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# ‘Compression makes every movie a melodrama’: A conversation with Laura U. Marks on the Small File Media Festival

## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a conversation with Laura U. Marks, a distinguished scholar of film and new media who launched the Small File Media Festival in 2020. Marks’ message is that large-file streaming is harmful to the planet and that we need to act against its growing yet under-the-radar carbon footprint. The festival’s goal is to demonstrate that movies can be captivating and immersive even if they are not large in file size, and encourages creators to experiment with low-energy technologies and techniques. Given the high stakes, the festival’s organizers hope that small-file media will become increasingly influential as an aesthetic movement.*

## KEYWORDS

small file films  
short film festival  
environmental film  
streaming media  
ecomedia  
low resolution  
media art  
film aesthetics

## INTRODUCTION

The following conversation with Laura U. Marks was conducted and drafted over the course of October 2022. Marks is a renowned scholar of new media and film who needs little introduction. She teaches as Grant State University professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver,

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1. For more on The Shift Project, visit <https://theshiftproject.org/en/home/>. Accessed 13 February 2023.

with research focusing on intercultural media art. She is widely known for her work on haptic engagements with visual media, which in recent years has notably branched out into both Middle Eastern and Islamic art and philosophy. In 2020, Marks launched the Small File Media Festival, a groundbreaking initiative that – with categories for submissions limited to 1 MB, 5 MB and 22 MB in size, for instance – calls upon moving image makers to experiment with low-energy technologies and techniques. Given that streaming media are calculated to cause a rapidly escalating 1+ per cent of our global carbon footprint, the message of the festival is dead simple: large-file streaming in HD and 4K and 5G is *killing the planet*. But fear not. Movies don't have to be *big* to be binge-worthy.

For more on Laura Marks, visit <https://www.sfu.ca/~lmarks/>. And for details and updates on the Small File Media Festival be sure to bookmark <https://smallfile.ca/>.

**Martin Rossouw (MR):** *It's great to be able to talk to you about this amazing initiative, Laura, thank you for taking the time. I'd like for us to start with a swift recounting of the story of the Small File Media Festival. How did it come about? Who were the main role players? What were your hopes and dreams at the time?*

**Laura Marks (LM):** You're most welcome, Martin. I love talking about small files! I started the Small File Media Festival to draw attention to the carbon footprint of streaming media. Yet it's also an extension of my career-long interest in creative experiments with lo-fi media and 'obsolete' technologies. I pulled together a brilliant Small File team of artists, scholars and activists, including media artist, musician, scholar and pirate-media activist Joey Malbon; independent filmmaker Sophia Biedka and scholar-artist Radek Przedpelski. We were determined to make the festival scrappy and joyous – a festival not of environmentally themed movies but of movies of all sorts that could stream with no damage to the environment. Joey was especially responsible for the festival's punk, lo-fi visual style and Radek for the fiery and poetic verbal provocations. Collectively we decided the movies should be no larger than five megabytes in size and five minutes in length and devised provocative categories. This year we've decided not to limit the length, but rather limit the file to no more than 1.44 MB/min, the storage size of a floppy disk.

Our goal was and remains to show that movies don't have to be large in file size to be beautiful, captivating and immersive. Given that ICT [information and communication technologies] are responsible for at least 4 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions (or: the same as the airline industry), and rising, I hope small files will lead the growing movement in energy conservation and appropriate technologies. I equally anticipate that small-file media will become an important aesthetic movement.

**MR:** *Your festival indeed has a crucial political agenda. And especially so since people aren't always fully aware of the environmental costs of streaming media. Could you elaborate a bit more on the eco-political motivations behind your work with the festival?*

**LM:** Since around 2014 I'd been suspecting that the new, seemingly light and invisible delivery system of streaming video had unacknowledged material and energy costs. In 2020 I led a team of researchers, two media scholars and two ICT engineers, who sought to verify a finding by the French think tank The Shift Project<sup>1</sup> that streaming is responsible for 1 per cent of global

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greenhouse gas emissions annually. Reading the engineering literature we were able to triangulate with The Shift Project's figures to ultimately confirm their finding. This corroboration is despite the fact that they, following early engineering research, had made the mistake of additively calculating streaming energy uses, which doesn't account for the fact that data centres and networks are always on, regardless of the amount of streaming. The data centres, networks and devices on which streaming (and the internet as a whole) relies consume massive amounts of electricity. About 79 per cent of global electricity derives from fossil fuels. Media and infrastructure corporations are very clever at greenwashing (such as Apple's and Alphabet's claims to be green at source), but they cause an overall increase in energy consumption from all sources. I also learned an enormous amount about the politics of engineering research.

