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## The form and technology of videographic cinema

Irina Trocan

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The surge of scholarly interest in the essay film has brought to light Theodor Adorno's analogy in *The Essay as Form* that is as fruitful as it is intuitive: 'The way the essay appropriates concepts can best be compared to the behavior of someone in a foreign country who is forced to speak its language instead of piecing it together out of its elements according to rules learned in school.'<sup>[1]</sup> Proficiently multilingual and adaptable, the essay form expands and develops outside of the institutionalised categories, like travelers unbound by dictionary definitions of the words they use – as Adorno puts it, dictionary meanings 'which are usually too narrow in relation to the changes that occur with changing contexts and too vague in relation to the unmistakable nuances that the context gives rise to in every individual case'. It follows that any attempt to soberly define the essay form – and the essay film – goes against the very qualities that provide the appeal of the essayistic.

The recent anthology on the topic *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology*, edited by Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams, has the considerable merit of admitting as much – fragmentation is preferable to (restrictive) unity, polyphony is the salutary alternative to critical dogma. Like Jonathan Rozenkrantz's *Videographic Cinema: An Archaeology of Electronic Images and Imaginaries*, which I will discuss further below, it approaches the central subject from various angles, often unpredictably. The only way to provide an unperishable description of the essay film is going 'beyond' it and avoiding essentialist redundancy.

Eclecticism has always been widely characteristic of films, and especially of cinema's much younger sibling, the digitally processed moving image. To take only one case study in *Beyond the Essay Film*, Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog* – it incorporates and co-opts music and performance art and would be impossible to discuss as a pure specimen of the seventh art. Adding to film practice's mutability is its dependence on technology,

starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century objectif – re-producing the reality in front of the camera without intervention of the human hand – to the contemporary computational possibilities and automated generation and editing which characterise digitally altered and distributed audiovisual content. This evolution not only changes the production practices of film but, as many scholars would argue, its ontology as well. Thus, setting an ultimate, unique goal for the essay film – be it aesthetic, political, pragmatic – is limited, albeit a workable defense tactic for its lack of (conventional) coherence and its frequent (justified) difficulty when compared to the narrative and documentary mainstream. The anthology's editors, following Ross Gibson, emphasise this historical dependence on cultural context: even in the case of Michel de Montaigne, the essay's 16<sup>th</sup> century father figure, 'the very birth of subjectivity as a cultural and historical phenomenon is predicated on specific literary ways of shaping and expressing it' (p. 13).

*Beyond the Essay Film* is suitably and refreshingly centrifugal. It collects the viewpoints of several writers, scholars, and practitioners, with porous boundaries between the respective categories. Famed scholar Thomas Elsaesser gives an in-depth account of the production of his first (and last) television film and its biographical and theoretical interconnectedness to the Elsaesser we know. Prolific audiovisual essayists Cristina Álvarez López & Adrian Martin engage in the most sustained critical polemic in the volume with various circumscriptions of audiovisual essays. Theoretical references range from Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* and Mikhail Epstein's subsequent readings of Bakhtin, to Jacques Rancière's concept of cinema's 'thwarted fable', Raymond Bellour's seminal 1975 essay 'Unattainable Text' (which Bellour himself revisited in the light of post-cinematic developments), to neurologist Benjamin Libet's 'conscious mental field' – where he posits, crucially, that senses mobilise memory in humans' continuous response to their environment.

The films under scrutiny are contemporary – whether by veteran filmmakers like Patricio Guzmán's *The Pearl Button* (2015) or more recent luminaries like Pietro Marcello and Deborah Stratman – to canonical (since it is basically impossible to grasp essay filmmaking without the one-man practice exhaustion of Chris Marker), and case studies often extend to installations and audiovisual apps (Vine being the most format-restrictive). Approaches vary from autobiographical (hardly idiosyncratic or ill-suited in describing an often confessional genre and a practice undergoing constant innovation, whose making-of and reception are often harder to intuit than in more traditional practices) to pedagogical (Vassilieva revisits Russian montage theory and practice of the 1920s and 1930s, having in mind their usefulness one century later; Williams proposes the concept of hauntology as the key that unlocks *Heart of a Dog's* slippery coherence).

