



# The *Essay Film* After Fact and Fiction

NORA M. ALTER

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THE ESSAY FILM  
AFTER FACT  
AND FICTION

FILM AND CULTURE SERIES

FILM AND CULTURE

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NORA M. ALTER

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FOR ARIELLE AND ZOË



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THE ESSAY FILM  
AFTER FACT  
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FIGURE 0.1 Alexander Kluge, *News From Ideological Antiquity*, 2008.

## INTRODUCTION

Upon entering the dark exhibition room in which John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea* (2015) is installed, the spectator is confronted by three large screens. The images that flow from the screens engulf and threaten to overwhelm the visitor because of the shallow field of vision in the narrow room. The overall apparatus, together with breathtaking shots of crashing waves, churning surf, and roiling seas, places the spectator in a contemplative role. The installation's surround sound system completes the immersive experience. Porpoises diving elegantly break the ocean's surface, as do breaching blue whales, a polar bear paddling between ice floes, a chugging fishing vessel, and an arching harpoon. Rifle shots and the eerie cry of hunted whales haunt the soundtrack. The disjuncture between the sublimely aesthetic imagery and the terrible sounds and subject matter amplifies the spectator's sense of unease. The forty-eight-minute looped film is subtitled "Oblique Tales of the Aquatic Sublime."

Many of the stories interwoven in *Vertigo Sea's* maelstrom of astonishing images and sounds touch on the theme of migration. The narrative organization does not follow normative rules of time or place. Seemingly disparate fragments are combined like so much flotsam and jetsam, generating perplexing thematic correspondences and visual juxtapositions. Early-twentieth-century whale hunts are brought together with the centuries-long history of the forced movement of enslaved people from Africa,



and the latter is intertwined with the contemporary plight of migrants who risk everything to cross large bodies of water in search of a better world. As an age-old medium for transportation, the sea in Akomfrah's film at once connotes hope and despair.

"Vertigo" refers to the sense of losing one's balance, experiencing dizziness or the fear of falling. It is the feeling produced when contemplating a problem or condition too large to fathom. In Akomfrah's film, vertigo suggests the anxiety of being caught in the whirlpool of historical memory where barbaric currents of violence swirl. By definition, "oblique tales" are not straightforward; their comprehension requires the spectator to shift perspective. They are delivered as visual, aural, spatial, and temporal fragments. Their interconnections or elective affinities are tenuous at best. Side by side and one after another in *Vertigo Sea*, kaleidoscopic configurations of images and sounds appear: nuclear test explosions on faraway islands, animals suffering the horrific effects of overexposure to radiation, the slaughter of polar bears. At one point a story is told of a baby tossed off a slave ship into the sea for the crime of crying too much. The narrator pauses and directs a question to no one in particular over shots of black corpses washing up on a beach: "Why do I speak of one child when we have heard of many hundreds of men cast into the sea?" Intertitles are then superimposed on a navy blue screen: "The way of killing man and beast is the same. Algiers, 1956"; "With her South China Sea eyes, 1978"; "Memory does not stamp his own coin. Argentina 1974." On the soundtrack, a clock ticks like a timer on a bomb about to explode.

A sense of being unmoored, detached, lost, usually accompanies vertigo. *Vertigo Sea* opens with an image of an old sailing vessel shot from above and appearing exceptionally small and barely significant in the vast sea. Underwater sequences and images of a blue sky are projected onto the other two screens. A contemporary newscaster reports the recent accident of a boat carrying migrants. Waves crash as details of the disaster unfold, including the information that few on board knew how to swim; apparently the captain abandoned his human cargo and made it safely to shore. The voice of a man murmuring, "Oh Jesus save me, oh Jesus save me" overlaps that of the reporter. The traumatized plea echoes metonymically across centuries as the sea is cast as a watery grave that has swallowed the bodies of many souls and regurgitated some on idyllic beaches. Beauty and horror are brought together in a complex constellation.

As with the twist of a kaleidoscope, things change again. Magnificent images of the ocean roiling give way to a depopulated landscape overlooking a bay. Relics of a colonial habitat clutter the scene. By the water are hundreds of ticking clocks. A surrealistic cluster of objects, including a baby carriage, an umbrella, period furniture, and a dead deer hung upside down between two poles, rest on the grass in the foreground. The figure of a man in bourgeois attire appears on the beach. A woman joins him. The two do not interact as they slowly wander through the bleak natural landscape. A voice-over reads passages loosely concerning a couple's estrangement. The text is from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as heard in a famous British audiobook series. Like the high production quality of the images, the narrated passages on the audio recordings are nothing but professional. Save for the bizarre tableau just described and a curious scene of a man in seventeenth-century noble attire, most of the visual sequences in *Vertigo Sea* derive from found footage. Clips from spectacular nature films, early documentaries of ocean expeditions, and accounts of arctic hunting and open-sea whaling are juxtaposed with anonymous still photographs of enslaved people and of individuals "disappeared" by savage regimes. Akomfrah dismantles sequences of prerecorded aural and visual material and reassembles them in a series of oblique tales. The final narrative is neither linear nor singular; rather, it is assembled from a vast array of fragments and shards. Together with its triple and overlapping soundtrack, the spectator must look askance and choose visual and aural paths to follow to take it in.

*Vertigo Sea* was produced for the 2015 Venice Biennale, where it was first exhibited. How might one classify such a production? It exceeds the category of nonfiction, but it is certainly not fiction—or at least not entirely. It also exceeds the cinematic apparatus. The context of its screening places it in the field of art. Its installation is almost sculptural; the immersive experience produced by the powerful soundtrack and images on the three screens shares similarities with the effect of Richard Serra's large-scale steel objects, or Olafur Eliasson's sublime installations. But it is not comfortably art either. The exhibition catalog identifies it as film. And what should one make of the interplay of the three screens? How do we understand the entangled narratives and mixed layers of images and sounds? What do productions like this do to conventional notions of montage? I argue that works such as *Vertigo Sea* are essay

films, a genre of nonfiction filmmaking that is neither purely fiction, nor documentary, nor art film, but incorporates aspects of all of these modes.<sup>1</sup> Such a multilayered and complicated filmic work would have been rare to find in an art context in the previous century. However, the essay film has proliferated in the art exhibition circuit since the 2000s. This recent interest led the 2015 Biennale to screen six decades of these films made by Chris Marker, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Alexander Kluge, Harun Farocki, Chantal Akerman, Isaac Julien, and Steve McQueen.

New genres, explains Alastair Fowler, are apprehended “only from a subsequent perspective. This retrospective critical insight regroups individual works, and sees them now as beginning a new genre, now anticipating it, now differing in kind.”<sup>2</sup> As with the official designation of Duncan Campbell’s highly touted *It for Others*, a 16 mm film transferred to video made for the 2013 Venice Biennale, the appellation “essay film” is today commonly used to refer to moving image productions that might earlier have been described as either documentary or art film. This has prompted artists such as Hito Steyerl, who works at the intersection of art and film, to ask: “Has the essay become a dominant form of narrative in times of post-Fordist globalization?”<sup>3</sup> I will return to the issue of the relation between the essay film and globalization in a moment, but for now allow me to emphasize the growing acceptance of the term for many filmmakers who work in nonfiction modes. I see this phenomenon as an articulation of something that has long been present but only recently named. My thesis, in brief, is that essay films have proliferated since the 1920s, if not earlier, and have often been accompanied by their theorization. The genre emerged from disparate traditions of early filmmaking, each with its discrete procedures. These traditions shifted and overlapped, and a new genre resulted from the intricate mixture. However, it has only become intelligible in the twenty-first century. Until recently, it was conventionally ordered with documentary, and occasionally with art film. Identifying new genres has never been easy because they continuously undergo metamorphoses. But the contemporary resonance and currency of some of the formal characteristics of essay films—their indeterminacy, hybridity, openness, playfulness—has led to the naming of the genre. My goal is to trace the long history and various transmutations of the essay film and to address its present-day ramifications.

The twenty-first-century articulation of the audiovisual essay has been accompanied by a shift in the apparatuses of nonfiction as well as art filmmaking. Traditional nonfiction filmmakers now often project their work in galleries and museums around the world, and artists increasingly exhibit their work at film festivals and cinemas. The disciplinary boundaries have blurred. What is this labile form that migrates so readily across conventions, institutions, and nations? Most accounts of the essay film to date have been partial at best.<sup>4</sup> The full spectrum of work in this genre, including its historic roots, has yet to be properly addressed. *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* charts the uneven course of the newly named genre as it has developed over the years. The journey it follows is marked by discontinuities, eruptions, ellipses, and migrations across time and space. My account concentrates on relating and coordinating the constellations of the essay film to each other dialogically. It springs from the conviction that it is time to understand the genre in all of its historical and theoretical complexity.

### “FILMED PHILOSOPHY”

French film theorist and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc asserted in 1948 that if René Descartes were to write his *Discours* today it would take the form of a 16 mm essay film.<sup>5</sup> This notion of the essay film as “filmed philosophy” has proliferated over the past two decades. The genre has come to be recognized as an in-between form that moves freely from fiction to nonfiction, a neutralizing zone where fiction is unfictionalized. I refer to this zone as the essay film *after* fact and fiction. It is part documentary and part invention, made as much for television or cinema viewing as for gallery or museum exhibition.

The form of the essay film is characteristically unpredictable because it does not follow conventional rules. This pertains not only to material form, such as visual and aural components, but also to aesthetic form and narrative elements. Moreover, essay films are both inspired by and produce critical thought. They constitute part of a body of experimental films that Edward Small refers to as “direct theory.”<sup>6</sup> Many essay filmmakers are trained in the humanities and are experts in philosophy, psychoanalysis,

art history, cultural studies, or media archaeology. In addition, much like its literary predecessor, the written essay, the essay film poaches from other disciplines as it transgresses the conceptual and formal norms of its proper medium. It also performs its own criticism recursively, which creates an additional challenge for scholars because the films appear to have already done the critical work of deep textual analysis. These factors have made the essay film a confounding object for much film criticism and theory.

Along with being interdisciplinary, essay films tend to be international. Many of the genre's practitioners move between cultures, negotiating multiple identities and subject positions. As a transnational genre, the essay film provides filmmakers with a way to escape the symbolic circuits inherent in their national cultures and connect with a broader social and political world. The genre operates in the mediating space between national and transnational contexts, challenging such distinctions. But far from being affirmative, essay films tend to introduce new facets of topical issues, and many develop potent kinds of critique. Within their in-between space, struggles of all sorts are refracted, diluted, merged, and transformed according to a broad range of filmic and artistic techniques.

Because essay films flourish in sectors of independent cinema and in the field of art, they exceed a number of traditional filmic conventions. Producers include not only feature directors and documentarians but also avant-garde filmmakers and artists. The films themselves do not follow a clear narrative trajectory and often offer their own reflexive criticism by putting film history in dialogue with contemporary critical theory. Like the written essay, its cinematic equivalent is positioned somewhere in relation to but separate from the more stable genres of its medium, and its perpetual modulation problematizes categories of representation.

Reasons for the recent proliferation of essay films are multiple and include the broad accessibility of digital cameras and editing systems that have allowed creative individuals with little or no training and limited financial means to become filmmakers. New media platforms for exhibition and distribution, such as YouTube and Vimeo, have popularized the genre and made it possible for producers to reach unprecedented numbers of viewers. Another determinant has been the more general shift in recent decades away from literary and toward visual culture. The essay film has come to perform the critical function of its written counterpart.

How might an audiovisual essay be defined? I delineate it in general terms as an essentially hybrid genre that borrows key techniques from artistic representations to prompt the spectator to shift her or his conceptual vantage point. The modulation is so frequent that one would expect it progressively to loosen its status as a genre altogether. But it has been practiced for many years without any such result. When successful, the cognitive anamorphosis the genre puts into play enables the spectator to glean otherwise elusive meanings. Essay films perform a kind of estrangement. They draw the spectator into an intricate process whereby the perspective of the filmmaker is folded onto the spectator's own in the production of signification. The meaning generated is not only relational but also open-ended, an area of possibility where the spectator plays an ever-greater role. Unlike the relatively clear line of argumentation developed in documentary productions, the essay film's order calls into question the very possibility of a single narrative logic or perspective.

The rationale underlying the generation of essay films varies, as do the degrees and conditions of subjective agency actualized by the genre. In contradistinction to most documentary films, in which a relatively clear line of argumentation is developed, the essay film produces multiple vantage points and puts into question the very possibility of a single narrative logic or perspective. This pulls the spectators into the film because it requires them to invest their meaning based on their relation with the signifying elements or narratives. Yet essay films are more narrative than art films, and their effort to communicate exceeds the reflexive dimension of the artistic avant-garde. By separating the essay film from the genres of documentary and art film, and extending the concept of anamorphosis to filmic production, *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* tracks the emergence and development of a genre that has altered the shape of filmmaking in fundamental ways.

