

Visual Essay

## **Playing the Self and Other Otherwise: A B Movie Journey through Low-Expectation Co-Creativity and Outsider Knowledge**

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## Playing the Self and Other Otherwise: A B Movie Journey through Low-Expectation Co-Creativity and Outsider Knowledge

Jared Epp

My co-creator David Ross and I made what we called 'ethnographic B movies' as the central element of my doctoral fieldwork. These low budget and cheesy speculative fiction films, written primarily by David, became an opportunity for him to share his ideas of a revolution based on the concept of the Musicality of Reality. The films gave David a chance to perform himself otherwise: no longer on the socio-economic margins, as a failed academic living on a senior's fixed income, but as a legitimate thinker leading a global movement. Together, we gave into and created a mad world of possibility, a place where I could also become an Other to my ethnographic self, performing a version of my actual self as always unsure about what was happening in the field. In this visual essay, I share a series of film stills in a montage-like fashion and with an accompanying text, to mirror the absurd silliness of our films inspired by the B movie genre. I focus on moments across our filmic output that highlight how giving into playfulness provided very serious self-disclosure opportunities both for David and for myself. By bringing the reader into the space of our films in this way, I want to encourage others to experiment and play with the possibilities of ethnographic becoming afforded by low aesthetic expectations and absurdist creativity.

**Keywords:** alternative knowledge, collaboration, filmmaking, research-creation, madness, speculative fiction

*Is not thinking outside the university a mad act—  
given the scholastic bureaucracy that passes for  
thought?*

David Ross

David Ross and I met during my doctoral fieldwork, in December 2019, at a community meeting in Parkdale, Toronto, Canada. He wanted to institute systemic change to housing activism through his vision of shamanic neo-Marxism. I was at that meeting interested in the spirit of place amidst gentrification. David invited me to attend a theater group at the same center, serving those living precariously in the neighborhood.

From the very beginning, the ethnographic moment was defined by playing and creating worlds. Inspired by our improv skits and sidewalk

wandering conversations, we decided to make films. Neither of us had much experience, but we did it anyway, learning through playing, with low stakes. We were working on our first film, *Ectoplastic*, in spring 2020, as the pandemic became hyperlocal. What started as a commentary on plastic consumption became our own conspiracy theory: Bezos, Zuckerberg, Musk, and other tech giants let COVID-19 spread across the globe to put the wheels in motion of total virtual reality.

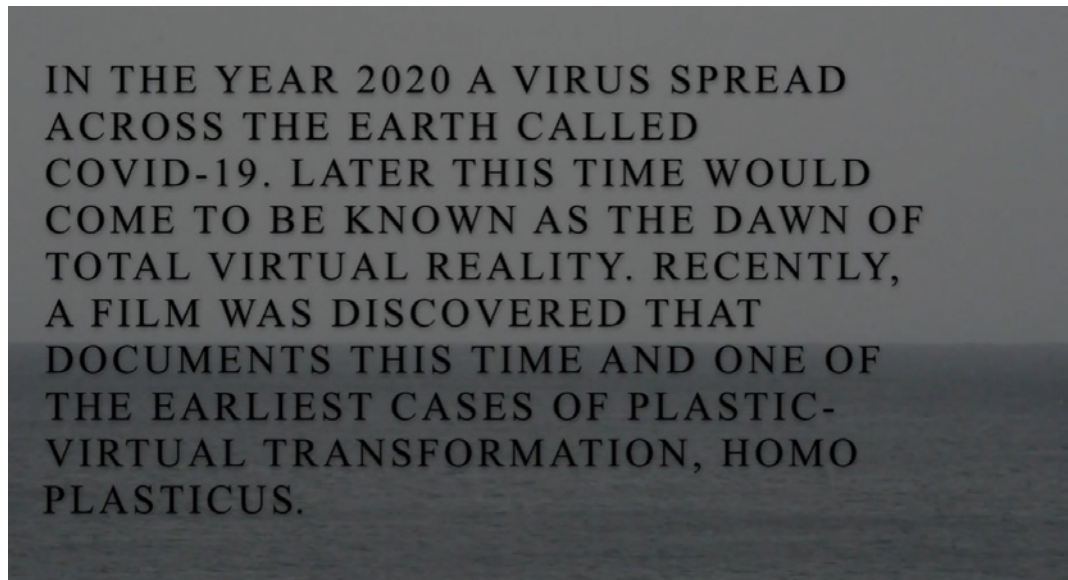


Figure 1. A screenshot of the opening phrase of *Ectoplastic*. Courtesy of the author.

