I started doing somatic work in therapy which immediately took shape in my creative life and spiritual practice. Conscious embodiment is all about being present in one’s body, paying attention to what’s happening physically and where it’s happening. Maybe I’m experiencing tightening in my chest, or a sharp pain in my neck. When I allow myself to sit with that tightening or that sharp pain, when I close my eyes and pay attention to it, get curious about it, I begin to experience much more than the apparent physical discomfort (or comfort). Associations or memories may arise, seemingly, from that part of my body. I may have a kind of vision, some imagined scenario. The sensations and experiences give me information or ideas. Sometimes the experience is liberating. Sometimes it is directive: I realize I need to do a particular thing, write a particular thing, or make a particular film.

Embodied or somatic work in my media art practice is very much like doing *lectio divina* in/with my body. *Read* (scan my body), *reflect* (scan again, notice in more detail what’s arising—memories, associations . . . ), *respond* (what’s my body asking of me, inviting me to . . . ), and finally, *rest* (rest with the embodied wisdom arising in me and welcome it consciously into my everyday life).

For me, this process is unfailingly enlightening.

**CA:** There are power dynamics inherent within the formal aspects of filmmaking. M, your theory of Vertical Transparency subverts conventional documentary modes of voiceover that “mask subjectivity” (Freeman 2020a, p. 155). Robyn Wiegman describes similar tensions existent within autotheory stemming from the perceived truth/subjectivity and truth-telling/objectivity histories of autobiography and theory (Wiegman 2020, p. 13). What are the risks for you when considering the dialectal tensions of subjectivity/objectivity present within your own work?

**MF:** The way I work with voiceover in Cinema Divina is another example of autotheory in practice, which I speak to in *The Illuminated Space* as A Theory of Vertical Transparency (Freeman 2020a, pp. 155–57). As I mentioned earlier, film-by-film, dozens of pages of writing may be reduced to a few minutes of voiceover. In practice, those few minutes of voiced autotheorizing are transparently self-questioning and self-aware. I’m not masking my subjectivity behind interviews and voice-of-God authorities. Unmasked subjectivity undoes that illusion. I engage, speak directly, vulnerably, and intimately with audiences. Where there is vulnerability there is risk. Being vulnerable in the work is my commitment to the work, to the participating audience, to the possibility of reckoning, to healing, to love. Vulnerability is in service of the work. By ‘the work’ I mean everything from the comprehensive creative/contemplative making process—filming, writing, audio recording, editing—through to the offering, the sharing or screening of the pieces for communal contemplation.

**CA:** Do Cinema Divina films differ from the video essay format?

**MF:** Your question brings with it the delight of a particular mystery in which I find myself: the difficulty to name creative work that transgresses formal boundaries and resists categorization.

There are fundamental formal aspects of Cinema Divina films that are not essential to video essays. From the inception of Cinema Divina, what I’ve come to call (and theorize) Vertical Dissonance and the evocative method of dialectical editing are intrinsic formal properties of the films. However, those formal aspects don’t preclude Cinema Divina pieces from being characterized, sometimes, as video essays. These days and for a while now, I tend to refer to Cinema Divina pieces as contemplative films, based on the way I make them (through contemplative practice) and the reason I make them (for contemplative practice). Initially, I described Cinema Divina pieces as video essays, or experimental video essays, then contemplative video essays. I have a number of Cinema Divina films screening in festivals internationally and they’re programmed in various categories: as video poetry, video essays, documentaries, artist films, monologues, short films, and experimental films. I guess you could say Cinema Divina pieces are genre fluid.

In 2004, I wrote a personal essay entitled ‘Baptism’. I never published it as a text piece. Instead, as soon as I finished writing it, I began to re-imagine it as an audio-visual piece. I thought of *Baptism* (Freeman 2009, Figure 6) then (it was some years in the making) and still think of it as my first video essay.

By the time *Baptism* (Figure 6) received a permanent home in 2010 at Blackbird<sup>5</sup>, an online journal of literature and the arts, I’d spent years discerning the form of the video essay. Then I was invited to write the inaugural curatorial (text) essay for the 2012 launch of *TriQuarterly*’s video essay suite. At the time, some ten years ago, I felt I’d nailed the form of the video essay:





**Figure 6.** *Baptism* (2009). Digital film still. [https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v9n1/gallery/ve-freeman\\_m/baptism-video.shtml](https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v9n1/gallery/ve-freeman_m/baptism-video.shtml) (accessed on 26 September 2022).