## THE LITERARY-PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

Certain formulations of the literary essay also pertain to the essay film. "To essay" means "to assay," "to weigh," as well as "to attempt," suggesting an open-ended, evaluative search. The verb is also linked via the Latin

*ex-agere* to *agens*, referring to the problem of human agency. Current use of the word *essay* as a distinct genre of writing can be traced to the sixteenth-century social critic and philosopher Michel de Montaigne, whose *Essais* (1580) exerted a deep influence on the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and critical writing in general. By “essay” Montaigne meant the testing of ideas, of his own subjectivity (slyly qualified as “the most frivolous of topics”), and of society. Montaigne considered the essay to be a wide-ranging form of cognitive perambulation that reflects upon fundamental questions of the human condition, including overlaps between “fact” and “fiction” and their consequences for social order. Many consider Montaigne’s text as the generator of the self-reflective, highly subjective and hybrid genre between fiction and non-fiction, literature and philosophy, that today goes by the name essay. The essay’s weapons are humor, irony, satire, and paradox; its atmosphere is contradiction and the collision of opposites.

Following Montaigne innumerable essayists have practiced and honed this mode of writing. When discussing the genre of the essay film, theorists cite the writings of a relatively small number of authors, including Theodor W. Adorno, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Max Bense, Aldous Huxley, Georg Lukács, Siegfried Kracauer, Robert Musil, and Jean Starobinski. Essay filmmakers, too, evoke these writers according to the problem they wish to address. Those interested in probing personal subjectivity and constructions of the self tend to turn to the essays of Montaigne and Starobinski; those who seek to draw a connection between form and expression often cite Lukács, Adorno, or Barthes. Benjamin and Kracauer are sources for those interested in history and memory and their technological translations, and Bense is evoked as a proponent of the notion of the essay as an experimental form of critique that is imbued with an ethical dimension.

The German language essay has been a particular touchstone for many European and American film essayists from the 1960s to the present day. Lukács’s “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” (1910), Bense’s “On the Essay and Its Prose” (1947), and Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” (1954) are considered foundational texts.<sup>7</sup> In Germany the written essay was initially a problematic genre and regarded as a minor kind of writing, a frivolous exploration of form that could sustain neither the deep thought of philosophy nor the creative impulse of literature. In contrast, in the French and

Anglo-Saxon traditions, which cited the works of Montaigne and Francis Bacon, the importance of the essay was widely recognized.

The evolution of the essay film is closely linked to the twentieth-century German essay tradition in a number of ways. Many essay films produced in disparate national contexts and languages over the past half-century incorporate, either by direct citation or visual reference, the words, theories, and critical methods of Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht, Lukács, and Kra-cauer. Essay filmmakers mediate the writings of these authors not only from one language to another but also from literary to visual form, often quoting directly from their texts. The popularity of German language essays is in no small part due to the proliferation of interest from the 1970s onward in the nexus of art and politics, as well as to a substantial body of secondary work devoted to the writers just listed.<sup>8</sup> This has secured the cultural and intellectual position of these authors in several disparate fields and disciplines, ranging from art and art history to visual and cultural studies, as well as philosophy and film. Moreover, since the 1990s, German language publications, conferences, and film series have been at the forefront of historicizing and theorizing the essay film. Beginning with Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wolff's invaluable *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen* ("Writing images speak," 1991), numerous collected volumes and special journal issues, often the result of symposia and workshops, have focused on the essay film.<sup>9</sup> Many of these have appeared in bilingual (German and English) editions, thereby increasing international accessibility and the cross-pollination of ideas.

The essay has a unique status in twentieth-century German thought as the genre for political critique. As Peter Uwe Hohendahl asserts, in Germany the essay form "defines the intellectual." Accordingly, authors who seek to intervene in the public sphere where "aesthetic criticism becomes the core of intellectual activity" adopt the essay form. Hohendahl notes that "the essay encourages the vital process of self-reflection that the New Class [part of an intellectual public sphere] needs to fulfill its critical cultural and social function," and concludes that "the pluralism of conflicting voices [within the essay form] does not signal either a mere satisfaction with mainstream compromise or a celebration of undecidability; rather it evokes the need for intertwining individual experience and the movement of critical thought."<sup>10</sup> This capacity of the essay to actively engage a public is key to my preoccupation with its filmic form. Filmmakers working in



this kind of production are motivated by a pursuit of critical dialogue, or by a belief in the need to intervene intellectually in the standing order of things. In a word, the essay film is at its core a form of critique.

#### SOLIPSISM OR CRITIQUE?

Numerous scholars have come to see essay films as the perfect medium for solipsistic explorations of subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> Both Michael Renov and Paul Arthur study the essay film primarily through the lens of the personal “I” of the director. As Arthur writes, “a quality shared by all film essays is the inscription of a blatant, soul-searching authorial presence.”<sup>12</sup> Following Arthur’s lead, Laura Rascaroli contends that the authorial figure of the filmmaker is crucial for any consideration of the essay film. As she puts it, “an essay is the expression of a personal, critical reflection on a problem or set of problems. Such reflection does not propose itself as anonymous or collective, but as originating from a single authorial voice.”<sup>13</sup> It is true that a number of essay films can be viewed as self-consciously embodying and projecting the personal subjectivity of the author, but to focus on the genre exclusively from that perspective obscures numerous instances in which individual auteurship is abandoned in favor of collective practices. During the height of poststructuralism in the 1970s and 1980s, many essay filmmakers detached personal subjectivity from their films as much as possible. There were plenty of sources to back that decision. For instance, Musil asserts in *The Man Without Qualities* (1940), “an essay is rather the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man’s inner life in a decisive thought. Nothing is more foreign to it than the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism.”<sup>14</sup> Arthur warns against an auteurial approach to the essay film. He notes that “the creation of a felicitous balance between personal musings and external events is far from automatic; for example, in Ross McElwee’s *Time Indefinite* (1994) a necessarily uneasy dynamic is smothered by energy-sapping solipsism.”<sup>15</sup> In Arthur’s view, such amplification of the personal at the expense of the social obscures the political dimensions and concerns of the essay film.

I argue that the essay film functions as a genre of sociopolitical critique that uses sounds and images in unpredictable ways to produce theory. The

essay films I focus on rely less on personal narratives expressed through the “voice” of a journal or diary than on thought related through cinematic techniques of montage, the interplay of synchronic and asynchronous sound, and tropes such metaphor, metonymy, allegory, and doublespeak. These techniques and tropes combine to produce multivalent and multivocal texts.<sup>16</sup> My starting point echoes essay filmmaker and theorist Jean-Pierre Gorin’s vehement rejection of all attempts to insert the “I” as the primary code through which to understand the essay film. For Gorin, “the autobiographical, the diaristic, the confessional that come with the pronoun do not necessarily make an essay. And to take a step back and tag the essay film to a persona that would appear in filigree of the utterances of an *I* does not necessarily help either.” In contrast to such instances of self-reference, he proposes that the focus of the essay film be on a practice of filmmaking that erases all boundaries in the process of production: “What if we had essay films less for the fact that a nominative singular pronoun spoke in them and less for the fact that a type of persona could emerge as a watermark of that discourse than for the fact that in certain films an energy engaged and redefined incessantly the practice of framing, editing, and mixing, disconnecting them from regulatory assumptions of the genre.”<sup>17</sup> This notion of the essay film, Gorin emphasizes, is outside dominant Western ideology and bears traces of Third Cinema, a mid-twentieth-century movement that condemned the bourgeois focus on the individual, while also staying clear of the aesthetics of communication advanced by the Soviet propaganda model. The proponents of Third Cinema called for the formation of collectives that could give voice to a plurality of voices and subject positions.

The explosion of self-identified essay filmmakers in the new millennium has inevitably raised questions of quality.<sup>18</sup> As with any art form, there are good and bad essay films. Deep in the mid-twentieth century, Adorno observed that “bad essays are just as conformist as bad dissertations. . . . The essay form, however, bears some responsibility for the fact that the bad essay tells stories about people instead of elucidating the matter at hand.”<sup>19</sup> Because one of the virtues of the essay film is its protean character and lack of strictly prescribed rules, some filmmakers have chosen the form to avoid rigorous thought while remaining active. There are plenty of mediocre essay films. Musil cautions, “the essay is subject to laws that are no less strict for appearing delicate and ineffable. . . . And

sometimes they [essayists] are also simply men on an adventure who have gone astray.”<sup>20</sup> As with much avant-garde art, the essay film’s initial social and political aims have in numerous cases been forgotten or cast aside as the genre has become more popular.

Today the essay film is the primary vehicle through which critique is developed in audiovisual practice. Practitioners who choose to work in the genre do so largely because of its distinct capacity to perform a multi-layered analysis and oblique commentary. This has long been recognized. For example, in 1947 Bense posed the following rhetorical question: “Is it not peculiar that all great essayists are critics? Is it not noteworthy that all eras which are distinguished by the essay are significant periods marked by criticism?”<sup>21</sup> In particular, the genre tends toward ideological critique. The essay, to cite Adorno, is “the critical form par excellence; as immanent critique of intellectual constructions, as a confrontation of what they are with their concept, it is critique of ideology.”<sup>22</sup> Essay films cut through the prevailing *doxa*, especially in the context of dark clouds. Here is Gorin again: “However dire the circumstance, the essayistic energy remains alive in the margins, an *Id* that haunts cinema. It is never more alive than when the times are more repressive and the dominant aesthetics occupy more squarely the middle of the road.”<sup>23</sup> Kluge’s *In Danger and Dire Distress the Middle of the Road Leads to Death* (1974), an essay film that focuses on the phenomenon of urban renewal and gentrification, critiques the state of detachment that liberal or so-called “apolitical” ideology exacts on its subjects. All of these perspectives cast the essay as a genre that responds to and comments on contemporary events, not unlike its literary equivalent did in the feuilleton sections of newspapers. In some instances, although the subject may be located in the past, such as with Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), inserted footage from contemporary events disrupt the flow and place past and present into an immediate dialogue. Now that advances in production and distribution technology have increased the rapidity and facility by which films can be made, the essay film has assumed an even greater role in reflecting on current issues. Even when sited in the esoteric realm of high art at a seeming remove from global politics, filmmakers mobilize the genre to bring attention to the plight of contemporary society. As Isaac Julien explains in a discussion that revolves around his shift from cinema to gallery:

Why make moving-image works, or films, for somewhere other than the cinema? . . . In an increasingly troubled time of emergencies, war and disinformation, moving images in a gallery context could represent an alternative view—one in which artistic images can play a critical role in shaping our understanding of the world, rather than merely being used as a tool for propaganda, or for the art market. This is not simply a question of the number of screens—but about breaking away from the normative habits we have in exhibiting and also in looking at moving images.<sup>24</sup>

The essay film's malleable form enables it to be easily adapted to new environments and contexts. One of the genre's essential qualities is that it denaturalizes events, representations, and problems, thereby challenging accepted ways of viewing and understanding the world.

#### ON TRANSLATION OF FORMS

Many essay filmmakers also write extensively. Hans Richter, Marker, Godard, Kluge, Farocki, Martha Rosler, Renée Green, and Steyerl have all penned a significant number of essays. Godard, who began as a film critic, explained his shift to filmmaking in the following way: “As a critic, I thought of myself as a film-maker. Today I still think of myself as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in novel form or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them.”<sup>25</sup> For these individuals, filmmaking is an extension of writing and writing an extension of filmmaking—the two mediums are deeply intertwined. As Laura Mulvey recalls about the essay film projects she codirected with Peter Wollen, “For Peter and me, it was a logical step to apply for available funding to expand our written theoretical essays into image and sound; we could then reflect cinematically on the kinds of political and cultural film issues and questions that we wanted to explore.”<sup>26</sup>

In “The Author as Producer” (1934), a seminal text on the relationship between artistic form and politics, Benjamin signaled his acute awareness of the central importance of technological developments for cultural

production and of the creative individual's need to keep up with new technologies. Authors who continue to use old forms and techniques advance older patterns of understanding. "In view of the technical factors affecting our present situation," he wrote, "we have to rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres . . . if we are to identify the forms of expression that channel the literary energies of the present."<sup>27</sup> From this perspective, thought and cultural expression are inextricably linked.