...It is May 2025, years after that first film and days after my dissertation defense. I wanted to spend time with David to celebrate my defense, and we decided to shoot another film. In this film, there is an alien from the Alpha Centauri B movie planet, who recruits a prospecting fool. Because I was anxious about my professional prospects, the filmmaking, meant as a celebration of my defense, became a cathartic opportunity to play with my anxieties. I played the prospector, 'a fool with a PhD and no prospects.' Now, the relational moment felt less like doctoral fieldwork and more like two friends making a film and having fun.

In this visual essay, I share film stills that document our work together, primarily focused on the film, *Fools of the B Movie Planet*, mentioned above. Through these stills, I invite the reader to think about the center and periphery of anthropology as well as about what David calls 'playful absurdity' (Epp & Ross, 2024, p. 60) as ethnographic relationality. We made the films for each other, for David's ideas and my ethnography. We developed a form of filmic research-creation that Michael MacDonald's (2023) concept of 'Cineworld' helps situate. We were beholden to our

own vision and each other, practicing what Faye Ginsburg (2019) calls an 'aesthetics of accountability.' It was our co-creation that mattered and not the foregrounding of a predefined ethnographic context. Nicholas Bourriaud's (2002) idea of relational aesthetics further grounded our co-creative ethics. He argued that we should pay attention to the relations that art produces—not only objects. He provoked critics, artists, and audiences to ask if a work denied or affirmed anyone's ability to be themselves.

While our films were meaningful to us, how could that meaning translate to an academic audience? Here, Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón's (2023, 2019) concept of the 'politics of invention' remains helpful for thinking through the entanglement of worlds imagined and enacted ethnographically as well as their reception within the discipline. But why would anyone watch our recent post-research film? What kind of patience and openness should be expected of an audience for outsider ethnographic filmmaking? Is the baseline a learning opportunity of disciplinary relevance, a pleasing aesthetic journey, or maybe something else entirely?

The question of relevance to an audience opens space for reflecting upon the center and periphery, and upon the conventional and unconventional within anthropology. David is a thinker; he has a PhD and briefly held an academic position.<sup>1</sup> Now, his ideas live on the periphery, and he has failed to return to the sites of normative knowledge production. He finds purpose in this failure, staying true to the vision of his thinking. He rails against the formalities of conventional academia, or 'scholastic bureaucracy,' as evidenced in his opening quote. It is this denial of conventional thinking that David affirmed and that I followed in our filmmaking.

Being creative, following David's desire to remain outside conventions provided a space to produce and share alternative knowledge beyond academic standards. The periphery unburdened by conventions provides a fertile ground to be creative on the disciplinary fringe. I follow the call of *Peripheral Methodologies* by Francisco Martínez et. al (2021), who show the peripheral, whether 'vague, contradictory, unfinished, superficial and eccentric,' is not a 'flaw to be banished' but 'a source of creativity' (p. 1). There was no denying David's outsider knowledge and its filmic embellishment. We leaned into the strangeness of it, wearing tinfoil helmets, running around empty wading pools, circumambulating garbage in a parking lot, or creating conspiracy theories. It was all somehow fieldwork and collaborative creative ethnography (Criado & Estalella, 2023). Making films became an experiment in taking this call of peripherality and creativity to the limits of academic legibility.

