Peripheral Flows: Creative film practice as a medium to reveal the intangible heritage of motion in Ho Chi Minh City.

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Abstract

This paper presents initial findings of a research project that documents peripheral flow from a mototrbike, revealing the relations between the pavement, event and movement within Ho Chi Minh City. This research argues that peripheral vision constitutes a form of ephemeral and intangible urban heritage that is often overlooked yet crucial to understanding the lived experience of the city. By using mobile recording technologies, a series of motorbike journeys have been documented, shifting the focus away from the direct path ahead and instead emphasizing the peripheral view. This approach captures the spatial interconnectedness between the passenger and the city, highlighting the layers of urban life that are typically unnoticed in the fast-paced, motorbike-dominated streetscape. The project challenges conventional ways of framing urban experience by embracing movement, transience, and the fragmented perspectives that define everyday mobility in Ho Chi Minh City. Through this method, the research not only offers new insights into how the city is navigated and perceived through the 'zoning' of the urban streescape, but also asserts the importance of recognizing and preserving ephemeral urban heritage. This investigation contributes to broader discussions on urban cultural memory and the role of creative moving-image practices in documenting and interpreting city life, as knowledge artefacts that can inform a more inclusive urban governance.

Keywords: Motorbike, Peripheral Vision, Digital Video, Streetscape

Purpose

The motorbike holds a special status in the hearts of the Vietnamese community and in the country's economy. Across social media, you can find images of families squeezed onto a motorbike, fridge-freezers being transported on two wheels, and the ubiquitous motorbike taxis found throughout Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The motorbike has transformed the nation, liberating women from the home and facilitating the migration of workers across the country. Beyond these pragmatic uses, the motorbike also offers a distinct way of experiencing the city. Because of its everyday use, its experiential qualities are often taken for granted. This paper argues that the peripheral view experienced while moving through the city on a motorbike is an important aspect of its ephemeral and intangible heritage.

Despite the ubiquity of motorbikes and their central role in Vietnamese society, there is little representation of their experiential and sensorial dimensions in academic literature or creative outputs. By centering the peripheral view, an observational perspective unique to motorbike travel, this project proposes a way to generate knowledge about the relationship between movement through the city and the immediate built environment.

This project adopts a practice-led approach, aiming to produce a series of films that can be used to reveal the qualities of these journeys. To film the relational properties between motorbike movement and the built environment, I recorded a series of routine journeys. Using

familiar routes was essential, planning new routes might shift the focus toward the physical layout of the city, rather than the experience of the journey itself. I used a phone to record these trips, capturing both outbound and return journeys, during both day and night. The footage then underwent post-production processes designed to enhance the clarity of the journeys. Colour correction was employed to address the challenges of filming in both intense daylight and nighttime conditions.

To date, the project has explored four research questions that aim to understand the relationship between motorbike movement, the built environment, and how these dynamics challenge traditional understandings of heritage in Ho Chi Minh City and Vietnam more broadly:

- What do the relationships between peripheral vision and the filmed sequences reveal about the intangible heritage of motion in HCMC?
- What does this particular point-of-view filming reveal about the occupation of city spaces?
- In what ways can the film medium disrupt traditional notions of urban heritage through the recording of HCMC from the perspective of a motorbike passenger?
- How is this research critical to the governance of the city?

These questions identify a formal structure for the research. However, within this project, my approach to creative practice means that the questions are also shaped by the processes of making and reflecting. Drawing on the concept of epistemic or knowledge artefacts, the creative works themselves generate questions and contribute to knowledge, offering ways of knowing that are embedded within and emerge from the creative practice.

This paper outlines progress in the project so far. It begins with a detailed breakdown of the methods used to record from the motorbike, including a comparison of daytime and nighttime shots. It then describes the post-production approach, including a two-step process: refining single-shot films of each journey, and creating a montage version suitable for film festival submissions.

This is followed by a results section, which discusses specific outcomes and their visual impact. I reflect on the aesthetic qualities of the films—particularly the differences between day and night footage, and the effects of zooming into sequences. I also consider the visually abstract nature of the films, and their poetic engagement with movement.

Finally, the conclusion summarises the project's progress to date and suggests ways in which the work may continue to evolve, particularly through further experimentation in the editing process.