In "The Task of the Translator" (1921), Benjamin explained that translation was above all a "mode," a means of rendering, interpreting, or elucidating. For a thought to be adapted to cultural production, it had to have a certain "translatability."<sup>28</sup> Although Benjamin referred to written texts, he did not explicitly exclude translation from one medium to another. The unity of content and language in the initial text was, in his view, inevitably disrupted in the translation. The new version becomes an "echo of the original," a "reverberation of the [first] work in the alien one."<sup>29</sup> According to Benjamin, even the most hybrid essays are translatable. Indeed, it is precisely because it is playful, self-contradictory, and barely definable that it lends itself so readily to mutations and adaptations. Picking up on Adorno's suggestion that essays are composed of fragments, Benjamin maintained that "both the original and the translation [are] recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel."<sup>30</sup> In other words, both are inherently fragmentary in arrangement and form. The metaphor of the kaleidoscope is not too far from this perspective.

Bense, too, evoked the fragment as a component of the essay, as a means by which to draw attention to the "gaps" or breaks in the narrative sequence. In "On the Essay and Its Prose," he writes that "the essay is a type of prose, but it is not a fragment in the sense of Pascal-esque fragments. . . . The essay reveals a gap."<sup>31</sup> The gap he referred to was linguistic, that is, between two languages, but it also exists conceptually between two mediums and is fundamental to the operation of filmic montage. Further to this, and parallel to Benjamin's notion of the translator moving from one language to another without being bogged down by literal meaning, is Adorno's view that 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>32</sup> Bense, too, proposed that reading an essay is akin to translation because the genre is essentially hybrid.

The essay, he maintained, mixes prose and poetry, each of which follows its own rules. Almost by definition, then, essays encourage and promote their translation, not only into different languages but also into different media. Their continuing afterlife in film attests to the inherent malleability and “translatability” of the genre. In projected image installations and various creative experiments on the Internet, the genre’s experimental and critical dimensions continue to play out.

### CRISIS

Historically, essays tend to appear in times of crisis. Accordingly, they may be seen to have a functional dimension, but their appearance may also be symptomatic. As Homi Bhabha put it in a widely quoted phrase: “In every state of emergency there is an emergence,” and essay films have often been produced in response to just such a state.<sup>33</sup> In the early 1910s, Lukács related the growing importance of the essay to the crisis modernist novels, drama, and poetry inflicted on traditional literature, and to the predicament the concomitant rise of modernist painting, sculpture, and music imposed on the arts. Lukács situated the essay between scientific and aesthetic production and defined it as “criticism as a form of art.”<sup>34</sup> Musil, writing in a context of social, political, and economic upheaval two decades later, explored the essay synchronically, probing the degree to which the genre functioned as a means of sociopolitical critique in the context of an increasingly unstable contemporary intellectual landscape. In the same spirit, Bense, commenting immediately following the horrors of World War II, saw the essay as a crucial instrument for critical thought in the wake of a cultural catastrophe. As he concluded in “On the Essay and Its Prose,” “due to the critical situation as a whole, due to the crisis which mind and existence thrive, the essay has become a characteristic of our literary era. The essay serves the crisis and its conquest by provoking the mind to experiment, to configure things differently, but it is not simply an accent, a mere expression of the crisis.”<sup>35</sup> For his part, Adorno posited the essay as perhaps the only genre capable of resisting the massive instrumentalization that characterized the era. Like its literary and philosophical antecedent, the essay film also tends to become more pointed and effective during periods of cultural, social, and political crisis.

Numerous writers have conceived of the essay as a three-dimensional form. Lukács adopts the metaphor of “ultra-violet rays” refracted through the literary prism to compare the essay to other forms of literature.<sup>36</sup> Critic André Bazin mobilized a similar metaphor to describe a sequence in Marker’s essay film *Letter from Siberia* (1957), which projects “three intellectual beams” onto a single track and in return receives “their reverberation.”<sup>37</sup> Bazin’s metaphor of beams in turn evokes the dynamic and vibrating rays of light projected by cinema. For Adorno, the elements of an essay “crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay’s gaze.”<sup>38</sup> Although their metaphors vary, all of these thinkers deem the essay to be in a state of perpetual dynamism. The thoughts and images that comprise the genre are in constant motion and change according to their configuration and degree of illumination. Like the written essay, spectators, whose intellectual perceptions are crucial for the particular configurations of the essay film’s kaleidoscopic patterns, dialogically generate its meaning. From this perspective, essayism is not just a mode of producing—it is a method of reading, viewing, and interpreting.

Lukács characterized the essay as both “accidental” and “necessary,” a description Adorno partially echoed when in his rejoinder to the Hungarian philosopher he included “luck,” “play” and “irrationality” as characteristics of the genre.<sup>39</sup> Both figures describe the essay as fragmentary, wandering, and devoid of attempts to advance truth claims. Essays find their “unity in and through breaks and not by glossing them over,” writes Adorno.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Adorno goes so far as to propose that it is precisely in its untruths that the truth of the essay is located. For Lukács, the genre performs judgments; its “essential, value-determining” power is located not in “the verdict” but in “the process of judging.”

Formally, Lukács, Adorno, and Bense all generally agree on the basic characteristics of the essay. They differ in their understanding of the genre’s status as a mode of artistic production. Lukács postulates that the essay is both a work of art, because of what he called its autonomous, “sovereign” quality, and not a work of art, because of its standing as critique. For Bense the essay is above all a form of experimentation that allows the critic to inhabit “the border area (Confinium) that develops between poetry and prose, between the creative and aesthetic stage

of creation and the ethical state of persuasion.”<sup>41</sup> Although Adorno did not consider the essay to be a form of art per se, he granted that the genre “has something like an aesthetic autonomy” that often leads it to be “accused of being simply derived from art.” In his view, the essay is to be “distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance.”<sup>42</sup> It is tenuously located between science and art and should not be tipped in one direction over the other. Whereas Lukács saw the essay as both art and critique, Adorno believed that its artistic component, if it indeed has one, is purely formal and related to the essayist’s constant pursuit of new manners of presentation. Not surprisingly, Adorno considered Benjamin to be the essayist par excellence. To be sure, it is to Benjamin that many audiovisual essayists turn when seeking a theoretical footing for the translation of the written essay into another medium. There are still some, however, who prefer to turn to Lukács’s conception of the essay because his reformulation of Gotthold Lessing’s famous dictum that a “theory of the novel should be a novel” suggests by analogy that a theory of the essay should be an essay, or a theory of film a film.<sup>43</sup>

## EARLY ARTICULATIONS OF THE ESSAY FILM

The invention of a genre, writes Fowler, “may of course be largely unconscious.” The author or artist perhaps thinks only of writing or creating “in a fresh way. It will often be his or her successors who first see the potential for genre and recognize, retrospectively, that assembly of a new form has taken place. Then the assembled repertoire will become a focus of critical activity, whether formal or informal.”<sup>44</sup> The first formal theorization of the essay film with hindsight can be attributed to Sergei Eisenstein, who contemplated what it would mean to make a film of Karl Marx’s *Capital*. He found representing an abstract concept such as capital, which lacks a material base, to be particularly perplexing. In his 1927 project notes, Eisenstein reflected on a new kind of cinematic expression introduced by his recently completed film *October*. He described this “new form of cinema” as “a collection of essays on a series of themes.” Projecting that a film on “CAPITAL” would have to be “discursive” and based on Marx’s “libretto,”



Eisenstein conceived of his filmic translation of Marx's three-volume work in musical terms. In his view, the great innovation of *October* was its grounding in multiple fragments.<sup>45</sup> Explaining that the film's method was of as much concern to him as was its subject matter, he stressed, for instance, that an adequate rendering of the stock exchange would require "thousands of tiny details." Speaking of the operative method and structure of his films, Eisenstein subsequently maintained that "the form of *fait divers* or collections of short film-essays is fully appropriate for replacement of 'whole works.'"<sup>46</sup> In his notes he frequently returned to the example of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and in particular to passages in this essayistic novel in which the Irish author posed questions and answers. Emphasizing the importance of banal images as a means by which to represent *Capital*, Eisenstein also noted that whereas "ancient cinema shot one event from many points of view . . . , the new one assembles one point of view from many events." He reasoned that the plot structure should not be linear or "logically progressive" but instead be based on "an associative unfolding."<sup>47</sup> Eisenstein proposed constructing monads of thoughts reflecting on the central theme of capital, assembled in constellations and dialectically suspended in tension with one another. Although he ultimately failed to realize this project, other filmmakers have recently taken it up, producing essay films based on Marx's text, including Kluge (*News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx/Eisenstein/Capital*, 2008–2015), Julien (*Kapital and Playtime*, 2013), and Raoul Peck (*Profit & Nothing But!*, 2001).

A decade after Eisenstein wrestled with questions of how to capture the essential immateriality on film, Richter formulated a short tract, "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms" ("The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film").<sup>48</sup> In this pioneering text, Richter proposed a new kind of film that would enable its maker to render "problems, thoughts, even ideas" perceptible and make "visible what is not visible." He called this new kind of film an essay film because it "deals with difficult themes in generally comprehensible form." Unlike documentary film, which presents facts and information, Richter reasoned that the essay film produces complex ideas not necessarily grounded by reason or in *reality*—ideas that might be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic. For Richter, the essay film no longer binds the filmmaker to the rules and parameters of traditional documentary practice, and it gives free rein to his or her imagination, with all its artistic potentiality.

Richter explained that he used the term “essay” because the new genre is inherently digressive, playful, contradictory, and political. Echoing Eisenstein’s reflections, he cited the stock exchange as an example of a topic that the essay film might confront:

The problem starts when for a task, such as to show that “the function of the stock exchange, is that of a market”—reproducing the stages involved in the stock exchange exactly and in chronological order, however meticulously observed, is no longer sufficient. This is due to the fact that the function of the represented object, in this case the stock market, is fundamentally different from how a machine functions. One can read how a machine functions from A-Z right off the machine itself. However, in order to make comprehensible how the stock market functions, one must include other factors: the economy, the needs of the public, market laws, supply and demand, etc. In other words, one cannot rely on simply photographing the object, as is the case in straightforward documentaries, instead one has to try—by whatever means necessary—to reproduce the idea of the object. One has to try to substantiate the notion one has of the “stock exchange as a market.”<sup>49</sup>

For both Richter and Eisenstein, then, the conceptualization of the essay film was spurred by the frustration of not being able to represent an abstract economic concept with conventional forms and techniques. They both advance the cinematic essay as a new kind of filmmaking that modulates elements of documentary and art film given the perceived limits of each on its own. The intergeneric relations result in a new amalgam that comes to take the form of a genre. This conceptualization of the essay film will be highly significant for the development of the genre in the field of the visual arts.

Another important dimension of the audiovisual essay was articulated by Astruc, who in the 1940s advanced the metaphor of a *caméra-stylo* (camera-stylus). This new tool would, according to Astruc, “become a means of writing, just as flexible and subtle as written language, . . . [rendering] more or less literal ‘inscriptions’ on images as ‘essays.’”<sup>50</sup> In retrospect, we can see that some essay filmmakers have literally taken up this idea and inscribed textual and graphic elements directly onto the celluloid. Astruc developed the notion in the French postwar landscape,

where the term “film d’essai” circulated, and applied it to films by Georges Franju, Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda, among others. Richter and Astruc pronounced two significantly different understandings of the essay film. This is not surprising given the distinct circumstances in which each worked. Richter’s point of view, informed by images, derives from his background as an artist, whereas Astruc’s stems from his literary and philosophical origins. Richter wrote in exile, and Astruc produced his tracts in a relatively stable environment during one of the most vibrant and fertile periods of Western cinematic history. Because Richter was geographically displaced and culturally isolated in the postwar period, film historians have tended to overlook his writings and films and locate the emergence of the essay film in late-1940s France. For example, Noël Burch postulates that the essay film proper does not begin until Georges Franju’s *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), although he admits that essayistic tendencies can be detected earlier. In particular, Burch notes that in the 1920s Jacques Feyder considered making a film based on Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* and Eisenstein’s plan for *Capital*.<sup>51</sup> The history of the essay film that I develop in this book runs counter to these accounts. By acknowledging the roles of Eisenstein, Richter, and their contemporaries in the theorization and actualization of the new genre, *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* not only cites significant innovations that contributed to the development of the new kind of film but also challenges previous understandings of nonfiction film. To comprehend the full history of the essay film, it is important to shift the vantage point, turn the kaleidoscope, and problematize the categories that have long dominated understandings of nonfiction film.

## AFTER FACT AND FICTION

Nonfiction cinema has traditionally been subdivided into documentary and art films. The two separate branches have been understood as distinct, each having its own genealogy and history in accordance with particular traditions and practices. Upon closer examination, however, the discreteness of these categories quickly falls apart, owing to many instances of generic intertwining and overlapping boundaries. The essay

film is located within this zone of indeterminacy. The history of cinema that has become dominant in standard accounts was written in the postwar period when historians tended to cast narratives as absolute, without breaks, interruptions, discontinuities, or contradictions. In this setting the entire field of cinema was neatly split between three major genres of feature, documentary, and art films; corresponding institutionally with humanities-based departments, journalism schools, and art schools, respectively.<sup>52</sup> Each genre and discipline was fortified through its projection of a unified field of production. The simultaneous existence of the essay film as an in-between, hybrid genre that transgresses and dissolves generic as much as disciplinary and institutional parameters was barely discernable in this context of neat categories and classification.