Small files are an extreme provocation to make simple changes individually, such as choosing alternatives to streaming, streaming less, streaming in lower resolution, being wary of what engineers call the substitution effect – such as making video calls instead of phone calls – and decreasing the size of the files you upload. But high-level change is also key, including government regulation of platforms and telecoms and, of course, decarbonization.

*MR: I'm intrigued by the fact that your inaugural festival in 2020 happened during the pandemic and was fully online. Was the idea of the festival in any way inspired by the pandemic? Or, if it was a coincidence, would you agree that the coincidence is a rather loaded and profound one?*

**LM:** It was a profound coincidence! We had planned to hold the 2020 festival live and like many festivals, we had to pivot to streaming. When we were planning the first festival, the lockdown hit and millions, if not billions, of people took comfort in social and streaming media, straining network use to the point that Netflix, YouTube and PlayStation had to decrease the resolution of streaming files to SD. Despite this, in what Naomi Klein terms 'the shock doctrine' (2007: 3–21), media platforms seized the opportunity to manufacture more addictive media; platforms that had been niche – videoconferencing, video calling and high-definition streams to stationary bicycles – became the norm, and folks often had to purchase new devices to accommodate them. Meanwhile our festival was celebrating online movies that are not only absurdly small but piquantly short, that you can feel good about streaming – and then step away from the screen and do something else.

*MR: In August 2022, the annual festival already had its third run. What, for you, are some of the highlights of the festival over the past three years? I'm particularly interested in any striking or recurring narrative or stylistic themes that have emerged so far – perhaps some unexpected ones?*

**LM:** This is hard to answer, because artists have submitted so many thrilling inventions, both anticipated by us and not. The small-file constraints invite experiments in poetic brevity: essay films like Criss Wang's *YELLOW* (Canada, 2022) (Shot 1), dense micro-narratives like Marilia Kaisar's *In Nisyros: An Instagram Story Poem* (Greece, 2022) and clever sight gags. We also receive many works in the genre of intimate solo performances for the camera, similar to artists' video from the 1970s, like Leanne Dunic's *Melt* (Japan, 2020) (Shot 2)

and *Snow White* (Japan, 2021). We receive many works that could be considered archival films, some quite complex, like Matt Warren's *Hauntology at 576 Lines (and some at 480 lines)* (Australia, 2020) and Hàñ Pham's *Once Upon a Time* (Canada, 2020), meditating on old images and files made with older devices. There are nature walks, micro-documentaries and internet meta-commentaries like Remy Porter's *Trying to Play* (USA, 2020) and Christopher Carruth's *Why Wonder* (Canada, 2021). And gorgeous manifestos, like Mariana Sanson's *My Niece Is a Dragon* (USA and Mexico, 2021).

**MR:** *And I couldn't help but notice a healthy portion of porn on the menu too...*

**LM:** Absolutely, yes. We included porn in our first call, because The Shift Project determined that 27 per cent of streaming is porn – i.e. 0.27 of global warming can be attributed to online porn viewing. (That caused some problems in my university, which hosted the first three years, and with another university that refused to post the call for work.) Our call was rewarded with some extremely inventive pornographic works – shocking, hilarious, sweet, like Dooley Murphy's *Shameless Plug* (Denmark, 2020) (Shot 3).



Shot 1: *Colour-bursting experiments in poetic brevity*, Criss Wang (dir.), *YELLOW*, 2022. Canada. © Criss Wang.

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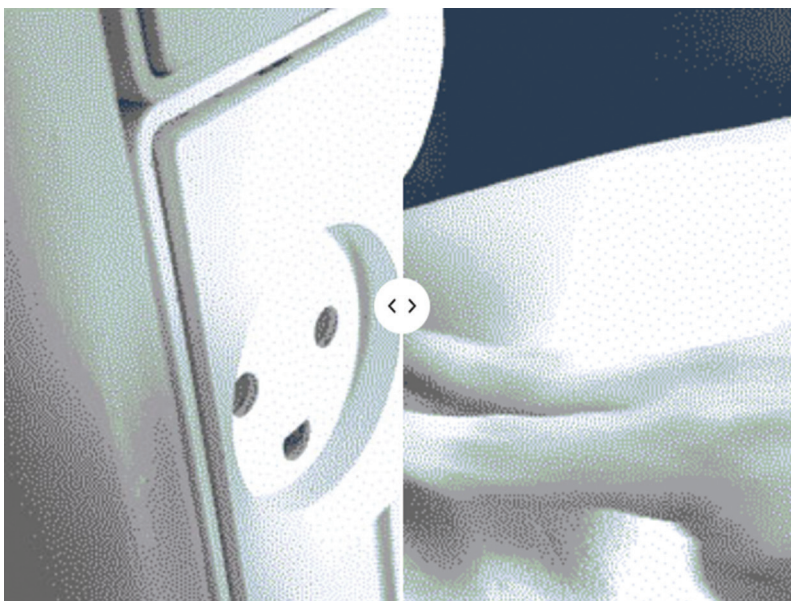
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Shot 2: A sensuous performance work poised between heated intimacy and icy nature, Leanne Dunic (dir.), *Melt*, 2020. Japan. © Leanne Dunic.



