

The impersonal essay, or Montage as memory of the world

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Abstract

The audiovisual essay has been conventionally associated with the subjective and the personal. On the other hand, this introduction makes a case for the adoption of an 'impersonal' voice or viewpoint as a tactical response to the overvaluation of the self that pervades our current media economy.

Keywords: audiovisual essay, impersonal, memory, montage

By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible. – T.W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form'

The essay as form has adapted rather well to globalization. – Hito Steyerl, 'The Essay as Conformism? Some Notes on Global Image Economies'

What was heterodox in T.W. Adorno's age of the factory might no longer be so in our post-Fordist times. Hito Steyerl's call for self-inquiry, on the part of the audiovisual essayist and their viewers, is hard to set aside. Fragmentation, discontinuity, mobility – all traits of the essay as form – have been co-opted by an information economy that thrives on the 'compulsory manufactory of difference' or, rather, of variety, which is not the same thing.[1] Steyerl makes two interrelated points in this respect: the essay form has mutated so as to express the suppleness of neoliberal subjectivities and, concomitantly, to reproduce a 'superficiality', a 'flatness or depthlessness' that affects not only space but also time.[2] And yet, she maintains,

the essay form still holds critical capacity, which now emerges as ‘the potential to create different “visual bonds”’,[3] an expression she borrows from Dziga Vertov to refer to connections between people, images, sounds, and technologies that reach beyond the measure (and the ‘outside of measure’) of the market.[4]

Steyerl was writing a decade ago. Since then, alternative media economies have further intersected with mainstream ones; togetherness in dispersion has been further co-opted. But the turn in this process is not what many expected: if the rigidity of the industrial subject has not returned, the ‘pressure of identity’ lamented by Adorno has reemerged amid the suppleness of the post-industrial subject, though in pluralised forms; neoliberal subjectivities are less open to ‘be networked and coupled with almost everything else’.[5] This is far from an indictment of identity politics tout court, whose role has been too relevant and, at critical junctures, too productive of change to be addressed in a few lines. What is at stake in this context is a libidinal attachment to the self as producer/consumer of knowledge, beliefs, and lifestyles; an attachment that is experienced, and promoted, as a right to what is one’s own, in the sense of property. So Steyerl’s points remain valid to the very extent that they identify a ‘conformism’ of the essay form that pivots around the subject, the self – now in its networked version – as the locus of an ever-present expressivity and creativity.

The history of the essay and its critique of method is not uniform.[6] But the fact that, in cinema and media studies at least, the essay has straightforwardly been associated with the subjective and the reflective, if not with the personal and the ‘single authorial voice’ altogether, has not made things more difficult for the current system of value extraction.[7] Indeed, there is an irreducible gap between the subject (in its various inflections) and the individual; and speaking of the ‘I’ does not necessarily mean speaking of the self. Kaja Silverman makes this distinction, apropos of Jean-Luc Godard’s process of ‘authorial divestiture’ in ‘The Author as Receiver’, offering an alternative to the discourse of proprietary personhood.[8] Steyerl herself advocates tactics of ‘barter, theft or appropriation’[9] so as to counter principles of ownership and genealogy, to interrupt lines of transmission and exchange. Jean-Pierre Gorin (once Godard’s partner in the Dziga Vertov Group)

goes even further on behalf of a 'termite art' whose energy and 'unruliness' radically exceed the boundaries of the subject.[10] But one might be tempted to move in yet another direction, that of an impersonal subject, at once idiosyncratic and anonymous; less a subject than a concretion in the sensorial thickness and dispersed intelligence of the world.[11]

All the films gathered here – by Cauleen Smith, Deborah Stratman, Domietta Torlasco, Maha Maamoun, and Sara Fgaier – emerge at the borders of essayistic practice, between the art and film worlds and academia, and are often the result of collaborations.[12] They draw almost exclusively on archival footage (industrial, educational, and home movies), or preexisting still images (postcards). What distinguishes them is that they rework these materials by adopting an impersonal voice or viewpoint. The term 'impersonal' does not mark the return to the alleged objectivity of documentary, nor does it simply oppose itself to the autobiographical, the confessional, the diaristic. Instead, it signals the attempt to trouble the distinction between subject and object, according to which the workings of both vision and thought are often, if implicitly, understood. That such distinction still holds its place partially accounts for the tendency, quite diffuse in academic settings, to stage the encounter between the audiovisual essayist and their materials as a form of reading. The world, the past, the history of cinema are there to be read and the essayist does the reading. Editing is crucial to this process, and yet it remains external to the materials; it remains the operation of a subject who reads, a 'consciousness' now spread out across screens.[13]

