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Introduction to the audiovisual essay: A child of two mothers

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The audiovisual essay is not a strict genre or a delimited form – it is the name for a burgeoning field of inquiry, research, and experimentation within academia and also beyond it; the expression of critical, analytical, and theoretical work using the resources of audiovisuality – images and sounds in montage.

The specific inflection of a chosen name always matters. Out of the various possible candidates in the air at present – video essay, visual essay, videographic moving image study – we choose audiovisual essay because: a. we all need to put an end to the casual ignoring of the decisive role of *sound* in every form of modern media; b. *video* (as in electronic videotape) is already an anachronistic term in the digital age and has been for some time; c. *essay* is a word which, in the spheres of film and media (both their analysis and production), has come to carry the simultaneous connotations of intellectual research and poetic exploration – neither simply a vehicle for instrumental rationalism nor art for art's sake.¹ It is a word which can create its own problems (see remarks below) but, at present, remains charged and useful as a probe to identify a new energy in creation and critique.

The objection is sometimes heard in public forums: but is any of this really new? From Joseph Cornell's surrealist collage *Rose Hobart* (1936) to Jean-Luc Godard's epic *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998), filmmakers and artists have long been cutting together appropriated images and sounds in order to make a critical point or pursue their particular politico-philosophical 'vision'. Celebrated multimedia border-crossers including Agnès Varda, Chris Marker, Ken Jacobs, and Harun Farocki have been extending the ruminative, speculative form of the written essay into renewed, audiovisual formats since at least the 1950s. However, something fundamental in

the contemporary situation of media has changed for a large number of actual and potential producers (including our students). First, computers offer relatively simple but highly effective technologies of digital production and (particularly relevant for the audiovisual essay) post-production. Second, the raw materials – the images and sounds of pre-existing films, television, and media items – are available to acquire and manipulate via digital channels in a way that is historically unprecedented. For close to a century experimental filmmakers sourced out-of-copyright movie trailers and black market prints and literally scoured the bins and dumpsters of rejected footage in order to re-edit, re-film, and creatively manhandle them. Film/video essayists such as Farocki and Marker invented ingenious schemes in order to access the official streams of imagery made by and for corporations or recorded on security cameras. Godard, alongside hundreds of other artists worldwide in the 1980s, went the VHS or Super-8 route, forensically taping from television broadcasts or reshooting playback off of video monitors.

The audiovisual essay, in the wide range in which we are encompassing it within NECSUS, is – to adapt the title of Massimo Bontempelli's novella that Raúl Ruiz filmed as *The Comedy of Innocence* (2000) – the 'child of two mothers'. At least two! There is the tradition of research and experimentation that comes through avant-garde film and video, particularly all that is gathered under the rubric of *found footage* work. The subject of this kind of audiovisual essay is not restricted to but tends at its primary level to be focused on the critique or examination of cinema itself in some respect – particular filmmakers or genres, specific movies or fragments therein, or a more theoretical aspect of the 'cinematic machine' in general, as a medium and as a part of cultural history. Then there is the essay-film (or film-essay), that historic breakaway from supposedly objective documentary which stresses the elements of the personal and the reflective, and which has itself spawned many sub-forms in the digital age. Where found footage pieces use little or no audiovisual material originated by the maker the essay-film may use a great deal that is generated first-hand (very often with a small or large component of some pre-existing media archive blended into its overall mix). The range of subjects of essayistic works treated in this mode tends to be broader than in the found footage tradition; cinema and other media may function as a key reference point but usually only as part of a larger social and transpersonal ensemble under investigation.

These are not intended as hard-and-fast categorical distinctions. As always, anything that is deemed by some commentator to be a genre, type,

model, template, or tradition has usually already produced ample examples of hybrid combination, anti-type, or peculiar exaggerations of the posited form. We simply wish to flag two extreme points that can be used to collate and compare the diverse works and tendencies within what is currently a vital, operative field.

In the present academic climate, and in light of the resistances to and questions about the audiovisual essay that sometimes arise, a dual campaign needs to be waged, exerting pressure from two sides. First, we need to assert and demonstrate that seemingly 'purely' poetic forms can carry intellectual ideas and embody practices of scholarly research. This is more a matter of fighting ingrained perceptions and assumptions (even among humanities scholars) than of changing the nature of artistic work itself – although that too has been entering a new, hybridised phase in our era of 'PhDs through practice' and research-driven art, as more and more practitioners abandon the once fragile and now completely crumbling economy of cultural subsidies and choose to enter the academy to pursue their lifetime of work.