Shot 3: Swipe left for the big reveal in this amusing porn loop, Dooley Murphy (dir.), *Shameless Plug*, 2020. Denmark. © Dooley Murphy.

I can add that this year we introduced the Not So F\*ing Tiny (NSFT) art category in response to NFT art, which uses a massive amount of blockchain electricity, much of it coal-fuelled. Artists chose to designate their works as NSFTs, which folks could bid on in a secret auction: the top bidders receive hand-stamped certificates of authenticity.

**MR:** *A major reason for my own fascination with the Small File Media Festival is its confluence with – and re-articulation of – the sphere of short film. For most intents and purposes, I'd say, yours is a 'short film' festival ('small' usually entails 'short'), albeit one with a very distinct (not only political but also lo-fi-aesthetic) agenda. With that, I have in the back of my mind William Brown's (2017) reflections on the need to disentangle 'slow' films from 'long' films. Now what strikes me about your case is how precisely such parameters proliferate: there's not only 'short vs. long', but also 'small vs. big', as well as a 'short' that can exude either a 'fastness' or 'slowness' of style. How would you situate typical film submissions to your festival within these parameters?*

**LM:** Wonderful question. I would say small-file movies are not so much short as *intensive*. They can be slow: watching a five-minute landscape movie shimmering with compression artefacts, you can lose all sense of time. They can be quick: some small-file movies compress a whole story into five minutes – or in the case of master compressor Andrew Roach, fifteen minutes, such as his *Expedition Sasquatch* (USA, 2021). Though we prefer the movies to be over a minute in length, artists have sent intense fifteen-second gems that feel like popping for a moment into another universe, like Phoebe Legeré's *To the Moon Catfish* (USA, 2021), Golnaz Moghaddam's *A Friendly Conversation* (Iran, 2021), and the burbling animated miniatures of Canadian collaborators Monique Motut-Firth and pr0phecy sun.

**MR:** *It seems to me that the urgency to cut down on streaming resolutions possibly creates a new significance for 'short film' broadly construed – a new space for a flourishing of the short, of the compact, of brevity as such.*

**LM:** I hope this is the case. I know why people use movies as sense-numbing drugs; I do it too. But I wish people could think of movies as intensive pleasures that are refreshing and reviving, instead of huge hours-long extensive movies and series that dull our faculties. Sometimes I dream that there were just a few movies in the world that we would all watch again and again, pressing out their deliciousness.

**MR:** *I'm curious about organic connections that your festival has with online meme culture (GIFs, gloriously crap-quality cat videos and the like), which so often wears its lo-fi heart on the sleeve. Part of that is also the rise of TikTok and the raw new genres of short film that it triggered. Have you picked up any such resonances in your festival?*

**LM:** Oh yes! We've had lots of movies that play with memes and GIFs (brilliantly versioned by Allison Tanenhaus) and energy-efficient Instagram filters. Some of the most beloved and (secretly or not) profound movies in the festival are cat movies, like Pierre Leichner's *Catfessions* series (Canada, 2020), Rachel Stuckey's *Convalescing Camcorder and Two Cats* (USA, 2021) (Shot 4) and Colin Williscroft's *O'Hara Lane* (Canada, 2020). We get wild YouTube-like mashups like Qianlin Wang's *Waiting Room Special Education Programme* (USA, 2021).

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*Shot 4: A VHS-made video diary sets off a dialogue between ageing technologies and feline friends, Rachel Stuckey (dir.), Convalescing Camcorder and Two Cats, 2021. United States. © Rachel Stuckey.*

TikTok files are unnecessarily huge. This year we made a call for TinyToks that, strangely, didn't receive many responses, but we're going to make TikTok central to next year's campaign, along with frequently streamed genres like ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) content, instructional videos, child-soothing videos (in light of the fact that *Baby Shark Dance* has been streamed more than 10 billion times) and of course porn.