Approach

In this section, I outline the creative processes I have undertaken and how they generate creative artefacts that offer new urban imaginaries. I explain how moving image is used to record and edit sequences of footage, generating film-based outcomes that reveal the impact of movement on our experience of space. These methods highlight the performative nature of riding a motorbike through the city and how this develops into a sensory experience, offering an intimacy with the immediate built environment that is qualitatively different from being a pedestrian or using other modes of transport.

This research adopts a research-through-practice methodology, divided into two parts: first, the recording of journeys through the city, and second, the creative post-production processes. Both parts provide iterative opportunities to explore the footage’s content and to develop visual understandings of how movement impacts our sensory response to place.

Creative film practice provides an effective platform for investigating peripheral vision as an intangible heritage of the everyday urban experience. The time-based nature of

the medium centres its ability to capture ephemeral, embodied, and relational qualities of urban space. Film encourages a sensory response to movement and atmosphere as the motorbike navigates through space. It reveals both the flow through and within the city, as well as capturing the everyday textures and forms of the built environment. The resulting film artefacts, recordings and edited outputs, enable reflective processes that support the reconstitution of sensory experience, generating both epistemic and knowledge artefacts.

This project has developed as a way to record and explore the experience of riding through Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) as a pillion passenger on a motorbike. The specific aim is to record and experiment with the peripheral vision of the passenger. This abstracted and sensory-focused part of our visual perception balances the 'truth' of the environment with the brain's creative interpretation to render a spatial reality.

The recordings centre on the spaces being travelled through, shifting the focus from destination and direction to the relationship between the motorbike's motion and the built environment. To date (the project is ongoing), I have recorded six trips, four during the day and two at night. Two of these were one-way journeys.

I used an iPhone 16, recording with FiLMiC Pro software. The phone was placed on my thigh, capturing footage of the nearside of the street (rather than across the street). This positioning foregrounds the relationship between being on the motorbike and the events glimpsed on the pavement and in the traffic, such as passing motorbikes. I chose to record routine journeys rather than pre-selected routes. Planning a route would emphasise the built environment rather than the experiential quality of the journey, which is the focus of these recordings.

Sound was recorded alongside the footage. However, it was heavily affected by wind noise generated by the motorbike's movement, with environmental sounds only becoming clear when the bike came to a stop. Rather than treating the wind as interference, I used it as a key feature reflecting the motorbike experience. This sound was included in one of the NTROs (non-traditional research outputs) created from the footage.

My practice is influenced by a slow cinema approach, involving the recording of entire journeys in single takes. This method minimises editorial intervention, my only input during recording is pressing the record button. Each journey lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The footage received an initial treatment to comply with RMIT's ethics approval, which requires that individuals in public spaces not be identifiable. This restriction supports my non-human-centred approach, as my practice focuses on relationships with the built environment. I used a focus blur to obscure people and to draw attention to the city's environment.

Instead of using built-in colour correction tools, I prefer working with layered techniques. Layering offers a tactile, intuitive method akin to my earlier painting practice, where layers of paint were scratched through or built up to form an image. In my digital work, this approach 'un-digitises' the medium by applying analogue-inspired methods that resonate with my artistic sensibility.

The high-definition quality of digital footage offers hyper-realistic detail, which I find aesthetically unsettling. The atmosphere gives way to what Werner Herzog terms "the accountant's truth" (Hegnsvad and Thomson, 2021). Digital film democratises visual attention, applying equal emphasis across the frame. To counteract this, I use a combination of focus blur and layering to evoke the atmospheric and embodied experience of the journey.

At this stage in the post-production process, the footage is treated as a whole and is not montaged or cut up. These uncut films serve as epistemic artefacts, generative works that present potential perceptions, references, and associations (Ballestrem & Gasperoni, 2022). NTROs are created from these whole-take films. These are further edited and montaged to develop narratives that evoke the initial embodied experience. Sound is either retained from

the original footage or developed in collaboration with sound artists to produce immersive film ‘experiences’ for public dissemination.