The films in this selection attempt to embody and disseminate modes of relation – between people, images, sounds, technologies – for which there are no clear definitions or stable borders. They recognise that the world, including the world of archival images and sounds, has its own agency, even its own life. If they do what has been called 'performative research', they do so in an impersonal manner.[14] That is, they let the subject (maker or viewer) vanish as such and re-emerge as a configuration of sounds and images, without a proper name or a proper body. 'I' is there/here as an arrangement of matter, entangled with the world and the apparatus that is being employed to observe it. It is the world, not the subject, that is

performative; that rearranges, reconfigures itself in myriad ways. In this performative account, which owes much to Karen Barad's theory of matter and meaning, montage emerges as a mode of that 'cutting together/apart' through which matter – all matter, animate and inanimate – differentiates itself internally, without recourse to a transcendental operator.[15] As a material-discursive practice that 'matters', montage is immanent to the world and its density.

At the thematic level, this emphasis on the world as ongoing reconfiguration – as 'matter-ing' rather than matter – finds expression in the landscape, natural or artificial, devoid of human figures or populated with them, in black-and-white or in colour. The landscape has a duration; it exists in and changes through time; it is the subject of a memory that exceeds chronology and individuality. But this is just a general statement (or perhaps a statement on the generality of mattering) which each film questions, plays with, and reworks in its own distinctively impersonal manner. The first two films, Cauleen Smith's *Song for Earth and Folk* (2013) and Deborah Stratman's *Second Sighted* (2014) present themselves as creative 'systematisations', encyclopedias whose organisational principle undergoes subtle re-adjustments. They share an emphasis on the apocalyptic, the collapse or avalanche as abrupt and final reconfiguration of the world. However, they do so in complementary ways: if Smith privileges the ear/sound component and scoring, Stratman mobilises the eye/image component and mapping. Smith's film orchestrates a call and response exchange between 'Earth' and 'Folk', a rhythmic interaction that leaves no pause. Time cannot be stopped. Humans have gambled and lost. Yet, as impersonal as they are, the subjects of this final exchange are not neutral or homogeneous. Time is not simply time. The plundering of Africa and the exploitation of its people has set time out of joint, and the end of the world that is awaiting us has already occurred. Images from educational science films, ethnographic films, and nature documentaries alternate, relentlessly, along a line that has already been broken. But the influence of science fiction and Afrofuturism turn this line into a fold, and the film does not quite end. The awareness that 'this planet is our spaceship, and we die without it',[16] returns in Stratman's *Second Sighted*, which also creates a 'temporal universe' of its own by means of 'rhythm and pressure'.[17] Here the emphasis is on the incongruous powers of sight, its blindness and clairvoyance. Geometric figures (lines, arrows, curves) inscribe the earth, charting the

routes of urban transportation, maritime commerce, space exploration, while the city is on fire behind empty, cut-out eyes, and a lone woman waits on a Chicago metro platform.

The third and fourth pieces – my own *Parallax Dash* (2018) and Maha Maamoun's *Most Fabulous Place* (2008) – present a far less systematic approach, organising themselves as open 'collections', even family albums of sorts. Again, there is complementarity between them: I move by lateral displacement (one image next to the other), creating unforeseen alliances, while Maamoun proceeds by substitution (one postcard takes the place of another), foregrounding the logic of cultural consumption. In either case, there is no end, no avalanche, only ongoing sedimentation. *Parallax Dash* reassembles Italian home movies from the 1920s to the 1970s, privileging shots that display some kind of kinetic activity (from mountain excursions to political rallies) and reworking their relation by means of a soft montage.[18] This split screen technique drives the movement of the unknown actors into the crevices, the interstices of the image, producing a sense of errancy through time – with no center and no end – and a subject that was never quite there, a community that can only be imagined. Maamoun made *Most Fabulous Place* as she was 'preparing for, researching, and thinking about *Domestic Tourism II*' (2009), a film that re-edits scenes from Egyptian films with the pyramids as background. In the 'scenario', large colour postcards of that single icon are being flipped through to a sampling of film dialogues. Only the hands and the postcards are in clear view, and yet the rest of the body can be felt and not simply glimpsed. It is a body touched by abstraction, not superseded by it. One wonders whether the mass-produced images and sounds have taken over all layers of memory, or whether these hands, contingent and yet anonymous, are preparing for writing history otherwise.