The conventional understanding of film history had its beginning, on one hand, with the Lumière brothers filming actualities, and on the other, with Georges Méliès fabricating fantastical stories through elaborate editing processes.<sup>53</sup> In what Charles Musser refers to as the “Anglo-American mythology,” John Grierson, in his review of Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926), credited Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) as the first “documentary.”<sup>54</sup> Although Grierson went on to become known as the “father” of documentary film, his formulations, which included lauding creative interpretations of the real and the inclusion of artifice, bear little resemblance to the “objective” presentation of reality that came to be understood as documentary in the postwar period. With the proliferation of newsreels and propaganda films during World War II, the documentary mode of imparting “information” and “news” was streamlined. Documentaries were understood to be based on truth, to depict “real events” in a straightforward manner, and to have a clear argument and objective leading to an unambiguous conclusion. During the 1960s, this kind of film production developed into a distinct academic discipline within the field of communication studies. Within the genre of documentary were three subgenres that corresponded to national variations: Direct Cinema (North America), Observational Documentaries (Great Britain), and Cinema Vérité (France). In each, personal subjectivity was to be avoided in favor of objective truth.

Concomitant to the postwar institutionalization of the documentary genre, a historiography was created that followed a basic master narrative. This narrative steered clear of exceptions and aberrations and

turned a blind eye to the contrasting genre of the essay film.<sup>55</sup> As Arthur explains, “essay films may segue between separate styles, tones, or modes of address. In doing so, they fracture epistemological unities of time and place associated with documentary practices from John Grierson and Thirties New Deal tracts through Sixties vérité.”<sup>56</sup> Bill Nichols has been one of the most important voices in advancing the field of documentary theoretically. With his multiple publications, beginning with his dissertation *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left* (1978) and extending to *Representing Reality* (1991), *Blurred Boundaries* (1994), and *Introduction to Documentary* (2001), Nichols has done more than any scholar to define the characteristics of the genre. Yet he does not acknowledge the essay film as a distinct kind of nonfiction film. In *Blurred Boundaries*, he investigates documentaries that obscure the “distinction between fact and fiction” but avoids any mention of the essay film.<sup>57</sup> Nichols identifies four “modes” of documentary practice in *Representing Reality*—Expository, Observational, Interactive, and Reflexive—placing films that I would consider essay films in the fourth category. Examples include Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Marker’s *Letter from Siberia* (1957), Gorin’s *Poto and Cabengo* (1980), Raul Ruiz’s *Of Great Events and Ordinary People* (1983), and Jill Godmilow’s *Far from Poland* (1984). These works are “representative” of a reflexive impulse and as such are concerned with what Nichols describes as the “process of representation itself,” but they also are much more than that.<sup>58</sup> To see the makeup of these complex films through the lens of but one trait is to do them a profound disservice.

The late-twentieth-century shift from analog to digital production and the corresponding loss of the “negative” as the indexical signifier of “truth” threw the conventional understanding of documentary into crisis. Postmodern challenges to the genre’s fundamental truth claims were exacerbated. If postmodernism troubled traditional master narratives and opened the possibility of previously unrecognized histories, then the advent of digital technology prompted even further explorations into zones free of the notion that filmic images relay truth. *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* contests the postwar narrative of documentary film and reveals the century-long existence of its contrast—the essay film.

## ART FILM

Art historians and critics writing about art films have similarly obscured the long-standing existence of the essay film.<sup>59</sup> In many ways the essay film is the art film's complement. Its presence tends to imply the absence of the other, but they remain distinct genres. In their efforts to identify and historicize art film as a genre, scholars and critics have established a historiography that typically begins with Richter's abstract *Rhythmus 21* (1921), credited with initiating the use of celluloid as an aesthetic material explored primarily for its formal properties. Many of the films of the Surrealists are seen to follow in its path. According to this genealogy, the European avant-garde project was interrupted by the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s and did not resurface until the Lettrist films of the 1950s and structuralist films of the following decades. An overriding characteristic of the art film is an emphasis on the material and formal aspects of film at the expense of narrative, and the exclusion of narrative explains the omission of numerous film and video makers, including essay filmmakers, from the canon of what constitutes art film because essay films always follow a narrative thread, even if it is often very loose and fragmentary.

Wollen rethought the distinction between art film and art cinema in his writings of the 1970s. In "The Two Avant-Gardes" (1975), he argued that the uneven development of North American and European film history had resulted in the articulation of two different types of avant-garde film production. European art cinema emerged from the Soviet legacy of Vertov and Eisenstein, which begat filmmakers such as Godard and the collaborative team of Straub and Huillet, and North American art film that Wollen refers to as the "Co-op movement," which emanated from the visual arts and dominated in the United States. According to Wollen, European avant-garde film is language-based and concerned primarily with developing narrative and breaking and restructuring semi-otic codes of meaning and signification. As he observed about Godard, "he wants not simply to represent an alternative 'world' or alternative 'world-view,' but to investigate the whole process of signification out of which a world-view or an ideology is constructed."<sup>60</sup> Wollen saw North American avant-garde art film as self-reflexively obsessed, "pushing

film-makers into a position of extreme ‘purism’ or ‘essentialism,’” resulting in “an ever-narrowing preoccupation with pure film, with film about film, a dissolution of signification into objecthood or tautology.”<sup>61</sup> He observed that there was little exchange or dialogue between the two different branches of filmmaking, which enabled their distinct qualities to be maintained. Wollen believed that “the absence of any avant-garde of the Godard type in North America” severely limited “the development of the New American Cinema itself, narrowing its horizons and tying it unnecessarily closely to the future of the other visual arts.”<sup>62</sup> In an article on Godard’s *Vent d’Est*, Wollen evoked Astruc as a way of understanding the Swiss filmmaker’s cinematic practice, which, he elaborated, enables us “to consider film as a process of writing in images, rather than a representation of the world . . . [so that] it becomes possible to conceive of scratching the film as an erasure, a virtual negation. Evidently the use of marks as erasures, crossing out an image, is quite different from using them as deliberate noise or to foreground the optical substrate. It presupposes a different concept of ‘film-writing’ and ‘film-reading.’”<sup>63</sup> In this essay Wollen also explored Godard’s tactic of modulating fiction and nonfiction in his films. Thus, although he never explicitly used the terms “essay” or “essayistic,” the “Godard type” of filmmaking to which Wollen referred approximates the essay film.<sup>64</sup>

Wollen detected another important (and essayistic) characteristic of “Godard-like” filmmaking in the cinema of Straub and Huillet, whose films “are almost all ‘layered’ like a palimpsest. In this case the space between the texts is not only semantic but also historical, the different textual strata being residues of different epochs and cultures.”<sup>65</sup> Despite championing Godard, finding in his films a “starting point for work on revolutionary cinema,” Wollen asserted that the Swiss filmmaker’s productions do not comprise “revolutionary cinema itself.”<sup>66</sup> For such a cinema to emerge, the two avant-gardes would have to be brought together, leading if not to their convergence then at least to a productive juxtaposition. Film, he concluded, “because it is a multiple system, could develop and elaborate the semiotic shifts that marked the origins of the avant-garde in a uniquely complex way, a dialectical montage within and between complex codes.”<sup>67</sup>

Wollen’s “The Two Avant-Gardes” is significant not only because it explains the divided field of avant-garde film through its historical

development but also because it bridges two types of film and yokes together nonnarrative and narrative-based avant-garde practices. In this respect, Wollen countered the arguments of the era's leading film critics and theorists, as well as the efforts of numerous filmmakers who sought to keep art film self-reflexively focused on its medium. His film collaborations with Mulvey during this time employ the essay film to translate these and other theories into an audiovisual medium.

The modulation of art and documentary films has increased in the new millennium. The mega-show Documenta XI (2002) featured numerous essay films and included works by filmmakers such as Ulrike Ottinger, Akerman, Akomfrah, Alan Sekula, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. A number of recent scholarly publications, including Catherine Russell's *Experimental Ethnography* (1999) and T. J. Demos's *The Migrant Image* (2013), have looked closely at both the art film and documentary genres.<sup>68</sup> Film historian Scott MacDonald has coined the phrase "Avant-Doc" to account for the growing number of productions that combine elements of documentary film with those of the artistic avant-garde.<sup>69</sup> These institutional shifts have affected the production and exhibition of the essay film and helped to give the genre greater recognition.

## SONIMAGE SOUND/IMAGE

Essay films are highly layered texts constructed and based on complicated arrangements of montage. They include an image track, which may have multiple overlaps of shots and sequences, superimpositions, and parallel frames. They also often include a textual stratum, which might take the form of words written directly across the screen, intertitles, or verbal commentary exterior to the image frame. The information presented on the voice-over track may directly contradict the material on the image track, resulting in a jarring collision of opposites and complex levels of meaning that spectators must disentangle and coproduce in their own way.

Despite the fact that film is an audiovisual medium, scholars of the essay film have for the most part ignored the soundtrack and focused almost exclusively on the flow of images. This is unfortunate because the aural and acoustic spaces of the medium have long been essential aspects



of the genre. Even prior to the advent of synchronized sound in the 1920s, the images of the essay film were structured by music, which was often employed as a key editing stratagem. As sound technology developed to permit a greater complexity of acoustic tracks, the audio component of the essay film became as important as the visual one. Music was employed not only to complement the image but also to produce a parallel track, thereby freeing the viewer's imagination from the constraints of the visible world. Sound, like texts, may be used to generate jarring collisions of opposites, directly contradicting what is seen on the image track. It is often presented as an alternative to visual spectacle. Whereas the cinematic image is grounded in the indexical real captured by the camera, sound is unfettered, unleashing fantasy and imagination. Sound bites, shards of noise, and musical fragments provide the fiction to enliven and enhance the "reality" aspect of the essay film. Vision may have become completely colonized and transformed in second nature, but sound retains the possibility for a different sort of expression.

Examining the essay film through its acoustic dimension opens up layers of meaning that interpretive approaches focusing solely on the montage of text and image are unable to detect. Nondiegetic sound elements are capable of conveying ideas and sensibilities that images on their own cannot. They can summon different times and spaces and allow the viewer to imagine zones that differ from the one depicted on the screen.<sup>70</sup> Sound elements can also bridge different films and productions and enable a transfer of meaning from one film to another in an intertextual dialogue that can span decades and cross national borders. To put this another way, sound and the nondiegetic acoustic track more generally often functions in *excess* of visual representation in film, and its great power of suggestion makes it a very significant component. To underestimate, or entirely overlook, its role runs the real risk of missing key layers of content.

Essay films are comprised of many different elements that mix in disparate ways to generate meaning. Their kaleidoscopic nature exceeds the realm of the visual to include the acoustic. The complex layering and interplay of images and sounds they put into effect imbues them with a certain unpredictability. Their objective or subject matter tends to be labyrinthine, and largely open to the spectator's interpretation. This is what makes them dialogical. It is also what makes them essayistic. As with

Adorno's theorization of the essay as a form that "coordinates concepts with one another by means of their function in the parallelogram of forces in its objects," the essay film, almost by definition, cannot be subordinated to any overarching concept.<sup>71</sup>

## OVERVIEW

This book is organized chronologically. It follows the evolution of the essay film over the course of a century, from its origins in early cinema to its growing recognition as a distinct kind of film in the postwar period. Concerted attention is paid to the divergent trajectories of the genre in the last third of the twentieth century. These include video essays, essays of liberation, and film essays. The study concludes with an exploration of the ways these distinct trajectories have recently entered into direct dialogue with each other.

Technological questions are also central to my investigation. Throughout its century-long history, the production, exhibition, and distribution of the essay film has been affected by shifts in technology, not only the advent of sound in the 1920s but also by the introduction of the 16 mm camera in the 1940s, the video camera in the 1960s, and digital technology and the Internet in the 1990s. *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* explores the various institutional contexts in which this kind of film emerged and continues to develop in a vibrant way. Today there is an increasingly malleable distinction between essay filmmakers and artists. As the essay film expands to encompass multichannel productions projected onto numerous screens in art galleries and museums and digital streams accessible through the Internet, the genre continues to evolve conceptually. Accordingly, the migration of the essay film from the institution of cinema to that of art is of particular relevance to my study.

Added to the overarching diachronic analysis, my aim is to address the essay film's development across geographical contexts. Consideration is given to developments of the essay film not only in Europe and North America but in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia as well. In particular, chapter 6 explores various ways the genre has been mobilized as a mode of resistance in postcolonial contexts.