Reflection is central to my process, not only in the creation of the films but from the moment each journey ends. Unlike previous projects, this one involves a unique disconnect between what I film and what I experience. As a pillion passenger, my attention is focused on navigation and safety: traffic conditions, route decisions, and watching for potential hazards. Communication with the driver is limited due to noise, language barriers, and safety concerns, resulting in mute observations. This distance contributes to the abstracted quality of my peripheral vision, which receives far less conscious attention during the ride, hence the desire to film it.

Reflection also informs my creative sensitivity in portraying the atmospheric qualities of the journey. Having lived in HCMC for over nine years, I am familiar with many of the routes I filmed. This familiarity can distract from objective reflection. The initial editing step of adding a focus blur assists in de-identifying the location, allowing me to concentrate on qualities such as movement, form, and texture. Further treatments, such as desaturating daytime footage to black and white, and increasing saturation of night-time footage, abstract the sequences further.

The final part of the methodology involves producing the creative works or NTROs. These outputs serve a different function from the single-shot artefacts. Montage sequences, always constrained to footage from a specific journey, enable the emergence of new knowledge within the film. This knowledge is embedded in the design-based decisions made during the creation of visual narratives, which respond to visual prompts within the sequences and result in a reconstitution of the journey.

These outputs are not solely academic or epistemic in nature; they are also designed for a broader audience, whose expectations of film must be considered. My creative practice outputs are situated between gallery exhibitions and film festival screenings. This dual positioning presents challenges in reaching broader audiences, but both academic and non-academic avenues for dissemination remain open.

Results

The routes recorded in this research are those undertaken as part of my daily activities, originating from my residence in District 7, in the south of Ho Chi Minh City. Most journeys were to and from District 1, the city’s central area, with one journey extending to Thao Dien (now part of Thu Duc City, to the east of HCMC). These routes consistently involved crossings over the Tẻ and Bến Nghé canals. With only three crossing points on each canal, the outbound and return trips often shared similar paths. This repetition introduced challenges in terms of location recognition, reinforcing the need for post-production techniques to obscure identifiable landmarks and maintain the focus on spatial experience.

As seen in **Figure 1**, filming in daylight conditions proved difficult due to the city’s compact urban form. Narrow, tree-lined streets and tall buildings created frequent shifts in lighting conditions, which the camera responded to by adjusting aperture levels mid-shot, disrupting the viewer’s attention and drawing focus to the mechanics of the recording device. To mitigate this, I locked the aperture to a medium-light setting. This often resulted in overexposed skies and backgrounds in open areas. This phenomenon parallels my own experience of squinting in bright sun, creating a sensory distortion of space.



Figure 1. Daylight unedited film still. Digital Still, by author. 2025



Figure 2. Night time unedited film still. Digital Still, by author. 2025

As can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2, filming the nearside of the road establishes a sense of intimacy or closeness to the activities happening on the street. This is enhanced in the night time films where darkness focuses the image. Using layers in the sequences enhances color and tone and when allied with a focus blur, Figures 3 and 4, it adds even more depth to the films. This process really helps the impact of bleaching as can be seen in figure 3, where the emphasis on tone creates a different spatial organisation, and therefore a different sense of space. The night time sequences generate. A far more evocative sense of space. The artificial colours of the city, the mix of LED, Neon and fluorescent lighting generate moments in the streetscape, which are surrounded by areas of darkness as can be seen in Figure 4.