The fifth piece, Sara Fgaier's *Gli anni* (The Years, 2018), sets this double alignment off balance by introducing a female voiceover that 'speaks' excerpts from Annie Ernaux's homonymous novel (some are spoken verbatim, others in a free form). This voice touches, makes contact with, at times 'pricks' the images without quite reading them; if anything, it is read back by the images it is supposed to read, in a heretical instantiation of André Bazin's 'horizontal montage'.[19] The oscillation between the pronouns 'I' and 'she', together with intermittent references to other

parties (the husband, the relatives, the dead), concur to sketch a landscape – of memory, affect, imagination – that simultaneously belongs to ‘someone’ and to a multitude of ghosts. This is also the landscape of cinema, of the archive as reinvention of a vanishing world:

All the images will disappear, all the twilight images of the early years, images from dreams in which the dead relatives come to life...They will vanish all at the same time. And one day we'll appear in our children's memories, among their grandchildren and people not yet born.[20]

It remains uncertain whether these words, spoken over the images of children in carnival costumes, are telling the history of cinema or the story of a life.

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Domietta Torlasco is a critical theorist, filmmaker, and Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature at Northwestern University. She is the author of three books on cinema's potential to reimagine histories and forms of life: *The Time of the Crime: Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Italian Film* (Stanford University Press, 2008), *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), and *The Rhythm of Images: Cinema Beyond Measure* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021). Torlasco's video essays explore questions of domestic labor, borders, surveillance, and debt. They have screened at national and international venues, including the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

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Notes

- [1] Schneider 2011, p. 22.
- [2] Jameson 1991.
- [3] Steyerl 2017, p. 278.

- [4] See Hardt & Negri 2001 on the difference between 'out of measure' and 'beyond measure'.
- [5] Steyerl 2017, p. 276.
- [6] On the difference between the French, English, and German traditions, see Chandler 2022.
- [7] Rascaroli 2017, p. 183.
- [8] Silverman 2001, p. 21
- [9] Steyerl 2017, p. 278.
- [10] Gorin 2017, p. 273. Here Gorin is, by his own admission, 'borrowing from Manny Farber, and borrowing wholesale'. See Farber 1998.
- [11] This idea is further developed in Torlasco 2022.
- [12] A few words on the (post-)production contexts: Smith's and Stratman's films were made for the CFA Media Mixer, a project through which, since 2012, the Chicago Films Archives has promoted collaborations between image and sound artists. (<https://chicagofilmarchives.org/>). Torlasco's piece was made for the International Media Mixer, a joint venture of CFA and Lab80, a film collective and archival center based in Bergamo, Italy (<https://www.lab80.it/>). Fgaier's film was produced in the context of the Re-framing Home Movies initiative, which provides the tools and training to approach home movie collections from different artistic perspectives and, in collaboration with several Italian film archives, opens these collections for reuse (<https://www.reframinghomemovies.it/>).
- [13] Adorno, who maintained the distinction of subject and object, would nonetheless write that 'the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it'. See Adorno 1984.
- [14] Grant 2016.
- [15] In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad highlights that matter is 'not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency'. See Barad 2007. The expression 'cutting together/apart' appears in Barad 2010. That the world is performative does not mean, at least in a scientific framework, that there are no subjects and objects. It means, rather, that they themselves emerge by virtue of a cut (the Bohrian cut) that contingently separates and relays them as part of the same phenomenon. On the other hand, one might argue that, in the case of aesthetic experimentation, the observation does not need to produce unambiguous results and can allow for the emergence of configurations beyond the subject and object binary.
- [16] Lacava 2020.
- [17] From an email exchange with the filmmaker in September 2022.
- [18] Farocki 2010.
- [19] See Bazin 2003, p. 44; in his review of Chris Marker's *Letter From Siberia* (1958), Bazin observes that horizontal montage interrupts the sliding forward of conventional editing so as to prioritize the lateral relation between words and images in the same shot. However, in Bazin's account, *Letter From Siberia* is an 'essay documented by film'.
- [20] This is a transcription of the English subtitles to the film.