We re-imagined ethnographic film as speculative<sup>2</sup> B-movie fiction beyond documentary.<sup>3</sup> Together, David and I have written about making 'ethnographic B movies' and the research relations and possibilities we generated. (Epp, 2024; Epp & Ross, 2024). B movies, as Becky Bartlett (2021) points out, are defined by a lack of skill and resources to realize a vision or an inability to adequately render an imagined world but doing it anyway. It is this acknowledged B movie failure that gave us courage. We knew our techno-

dystopic pandemic reality or alien encounter would be rendered less than it could have been, but it didn't matter.<sup>4</sup> We gave in to a 'playful absurdity' (Epp & Ross, 2024) and an openness to expression with very low expectations of the outcome.

We made a new world on our own terms, on David's terms. He shared his life as he saw fit, blending a 'real' past with imagined present and future through different characters. In his words, he had 'failed to have a middle-class life.' While failure saturates his sense of self, it animates his resolve to live and think beyond the mainstream. He generates ideas, communing with the history of ideas, crafting and living the Musicality of Reality. The Musicality of Reality, David's central concept, is an assemblage of knowledges, including but not limited to, quantum physics, Marxism, Heidegger, Lacan, Platonic ethics, and Shamanism. Reality is music—and playing that music will change the world. During a zoom call, as we talked through the material for our article, David provided a summary:

It's to liberate and to articulate how matter is the space of musical structure and how existence is essentially an exercise in musical composition that undercuts the notion of capitalism and the notion that the bottom line is making money. Time is not money... time is the present. I would argue that the invaluable tool and weapon for overcoming capitalism is the systemic affirmation of shamanistic consciousness as delimitating the electronically mediated gathering and hunting of information.<sup>5</sup>

David is serious about achieving his goal and does so resolutely along a whimsical and singular course. He is not trying to barge into a lecture hall at the University of Toronto wearing a tweed jacket, khakis, and loafers—as David Ross, PhD. No, he is a tinfoil-helmeted alien from Alpha Centauri wearing flamingo glasses and leather jacket and teaching, in a graffitied alleyway, that foolishness is wisdom. Or he is David Ross wearing his ideas on a sandwich board sign, wandering up and down the sidewalks of Toronto, carrying around his agora and hoping for public conversation.

The style of sharing ideas or, as David called it, the method of his madness, and our B films, the madness of the method, became the fieldwork. Writing about madness as a catch-all signifier for what eludes categorization in anthropology, Sarah Pinto (2023) draws attention to how the discipline implicates itself in creating the thresholds and concepts it seeks to study in the field. I follow Pinto here to think about the binding of form and content in knowledge creation and mobilization. There are no graffitied alleys in the Ivory Tower, nor unvetted agoras of public dialogue. Anthropologists talk to other anthropologists about the messiness of life and fieldwork, but that messiness seems to dissolve when we write to and for our discipline. What was madness in the field becomes cultural politics or the subjectivation of normativity and difference. David refuses to conform—and I hoped to affirm that refusal in all its absurdity and vital energy.

Jean Dubuffet's (1988) ideas of outsider art provide a frame to think through the kinds of worlds where knowledge emerges beyond the academy:

'The production of art is the playground of the whimsical spirit. Nothing is more damaging to the whimsical spirit than being subjugated to state reason, than being administered by the community which then controls it and decides upon the direction it is to take' (p. 28).

For Dubuffet, the outsider is unbridled by conventions and free to express themselves in raw singularity. David is more interested in sharing his own ideas than in an exegesis of Marx or Lacan, which he could do with ease.<sup>6</sup> This refusal frees him from the academic self-bound by conventions and citations. Martin Fredericksen (2018) in *An Anthropology of Nothing in Particular* references Gilles Deleuze's Nietzsche-inspired concept of radical nihilism. Whereas, traditionally, nihilism refers to a denial of meaningful existence, radical nihilism speaks to meaning that has nowhere to exist. Without an academic world to perform his thinking, David creates one in the everyday spaces of public life, on a podcast<sup>7</sup> and on our YouTube channel.<sup>8</sup> He shares his ideas on sandwich board signs with no Ivory Tower to back him up. While he has credentials, his knowledge is not precluded to an academic CV, publications, or position. He has only himself and the agora of public dialogue. I entered that agora, following the realm of the 'cosmic nutbars' and thinking about where, how, and with whom knowledge matters.