Figure 3. Daylight edited film still. Digital Still, by author. 2025

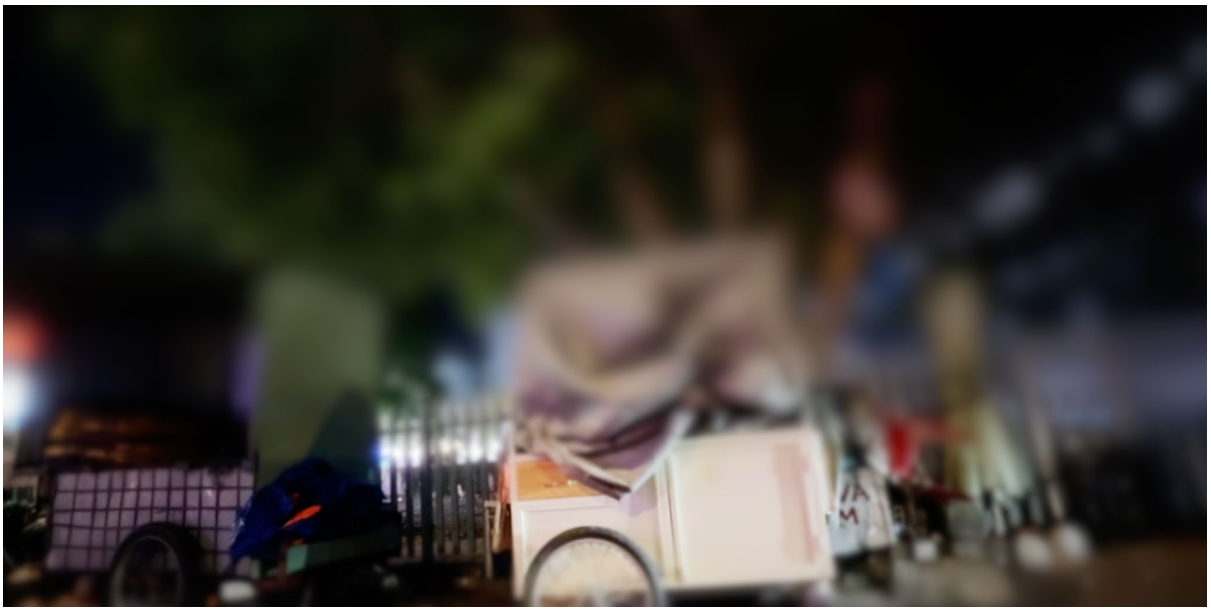


Figure 4. Night time edited film still. Digital Still, by author. 2025



Figure 5. Daylight edited zoomed film still. Digital Still, by author. 2025

The forms of the city take on a notable presence within the sequences, when a zoom is applied to the films. In figures 5 and 6 the road and pavement play a far less role in the composition and reading of the spaces. The process of zooming in is basically enlarging the frame. So there are options to move the frame to show the top half or lower half of the frame. In experiments so far I have left the frame centered as seen in figures 5 and 6. In these films the focus is on the middle to upper section of the street. This removes bystanders, except for glimpses of other motorbike readers and passengers. The streetscape morphs and changes as the motorbike moves through the city, offing another layer of abstraction, I particular where the buildings are not so tall or more open areas, where the city's services infrastructure takes prominence. This includes electricity pole wires and pylons, street lights and communications wiring. By zooming into the frame the motion from the motorbike gains an intensity. The city passes by at a seemingly faster speed.



Figure 6. Night time edited zoomed film still. Digital Still, by author. 2025



Figure 7. Driftlight. Frame sequence of film. Digital Still, by author. 2025

Driftlight, figure 7, is a film developed as a more poetic and condensed version of the full sequences. This film is montaged but using the same sequence so there remains a spatial integrity if not a temporal one. The film derived from a single journey. These edits require a narrative that is derived form the embodied experience, situated knowledge, and through multiple reflections through the trips footage conducted in the editing process. The shorter form edits act as poems, reflecting my experiences, but acting as repositories of a visually poetic knowledge for the wider audience.

This project is still ongoing and I am discovering more and more information within the sequences each time I review them. The films collected offer the longest single sequences I have captured. Duration has been developed as a critical part of my practice. It also provides a voice to the spaces and events that are captured in the films. Duration provides a means to reveal of the depth of knowledge held within the city spaces I film. The first edit of the sequences develops films which not only hold this knowledge but they provide a container to review and reflect, developing questions and provocations that lead to the development of more poetic and narrative focused films. It is important to note that the initial footage are poetic outcomes in their own right, and they hold all the potentials, which are revealed in the edited NTRO sequences.

Conclusion

This research project has grown from a personal passion for exploring Ho Chi Minh City on two wheels—by bicycle and motorbike. This mode of exploration resonates strongly with local culture. As documented in Esther Johnson's film *Dust & Metal* ("Dust and Metal – Dust and Metal," n.d.), motorbikes have long been associated with freedom in Vietnam. Johnson argues that two-wheeled vehicles provided liberation from village life—particularly

for women—offering the possibility of urban migration and new futures. Despite increasing car ownership, the motorbike remains a vital and beloved part of Vietnamese life. In the first quarter of 2025 alone, 7,500 new motorbikes were sold daily across the country ("Vietnam buys 7,500 new motorbikes daily in Q1 2025," n.d.), indicating its enduring significance.

