

Towards an alternative history of the video essay: Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Cologne

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NECSUS (6) 2, Autumn 2017: 275–280

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/towards-an-alternative-history-of-the-video-essay-westdeutscher-rundfunk-cologne/>

Keywords: audiovisual essay, cinema, Germany, television, WDR, Westdeutscher Rundfunk

This dossier on audiovisual essays focuses on a trajectory in the history of the video essay that tends to be ignored in current discussions of the format. According to a well-known genealogical account, the video essay was born from the encounter of platforms like YouTube, social media, cinephilia 2.0, inexpensive DIY editing software, and the accessibility of films as data. If a historical (and thus: proto-digital) perspective is taken into account, it either conjures up canonical essayistic masters like Jean-Luc Godard or Chris Marker, or aspires to ennoble the genre as the legitimate successors of the found footage tradition in experimental cinema.

However, there are less glamorous sites where an investigation of cinema by its own means was pursued with enthusiasm and inventiveness. Film educational efforts (pursued most insistently in France since the 1960s) and experimentation on television are two of the currents that should play a more important role in the historiography of the video essay. One important center of activity in the Federal Republic of Germany was the film department of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in Cologne. Starting around 1970, commissioning editors such as Reinold Thiel, Wilfried Reichart, Werner Dütsch, Angelika Wittlich, Helmut Merker, and Georg Alexander produced and commissioned a variety of different productions that devised ways of combining images and sounds to address the aesthetics and history of cinema.

All three WDR examples featured in this dossier take us back to the mid-1970s. Two of them, Rainer Gansera's *Über zwei Filme von Peter Nestler* and Harun Farocki's *Über Song of Ceylon von Basil Wright*, were episodes of

the series *Telekritik*; the third, the 45-minute *Fritz Lang* made by Werner Düttsch is a reworked version of his 1974 program *The Heavy Dreams of Fritz Lang*. This is only a tiny selection of a vast body of work lying dormant in the vaults of the television archives. Werner Düttsch remembers that in the early days, the Filmredaktion commissioned one program each week in winter and one every 14 days in the summer, adding up to around 30-40 programs per year.[1]

To highlight television as a major catalyst in the history of videographic film studies aims at adding three arguments to today's discussion of the video essay:

(1) Hopefully, it can help to shift the focus from questions of individual authorship to questions of infrastructures and institutional frameworks.[2] Researching the history of these programs means becoming aware of the alliance between the WDR film department and the journal FILMKRITIK, but also of the importance of specific commissioning editors and editorial departments within the channel.

(2) There is an unfortunate tendency to identify film history – and thus: the potential source material of videographic film studies – with those films that are available in digital formats, be it on DVD or as mpg-files or via streaming. In a kind of digital amnesia, this means involuntarily wiping out the analog precursors. The media history of videographic film studies remains to be written; it would have to include the Steenbeck editing table, VHS tapes, television studios, DVD extras etc.

(3) The absence of television history from the debates around the video essay does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest. It rather results from the invisibility and difficulties of access to the treasures in the television archives. Against the comfort of clicking one's way through what is available online, it is a tedious and cumbersome endeavor to explore these treasures: one has to travel to the archives, to make appointments with complicated institutions, and to pay substantial fees to get the opportunity to screen historical programs. Without institutional backing and substantial funding, this is almost impossible to realise.

The consequence to be drawn from this is simple: this particular segment of television history, but also television history in general, needs to be more accessible to enter the historiography of digital practices. Since the programs in question were produced with public funding (the taxpayer's money), it is hard to understand why they should not be available to the public for non-commercial educational and research purposes. In a letter to Harun Farocki written in January 1976, German producer and commissioning editor Joachim von Mengershausen (co-producer of Wenders, Fassbinder, and the like), claims:

One should put a substantial effort into making the TV archives as public as public libraries, with all that this requires: adequate preservation, recording of origins and dates, etc. Hence, at least partially an expropriation of television, which should not be difficult to find political arguments for. [3]

A few words on background context. In Germany, culture and education are organised on the federal level of the 'Bundesländer'. The different areas of Germany have their specific regional 'third channels' under the umbrella channel ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland). These channels are complemented since 1963 by the ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen). Before the implementation of private television in the 1980s, ARD, ZDF, and the respective third programs were the only channels that existed. As a child and adolescent in the 1970s and 1980s it thus depended quite heavily on your location as to which kind of television program you were exposed and what kind of cinephile discoveries you could make on television. I can tell from my own experience that a retrospective of Jack Arnold Films in autumn and winter 1983 was a formative event – especially since it comprised 'Jack Arnold relates...', where the director, around 70 years old at the time, would explain the historic background of his films, the special effects for *The Creature from Black Lagoon*, etc.