As we filmed, David and I became fictional versions of our real selves, akin to a silly ethnographic psychodrama. He plays with his failures and bipolar depression, talking to stone statues under a freeway or talking to himself on a rotodial phone along a busy sidewalk. I am an ethnographer but a pretend one, a prospectless prospector, a hyper-sensitive and self-deprecating anxious anthropologist playing a harmonica in an alley. If all anthropology can ever produce is a kind of fictional interpretation of 'real' worlds (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973), then what is real and what matters? What are the thresholds that we legitimate as disciplinary? And what gets left on the margin?

The visual journey here starts with stills from our filmography,<sup>9</sup> with accompanied dialogue to show how playing with speculative fiction generated opportunities to shuffle and subvert the roles and power dynamic of researcher/researched. In these opening stills I ask: what does it matter if the whole thing is a kind of inside joke of questionable academic relevance or the world of one person who constantly fails to become mainstream? In this spirit, calling out from the periphery, I guide the reader to question how we all want to define our acceptability thresholds. I ask these questions without an answer but to provoke conversation on the fringes of the discipline, the fertile ground for David's independent, alternative knowledge.



Figure 2. A still from the film *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality: An Ethnographic B Movie* (2025). Courtesy of the author.

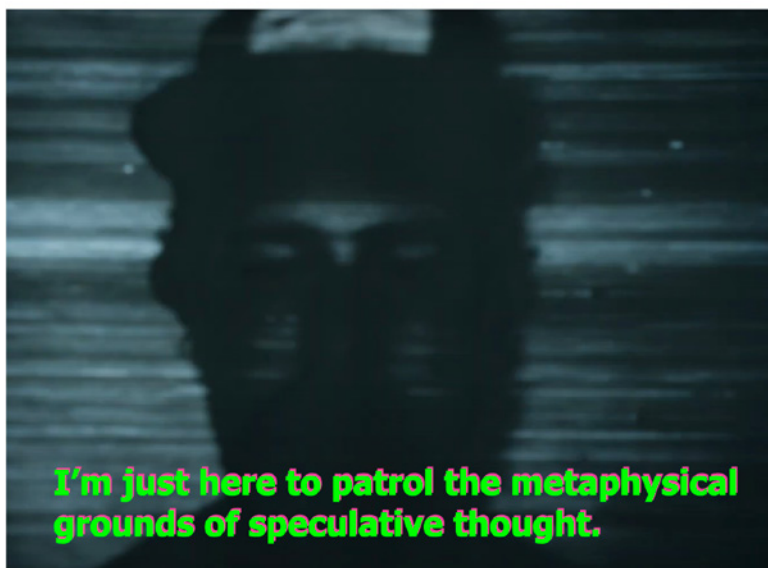
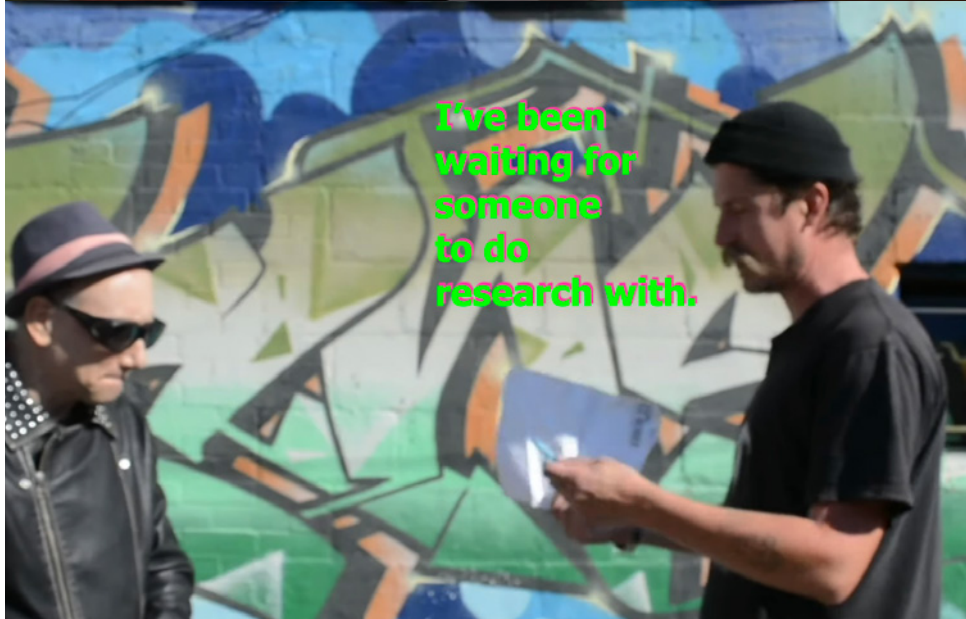