- the brainy, bratty . . . love child of poetry, creative nonfiction, art house indies, documentary, and experimental media art
- an ascendant incarnation of Adorno’s heresy
- personal, lyrical, contemplative, improvisational, performative, critical—not on the page but on the screen
- playful, irrational, and fragmented
- reflexive, subjective, autobiographic, poetic, interdisciplinary<sup>6</sup>

Here, I could be describing Cinema Divina films and numerous other media arts pieces made by others that I’ve viewed at video poetry festivals, artist film events, arts and culture festivals, experimental film festivals, and in galleries and museums. I’ve burned a lot of creative energy trying to categorize or name the audio-visual marvels that challenge the boundaries of literary and media art, and work that is inclined to interrupt our ordinary perception by also messing with sound and image.

Which brings me back to Barthes and *Camera Lucida*,

“The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.” (Barthes 1981, p. 51)

I love that: A good symptom of disturbance.

I’ve been invited by The 3rd Thing, publisher of *The Illuminated Space*, to develop an online anthology of short films that “trouble the boundaries between and within cinematic and literary form—work that defies easy categorization and resists our impulse to name.”

We’re calling the project:

Good Symptom—A Serial Anthology of Time-Based Disturbances.

(Be still my heart.)

**CA:** M, How important is language to the autotheoretical project of Cinema Divina? How do you weight the ‘visual’ and ‘written’ within your creative practice and why? Is writing (for example, a book or even this essay) necessary to discuss autotheory and describe what your moving image work is doing?

**MF:** Writing is integral to living my life and one way in which I describe, to myself and others, my autotheorizing. For example, take the Cinema Divina piece, *Like The Air* (Freeman 2022, Figure 7). We experienced a most difficult death

in our family in the spring of 2021. At the time, every day was a blur, day after day. My usual practices didn't hold me the way I imagined they might. It wasn't until I read C. S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed* (Lewis 1994) in combination with Barthes' *Mourning Diary* (Barthes 2010)—two very different but very personal books on the devastating loss of a loved one—that the idea came to me to start a daily journal in which to reflect on at least one thing about the day before. I somehow realized the best way I could show for today, in all that grief, was knowing I could reflect on today, tomorrow. I called that diary my Yesterday Journal. Pared down entries from my Yesterday Journal became the text, then voiceover, for *Like The Air* (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** *Like The Air* (2022). Digital film still. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/9841426/video/752712549> (accessed on 26 September 2022).

When it comes to writing curatorial text-based essays, critical essays, or a book—that kind of writing is a helpful way to reflect on a thing again and again, to go deeper and deeper into sessions of listening to my heart. That's an evocative process. You'll notice, even in a more critical context, I tend toward a *lectio*, contemplative, process—an evocative process—in hopes of mining embodied wisdom.

Filming is equally integral to living my life, and is inherent within the autotheoretical project of Cinema Divina. My voiceover for *Like The Air* (Figure 7) is coupled with footage shot over the same time period—pelicans flocking along the Pacific shoreline, fireweed seeds lifting up in the wind, seagull feathers in sand dunes, Anne feeding worms to a baby robin she'd rescued. The footage I shot throughout that sorrowful time was as transforming as each Yesterday reflection. Writing and filming, recording natural sound too, are nourishment for me. Food for my heart and soul. Bringing them together, whether in opposition or in some kind of harmony, is a kind of feast that is best when shared with others.

I invite the specific piece to tell me if one thing (text, image, or audio) is more important than another at any given moment, and if and how they relate to one another. I listen for the piece to let me know how much space it needs, how much quiet, how much air.

In all of this work I am processing and theorizing about my lived and felt experience—autotheorizing.

**CA:** M, thank you for giving us such generous insight into your life and art practice.

**MF:** Doing this interview has been a gift, Cat. Thank you.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The ideas of Cinema Divina and 'the illuminated space' are expanded upon in full in Marilyn Freeman's 2020 book, *"The Illuminated Space: A Personal Theory & Contemplative Practice of Media Art"*.
- <sup>2</sup> Autotheory was coined in (Young 1997), and popularised in (Nelson 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> These questions are drawn from a 1933 edition of *Baltimore Catechism No. 1*, republished in 1977 by Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., Rockford, IL, USA, originally issued by the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1885.
- <sup>4</sup> More can be found on Thich Nhat Hahn's notions of interbeing in (Nhat Hahn 2017, pp. 13–15).
- <sup>5</sup> [https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v9n1/gallery/ve-freeman\\_m/baptism-video.shtml](https://blackbird.vcu.edu/v9n1/gallery/ve-freeman_m/baptism-video.shtml) (accessed on 26 September 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.triquarterly.org/essay/on-the-form-of-video-essay> (accessed on 26 September 2022).

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