My choice of particular filmmakers and films singled out for discussion also calls for some explanation. The goal is not to supply a complete overview of the manifestations of the essay film in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Clearly this would be impossible. My purpose is to present a perspective on the emergence and development of the genre that elucidates its primary characteristics. Although most of the filmmakers were aware of what the others were doing (or had done) and several were in direct dialogue, I am acutely mindful of a certain arbitrariness that remains in my selection of filmmakers. My aim is to take account of a few key figures, such as Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, and Harun Farocki, and to include a number of essay filmmakers and video makers who would not necessarily be familiar to a film studies audience, such as Martha Rosler, Isaac Julien, John Akomfrah, and Renée Green. Moreover, my study expands the field by introducing the productions of a range of essay filmmakers who work collaboratively in collectives.

The second part of *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* reviews the cultural and historical context that several scholars have singled out as the birthplace of the cinematic essay: postwar Paris. I challenge this widely accepted narrative by introducing the development of the essay film in mid-twentieth-century New York where Richter made *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947). I further complicate the dominant understanding of the essay film by putting pressure on precisely those French productions by Marker, Resnais, Franju, Varda, and Jean Rouch that are often cited as the origins of the genre. Here I show that each of these filmmakers developed different themes that subsequently became crucial for future essay filmmakers, including ethnography, decolonization, migration, and historical memory.

The maturation of the essay film in continental Europe in the 1960s through the 1980s is widely considered to be the second most fertile period in the development of the genre. Historians for the most part have focused on self-reflexive essay films that draw attention to the art of representation. As important as these films are in illuminating the aesthetic dimension of the essay film, I also address less-known examples of the genre made during this period that respond to more immediate contemporary crises such as global unrest and the dire condition of culture and society during states of emergency. Beginning with a focus on the Fascist legacy in Germany and Italy, this trajectory leads essay filmmakers

to respond to various other crises, such as the Vietnam War, the Israeli-Palestine conflict, European terrorism, the collapse of the second world, and the bloodbaths in the region formerly known as Yugoslavia. In these works, essay filmmakers take on the role of journalists, and the genre operates as a new branch of the fourth estate.

A focus on the development of the essay film in the context of art brings the second part of my study to a close. I show that a number of U.S. artists began to produce essay films and videotapes that introduced the genre to the field of art in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These productions reflected on questions of medium specificity as they pertain to the film or video essay and on issues related to spectatorship, politics, and narrative. In its perambulation across continents, I show how the essay film took on the anticolonialist and imperialist subject matter that characterizes many films of the African diaspora and came to serve as a critical tool for filmmakers marginalized from the cinematic center.

*The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* concludes with an examination of essay film production in the digital era. Contemporary work in this genre extends beyond the traditional single-channel screen, drawing on new forms of technology. It also engages with new exhibition contexts and platforms that have become available in the early twenty-first century. That the essay film today plays such an important critical function in contemporary culture makes the issues explored in this book as pressing as they are historical.



FIGURE 1.1 Hans Richter, *Inflation*, 1928.

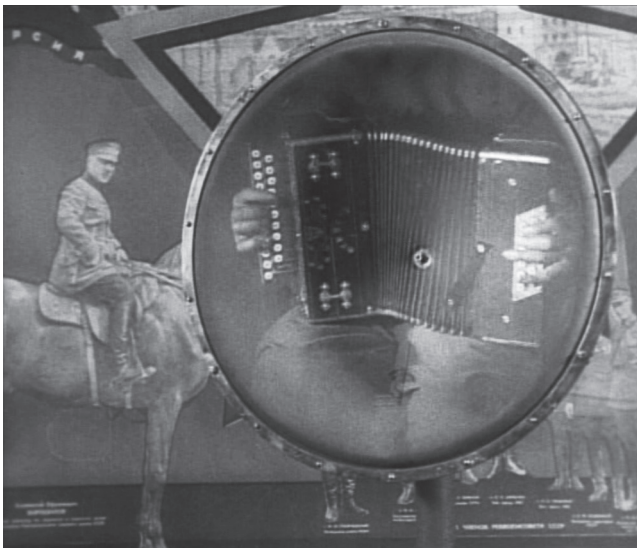


FIGURE 1.2 Dziga Vertov, *Man With a Movie Camera*, 1929.

# 1

## BEGINNINGS

*The “essay” is the unmediated literary expression of this strange border area between poetry and prose, between creation and persuasion, between an aesthetic and an ethical stage.*

—MAX BENSE, “ON THE ESSAY AND ITS PROSE”

**W**riting about Dada filmmaker Hans Richter in 1964, critic Jay Leyda lamented in a footnote, “today the ‘film essay’ form is almost totally, and incomprehensibly, ignored. The only modern film-maker who employs a witty variation of it is Chris Marker.”<sup>1</sup> With this remark, Leyda makes two important observations: first, he implies that the essay film was recognized and practiced by a prewar and even presound generation of filmmakers; second, he draws attention to the fact that by the midsixties—an otherwise vibrant time for film development, experimentation, and exploration—the essay film was relatively ignored. The first part of Leyda’s comment, which suggests that there was an earlier moment when essay films received considerable attention, needs elaboration before one can understand the critic’s dismay at the decline of essay films in the late 1950s and 1960s. Leyda’s pronouncement also raises several other questions central to this study: What are the theoretical underpinnings of the essay film? Why was the genre ignored in the late fifties and sixties? Why did it explode once

again a decade later? And why does it continue to thrive well into the twenty-first century?

Leyda locates the emergence of the modern essay film in Hans Richter's *Inflation* (1928).<sup>2</sup> Richter sought to make a film that would address a question that was central for him: "What social purpose does cinema serve?" He believed that cinema's "artistic development as a whole and the development of each individual sector in every one of its forms" could only be properly understood if one continuously posed such a question.<sup>3</sup> After seven years of making films in which formal experimentation took priority over any social content, Richter was ready to pursue a new tack. *Inflation* constituted his first concrete conceptualization of an alternative cinematic form, one that was neither pure aesthetics nor simple reportage. As Richter wrote shortly after completing *Inflation*, "the path of theatre-freed film follows two directions: one in the pursuit of so-called unstaged shots, which are the technical base of weekly recordings of reality, the main proponent and director of this type of cinema is Dsiga Werthoff [*sic*]; the other type of film is that without plot, theme or narrative—the so-called 'absolute film.'"<sup>4</sup> Although he oversimplified Vertov's project, Richter's statement indicates his awareness of how limited the genre of nonfiction was by the late 1920s.

Following his training in the fine arts, Richter, one of the key players of the German Dada, sought in his early cinematic experiments to translate abstract painting directly into the medium of film.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1920s, however, he gradually moved away from abstraction and toward figural representation. Initially Richter believed that "the abstract form offers film unusual possibilities because: 1) it allows for the possibility that the artistic expression can be realized free of all associations and coincidences; and 2) nonrepresentational, abstract 'signs' are, for us, the most persuasive and strongest means for expression."<sup>6</sup> Hence the abstract nature of his rhythm films and especially his borrowing of the shape of the Suprematist square in *Rhythmus 21*. But Richter soon realized that "abstract form in films does not mean the same as in painting where it is the ultimate expression of a long tradition of thousands and thousands of years. Film has to be discovered in its own property."<sup>7</sup> This attentiveness to the specificity of the filmic medium led Richter to dramatically alter his style in favor of using representational forms and human figures as initially exemplified in *Filmstudie* ("Film Study," 1926).

Two years later, with *Inflation*, he took his theory of film to another level. Like other nonfiction films at the time, *Inflation* was commissioned by the German production studio UFA (Universum Film AG) as a short to precede Wilhelm Thiele's commercial feature, *Die Dame mit der Maske* (*The Lady with the Mask*, 1928). For Richter, *Inflation's* potential to reach a mass audience cannot be overestimated; it prompted him to contemplate how best to pursue his social goals because this production would be screened not only for like-minded people but also for a much more diverse audience. The film would therefore have to cut a fine line between being critical and accessible. To that end, Richter advanced his use of montage to a new level. As marked by the subtitle, "A Counterpoint of Declining People and Growing Zeros," the short consists of a rapid flow of superimposed images of abstract circles set in motion against a black screen. As they gradually come into focus, they are recognized as coins, which are replaced by ever-increasing quantities and values of banknotes juxtaposed with their equivalent in U.S. dollars. As the notes multiply, images of consumer goods, such as a sewing machine, an automobile, food, types of shelter, and the like, crowd the screen, followed by a series of close-up shots of human faces bearing anguished expressions suggesting poverty. The film then cuts to figures of wealthy businessmen, shot from a low angle to increase their stature and visual dominance. Clearly, they are engaged in the high-end trading of goods and stocks. The next sequence presents a well-dressed man who, viewers presume, is reading about his loss of fortune in a newspaper. In a brilliant montage of images, Richter transforms this figure from a position of bourgeois respectability to that of a beggar asking for handouts. Shots of "faceless masses" that lose their individuality to poverty increase, and the final minutes are filled with images of nihilist revolution as buildings collapse in a paroxysm of destruction and violence.

The rapid-fire cascade of images symbolically corresponds to the crisis in which Germany found itself, brought on by uncontrolled inflation. Thus Richter underscored a formal relationship between his film style and his subject matter. In *Inflation* the reference to the crisis is dual: on one hand it echoes the country's materialistic socioeconomic collapse; on the other hand it self-reflexively mirrors the conceptual confusion concerning the condition of nonfiction film. A factual news report of the same length—eight minutes—could not convey the utter destruction or



register the agonizing despair and anxiety caused by the financial crisis, which was leading to the physical and mental collapse of the German citizenry. A feature film would run the risk of turning a tragedy into a melodrama, with excessive attention diverted to stars, outweighing the attention paid to the crisis at hand. What makes Richter's film so effective is that, through cinematic tools and the language of montage, superimposition, and stop-motion, it condenses a complex historical drama to deliver its message more directly than what could be achieved in a pure documentary. The film resonates with Benjamin's theory that history is conceptualized in the dynamic image. Recalling Richter's comment about the misleading effects of the photograph of a bucolic village, images alone do not reveal the problematic relationships that lie beneath appearance. In contrast, he posited film as the medium capable of providing a glimpse of the other side:

The cinema is perfectly capable in principle of revealing the *functional* meaning of things and events, for it has *time* at its disposal, it can contract it and thus show the development, the evolution of things. It does not need to take a picture of a 'beautiful' tree, it can also show us a growing one, a falling one, or one swaying in the wind—nature not just as a view, but also as an element, the village not as an idyll, but as a social entity.<sup>8</sup>

Through the use of fast-motion images, *Inflation* provides the spectator with a complex critical commentary on the crisis of inflation; it offers both a brief history and a projected future: the full collapse of the socio-economic and political state. As such it is a cinematic essay that does not pretend to be a news report based on facts, a commercial feature, or an abstract art film; it stands as an impressionist meditation encoding sharp social critique.

Richter's *Inflation* predates by a dozen years his "The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film" (1940), a short text in which he formally introduced and described the new genre. At this stage, Richter conceptualized the essay film as a branch of documentary filmmaking, a form or variation of the dominant genre. Like Leyda, he retrospectively cited his own film *Inflation* as an early example of what an essay film might look like. Following World War I, the development of film technology, narrative complexity, editing techniques, and mise-en-scène capabilities

enabled practitioners of the medium to become more conscious of its unique nature. It was then that film's potential as a discursive seventh art was first glimpsed. Despite the evidence of essayistic traits or segments in early cinema, these were initially taken as discontinuous "experiments" rather than systematic attempts to produce a new genre. Reflecting on early cinema, in 1925 Jacques Feyder observed that it consisted of " 'essays,' various experiments, tentative trials and errors." He proposed that "anything can be translated onto the screen; anything can be expressed in images. It is possible to derive a fascinating fiction film from the tenth chapter of Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* as well as from a page of [his] *Physiologie du mariage*, or a paragraph from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* as well as any novel of Paul de Kock." Feyder understood the act of "translation" as a process that is no longer purely linguistic but can be intermedial in the shift from the written text to moving images. He stressed the need to "understand the importance of these words: to make *visual*. In them lies the whole art of cinegraphic transposition."<sup>9</sup> Feyder's nontraditional concept of translation resonates with Walter Benjamin's notion that translation is above all a manipulation of "modes" that allows for different expressions in new arrangements or forms.