Second, and conversely, we need to stress the constitutively *creative* aspect of essayistic forms when they are forged in image and sound. The traditional academic habit of both beginning with words (in the form of a plan, such as a pre-written script or structured outline) and ending with words (as final justification and elucidation) is challenged by a great deal of work appearing under the audiovisual essay umbrella. Godard himself was probably the first to articulate this problem back in the late 1970s when he explained to television commissioners that his forthcoming found footage/essay works (including *Histoire(s)*) would not proceed from a pre-formulated script but be arrived at solely within the editing process itself, in order that an idea could be *seen and heard* in a new and more direct way. He would usually be met with the initially enthusiastic but then immediately defensive response: '[t]he originality is that it will be visual! [...] But can you *tell* us how it will be visual?'²

We do not go so far as Godard in polemically denigrating 'the word' in favour of some pure audio-vision. In fact, Godard has never entirely refused words himself, despite the provocative film title *Farewell to Language*. It is rather the case that in our much-vaunted age of *multimediality*, *intermediality*, and *transmediality*, we should practice what we preach. All the diverse elements of media (image, sound, graphic design, text, etc.) are available for us to use in different combinations, and we stand only to gain from exploring the possibilities of this 'infinite semiosis'.

However, we do need to tread a little carefully with the very word

'essay'. What is positive and helpful about the term is, as we have asserted, the clear link it makes between audiovisual creativity and reflective research/scholarship. Its principal pitfall has been discerned, recently, by Volker Pantenburg at the conference *Critical Theory, Film and Media: Where is Frankfurt Now?* in August 2014, during a presentation titled 'Essayism and its Discontents'. Pantenburg argued that in celebrating the potential of the essay (in whichever medium) to be digressive, reflective, subjective, and so forth, we court the risk of freezing and reifying it into a genre with fixed characteristics – a paradoxical and indeed self-defeating gesture, since it amounts to a way of regularising and codifying what is meant to be surprising, inventive, and boundary-breaking. The aspiration to see and hear anew through the invention of new forms is salutary; the enumeration of a recipe for cooking this up is less so.

As Pantenburg (alongside Hito Steyerl in 2011) reminds us, the essay came into being not only with the famous, founding reflectivity/subjectivity of Montaigne, but very shortly after with the 'moral instructions' of Francis Bacon. Our commonplace experience today confirms this sometimes self-cancelling duality: while the essay-as-experiment triumphantly belongs to the tradition of Roland Barthes, Judith Williamson, Walter Benjamin, Christa Wolf, or Ross Gibson, the essay-as-business-as-usual, the conservative and normative op-ed 'think piece', belongs to Clive James, Peter Fuller, James Wolcott, and a thousand other high-end journalists (sad confirmation of this can be found in James' treatment of radical essayists including Benjamin and Marker in his appalling 2007 bestseller *Cultural Amnesia*). After all, the extremely schematic, rule-bound assignments that our students are taught to write are also called essays – often duly expunged of what Adrian Miles has rightly and enthusiastically inventoried as the essay's finest propensities toward 'disjunction, exploration, asides, rambles, excursus, and even digression'.³ Again, the drive to practice what we academically preach stands to gain much from a concerted push into thoroughgoing audiovisualism.

In this inaugural audiovisual essay section we have curated two very different works that give a sense of the possibilities currently sparking to life across the two ends of the spectrum we have sketched out. *Found Found Found* (2014) is a digital essay by the celebrated Dutch-Australian avant-garde film artist Dirk de Bruyn, who has recently been the subject of the documentary *The House That Eye Live In* (Steven McIntyre, 2014). *Found Found Found* might be seen to be taking as its point of departure the type of 'personal travel diary' which is a hallowed tradition in avant-garde cinema – especially as associated with Jonas Mekas who, increas-

ingly today, approaches his own very intimately shot footage as a vast archive to revisit and re-edit. The title *Found Found Found* flips that of Mekas' famous poetic film-essay *Lost Lost Lost* (1976) – but this fond homage/allusion is also a trenchant critique of a particular cinematic tradition, since the 'world viewed' by today's audiovisual essayist has transformed itself so profoundly in the intervening four decades. Irony looms: what or who is exactly 'found' in de Bruyn's piece?

