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McGILL UNIVERSITY
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

MASTER'S
INTERNAL
REPORT

NAME OF STUDENT: Richard BLACKBURN
DEGREE / UNIT: Master of Arts / Department of Art History & Communication St
THESIS TITLE: sentio, cogito, dictum, video

Use the following scale:

EXCELLENT, VERY GOOD, GOOD, SATISFACTORY, or UNSATISFACTORY
(Choose one grade for each category)

Criteria	Excellent Top 10%	Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
1. Grasp of subject, powers of criticism and awareness of previous work		✓			
2. Resourcefulness, alertness to significance of findings		✓			
3. Diligence, care, technical skill in the research		✓			
4. Organization of findings		✓			
5. Quality of presentation (coherence, lucidity, grammar, style, freedom from typographical errors)		✓			

6. OVERALL JUDGEMENT (circle one) PASS / FAIL

7. A student whose thesis is ranked excellent in all, or almost all aspects may be recommended for the Dean's Honour List. This is expected to be the top 10% of students' theses you have read.

DEAN'S HONOUR LIST (circle one) YES / NO

8. If the overall judgement is 'PASS' please provide:

- a. Comments explaining your evaluation including recommendations for improvement to be included in the final thesis.
- b. If recommending Dean's Honour List, provide on a separate page your reasons for the recommendation.

If the judgement is 'FAIL' provide (Note: at least one of the criteria above must be graded unsatisfactory):

- a. Comments explaining your evaluation including a detailed description of the shortcomings of the thesis requiring minor or major revision.
- b. On a separate page, please itemize the substantive issues that you expect the student to address for the thesis to receive a passing grade upon reexamination. Please refer to appended instructions for examiners.

DATE: March 4, 2011 SIGNED: [Signature]
(Prof W. Straw)

N.B. Please return your report by February 26, 2011 to:

THESIS OFFICE, McGill University, James Administration Bldg., Room 400,
845 Sherbrooke St. W., Montreal, QC, Canada H3A 2T5
Tel. No.: 514-398-3990 Ext. Fax No.: 514-398-6283 Email: angela.ngara@mcgill.ca

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Supervisor's report. MA thesis by Richard Blackburn. "sentio, cogito, dictum, video."
MA in Communications, Department of Art History and Communications Studies, March, 2011-
Supervisor: Will Straw

This is an engaging, original thesis which weaves its way effectively between personal reflection on a creative experience and a broader engagement with some of the key ideas that have presided over the making of films and other artistic texts, in Canada and elsewhere. In my opinion, it successfully negotiates some of the traps that are endemic to this kind of exercise: it is not simply a reconstruction of the artist's own creative processes (an exercise that often involves self-deception), nor is it a disingenuous attempt to analyse a film made by the writer as if that film had simply been found in the world. There is sufficient scholarship here to meet the requirements of the MA thesis, and enough interesting reflection on the writer's own experience as a film-maker to make this a valuable account of the making of a film within one of the National Film Board of Canada's most interesting recent programs.

The thesis revisits the work of a number of thinkers who have faded, perhaps only temporarily, from cultural analysis. The discussion of Vico is interesting, and invites a broader return to the thought of this important thinker. Likewise, such Canadian thinker as Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan and John Grierson figure in interesting ways, not simply because, like the filmmaker, writer and film, they are Canadian, but because, in their pursuit of a totalizing theory of aesthetics and communications, they provide insight into the sorts of larger questions that the thesis is anxious to pursue.

I found the discussion of Grierson to be particularly useful. Too quickly dismissed, for several decades, as a naive realist, Grierson reflected on the complexities of documentary form in ways that are nicely unpacked here. Likewise, the discussion of the more recent history of cinema direct is full of interesting insights, and the convergence of this history with the story of the making of the SALT film updates this history in revealing ways.

I liked the style of this thesis, the manner in which it speaks to its reader and the ways in which, most of the time, it balances scholarly distance and autobiographical reflection. Occasionally, there are the lapses into semi-mystical accounts of the artistic process that tend to put off scholars, as in the following: "All artists undertake an unmapped and unpredictable journey." I would ask whether this isn't true, as well, of the MA thesis, or how true it is of most film-making, constrained and ordered as it is by the need to plan, budget and administer.

Nevertheless, I learned a great deal from this thesis, and from the process of supervising it, and commend the candidate on an engaging work.

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McGILL UNIVERSITY
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

MASTER'S
EXTERNAL
REPORT

NAME OF STUDENT: Richard BLACKBURN
DEGREE / UNIT: Master of Arts / Department of Art History & Communication St
THESIS TITLE: sentio, cogito, dictum, video

Use the following scale:

EXCELLENT, VERY GOOD, GOOD, SATISFACTORY, or UNSATISFACTORY
(Choose one grade for each category)

Criteria	Excellent Top 10%	Very Good	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
1. Grasp of subject, powers of criticism and awareness of previous work			✓		
2. Resourcefulness, alertness to significance of findings			✓		
3. Diligence, care, technical skill in the research				✓	
4. Organization of findings		✓			
5. Quality of presentation (coherence, lucidity, grammar, style, freedom from typographical errors)			✓		

6. OVERALL JUDGEMENT (circle one) **PASS** / FAIL

7. A student whose thesis is ranked excellent in all, or almost all aspects may be recommended for the Dean's Honour List. This is expected to be the top 10% of students' theses you have read.