For Richter, however, practice and experiment came prior to formalizing ideas in writing. After completing *Inflation*, he made several sketches for cinematic projects, including his *Super Essay Films* (1941), which he was unable to realize due to material circumstances. As a film, *Inflation* constitutes the first concrete conceptualization of an alternative cinematic form, one that is neither pure aesthetics nor simple reportage. Moreover, Richter explained that he employed the term "essay" because of its significance in literature as a form that can make difficult and dense topics understandable. Yet he cast the film essay as between genres, merging documentary with experimentation and art such that it does not limit the filmmaker to the reproduction of facts. Richter explains:

The essay film, in its attempt to make the invisible world of imagination, thoughts, and ideas visible, can draw from an incomparably larger reservoir of expressive means than the pure documentary film. Since in the essay film the filmmaker is not bound by the depiction of external phenomena and the constraints of chronological sequences, but, on the contrary, has to enlist material from everywhere, the filmmaker can bounce

around freely in space and time. For example, he can switch from objective representation to fantastic allegory and from there to a staged scene; the filmmaker can portray dead as well as living things, and artificial as well as natural objects.<sup>10</sup>

Richter's concept resonates with Lukács's formulation of the literary essay, which postulates that the latter originates from the science of art but has radically departed from the constraints of "dry matter" and moved into "free flight."<sup>11</sup> Richter hoped that this creative and imaginative form would hold the attention of spectators and allow them to comprehend difficult theoretical constructions.

The significance of Richter's *Inflation* and his text "The Film Essay" increase when considered in the cinematic landscape of the 1920s and 1930s. Along with better-known cinematographic works, such as F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921), two particular films—Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921) and Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922)—helped shape and define nonfiction filmmaking. British documentary theorist and filmmaker John Grierson hailed the latter as the seminal inspiration of documentary filmmaking. In "The First Principle of Documentary" (1932), Grierson differentiated *Nanook* from earlier forms of nonfiction films such as actualities, newsreels, and travelogues because it initiated a change "from the plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material, to arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it."<sup>12</sup> From that perspective, *Nanook* and Flaherty's subsequent film *Moana* (1926) constitute significant interventions in a field dominated by superficial facts. As Grierson put it in an early lecture:

In documentary we deal with the actual and in one sense with the real. But the really real, if I may use that phrase, is something deeper than that. The only reality which counts in the end is the interpretation which is profound. . . . But I charge you to remember that the task of reality before you is not one of reproduction but of interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

In "The Film Essay," Richter also extolled Flaherty's *Nanook* as well as his later *Man of Aran* (1934) as models for innovative documentary filmmaking.

Richter's *Rhythmus 21* was equally as significant to nonfiction filmmaking as *Nanook*, but it was intended for a different public. Ushering in the

school of abstract filmmaking and inspired by the paintings of Kazimir Malevich, the film offers a black and white study of Suprematist squares and rectangles that change in size and depth through a series of rhythmic evolutions. The number “21” in the title refers to the year the film was made. The prior year, Richter had collaborated with fellow artist Viking Eggeling to produce a pamphlet, “Universelle Sprache” (“Universal language”), in which, as he recalled in 1965, they tried to defend the thesis “that the abstract form offers the possibility of a language above and beyond national frontiers.” For Richter and Eggeling, an art based on national or cultural identification should be shunned in favor of productions that achieve transcendent or non-community-specific communication. As they elaborated:

The basis for such a language would lie in the identical form of perception in all human beings and would offer the promise of a universal art as it had never existed before. With careful analysis of the elements, one should be able to rebuild men’s vision into a spiritual language in which the simplest as well as the most complicated, emotions as well as thoughts, objects as well as ideas, would find a form.<sup>14</sup>

Richter followed *Rhythmus 21* with three subsequent abstract studies: *Rhythmus 23* (1923), *Fugue in Red and Green* (1923), and *Rhythmus 25* (1925). On the basis of these works and those of Walter Ruttmann (*Opus I–IV*, 1921–1925) and Oscar Fischinger, *Wax Experiments* (1921–1926), *Orgelstabe* (“Staffs,” 1923–1927), and *Stromlinien* (“Flow lines,” 1925), these filmmakers came to constitute what is now known as the classical filmic avant-garde of Weimar cinema. The motion of the filmed objects, rather than any physical referential materiality, comprises the overriding structure of these works in time and space. The movement and editing were often choreographed to musical scores that determined the overall rhythm of the films.<sup>15</sup>

Approximately twenty years after the initial release of *Nanook* and *Rhythmus 21*, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized two disparate but important film events. The first, “The Nonfiction Film: From Uninterrupted Fact to Documentary” (1939), included a screening of *Nanook*; and the second, a 1940 festival centered on abstract European films, featured Richter’s *Rhythmus 21* in addition to films by Man Ray,

Fernand Léger, and Marcel Duchamp. The fact that a major institution for modern art saw nonfiction films as part of its purview is significant in and of itself. This division of the avant-garde cinematic field between works primarily based on facts and those rooted in abstract art reinforced and historically located a fundamentally misleading split in nonfiction film. MoMA's film programs thus institutionally produced a skewed dual lens through which to understand European nonfiction production of the 1920s. Of greater concern is that it initiated a division between two types of filmmaking that came to dominate the postwar landscape of nonfiction cinematographic production: documentary and art films. Bense observed a similar split between two primary literary tendencies: creative writing (*Erschöpfung*) and education (*Erziehung* or *Tendenz*).<sup>16</sup> Such a dual vision not only is too polarized but also fails to account for essay films such as *Inflation*, which do not strictly adhere to either of these two categories (art and documentary) but fall between them.

That *Inflation* and the other films discussed here coincided with high modernism in the arts is not coincidental. Early essay films are concomitantly responses to both the aesthetic avant-garde and to what might be called a documentary impulse or a trend toward realism in the literary arts. This tendency is undoubtedly related to the contemporary popularity of photography and film, and especially to these mediums' increasing concern with verisimilitude. In addition, within the framework of feature cinema, it is generally assumed that a process of standardization, which began around 1908 with the streamlining of narrative film, was firmly consolidated by the 1920s. Noël Burch has termed this process the "Institutional Mode of Representation," which he defines as "that set of (written or unwritten) directives which has been historically interiorized by directors and technicians as the irreducible base of 'film language' within the institution and which has remained a constant over the past fifty years, independently of the vast stylistic changes which have taken place." The institutional mode of reception, he elaborates, "has also of course been interiorized by all spectators as they learn (generally at a very early age) to read the films of the institution."<sup>17</sup> As the production of feature films increased, certain genres became part of the staple fare; these included melodrama, detective stories, comedy, historical fiction, horror, and the like. However, just as genres became solidified in the feature film, so too, I argue, did genres in the nonfiction film.

The boom in feature films that characterized the entertainment landscape in the 1920s was supplemented by an equally vibrant proliferation of nonfiction films. At this point, the division of feature films into fiction and nonfiction modes remained fairly distinct. The former used narrative resources and visual spectacle to satisfy the demand for entertainment and distraction, whereas the latter fed on what we might today call a documentary appeal, which, through its assumed direct access to the real, satisfied a quest for knowledge and fascination with outside reality. Film historian Tom Gunning contrasts what he terms “the *view*, a descriptive mode based on the act of looking and display, with the *documentary*, which is a more rhetorical and discursive form.”<sup>18</sup> The latter category included newsreels, science films, ethnographic films, colonial films, travel films, instructional films (*Lehrfilme*), culture films (*Kulturfilme*), and the like, the purpose of which was primarily informative and educational. These documentary shorts were often screened before the longer, spectacular features. Grierson commented negatively after seeing a series of these short films:

Together they have brought the popular lecture to a pitch undreamed of, and even impossible, in the days of magic lanterns. . . . These films, of course, would not like to be called lecture films, but this, for all their disguises, is what they are. They do not dramatise, they do not even dramatise an episode: they describe, and even expose, but in any aesthetic sense, only rarely reveal. Herein is their formal limit, and it is unlikely that they will make any considerable contribution to the fuller art of documentary.<sup>19</sup>

Grierson was not alone in his disappointment. Others argued that these nonfiction shorts were often as weak as their longer fiction counterparts owing to their formulaic production. For instance, in his seminal 1911 essay “The Birth of a Sixth Art,” the critic Ricciotto Canudo sharply complained that both shorts and feature films were not living up to their creative and aesthetic potential:

In an age lacking in imagination, such as ours, when an excess of documentation is everywhere, weakening artistic creativity, and patience games are triumphing over expressions of creative talent, the cinematograph

offers the paroxysm of the spectacle: objective life represented in a wholly exterior manner, on the one hand with rapid miming, on the other with documentaries.<sup>20</sup>

What Canudo longed for was a cinematic form based on imagination, one that would propel the new medium in the direction of an art rather than in the direction of a medium catering primarily to the masses. As the title of Canudo's essay suggests, cinema has the potential to become a new sixth art, taking its place alongside architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry.<sup>21</sup> Canudo was not alone in his pronouncements: he joined a growing chorus of art critics and filmmakers who believed that the new medium should be treated as an art form and be discussed as such. Echoing this general sentiment, Ruttmann penned a short proclamation entitled "Kunst und Film" ("Art and film," c. 1913) in which he argued against narrative films, proposing instead that cinema is an inherently visual art form and therefore should be most closely allied with painting and dance.<sup>22</sup> A couple of years later, he revised his theory, declaring that the new medium should be situated between painting and music because the successive movement of frames was such an integral part of film.<sup>23</sup> This connection to music will play a fundamental role in the development of the essay film.

From these explorations emerged a cinematic avant-garde or art cinema. Within this grouping of filmmakers were Impressionists such as Louis Dulluc, Marcel l'Herbier, Germaine Dulac, Abel Gance, and Jean Epstein; Expressionists such as Robert Wiene; Surrealists such as Louis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Antonin Artaud, and Robert Desnos; and Dadaists, including Richter, Eggeling, Ruttmann, Duchamp, René Clair, Francis Picabia, and Fernand Léger.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the variations, Clair termed a significant body of films "pure cinema" and Richter called them "absolute cinema." Clair held that pure cinema "can be found in fragmentary fashion in a number of films; it seems in fact that a film fragment becomes pure cinema as soon as a sensation is aroused in the viewer by purely visual means."<sup>25</sup> Clair wrote this during the era of silent cinema, and, as I shall show later, the advent of sound radically affected theories of film as a primarily visual art.

Some film historians divide the cinematic avant-garde of the 1920s into three rough categories: abstract films, surrealist cinema, and Soviet

production.<sup>26</sup> Critics such as A. L. Rees have proposed a major division between avant-garde films that encode primarily an aesthetic critique and those that are political; what brings them together is their shared reaction to and against “commercial fiction film.”<sup>27</sup> Some critics define avant-garde cinema according to modes of production or systems of distribution, and others make divisions along national lines. Yet others follow more conceptually the manner in which space and time are radically reconfigured.<sup>28</sup> What all of these commentators have in common is that they understand avant-garde cinema as motivated in opposition to commercial fiction cinema. As Scott MacDonald observes, our very understanding of what is cinema has been so dominated by commercial films “that even when filmmakers produce and exhibit alternative cinematic forms, the dominant cinema is implied by the alternatives.”<sup>29</sup>

These instances of alternative cinema are known as the cinematic avant-garde. In his study of the avant-garde, Peter Bürger proposed that at its core the formation provides a fundamental critique of “the category *art as institution*.”<sup>30</sup> Bürger details how during the 1920s a series of historical, social, and cultural confluences brought about a transformation or awareness in the aesthetic sphere by different groups of artists who assumed that “when art is institutionalized as ideology in developed bourgeois society . . . its critique must engage its most developed exemplification.”<sup>31</sup> Extending Bürger’s theory to the specific domain of filmmaking, I argue that avant-garde cinema emerged as a parallel response to the burgeoning popularity and influence of the cinematic apparatus. For Christian Metz, the “cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry (which works to fill cinemas, not to empty them); it is also the mental machinery—another industry—which spectators ‘accustomed to the cinema’ have internalized historically and which has adapted them to the consumption of films. (The Institution is outside us and inside us, indistinctly collective and intimate, sociological and psychoanalytical).”<sup>32</sup> Avant-garde filmmakers radically challenged the institutionalization of cinema as a commercial mass medium produced for entertainment and sought instead to create an art form that in its operation constituted a critique. This critique was not just directed against the institution of cinema—using film as an aesthetic or artistic medium—it also challenged the very institution of art and its traditional forms of expression. In this sense, avant-garde cinema constituted a double form of institutional critique.



Although avant-garde films were in many instances produced independently, in some cases they were directly impacted by the requirements of the commercial film industry. A few were made to satisfy the quota of national films that had to be shot before foreign films could be imported and distributed for screening. Ironically the resulting elimination of commercial pressures yielded remarkable results, such as Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), produced as a *Kontingentfilme* or quota film for Fox Europe. In other instances, filmmakers took advantage of commercial opportunities, as in Oskar Fischinger's advertisements for Muratti cigarettes. Many films, such as Richter's *Race Symphony* (1929), were screened before feature films and therefore depended on the popularity of the latter for their distribution.