Mixing, as he has done for some 35 years, an immersion in media theory (Marshall McLuhan, Guy Debord, and particularly Vilém Flusser) with the free-play of abstract, structural, and poetic forms, de Bruyn produces a meditation on the type of ceaseless loss (of a sense of self, of geo-physical co-ordinates, and of social values) produced by a neo-capitalist world premised on international travel, social mobility, and all-pervasive communications networks. Its 'argument' is channelled all at once through a montage of visual and sonic fragments (many recorded by his digital camera) and through the sensations produced by light, colour, and rhythm. As ever, de Bruyn's audiovisual art challenges us to think dynamically in frames, pixels, and micro-seconds, relentlessly tumbling one upon the next – to be a part of the sensorial, media-saturated world as it is experienced, on the move, but also to somehow get outside of it and view the logic of its ideological power structures.

Laura Lammer is a student in the Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies at Goethe University, Frankfurt. As a participant in our practical/theoretical class on the audiovisual essay she produced a kinetic reflection on the 'Apocalypse Trilogy' of U.S. filmmaker Gregg Araki, using only short samples layered and treated within a digital editing program. Her *Smells Like Armageddon Day – Dreamlike Settings and Magnified Trash* (2014) bypasses an excessive dependence on text-as-instruction in order to deliver its analysis through the careful arrangement, in multiple fragments and two major clusters, of the main strategies in Araki's cinema as Lammer sees them: first, the often garishly-coloured environments in which his characters live; second, the types of fetish-objects that he presents in eye-popping, close-up inserts.

Lammer's piece offers a clear case of something that an audiovisual essay can do which a written piece, no matter how detailed or brilliant, can scarcely touch: even the typical journalistic words I have just used ('garish' and 'eye-popping') do scant justice to the design-assault of colour, tone, shape, gesture, and vocal inflection that Lammer accumulates and co-ordinates in her montage. Through her work we can get closer analytically not only to what Araki's films materially *are* but also to what a neo-

cinephilic, subcultural taste for his type of cinema *means* and *feels* like, especially when scored to the music she selected. *Smells Like Armageddon Day* renews the possibilities for thinking in and through what has too often been hastily dismissed since the mid-1980s as the degraded 'MTV-style' music clip.

NECSUS is far from acting alone as an academic journal in acknowledging this current 'moment' of the rise of the audiovisual essay.⁴ Clearly it is spreading in many directions at once – and this is all to the good. By tentatively circumscribing one spectrum or continuum of the field for the purposes of this section – with digital, found footage collage at one end and the film/media essay at the other – we hope to orient the thoughts and works of our contributors and readers toward those audiovisual possibilities that actively produce *knowledge* and ideas via the multiple paths of performative, material research.

***Found found found* by Dirk de Bruyn:**

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/84353101>

***Smells like Armageddon day – Dreamlike settings and magnified trash* by Laura Lammer:**

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/101239332>

Notes

1. See Lebow 2012, Corrigan 2011, and Rascaroli 2009, among others.
2. Godard 2014, p. xxxviii.
3. Miles 2014, p. 2.
4. *Cinema Journal* and *Media Commons* have sponsored [*in*] *Transition* (<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/>), which is in its third issue. One of that journal's editors, Catherine Grant, via the *REFRAME* research platform of University of Sussex, has spearheaded an invaluable web resource titled *The Audiovisual Essay* (<http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/>). The latter includes the proceedings of the conference Audiovisual Essay: Practice and Theory which was held in November 2013 in Frankfurt and organised by the present authors through Goethe University. These recent events and publications build upon previous special issues of *Frames* (Issue 1, 2012) on 'Film and Moving Image Studies Re-born Digital?' (<http://framescinemajournal.com/?issue=issue>) and the dossier in *Filmidee* (Issue 5, 2012) on 'Pratiche del videosaggio' (<http://www.filmidee.it/archive/34/category/144/category.aspx>). We should not forget the ongoing, vibrant focus upon audiovisual production in extra-academic, cinephilic endeavours including *Transit* (<http://cinentransit.com/>), *Press*

Play (<http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/>) at *Indiewire*, *Photogénie* (http://www.photogenie.be/photogenie_blog/), the Vimeo group *Audiovisualcy* (<https://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy>), and the online extras provided by *Sight & Sound* as well as movie-streaming enterprises such as *MUBI* (<https://mubi.com/notebook>), *Fandor* (<http://www.fandor.com/keyframe/category/daily>), and the 'Tan lejos, tan cerca' section of *Filmin* (<https://www.filmin.es/blog/tag/Tan+lejos%2C+tan+cerca>).

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