These are, of course, more buzzwords and categories that indicate the value and enjoyment of the book without quite explaining it. Reading through the volume often feels like overhearing a think tank among some of the essay film's foremost enthusiasts, grasping recent developments and combatting oversimplified and conservative readings. Take Álvarez López & Martin's polemic with Luka Arsenjuk, on what the latter perceives as the misleading utopia of films' attainability in their digital form, as '[a]ny reflexive movement namely necessarily implies a certain doubling, division, splitting, heterogeneity' (p. 59). In short, videographic criticism's pretense to quote the films it discusses is destined to fall short of this ambition – a fair reminder, especially in the face of omnipresent euphoric fan compilations that non-professional viewers often equate with the audiovisual essay form in its entirety. However, Álvarez López & Martin are understandably skeptical of this fetishisation of impossibility and disruption, which leads Arsenjuk to view Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* ('a single, culturally approved, auteur masterpiece standing alone in the field', as Álvarez López & Martin describe it) as the supreme example of audiovisual essays' possibility. In turn, Álvarez López & Martin caution that it might be 'an eccentric and quite unrepeatable model to which to hold all current efforts in audiovisuality' (p. 60). Catherine Grant's description of her early videographic experiments – and the implicit change in perspective from traditional, word-based scholarship – completes the picture of how 'attaining' the audiovisual text through digital editing software is still a notably indirect process (mediated by autobiographical factors, by generalised viewing habits, by digital editing tools), and most audiovisual essayists acknowledge it as such.

In the midst of such flexibility and fluidity of formal means and thematic ends, it is worth asking: are generic distinctions still valid, beyond the sometimes rather bureaucratic curatorial divisions separating, for instance, essay films from fiction or documentaries? Upon careful consideration, the answer seems to still be yes. For instance, Deborah Stratman's *Illinois Parables* (2016) is comprehensible through the viewing reflexes trained by pedagogic historical documentaries, even if it has so little in common with the form – for example, it resists the centrality of the human figure and the optimistic outlook on a budding civilisation. In another amusing instance, film professor Richard Misek narrates how he accidentally wrote himself into a fictional character in making *Rohmer in Paris* (2013), while intending to make an essay film with an imagined commentator (in the tradition of Chris Marker's numerous personae) and discovering that audiences viewed it as a straightforward documentary, whose narrator, as traditional practice would have it, must be sincere.

Finally, a major and often overlooked tendency in the essay film addressed by the volume is its posthuman stance – it approximates the vantage point of someone or something, but that certain something might be non-human. The predominance of animal characters in Pietro Marcello's films, the majestic landscape in Stratman's work, *The Pearl Button's* loyalty to the water motif sometimes to the detriment of Pinochet's crimes against humanity might all be confounding on first viewing, but when taken together they attest to a shared effort. As trans-disciplinary Anthropocene scholarship has amply proved that it is impossible to separate nature and (human) culture, cultural agents might naturally follow its lead. Katrin Pesch and Belinda Smaill both evoke to this end the writings of Donna Haraway and others interrogating 'human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics'. [2]

In nearly half a century since the publication of Bellour's *Unattainable Text*, beside the undying reverence for 1960s essay filmmaking, much seems to have radically transformed: essay films have partly migrated to visual arts spaces (a development which Bellour himself now reads as the final frontier of unattainability). Videographic criticism proliferated far beyond the 1970s horizon, where the French television series *Cinéastes de notre temps* seemed peerless. Digital manipulability allows for a more hands-on engagement with cinema, thus rendering the essay – especially in videographic practitioners' circles – conveniently prophetic of what film criticism might one day achieve. The perceived political potential of found footage has climbed to its apex and back down again. The one constant feature of the essay film, to which this volume does justice, is its persistent ability to surprise us. While Vassilieva & Williams acknowledge in their overview that the essay film depends on hardware as much as it does on aesthetic thought – meaning that it 'has to be considered in relation to changing cinematic technologies and techniques', such as handheld cameras and digital filmmaking processes – *Beyond the Essay Film* ultimately anthologises such a variety of angles that the technological thread is often unnoticeable in the fiber of the book. Jonathan Rozenkrantz's *Videographic Cinema: An Archaeology of Electronic Images and Imaginaries*, by contrast, examines video technology in its intersections at different stages of development with theatrical cinema, narrowing down the focus to the rapid evolution and obsolescence of one single audiovisual medium.