Despite the fact that the cinematic landscape of the 1920s was dominated by spectacular, commercial, and large-scale fictional films, there was a parallel thriving industry in nonfiction cinema—a category already perceived as consisting of two branches: one based on facts, or science, that in the 1930s would be called documentaries, and the other based on avant-garde art. The essay film emerged in response not only to the institutionalization of feature films but also to nonfiction documentary films and avant-garde cinema. By 1928 (the year of Richter's *Inflation*), the theory of the institutionalized mode of representation (IMR) of commercial films could be applied to two branches of nonfiction cinema—fact films and art films. The predictability and patternlike approach of these productions was similar to that found in feature films.

Aside from technological innovations, these avant-garde productions did little to advance and broaden the cinematic field. As Grierson observed, “The rebellion from the who-gets-who tradition of commercial cinema to the tradition of pure form in cinema is no great shakes as a rebellion. Dadaism, expressionism, symphonies are all in the same category. They present new beauties and new shapes; they fail to present new persuasions.”<sup>33</sup> Richter expressed a similar disdain for nonfiction cinema when he declared a beautiful film of a rural landscape or a “romantic” village to be highly problematic because it reveals nothing of the history and sociopolitics of the region. “Outwardly everything looked quite picturesque, and there were plenty of opportunities for marvelous shots. But such a manner teaches one nothing about the object represented. And yet this is the documentarist's usual style, this superficial reportage.”<sup>34</sup>

The category of nonfiction, as it was then understood, was becoming increasingly bankrupt. Indeed, in 1930 at the second avant-garde film gathering in Brussels, it was declared that “the Avant Garde as a purely aesthetic movement has passed its climax and is on the way to concentrating on the social and political film, mainly in the documentary form.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus only half a dozen years after Richter’s *Rhythmus 21* and Flaherty’s *Nanook* one can detect an increasing frustration with the state of nonfiction film and a call for new directions. Grierson critiqued what had become purely factual film, stating that the “really real” is a product of creative rearrangements and subjective “interpretations.” He was especially irritated by the current state of factual films, which, he declared, did not sufficiently differ from the much older “illustrated lectures.” Grierson doubted that such productions would advance the nonfiction genre in any significant way. He also condemned the artistic innovations of Dada, Surrealist, and abstract films. Instead he saw creative potential in a mix of documentary footage and fictional narratives. He projected that just as “documentary has gone on its way . . . to include dramatic films like *Moana*, *Earth* and *Turkish* . . ., in time it will include other kinds as different in form and intention from *Moana* as *Moana* was from *Voyage au Congo*.”<sup>36</sup> For his part, Richter singled out the work of the “English documentarians”—Cavalcanti, Wright, and Grierson—as examples of the development of a new type of filmmaking.<sup>37</sup>

By the late 1920s, then, there was a mounting frustration, and what might even be called an aesthetic “crisis,” regarding alternative cinema. Nonfiction filmmaking, like art films, had come to constitute a cinematic category to be critiqued and exploded. It is at precisely this juncture that the essay film emerged. Situated in a space between science and art (to echo Lukács), it would come to define a major genre of cinema—one that was as opposed to fiction and documentary film as it was to art film.

WALTER RUTTMANN’S *BERLIN*:  
*SYMPHONY OF A GREAT CITY* (1927)

In “First Principles of Documentary” (1932), Grierson spent a surprising amount of time criticizing one film, Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, to denounce an entire trend, which he termed the

“symphony film.” Grierson remarked: “I hold the symphony tradition of cinema for a danger and *Berlin* for the most dangerous of all film models to follow.” He charged that Ruttmann’s film was responsible for initiating a fashion of city films, claiming that “in fifty scenarios presented by the tyros, forty-five are symphonies of Edinburgh or of Ecclefechan or of Paris or of Prague.”<sup>38</sup> What exactly are these “symphony” films, and why did Grierson deem them to be particularly “dangerous”? On the surface, judging by Grierson’s initial descriptions of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, it should have offered much of what the “father of documentary” would have extolled in a nonfiction film, as he argued: “*Berlin or the Symphony of a City* initiated the more modern fashion of finding documentary material on one’s doorstep: in events which have no novelty of the unknown, or romance of noble savage on exotic landscape, to recommend them. It represented, slimly, the return from romance to reality.”<sup>39</sup> Although Grierson presumably should have welcomed this return to reality, there was a quality of Ruttmann’s cinematic symphony, as well as of those that followed, that rankled the critic. Grierson proposed that *Berlin* emerged directly out of the tradition of what he called “tempo’d accumulation” of earlier experiments, such as Alberto Calvalcanti’s *Rien que les Heures* (1926) and Léger’s *Ballet Mecanique* (1924). Grierson was quick to acknowledge, however, that these films did not have enough “march” to comprise a distinct genre on their own; they lacked something, and therein lay the crux of why he took such an active dislike to symphony films.<sup>40</sup> This absence threatened what he perceived to be at the very core of his definition of a documentary, in which, according to Grierson, “The artist need not posit the ends—for that is the work of the critic—but the ends must be there, informing his description and giving finality (beyond space and time) to the slice of life he has chosen.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, a documentary must present a clear argument and conclusions. He was relying on a firmly instilled, but arguably etymological, grounding of “documentary” from *docere*: to teach and to warn.<sup>42</sup> If the message is not clear and the material presented is inconclusive, then the entire product becomes problematic and even “dangerous.” For Grierson these inconclusive symphony or city films threatened to destabilize his innovative attempt to define a new genre of documentary film. But it is precisely for this reason that Ruttmann’s film deserves, and even demands, special attention as an initial version of a musical essay.

During this period, all filmic essays were “silent.” This is significant because the demands of translating the text into images cannot be underestimated, and lengthy intertitles were deemed unwieldy and impractical. Perhaps it is this silence that has led most film historians to locate the emergence of the essay film with the advent of sound, when texts could be spoken either as voice-overs or by characters.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, one cinematic trait of the post-silent-essay film is the interplay between two tracks, the aural and the visual. Sometimes one of these tracks reinforces the other, and at other times they compete with each other or are completely contradictory. It bears mentioning, however, that silent film screenings were never properly silent; they were often accompanied by live music or recordings, or occasionally by a lecturer. In addition, these films were not originally conceived of as entirely mute; especially in avant-garde production, the montage and rhythm of the film was determined and sometimes predetermined by an accompanying set piece of musical composition.

Grierson’s critique notwithstanding, *Berlin*—as an interpretation of the city of Berlin or a meditation on it—secured a key position both within the national canon of Weimar films and in the history of international nonfiction cinema. Ruttmann was initially trained as an architect, but he very quickly turned to impressionist painting. Like Richter, his artistic career was interrupted by military service during the World War I, after which he resumed painting, inspired by the work of figures such as Henri Matisse, Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky, and Robert Delaunay. Also like Richter, Ruttmann quickly moved away from abstract painting to experiment with the relatively new medium of film. In 1921, he produced his first abstract film, *Opus I* (1921), a short work consisting of undulating painted and color tinted spheres, orbs, and geometric shapes choreographed to rhythmic patterns. A musical score composed by Max Butting accompanied the film. Following the success of *Opus I*, Ruttmann made three more “Opus” films: *II* (1923), *III* (1924), and *IV* (1925).

*Berlin*, made following Ruttmann’s shift from abstraction to representation, is a remarkable document not only of everyday life in the major German metropolis of the 1920s but also of Ruttmann’s extraordinary use of rhythm, cutting, music, and montage to structure a film.<sup>44</sup> The production developed from Ruttmann’s collaboration with a number of feature filmmakers. The cinematographer was Karl Freund, who had worked with

Fritz Lang, F. W. Murnau, and Paul Wegener. Freund played a large role in the film's conceptualization and scripting; indeed he claimed to have co-written the storyboard with Ruttmann but, as he was careful to note, all of the "ideas and the abstract ideas came from him [Ruttmann]."<sup>45</sup> To create his audiovisual "symphony," Ruttmann worked closely with the Austrian composer Edmund Meisel, known for his atonal and contrapuntal compositions (such as the score of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*). Meisel conceived of his musical score for *Berlin* as an assemblage of noises that characterize a cosmopolitan center. The expectation was that the urban spectator would recognize in the "symphony" the sounds that emanated from, and resonated with, the sonic environment of quotidian life in the metropolis. This close collaboration between composer and director resulted in a meticulously choreographed composition of images and music. Whereas Ruttmann structured his *Opus* films on the sonata form, for *Berlin* he adopted the more encompassing form of the five-movement symphony, with music scored to the five acts of the film.<sup>46</sup> Thus a slow opening *Andante* composition is played while the city sleeps, followed by a faster *Allegro con fuoco* as it awakens and work begins. A slower and more ponderous *Adagio* guides the midday rest, giving way to an energetic *Allegretto* that accompanies evening sport and entertainment activities, and all culminate in a resounding *Finale*.<sup>47</sup>

In sharp contrast to the trend to increase the role of fantasy in narrative film through the use of fictional stories and big stars, Ruttmann and others experimented with photographic realism to explore potential new territories that cinema could open. It was widely believed that cinematic verisimilitude offered the ability to capture the mobility of everyday modern life. Hence conspicuously absent from *Berlin* are plot, love story, suspense, happy ending, actors, or stars; according to Ruttmann, the main part is assumed by the city playing itself.<sup>48</sup>

Even though Ruttmann had moved away from abstract geometrical forms, the structuring principle of *Berlin* is based not on narrative sequences but on the rhythm and movements that characterize the cycle of urban daily life. What Ruttmann's camera captures is a "world in motion." This effect of motion is enhanced by a montage technique based on "visual rhyming," which occurs when, for instance, the horizontal geometrical shapes dissolve into concrete crossbars on the railroad track, or when a shot of dogs fighting is followed by one of men

fighting. In addition, music plays a significant role in the organization of cuts and montage. *Berlin* is, to use Bela Balázs's contemporaneous term, a piece of "optical music." It is fully conceived as a synthesized audiovisual production in which a sound score drives the image track. In *The Spirit of Film* (1930), Balázs described the rhythmic dimensions of Soviet films by Eisenstein and Vitkor Turin as "montage essays." For Balázs, "the greatest emphasis is placed on the rhythmical and purely musical, decorative effects of montage. Here the most irrational cinematic elements become the chosen mode of expression of the most intellectual. Rhythm becomes the expression of scientific thought."<sup>49</sup> Thus the rational or scientific is located in the structure, whereas the creative is found in the images.

Many different themes run through *Berlin*. Three in particular help structure the text and open lines of interpretation and meaning. First, the film takes us to and through the relatively young metropolis of Berlin. Its division into five acts corresponds to the periods in the conventional workday: predawn, morning, noon, afternoon, and evening. Initial shots of the awakening city are followed by people going to work, taking their lunch break, resuming work, and finally taking up leisure and entertainment activities that mark the end of the day. Second, *Berlin* is a self-reflexive film about filmmaking—and to that extent it is an *essay film*. With acute self-awareness, Ruttmann made reference to the major filmic genres prevalent at the time, including the abstract film, the documentary, and fictional feature film. Finally, *Berlin* documents the explosion of advertising during the 1920s and the eventual transformation of modernity into spectacle. Thus it is a film about advertising, which was at the time a booming development in the marketing of cinema; it displays the contemporary world in which exchange values have become ubiquitous.

Ruttmann experimented with various types of filmmaking in *Berlin*. He made clear references to a broad spectrum of abstract films: studies of geometric patterns and forms found in nature and industry, or even the spinning "Rotoreliefs" of Marcel Duchamp. Yet the film also features an obvious fictional sequence of a melodramatic suicide. The reenacted suicide of a young woman, conveyed through hyperbolic gestures and facial expressions, is highly loaded emotionally. This sequence includes dramatic shots of madly swirling leaves and a wild rollercoaster ride as

overdetermined metaphors of life. The suicide episode stands in direct contrast to the montage that directly precedes it: a shot of a downtrodden woman followed by an elegant hand removing a pearl necklace from a jewelry display window. By including these quasi-documentary images, Ruttmann suggests that the dominant form of melodrama prevalent in fictional popular cinema is not the only way of showing life's brutal inequalities. Shots of "real life" are made to appear as powerful as fiction; the "real" images render the fictional unnecessary. Not coincidentally, the feature film advertised by brightly lit signs in *Berlin* stars Charlie Chaplin as the "Little Tramp," underscoring how commercial cinema functions to mythologize social conditions. In contrast, *Berlin* presents the city as based on reality and offers an alternative to the types of popular entertainment packaged by the dominant mode of production. Let us remember that Ruttmann's work was a "contingency film," whose existence enabled commercial imports from abroad to be screened. Viewed from that angle, *Berlin* can be read as an insurgent meditation on the possibilities of an "other cinema," a countercinema as it were, substituting a filmmaking of reality for the artificial standard fare so readily devoured by the masses.