**MR:** *In your chapter for the edited volume, What Film is Good For: On the Values of Spectatorship, you write about the value of small-file films and media – which is to say, what they are 'good for' (Marks 2023). While the ecological and political values of these films are patently clear, to many people the aesthetic value of these films might likely be less clear. What would you say to them? What are some of the key aesthetic appeals and interventions that small, low-resolution films stage?*

**LM:** We have been blown away by the aesthetic invention of many of the works submitted. Small-file media have the modernist aesthetics of all works that take the medium as a theme. They make a virtue of compression, experiment with the panoply of compression effects, such as low frame rate for a dreamy pace, pixel blocking and datamoshing – like Hana Kokšalová's hypnotic *MyPhone Funeral* (Czech Republic, 2022) and Ayana Madi's *Built Reality* (Canada, 2022) (Shot 5), winner of the coveted Small File Golden Bear. I find that compression makes every movie a melodrama, as the pixel blocks add a layer of emotive performance. Some use still images with a rich soundtrack, like the classic small-file film *La Jetée*. Animation has so many elegant small-file solutions. And small-file movies play gorgeously with pure abstraction and saturated colours, as in Trevor Byrne's Paul Sharits-like

2. See, in particular, Marks (2000, 2002).



Shot 5: *The newest winner of the festival's Small File Golden Bear epitomizes how small file media make a virtue of compression, Ayana Madi (dir.), Built Reality, 2022. Canada. © Ayana Madi.*

*Sticky Note Studies #1 & #2 (Orange and Pink) (USA, 2020) and Kofi Oduro (Illestpreacha)'s A World Where Information Can Gather (Canada, 2022).*

**MR:** *I'm wondering about your earlier influential work on the skin of film<sup>2</sup> and the obvious tactile or haptic-visual appeal of low-res films. Surely this is one reason for your passion for small-file movies? Their 'skins' are so much more pronounced!*

**LM:** *Yes! I am in love with the way compression creates a skin-like surface that unifies the image, similarly to what happens with slow or backward motion. I get lost in the drifting artefacts that float around figures, turning every individual into a crowd and the melancholic trails created by datamoshing, as in that similarly suggests all entities are connected in time-based processes. There is the letting go of figuration that yields atmospheres, as in Charlie Cooper's *Series 1-4* (Canada, 2021) and Zach McLane's series that actually won the 2021 'Best Haptic Renunciation' award (Shot 6). Not all small-file movies are low resolution though: some, like the aforementioned *O'Hara Lane* as well as Cat Hart's *Correspondence* (Canada, 2021) are gorgeously crisp, thanks to smart cinematography. However, small-file movies, even the crisp ones, are generally, like haptic images, what Marshall McLuhan called 'pull' media: they draw viewers close and invite an intimate investment on our part. Which makes them immersive despite their minute stature.*

**MR:** *To close things off, I want to ask about any noteworthy sibling initiatives related to your festival, or perhaps unaffiliated and unofficial offspring that your*

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*Shot 6: Shifting pixelated abstractions and their haptic appeal, Zach McLane (dir.), Sketch in Orangeblue, 2020. United States. © Zach McLane.*

*project has given rise to. That is to say: has small-file media as a movement gained much broader traction yet?*

**LM:** We love partners, collaborators and imitators. So far we're delighted to have partners in Los Angeles, Cairo and Amsterdam, as well as here in Vancouver, who programme and distribute small-file movies and offer workshops. Our online tips and tutorials are frequently accessed and we share materials for small-file workshops. We plan to share a curriculum that can be easily grafted into any media production course. I would love for every festival to have a small-file section and for artists to regularly make two versions of their works: a lush, high-resolution version for live screenings and a small-file version for streaming.

**MR:** *Consider me a small-file convert, Laura. How can I contribute to the cause?*

**LM:** You can share our methods with your maker friends, submit movies to the festival, hold Small File Media Festival viewing parties and start your own small-file festival!

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### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Martin P. Rossouw is head of the Department of Art History and Image Studies, University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa, where he teaches as senior lecturer in film and visual media. He is the author of *Transformational Ethics of Film: Thinking the Cinemakeover in the Film-Philosophy Debate* (Brill, 2021) and co-editor, with Julian Hanich, of *What Film is Good For: On the Values of Spectatorship* (University of California Press, 2023). His most recent article publications are in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, *Short Film Studies*, *Akademisk Koarter*, *Image & Text* and *New Review of Film and Television Studies*.

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