In this project, I have experimented with filming from the position of a motorbike taxi passenger. This perspective is integral to the methodology. By engaging peripheral vision as a mode of seeing, I created a body of films that function as epistemic and knowledge artifacts. Matthias Ballestrem and Lidia Gasperoni (2022) describe such artifacts as central to research in design and architecture, providing insight through their form and experience. Similarly, Catherine Gough-Brady (2020) argues that film is a medium capable of generating explicit knowledge, emphasizing the audience's role in completing the meanings embedded within the work. The perspective of peripheral vision helps to construct what Gough-Brady terms an "internalised world in the footage," granting the films a creative freedom to reconstitute the street beyond traditional representation.

This research has been guided by four interrelated questions:

1. What do the relationships between peripheral vision and the filmed sequences reveal about the intangible heritage of motion in Ho Chi Minh City?

This question foregrounds the embodied experience of motorbike travel as a form of intangible cultural heritage. According to UNESCO, such heritage includes "the practices, knowledge, and expressions that communities recognize as part of their cultural identity, along with associated objects and spaces" (UNESCO, n.d.). The continuous journey sequences presented in the films offer a sustained view of this experience, departing from the brief, sped-up cuts often used in feature films to signify movement. Instead, these films invite viewers to consider how the act of riding—both as driver and passenger—embeds a sensory, ephemeral knowledge of place.

2. What does this particular point-of-view filming reveal about the occupation of city spaces?

The films offer insight into the ways in which space is inhabited, negotiated, and adapted by communities. In cities like HCMC, the street serves as a liminal "third space" that blends public and private life. Filming from the periphery, and enhancing that perspective through techniques such as zoom, blur, and layering, draws attention to how people augment their environments to support informal practices and economies. The camera captures the material adjustments—awnings, signs, seating—that show how residents shape the built environment to their needs. These choices reflect not just adaptation, but occupation as a dynamic cultural act.

3. In what ways can the film medium disrupt traditional notions of urban heritage through the recording of HCMC from the perspective of a passenger on a motorbike?

Recognizing the act of motorbike travel as a form of heritage presents a direct challenge to conventional heritage narratives in Vietnam. While cities like Hanoi, Hue, and Hoi An are widely acknowledged as cultural heritage sites, HCMC is primarily seen as an economic hub, with heritage limited to wartime remnants, colonial villas, or modernist architecture. The films produced in this research offer an alternative: a form of urban heritage rooted in movement, atmosphere, and everyday practice. Johnson's *Dust and Metal* contributes to this rethinking by positioning motorbikes as tools of emancipation and transformation. Likewise, these films propose a redefinition of heritage that includes the ephemeral, the mobile, and the lived.

4. How is this research critical to the governance of the city?

This question connects cultural production with urban policy. The films do not aim to document the city in a factual sense, but rather to reveal how it is experienced, particularly in relation to movement. What has emerged, for example, is the impact of moving and parked cars, through the division or re-enforcement of the zoning between pavement and the road. This disrupts the relationship between motorbike riders and passengers, and the events and atmospheres they are travelling through. By revealing these experiences, this research offers insights into understanding a heritage that should be essential to ensuring inclusive urban governance. As HCMC faces increasing car use and accompanying infrastructural pressures, these films highlight a more fluid, embedded mode of transportation. Motorbike travel fosters direct engagement with city spaces, and through exposure to sound, smell, temperature, and social proximity, creates a form of knowing that is inseparable from being in the city. Recognizing this form of engagement as heritage could inform more responsive and culturally aware development strategies.

This project is ongoing. Future journeys will be recorded and edited, with particular focus on developing poetic re-edits that emphasize the atmospheres and temporalities of the city. An important emerging element of the work is the creation of a portfolio of still images drawn from the films. These function as excerpts of peripheral experience—fleeting impressions made visible only through the act of filming. They serve both as documentation and as creative responses in their own right, capturing the traces of movement and perception that make up the city's intangible, lived heritage.

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