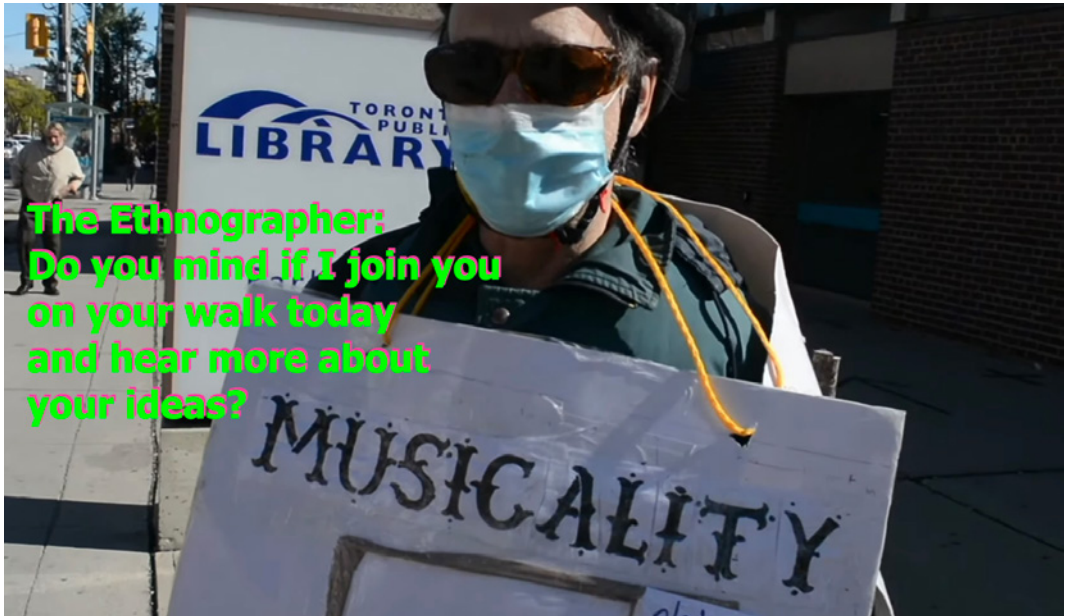
Figure 3. A still from the film *The Sissopher Dialogue* (2025). Courtesy of the author.



Figures 4 and 5. Scenes from two different films dealing with performing research ethics consent forms: *Music Sound Noise* (2021) and *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025). Courtesy of the author.



Figures 6 and 7. Scenes from two different films—*The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025) and *Ectoplasic* (2020)—put together in a single montage for a conference presentation at EASA 2024 in Barcelona. The scenes are dubbed over with David reading from a script for a mock thesis defense scene between my thesis supervisor (him) and myself. Courtesy of the author.



**The Ethnographer:  
Do you mind if I join you  
on your walk today  
and hear more about  
your ideas?**



**What is your representation of the other  
I ask, as the other represented by you?**

Figures 8 and 9. Stills from *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025). Courtesy of the author.



Figure 10. A mock thesis defense scene from *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025). Courtesy of the author.