*Videographic Cinema* progresses through both in-depth case studies and abstract-association leaps. It chronicles the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century euphoria of live transmission; the viewing autonomy afforded by videotape; the 'nightmares of video's home invasion' brought on by the proliferation of VCRs and their dissolution of viewer's submissiveness

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to broadcasting; and the late-century analogue nostalgia enabled by the medium's decline. Additionally, throughout the decades of video's adoption in homes as well as prominent institutions, it reveals the implicit connotations of surveillance and social control inherent in the hierarchy between the viewed subject and the viewer.

Rozenkrantz persuasively argues that one can glean every era's outlook on video through cinema's appropriation of video technology (complete with solving, or willfully neglecting, the glitches – most frequently, roll bars – inherent in shooting an electronic screen with a film camera). He samples omnivorously, from John Frankenheimer (*Seven Days in May*, 1964), Elia Kazan (*A Face in the Crowd*, 1957), Sidney Lumet (*The Anderson Tapes*, 1971), to George Lucas (*Electronic Labyrinth* and its feature-length expansion *THX 1138*, 1967-1971), to group only United States directors in this list – though even among US luminaries, it is probably not the most famous film of the former three, and definitely not the most famous films of the latter. Among case studies is the lesser-known, but highly relevant *Anti-Clock* (1979) by Jane Arden & Jack Bond, its 'designation as a theatrical feature was more or less only revealed by its feature film length' (p. 113), recounting the nightmarish invasion of video of the very private realm of personal memory.

Completing the bigger picture of what video has meant for successive eras are extracinemantic examples, for instance the 1948-inaugurated *Candid Camera* format, which beside fully earned skepticism and backlash nevertheless seduced prominent supporters. As Michael McKenna notes, the show 'found vocal pockets of interest and support in academia, particularly in the social sciences' (McKenna quoted in Rozenkrantz, p. 80), prefiguring the reception of reality TV. Perhaps most unexpectedly, Rozenkrantz explores to a fair extent video's uses in psychiatric therapy, such as the 'Interpersonal Process Recall', to suggest how this mediation adds to an already codified doctor-patient relationship:

As soon as a videotaped 'interview' is over, both 'client' and 'counsellor' are taken to separate dark viewing rooms where they are simultaneously subjected to severe self-confrontation under the firm guidance of their designated 'interrogator' – and adjacent written accounts note that an 'efficient' interrogator was an aggressive one.

Perhaps the book's greatest merit is its caution against flattening the intricate and rapidly morphing second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through a clean-cut retrospective analysis. Noting that video therapy emerged 'at a moment when progressive ideals swept through social institutions steeped in repressive techniques', Rozenkrantz warns

that video-wielding ‘artists and psychiatrists cannot easily be divided into two ideological camps: one progressive, critical towards repressive uses of audiovisual media, the other merely feigning a progressive stance to promote repression’ (p. 116).

Similar attention is given to the pure graphic impact of a video screen setup, for instance in Joseph Sargent’s *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970) and *THX 1138*, where it might inadvertently illustrate Deleuze’s term of the ‘dividual’. Deleuze argues that in societies of control, power exerts itself not through the distribution of individuals and masses within institutional spaces (Foucault’s disciplinary society), but through the distribution of information among entities that can no longer be considered as either.

We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become ‘dividuals’, and masses [have become] samples, data, markets, or ‘banks’. The concept of the dividual subverts the idealized integrity of the individual (as ‘indivisible’). In our age of CGI, it is easy to imagine spectacular visualizations of his notion: the individual dissolving into one element in a matrix of digital code rendered architectural. But in the 1960s, the videographic multiplication of a character, in the eyes of a Colossus or the anonymous apparatus that controls the world of *THX 1138*, evokes something similar. (pp. 63-64)

Fittingly for its non-linear approach, *Videographic Cinema* draws on media archeology as a methodological toolkit and attempts to clarify its usefulness for an examination of the feedback loop between technology and discourse. As Rozenkrantz patiently notes, Michel Foucault and Friedrich Kittler constitute two key sources of inspiration, sometimes viewed as antithetical: Kittler as the technological determinist, at odds with the Foucauldian archaeology of knowledge that ‘remains within the dimensions of discourse’ (pp. 16-18), though a closer reading might reveal a much slighter gap. Foucault’s relevance to media studies is primarily in his description of the Panopticon as an ‘optic-architectural prison model’ whose disciplinary efficiency relies on the power of the unencumbered gaze. Later, Thomas Mathiesen updated the concept to the ‘synoptic’ model where ‘modern mass media allow the many to watch the few’ (p. 56), while photography and video’s unfluctuating representation of the subject can be seen as leading to ‘autopticism’, the possibility of scrutinising and critiquing one’s own image as detached from oneself (an early example cited is Floyd Cornelson’s 1958 experiment, when he would confront psychiatric patients with their own photograph, eliciting strong reactions).

