Citation City is a time-travelling voyage through one city, assembled from hundreds of movie clips and inspired by the wanderings of Walter Benjamin.

A patchwork of over 300 features either filmed or set in London, Citation City combines multiple narratives to create the story of one city in a period of enormous change. Pieced together by audiovisual artist Vicki Bennett (aka People Like Us), this beguiling, labyrinthine work takes its cue from Benjamin’s Arcades Project, which was an ambitious attempt to map out Paris in fragments, which was cut short by the author’s death in 1940.

Citation City sources, collages and edits using 300 preexisting feature films where content is either filmed or set in London - to see what happens when these multiple narratives are combined... what will the story tell us that one story alone could never tell?

This pdf is intended as a companion to the audiovisual work, giving examples of the process one might undertake to create new work when sourcing from a large media database. This particular example relates to moving image and musical composition, but the methods can translate to other platforms that use composition, directing, editing, creative narratives and story telling.

peoplelikeus.org/citationcity
Regardless of which medium we may work with, we have to find a way to gather our thoughts together onto one concentrated palette where they are all available to use. Whether writing, composing or editing, there comes a stage where memory may no longer serve us alone. This is the case with a lot of my large-scale collage a/v projects. Below here are some examples of how I process this information.

The first thing is to choose a subject or idea that you want to explore. In the case of Citation City it is finding threads within and relationship between feature films shot or set in London. At the beginning I needed to search for source material. At first, I relied on memory alone, and that of friends - this helped start the list. A Google search brought up articles and forums on film, which then lead to specialist movie sites. The wonderful thing about the internet is whatever the search, someone has already been looking before you, and the main job is to find the 5% of content out there that is thorough and well informed. AND to try and keep your mind intact in the process (this is the internet after all). I found two sites that exhaustively research and locate where scenes in movies are shot and some even show you what they look like now: reelstreets.com and movie-locations.com

If you are stuck for an idea, that’s not a problem... ideas sometimes limit you to your old ways anyway. Being “process led”, means you decide along the way in a sort of “collaboration” with what you find on your journey, it’s rather like going for a walk. Instead of having an “idea” you think of exploring something that inspires you, and start finding more information about it on forums or a search engine, in an archive or library. Using a thesaurus is perfect for finding new relationships between subjects. This process led method can open you up to new ways of creating that are far more playful and experimental rather than worrying from the start that you won’t have a masterpiece. Having an idea isn’t something supernatural and spectacular, it’s just the result of making interesting connections, and in turn you should not worry about originality since it is only through these connections that we get the idea in the first place.

The wonder of working with collage in any medium material is generally available to you, and that juxtaposition of material can spark new ideas. much the same way as a conversation can. When editing and collaging you are in a way “collaborating” with this selected material in the sense that it already contains it’s own history and “life”, and it then goes on to have multiple contexts once you combine material.
The next stage is to seek out source material to edit. For CC I spent 4 months viewing 100s of fictional feature-length movies, choosing what was interesting along the way, throwing to one side what was not. With movie files you can open them in QuickTime 7 and trim movie selections within, and crop and save just that snippet. Then you name them one by one, put them in a folder, and move on. I watched 3 movies a day and kept going until I felt that my Google/forum results had brought me a fairly large comprehensive list of the subject I was examining. Bear in mind that when dealing with a large subject you may find the list is endless, that the more you look the more you find - you might just stop when you think you have enough. At this stage, for each movie snippet I typed descriptions into a text document.

Darling (1965). 4:00: man drops fish in matchbox over Allen’s bridge.

Das Phantom von Scho 1 mov: doctor walks in fog in darkened alley, suspicion of being followed, man follows in fog, footsteps.

Das Phantom von Scho 2 mov: police cars and bells arrive, towards camera in dark abstract of flashing lights close up.

The Day of the Triffids - edit 1 mov: man watches big breaking news showing view from top of London Eye, tram fire in sky phenomenon, time-lapse of people crossing millennium bridge towards St Paul’s, time-lapse of big hen (9.11 pm), time-lapse London Eye, Palm house Kew, City of London and aerial sun phenomenon, blindfolded man, global sun phenomenon, palm house kew, solar light blast blinds everyone, station sees the bare worldwide, all goes to static on screen, “22.03, that was the time when the world went dark”, everyone goes blind, plane starts taxiing towards London city, London at dawn, lots of smoke and clouds, empty streets deserted, movie phone no signal, Big Ben roof knocked off, Westminster bridge, time-lapse tower bridge, tower bridge and triffids.

The Day of the Triffids - edit 2 mov: aerial of Thames in smoke and rain, bridge, flashbacks walking through fog and wooded area, parliament, destroyed big hen, smoke, fire.