Figure 11. The closing scene of *Ectoplasic* (2020). Courtesy of the author.

'Oh, ectoplastic discharge of logocentric recalcitrance!' David as Dr. Carlos Popper exclaims to open his closing monologue in *Ectoplastic* (2020). A fragment of outsider knowledge, a call from the periphery, a moment of ethnography? Maybe all of these. It is how David represents himself through his own words, through the script he wrote and the ideas he shared. Does it matter that it was spoken or if it was meaningful to an audience? Is it the singular language of madness or anthropological knowledge?

The next section contains stills from our most recent film *Fools of the B Movie Planet* (2025). This is the film, mentioned at the outset, that we shot after I had just completed my defense. Here, I invite the reader to ask if, how, or in what ways this film matters. Is it the importance of cultivating, celebrating a creative ethnographic friendship, or does it matter as a piece of anthropology? Can bad films that don't share anything intentionally ethnographic even matter to anyone else but their creators? If they don't matter and are a waste of the viewer's time, can they still be a form of scholarship? And if not, then what is the threshold of mattering in anthropology? Is it that only the most professional and socially relevant films matter?

The ethnographic B movie approach follows others who have questioned the conflation of quality scholarship with quality filmmaking. Further, it explores how the standards of commercial documentary film have laid the foundation for the standards of quality filmic ethnography<sup>10</sup> (Macdonald, 2023; Minh-ha, 1991; Ruby, 2000; Worth, 1966). Our films, as ethnographic B movies, follow this line of critique as an invitation to accept and celebrate limitations. What about the relationship between ambition, openness, and limitations in knowledge production? What stops limitations from being an invitation in the emergent worlds of scholarship? How can we take the call put forward in *Peripheral Methodologies* (Martinez et al., 2021) to let what escapes knowledge production become a source of creative energy and ethnographic possibility? The genre of documentary has become the standard of ethnographic film. How can this be otherwise? What if the standard were fiction, and it was creativity and imagination that drove knowledge, not what was already knowable 'in the world' and open for interpretation not invention? I ask the reader to keep this constellation of questions in mind as you scroll through images of a couple of mad fools on the B movie planet.



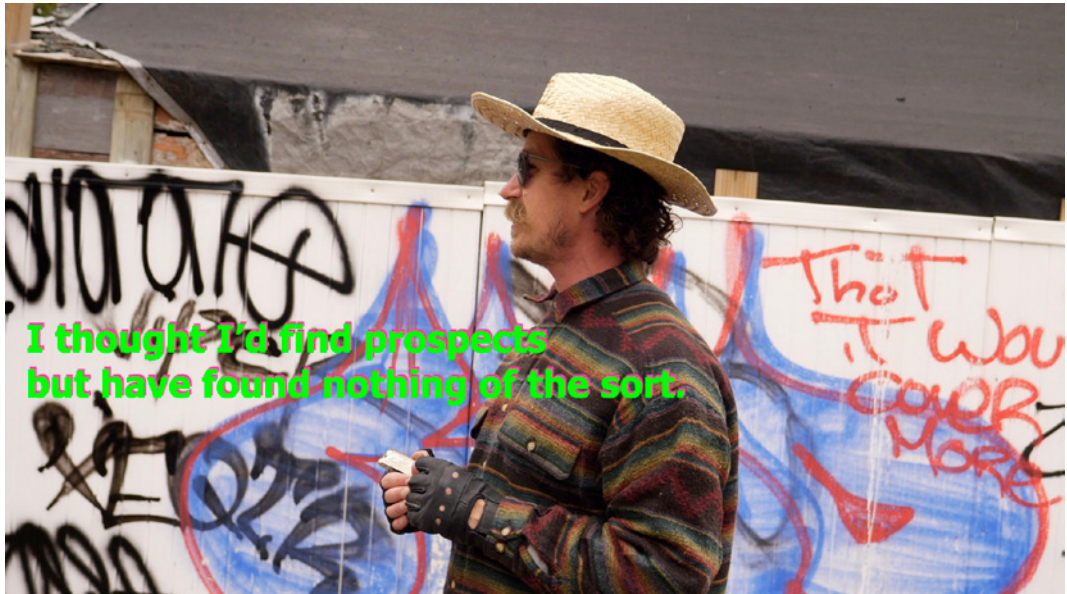
Figures 12–30. Stills from *Fools of the B Movie Planet* (2025). Courtesy of the author.