Another facet of *Videographic Cinema*’s media archaeology is its interest in imaginary media, chiefly the violence-inducing video signal in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983) and what Rozenkrantz names the ‘mnemopticon’ of *Anti-Clock*: ‘this apparatus –

which [...] so clearly constitutes an extension of the autoptic logic into memory – involves dual monitors (and presumably a camera), making the patient watch his own wired face on one monitor, while his mental images emerge on the other'. While fictional, these technological contraptions are based on actual conditions – not to mention real techno-phobia – in the world. Interestingly, *Anti-Clock's* notion of applying a threatening level of scrutiny to memory contrasts with Benjamin Libet's representation of the 'conscious mental field', a concept also evoked in *Beyond the Essay Film*. It is the static, evidentiary flipside of Libet's 'crucial contention [...] that the inspection occurs within a field of present stimuli at the same time that retrospection is drawing on a field of memory, even as each specified remembrance tends to try to play out as a sequential line of event'.[3]

While the anxiety induced by exploitative television formats behind the fictional apparatus of, say, Bertrand Tavernier's *La mort en direct/Death Watch* (1980) is more diffuse, Rozenkrantz convincingly argues that *Videodrome* is a literalisation of censors' apocalyptic scenarios. A piece on 'video nasties' in the Canadian press that roughly coincides with the release of *Videodrome* reports on a gathering of 'behavioural scientists, film critics and censors from eleven countries' to discuss video regulation measures (p. 144); this congress echoed fears across prosperous societies that decentralised audiovisual content, by swerving from traditional institutions in charge with maintaining social order and norms of respectability, poses an unaccountable threat to the viewer.

A relatively short-lived technology sandwiched between the hegemony of film stock and the boom of digital media, video allows the author to chronicle its evocation from the early 1970s 'futurity effect' it enabled to the nostalgic cry for analogue days, for instance in *Kung Fury* (David Sandberg, 2015), where video aesthetics suggest 'the paradoxical sentiment of pleasurable frustration' (p. 162), for instance in digitally reenacted tape defects:

Blocking out climactic moments of action, these analogue errors mirror the film's ironic recuperation of the Power Glove. What would have been a frustrating malfunction in the VHS era now turns into a playful signifier of the same; an original loss of entertainment value returns as nostalgic surplus. (p. 162)

Rozenkrantz's book itself gracefully benefits from video-specific replayability, best read with the option of skipping back to a previous chapter to let the analogies flesh out. For instance, let us reconsider the author's initial suggestion of a tidy axis between two

terminological poles, “[e]mergence”, [which] designates an early period (late 1950s to early 1980s) in which videographic cinema emerged though prospective imaginaries of surveillance and control’ and “[r]emanence”, [...] a later, albeit partly overlapping, period (early 1970s to mid-2010s) in which cinema came to rediscover video as a recording medium, thus bending the imaginary trajectories backwards towards retrospective examinations of video as memory and history’ (p. 35). Even considering the polysemous/multidisciplinary latter term (its appropriateness to describing videotape magnetism, beside retrospection), the initial opposition seems an oversimplification of what is explored ahead.

Media have often been taken for models of the mind, either by artists and theorists, or by institutions employing them: whether they are national studios building national identities, commercial television or, as Rozenkrantz notes, ‘mental hospitals and medical schools’ that employ video. While avoiding essentialist definitions, both *Beyond the Essay Film* and *Videographic Cinema* disentangle various connections that earned the respective forms’ cultural role and their persistence.

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## Notes

- [1] Alter & Corrigan 2017, p. 70.
- [2] Haraway 2016, p. 30.
- [3] Recalled by Gibson in Vassilieva & Williams, p. 116