DEAN'S HONOUR LIST (circle one) YES **NO**

8. If the overall judgement is 'PASS' please provide:

- a. Comments explaining your evaluation including recommendations for improvement to be included in the final thesis.
- b. If recommending Dean's Honour List, provide on a separate page your reasons for the recommendation.

If the judgement is 'FAIL' provide (Note: at least one of the criteria above must be graded unsatisfactory):

- a. Comments explaining your evaluation including a detailed description of the shortcomings of the thesis requiring minor or major revision.
- b. On a separate page, please itemize the substantive issues that you expect the student to address for the thesis to receive a passing grade upon reexamination. Please refer to appended instructions for examiners.

DATE: 28 February 2011 SIGNED: [Signature]
(Dr D. D. Barney)

N.B. Please return your report by **February 26, 2011** to:

THESIS OFFICE, McGill University, James Administration Bldg., Room 400,
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MASTER'S EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
McGill University

Name of Student: Richard BLACKBURN
Degree/Unit: Master of Arts/ Dept. of Art History & Communication Studies
Thesis title: sentio, cogito, dictum, video
Examiner: Darin Barney

Overall Judgment: PASS

This thesis is comprised of two main elements. The primary element (which falls in the second half of the thesis) is a firsthand account of the making of the National Film Board documentary film *SALT* (2000), in the production of which the author played a significant role. The secondary element (comprising the first half of the thesis) attempts to frame this account in terms of a theoretical discussion of the role of metaphor and poetics in literary creation and, more briefly, in relation to the history of documentary filmmaking in Canada, with particular emphasis on *cinéma vérité* or *cinéma direct*. Combined, these elements meet the criteria for an acceptable thesis at the Master's level, in particular due to the originality of the contribution. The thesis comprises a unique document that contributes to the historical record of documentary filmmaking in Canada and Quebec, and will in this respect stand as a resource for other film studies scholars in Canada. The thesis is carefully crafted and well-written, and attempts a degree of philosophical engagement not typical of work at this level. There are several arguments worth taking notice of here: that documentary is a more literary than journalistic mode of film-making; that the poetics of metaphor are a means of intensive, almost unmediated subjective expression for the documentarian; that the filmic practice of editing renders the status of *cinéma direct* as a genre of "truth" unstable; and that sensibility is more central to the documentary mode than rational argument. These arguments provide the most engaging scholarly aspects of the thesis and demonstrate a conceptual facility that holds its own next to the authoritative expertise conveyed in the second—dare I say more *documentary*—half of the thesis.

That said, there are several elements of the thesis that I think could have been strengthened. The overall research effort here is relatively thin. While the author strives to convey erudition in the early stages of the thesis (I am thinking here of the references to Vico and Derrida), in the absence of sustained textual analysis of the challenging ideas presented here, the treatment remains more allusive than substantive, more gestural than deep. In this respect, the treatments of Grierson and Frye were much more satisfying and well-handled than the nods to Aristotle, Derrida and Vico, which sometimes came off as a sort of forced attempt at sophistication (to give one example: at 15 a claim regarding "literature's operative essence" is attributed to Derrida; I find it hard to accept such a phrase being used to characterize his thought). I was also surprised not to find a more systematic engagement with the extant scholarly literature on documentary, the National Film Board, and youth media, as these might have provided a more effective context for the firsthand account of the making of *SALT*.

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I admire the author's attempt to elaborate a case on behalf of the role of metaphor as a condition of the immediate communication of subjectivity, primarily at the affective registers of emotion, feeling and sensibility (though at times this does rely too heavily on somewhat caricatured versions of "logocentric" objectivity, rationality and linearity; here again, perhaps more systematic engagement with the now-burgeoning literature on affect would have been productive). I am not convinced the attempt succeeds, not because the claim is implausible but rather because, by the end of the thesis, the figure of "metaphor" is enlisted so indiscriminately that it becomes nearly impossible to distinguish metaphor from communication itself. The author appears to see metaphor everywhere, and there would seem to be little it cannot accomplish in terms of producing and conveying intersubjective meaning. By the close, the concept is asked to bear more than it can possibly handle, and the case is weakened by this burden.

In closing, I should add that I watched SALT shortly after reading the thesis. The film is tremendous, but viewing it did raise for me what I think is the central, and perhaps the cruelest, irony of the thesis, which is that a text whose core argument so strongly contests the perceived imperative of rational objectification/translation of the inscrutable poetic dimensions of art includes roughly 50 pages of precisely this sort of translation – in this case of a work that so beautifully speaks for itself.