**Capital is the gift. It is the present.  
The gift that vibrates  
through all things.**



**What is truly gold is recognizing  
your own foolishness.**



I thought I'd find prospects  
but have found nothing of the sort.



I'm the only fool around here  
and there ain't no gold neither.



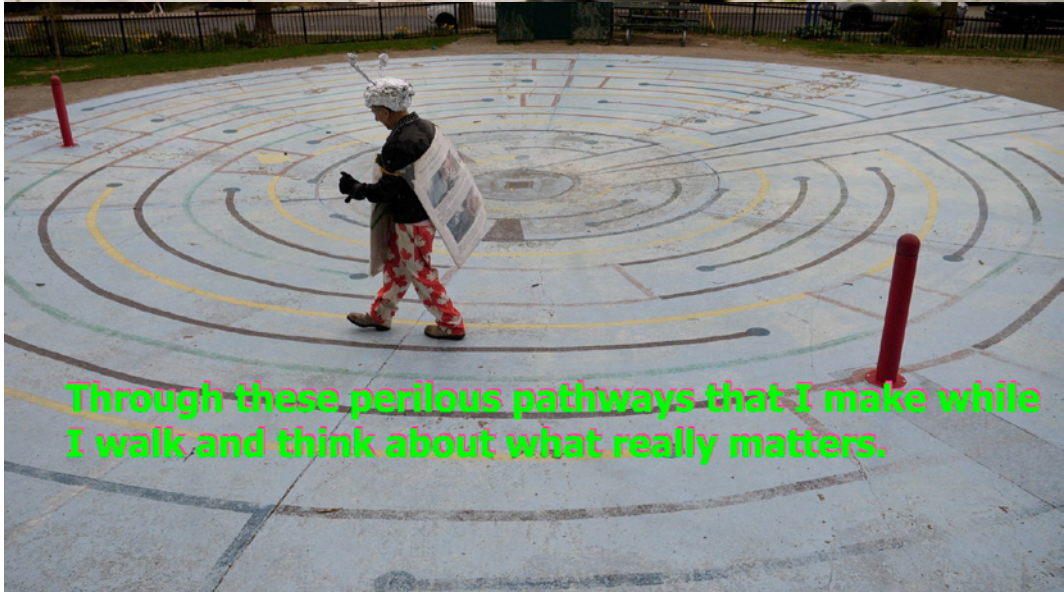
Recognizing your foolishness is the first step to wisdom.



How can I prospect with this non-physical reality that's important in terms of grounding my positionally as a human being?



**Matter matters my friend,  
because it is the space of  
musical structure.**



**Through these perilous pathways that I make while  
I walk and think about what really matters.**









**I shall now  
bless you  
with the  
Crown of  
Absurdity**

and welcome you into the fellowship of the cosmic nutbars!



**and welcome  
you into the  
fellowship  
of the cosmic  
nutbars!**



## Conclusion

The journey to the B movie planet presents a kind of speculative fiction ethnography that, existing on the periphery of legibility, becomes a fertile ground for alternative research relations and absurd imagined worlds. Yet at the same time, the periphery is always at risk of not being taken seriously or being ignored and falling completely off the edge. A lack of recognition has too often been the atmosphere of the revolution of the Musicality of Reality. I made the decision to join David's movement, to co-create and study his revolutionary world diving headlong into the possibility of joining him on the unrecognized edge.