Defence of the Realm.2 mov: man walks down street with parliament in the background.

Defence of the Realm.3 mov: pan of text in newspaper close up.

Defence of the Realm.4 mov: library darkened room, scooping more newspaper, coughs and tears page out of newspaper.

Defence of the Realm.5 mov: reel to reel tape recording of phone call, man in both listens to radio while in bath - repeats of “getting a copy out is another” on Dictaphone.

Defence of the Realm.7 mov: record switches itself off and flat blows up, printing press printing papers on mass, telex printer prints news of nuclear accident, multiple newspaper covers from around the world.

Dorset Gray: man pursued by gunman runs down the steps into the underground Farrington in rain, down circular windy steps, pursued down corridor and onto the railway track, gunman gets hit by train, pan of train blur passing.

Dr Jeffrey and Sister Hyde 1 mov: man follows prostitute down foggy alley, policeman in foggy alley, girl gets murdered, poster about man in dark cloak, woman gets eyes taken out, policeman blows whistle, man lets walk in fog.

Dr Jeffrey and Sister Hyde 2 mov: laboratory, bubbling glass containers, mr jeckyll does experiments.

Dr Jeffrey and Sister Hyde 3 mov: jeckyll checks his watch and takes notes and takes potion, jeckyll stumbles around, sits in front of mirror grimacing, turns into a woman.
Now this all may sound longwinded, but this is the “process” - a way to become inspired by content, make connections and familiarize yourself with the kind of subject matter that you are trying to relate to creatively. You are going deeper into the subject, and into the project, gaining insight. I then print out the descriptions, cut out snippet selections and place them on the floor where there is more space than a computer screen.

Citation City finds connections between the material - to try and define the spirit or mood of a place. That could be found in a number of ways - by actor, movie genre, storyline, stage setting, icon, fashion, music, movie location. This location could be a named place or something more abstract like “the river”, for instance. By placing all these descriptions together like an unmade jigsaw you start to notice the relationship between narratives, what they have in common. You move the paper around, putting subjects then subsequent groups together. You can start to visualise an overall list of subjects, of “convolutes”.
The more you look the more you see - an even bigger picture, one that is made of small stories, yet there are lots of stories that not only stand alone, but overlap with one another. These threads go way beyond the subject that you may have initially chosen (in this case London), and start to telling the story, even defining what an actual “story” may be. Compare Citation City’s (above) to Walter Benjamin’s list of convolutes in The Arcades Project (below) in relation to 19th Century Paris. There are remarkable similarities.
So we now have a list of subjects, and footage to go with it. At this point I start thinking about the soundtrack that might go with this footage, if I am making a performance that is musical. Otherwise I import the different folders of subjects into the video editing timeline now.

The problem with working with audio and moving image in the context of using preexisting material is it's already been put together! So you are dealing with something 100% made images and 100% made music/audio. It is already composed(edited) so although it is indeed a palette, this palette is limited. It is not “stock footage”. So as soon as you start trying to transform and juxtapose the material to make new relationships (and this IS what we are trying to do here!) you find that you are in collaboration with what already happened - working with something that to one extent already exists, and your job is to now make it into something extra too. However, this is what makes it interesting, that we are dealing with things already familiar to the audience, so there is the bonus of the journey that material has been on up to this stage. Plus we have magic on our side - it is amazing how these snippets of image and sound really do want to speak to one another. The actors really do want to meet on the screen together in the way they might not have in real life. The singers want to sing together. You will find that with collage you get amazing synchronicities of timing and key, and since we are already working with colliding narratives we just need to bring these things together on the video and audio software timelines.

Now we have our subjects/convolutes we want to represent them musically. If we are making a soundtrack we can collect samples in the same was as film. choosing music or songs that have something in common by lyric, rhythm, mood or association/context. You can find musical content by word search (either in your own music collection or online) - by song title and lyric. By placing unrelated music side by side the context can change, the stories within may collide and compliment, contrast with or highlight the story in the moving image. If you are sourcing movie soundtracks for your audio be sure to use it transformatively, rather than because you don’t have a better idea. Remember... if you are accumulating large lists of material remember that inevitably you are going to throw away 95% of it. This is the case with creating most work. Much like the main lesson of a music improviser being when to shut up rather than when to play, you have to get rid of what is irrelevant, and this is something you work out over time.

How you go about it from this point can vary enormously. Editing is something that you can learn both in a class or online tutorial so I will leave you here. If you treat editing sound and moving image together hand in hand, step-by-step, you can eventually walk the journey. Do not cop out by making the film then finding some music to throw on top or vice versa. Be thoughtful about your soundtrack. Be transformative, try to be engaging, lend another perspective, and remember that this is as much about experimentation as outputting a final product. - - Vicki Bennett (February 2015)