Since WDR is the biggest amongst the third programs it had (and probably still has) a bigger budget at its disposal than Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR), Hessischer Rundfunk, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, and the like. Using their production budget to run the film department like a Cinemathèque, the WDR Filmredaktion organised retrospectives and accompanied them with analytic and contextual programs directed by Hartmut Bitomsky, Harun Farocki, Helmut Färber, Frieda Grafe, and Enno Patalas, to name only a few. Back then, in the 1970s, these programs were dubbed 'filmkundliche Sendungen' (roughly translated: film educational programs). Together with other cultural and educational content, they assured that public television fulfilled its educational mission (Bildungsauftrag) which was – and nominally still is – an integral part of their rationale as publically-funded agencies.[4]

Werner Dütsch, one of the key figures of the WDR Filmredaktion, recalls that this work was of particular importance for audiences remote from the major cities and their cinema repertoire.

In those days, since there were no VHS recorders, people asked for transcripts of the programs. So our office was always filled up with piles of manuscripts to send via

mail. And most of these went to cities with four digit postal codes – not the big cities, but small cities and villages. We found out that the people in the countryside were really hungry for culture. [5]

Investigating the WDR as an important precursor and initiator for what later became known as videographic film studies was one of the goals of the independent research project Kunst der Vermittlung in 2008 and 2009. The project was based in Berlin and conducted by Michael Baute, Stefan Pethke, Stefanie Schlüter, and myself. We interviewed protagonists from different fields like Jean Douchet, Alain Bergala, Peter Tscherkassky, Martin Arnold, Tag Gallagher, Bernard Eisenschitz, André S. Labarthe, and others; we compiled a filmography of this genre, and we edited 18 online dossiers built around the people, infrastructures, and topics.[6] First and foremost, we organised cinema screenings to present work from this context.

It was during this project that we became aware that, independent and mostly unaware of this history, something quite similar to the forms that we were interested in started to emerge and proliferate on the internet, in web-logs like Kevin B. Lee's Shooting Down Pictures, or Matt Zoller Seitz' House Next Door.

Apart from the historiographic interest in German television and its relevance to contemporary video essays, there is a larger research horizon of this topic. It is more than likely that similar histories as the one linked to WDR wait to be discovered in other countries. The specifically French combination between cinephilia, writing, and filmmaking offers a rich field to be explored. In fact, André S. Labarthe's and Janine Bazin's *Cinéastes de notre temps*, evoked emphatically by Raymond Bellour in his canonical essay on the 'unattainable text' in 1975, was one of the few models that the commissioning editors at WDR had in mind when they invented their methods of audiovisual criticism. French school television, the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA), founded in 1974, and later film educational activities by Jean Douchet, Alain Bergala, and others also provide fertile ground for a reconsideration of the contemporary video essay's past.

There is, I would argue, a strong need for a European perspective on this. Mapping the television history of videographic film studies requires one to take a close look at the BBC and Channel 4 in Great Britain, RAI in Italy, and – I am sure – many other innovative television channels in Spain, Portugal, and other countries. NECSUS seems the right place to express this vision.

Author

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Acknowledgements

This dossier benefits from the opportunity to screen some WDR programs at the Essay Film Festival 2017 in London. Thanks to Ricardo Matos Cabo, Laura Mulvey, Michael Temple, Matthew Anthony Barrington, Janet McCabe, and Maren Hobein (Goethe Institut London) for their generosity and help. I am also grateful to Angelika Wittlich, Werner Dütsch, Rainer Gansera, and Antje Ehmann, Harun Farocki's widow, for their support and the permission to present and contextualise these programs.

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- Selected WDR filmography: <http://www.kunst-der-vermittlung.de/filmografie/fernsehen-wdr/> (compiled by M. Baute).
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Notes

- [1] Werner Dütsch in conversation with Volker Pantenburg, Essay Film Festival 2017, London, Birkbeck Cinema, 25 March 2017.

- [2] This corresponds to the attention to contextual and institutional contexts that Jessica McGoff has called for recently. See McGoff, 'Text vs. Context: Understanding the Video Essay Landscape' in 4:3: <https://fourthreefilm.com/2017/02/text-vs-context-understanding-the-video-essay-landscape/>
- [3] Letter from Joachim von Mengershausen (WDR) to Harun Farocki, 26 January 1976, PDF on the website of the Harun Farocki Institut: [https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/HaF_Brief-von Mengershausen.pdf](https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/HaF_Brief-von-Mengershausen.pdf) (my translation; VP).
- [4] See Prinzler 1997.
- [5] Werner Dütsch in conversation with Volker Pantenburg, Essay Film Festival 2017, London, Birkbeck Cinema, 25 March 2017.
- [6] See the comprehensive website Kunst der Vermittlung: Aus den Archiven des Filmvermittelnden Films, which contains a lot of editorial material and an extensive filmography: www.kunst-der-vermittlung.de.