While I recognized David's infectious vitality and sense of purpose, he recognized my commitment to his project. Committing was not a discursive gesture of rapport building that I offered as a kind of pledge but a performative demonstration; poorly acting, becoming the characters he invented, taking seriously the invitation to invent my own, as well as hours and hours of filming, directing, and editing. While we were meeting about revisions to our co-authored article (Epp & Ross, 2024), he commented that we both had equity in the argument, that ideas came from both of us. I believe he felt this sense of equity through recognizing the investment to the project that each of us made. He was not only the interlocutor who gave me data to produce knowledge from: the knowledge was co-produced.

After participating in a dramatized exorcism ritual for his depression,<sup>11</sup> I couldn't help but ask if he had been acting or not. Because he had failed to have a middle-class life, hold a job, have a family, he

explained, he had nothing to lose. Can this spirit travel beyond the margin? Having nothing to lose can be a license to take risks, to fail with nothing on the line, or to achieve something brand new when there is nothing in the way. Acknowledging the risks we each took investing ourselves in the collaboration solidified our bond. David risked exposing and sharing his failures, vulnerabilities, and ideas to me and whatever audience we have on our YouTube channel, even as he knew well that I would take, edit, translate, and rearticulate all of it beyond his control. I risked both the same public exposure of my acting while also making the content that David initiated and we co-created into the material of my fieldwork and my contribution to anthropology. When David wanted to lambaste the reviewers of our article for their perceived lack of platonic fluency, I had to tell him to relax. I still wanted conventional legitimacy and to get the article published. Making fiction films together provided a middle ground for our ethnographic relations. It created the space of mutual risk as we both made ourselves vulnerable on screen, open to being laughed at or, worse, ignored. The intentional low stakes of our work softened this sense of risk. We became a couple of mad fools creating something between ethnography and the Musicality of Reality.

1. David has a PhD in sociology and had a position at an English-speaking university in Istanbul. We didn't talk much about how he lost his position, but he did mention that he hadn't been a good lecturer and his students wanted him fired.
2. I choose speculative fiction, instead of science, or ethno-, or simply fiction because our films are intentionally oriented towards an imagined future, but we are other to ourselves, in a similar context. We were speculating on who we would be, as a different kind of ethnographer, or a different kind of radical thinker.
3. I acknowledge the historical place and importance of the ethno-fictions of Jean Rouch and more recent works that channel this genre and challenge the ubiquity of conventional documentary, such as, but not limited to, the films of Johannes Sjöberg and Rajat Nayyar. Though Rouch provided an alternative way to tell ethnographic stories, it seems that ethno-fictions have remained peripheral to the dominance of the documentary genre as the primary style of ethnographic filmmaking.
4. For a deeper exploration of how our lack of skill and resources intermingled with an inability to render a world David imagined, see Epp, 2024, pp. 83–88.
5. A Zoom call with David Ross, conducted by the author on 21 May 2024.
6. I have encouraged David numerous times to give paid courses on major thinkers, especially when he talks about living precariously only on a Canadian senior's pension of 750\$ CAD a month. Not that this would be easy, but it would be an option. But he is not interested at all. Though fluent in the ideas weaving Plato with Marx, or Heidegger with Lacan, he wants to share a neo-shamanism on electronic information hunting and gathering.

7. See David Ross's podcast, *The Musicality of Reality*: <https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/the-musicality-of-reality-building-a/id1881851003?l=en-GB> (accessed on 31 March 2026).
8. See Jared Epp and Davis Ross's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@Nomad787> (accessed on 31 March 2026).
9. See Jared Epp and Davis Ross's films: *Ectoplastic* (2020), <https://youtu.be/HXBBIxQ9mJo>; *Music Sound Noise* (2021), <https://youtu.be/rJlcFikFiU>; *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025), <https://youtu.be/0rNO1EOyluk>; *Fools of the B Movie Planet* (2025), <https://youtu.be/Z4oNCISPaHo> (all accessed on 31 March 2026).
10. I provide a more in-depth discussion on the topic of the relationship between quality film and quality research in an article on the ethnographic B movie (Epp, 2024).
11. I expand on the exorcism ritual in my dissertation (Epp, 2025).

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### Author's Bio

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