Ruttmann did not just champion his nonfiction composition against other forms of cinema; he also entertained a dialogue with another modern artistic medium: photography. Although its origins date back to the early nineteenth century, photography as an art had reached a high level of sophistication in the 1920s. Many artists found the medium's innate ability to image the reality passing before the camera, freeze it in time, and even make visible that which the naked human eye could not see to be irresistible. Ruttmann's shots of empty streets resonate strongly with the still photographs that Charles Marville made of Paris half a century earlier. Many of the images that make up *Berlin* also evoke the work of more contemporary photographers, especially Eugene Atget, who created uncanny pictures of empty Parisian streets, kiosks, and shop windows. But the most significant dialogue that *Berlin* establishes with photography is with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* work of Albert Renger-Patzsch. The latter's detailed prints of factories, machines, and other creations of modern technology parallel the almost obsessive repetition in Ruttmann's sequences of industry. As Renger-Patzsch explained in 1927, "we still don't sufficiently appreciate the opportunity to capture

the material of things. The structure of wood, stone, and metal can be shown with a perfection beyond the means of painting. . . . To do justice to modern technology's rigid linear structure, to the lofty gridwork of cranes and bridges, to the dynamism of machines operating at one thousand horsepower—only photography is capable of that."<sup>50</sup> Such fascination, glorification, and aestheticization of the inanimate technological world betrays a perspective dominated by the overvaluation of strict formal properties.

By setting his cinematic images against those of still photography, Ruttmann pointed to the common element of both media: the photographic negative. However, he also underscored a crucial difference, namely, the role of motion. Moving images are inherent to cinematic production. The etymology of "cinema" derives from kinesis: movement. Ruttmann made the point that it is precisely the ability to capture movement in time and space through duration, montage, and other editing techniques that makes film *the* medium of modernity. Further, his *Berlin* anticipates sound cinema by evoking a musical symphony in both its title and its structure, adding one more dimension to representation and distancing the film even further from the static, singular, and silent photographic image.

Ruttmann's film stands as an impressive alternative, neither a commercial fictional film, nor reportage, nor an abstract film. It constitutes a singular prototype of a modern cinematic essay about a newly emergent metropolis. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* has its literary parallel in the equally remarkable *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), in which Alfred Döblin sought to extend the formal limits of the novel through insertions of factual reportage. Ruttmann's film attests to the ability of cinema to represent the complexities and multiple layers of a city in a more complex way than the other "arts" could do. He orchestrated his piece, directing and placing each component as in a musical ensemble. *Berlin* is at once about Berlin and modernity, but most important, it is about film. Instead of extolling the latter's potential in a lengthy written treatise, Ruttmann used the medium itself to illustrate, perform, and self-reflect on what it can do. To that extent, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* harkens back to primitive cinema as a form of "monstration" or showing: a pure "cinema of attractions" that keeps its vitality even when forced by history to go underground.<sup>51</sup>



DZIGA VERTOV'S *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA* (1929)

Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is another ambitious work with a significant impact on the development of the essay film. This exploration uses self-reflexivity to make an important commentary on the general possibilities of cinema. Just as Lessing once famously argued that a theory of the novel should be in the form of a novel, so Vertov suggested that a theory of film should be in the form of a film. *Man with a Movie Camera* is that critical step. As the credits elaborate: "An excerpt from the diary of a camera man, this film presents an experiment in cinematic communication." This concept of experiment is closely aligned with that of the essay, which Musil, among others, noted is related to an "attempt," an "investigation." The experimental dimension of the film also evokes a scientific process, recalling the manner in which Musil, like Lukács, positioned the essay between science and art. Musil maintained that the essay "takes its form and method from science, its matter from art," and "proceeds from facts, like the natural sciences."<sup>52</sup> Vertov, immersed in a milieu in which scientific progress represented the revolutionary and utopian potential of constructing and realizing a new society, did not dismiss science. Indeed much of his work elaborates on how advances in science and technology could help realize this new community. His "Kino-Eye"—the cinematic equivalent of László Moholy-Nagy's "New Vision" photography—posits the superiority of camera vision over conventional forms of perceptual experience. Vertov's camera privileges technology over natural vision, the machine over the human eye, and leads straight to the question of whether human and technological vision are at all compatible. As the preamble to the film states, *Man with a Movie Camera* is the "cinematic communication of visible events." To that extent Vertov's film echoes Musil's musings on the essay in which the writer hypothesizes that the facts from which the essay proceeds "are not generally observable, and also their connections are in many cases only a singularity. There is no solution, but only a series of particular ones."<sup>53</sup> In addition, Vertov's theory of the interval upon which he based all perception of movement, like his theory of montage, is rooted in translating the "theory of relativity on the screen." As he explained, "intervals (the transitions from one movement to another) are the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movements themselves."<sup>54</sup> Annette Michelson has demonstrated that Vertov's concept of interval derives from a model other than that of musical composition, appearing rather to stem in large

part from mathematics and physics. She explains that, for Vertov, “montage means organizing film fragments (shots) into a film object. It means ‘writing’ something cinematic with the recorded shots.”<sup>55</sup> The parallels to Musil are striking if one considers that he equated essayistic writing with gathering facts and thoughts and establishing order and connections—much like what the filmmaker does through the process of editing and montage. Vertov worked with what was readily available. In that sense his method is similar to that proposed by Lukács who characterized the essay as “[speaking] of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive.”<sup>56</sup> Extending Lukács’s theory of the essay to film, we can see that it originates in documentary material (“dry matter”) but quickly moves into fiction (“free flight”).

Vertov, in his preamble to *Man with a Movie Camera*, took care to inform the spectator that the film has no scenario, no sets, and no actors. This statement serves as a program rather than a summary of the film because despite all the technical “tricks” to which he resorted, his shots are based in “everyday reality,” which Vertov concluded (in an intertitle in the film) will be the language of cinema, totally separated from theater and literature: “This experimental work was made with the purpose of creating a true international pure language of cinema characterized by its total differentiation from the language of theatre and literature.” It eschews verbal signs, and only admits images and rhythms. Thus, like Ruttmann and Richter, Vertov undertook a conscious attempt to produce an essayistic communication based not on linguistic code but rather on visual representation.

As announced in the preamble, *Man with a Movie Camera* foregrounds the cinematic apparatus and its operation. The first shot is a close-up of a film camera that fills the screen; superimposed on top of it, and dwarfed by its enormity, is the tiny figure of the cameraman. Next come shots of rows of empty theater chairs and a large motionless projector in a cramped projection booth. Then we see a metal canister containing a reel of celluloid as a hand reaches in, removes it, and begins to thread it into the projector. The camera cuts back to the empty theater and records its open curtains and seats. The audience, composed of average looking citizens (many wearing worker’s caps and some with small children on their laps), streams in and takes its place. The lights are dimmed, the camera focuses on the orchestra pit and the musicians, and the show begins with “#1”

projected on the screen. In this manner, Vertov creates a cinematic frame for his film—one that doubles the viewing experience. His celluloid audience multiplies the virtual spectator of *Man with a Movie Camera*. After a few moments, the camera glides through an open window into a bedroom where a woman lies sleeping. The spectator's gaze is limited to the camera's eye and its vision—they become voyeurs intruding into the private life and space of others who are unaware of this breach. As if to break the almost disturbing intimacy revealed by the images of the sleeping woman, Vertov then cuts to images of the homeless sleeping in public areas. This is followed, as in Ruttmann's *Berlin* film, by shots of a depopulated city waking up as the camera tracks desolate boulevards, window displays of closed storefronts, inactive factories, empty parks, stray posters, and banners. Yet two important differences from *Berlin* are immediately apparent: the first is the constant cutting back to extreme close-ups of the woman in bed—her bare neck and arms filling the screen as she lies vulnerable, unwittingly exposing herself to the camera's "Peeping Tom" eye; the second are the disorienting shots filmed at oblique angles and from unusual perspectives, interspersed with straight ones of streets and buildings. The strange shots require the viewers to adjust their vision to recognize what is in front of their eyes. Vertov thus suggests two main features of cinema: the camera as an instrument of scopophilic pleasure and the technological ability to make visible that which is normally invisible by manipulating viewing angles and radically changing perspective.

Unlike Ruttmann, who does not focus on specific individuals, Vertov returns to views of certain people and locations: the same woman and man are recorded as they awaken and begin their day; an empty boulevard with a Gorky banner suspended over it is reshot several times as the street becomes a busy, heavily trafficked artery; a placard that reappears at random intervals is ultimately revealed to be an advertisement for a feature film. The repetition of shots of locations that change as human activity interfaces with them as well as of shots of people who interact with the camera serve to engage the spectator directly with the action depicted on the screen. Unlike Ruttmann's *Berlin*, which maintains an objective distance, Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* brings the viewer into an intimate proximity with the narrative.

The tactics of cinematic self-consciousness and subjectivity that characterize *Man with a Movie Camera* are underscored by the repeated shots

of the cameraman. Whether from the medium perspective that tracks him with the movie camera and tripod over his shoulder as he leaves an apartment building in the early morning hours, or later on as his reflection is caught in the camera lens, the cameraman is ever present. In fact, he and his apparatus of production are continuously foregrounded, making *Man with a Movie Camera* one of the most self-reflexive of all cinematic productions. Unlike Buster Keaton's character in the commercial film *The Camera Man* (1928), Vertov's cameraman is not a hapless hero embedded in a fictional romantic comedy of errors; rather, he is presented as a highly trained and skilled professional. Close to the end of the film, a series of shots show him in profile, filming while standing in a rapidly moving car, his hair blowing in the wind and his white shirt sleeves rolled up to expose tanned, athletic forearms. These images prefigure the persona of the war cameraman popularized during World War II and later taken to extremes in the 1960s by individuals such as British war photographer Tim Page, and even later in the 1990s with the figure of the imperiled reporter in Bosnia (see chapter 4). Over and over again, Vertov's film illustrates the inventiveness of the intrepid photographer as he seeks difficult and at times dangerous shots, for example, placing the camera directly on the tracks of an oncoming train. In another sequence, the camera is positioned in an automobile that drives alongside another car to obtain a tracking shot of the passengers. Indeed, throughout the film the presence of a second camera tracking the principal cameraman is always acknowledged. The process by which certain filmic shots are obtained is thereby exposed, and the production of filmic images demystified. *Man with a Movie Camera* thus stands as an instructional manual on filmmaking, which was understandable in the 1920s.

Soon after the opening sequence of the awakening city, Vertov inserted his first cinematographic "trick." The screen splits, and a shot of a street-car is reproduced multiple times. This shatters the visual plane into fragments—an effect similar to that of a kaleidoscope which, when twisted or shaken, breaks into multiple images. The striking sequence is followed by a series of still photographs, thereby establishing the photographic lineage of cinematic film and the limits of that static medium when compared to the moving image. *Man with a Movie Camera* is replete with scenes demonstrating the remarkable potential of cinema to produce new sights. It is not just the exterior world that Vertov makes visible in the film; he also demonstrates how inner physiological and psychological

states can be translated into accessible images. The cameraman enters into a “Bier Halle” (beer hall), and suddenly his miniaturized figure appears inside a full beer mug. This is followed by a shaky and blurry series of shots that suggest the point of view of a drunken person. As the cameraman continues to consume alcohol, the shots become progressively erratic and seemingly out of control. The last quarter of *Man with a Movie Camera* is dominated by an increasing number of superimpositions and trick photography. The effect of these visual *tours de force* is one of both amusement and amazement, reminding us of the early magical cinema of Georges Méliès whose experiments in film manipulation resulted in fantastic projections. In fact, Vertov’s film combines the actuality style of the Lumière brothers and their shots of everyday life with the playfulness of Méliès’s productions; as a result, *Man with a Movie Camera* is a cinematic essay of attractions in which *performance* and *spectacle* maintain the viewers’ interest in a film without “scenario” or “characters.”

Grierson at one point dismisses Vertov’s work as “not a film at all: it is a snapshot album.”<sup>57</sup> Yet *Man with a Movie Camera* is clearly not a random assortment of images taken by a tourist. Aside from the director’s remarkable editing and arrangements, Vertov chose very carefully what he decided to shoot. Immediately following the scene in the beer pub, for example, the cameraman visits the Lenin Club in Odessa where, in contrast to the drunken revelry of the previous sequence, people read newspapers and play chess and checkers. In the shooting gallery behind the club, a woman fires at a figure of a cartoon man with a swastika on his cap. After each successful shot, a board flips down with the words “Father of Fascism.” In this way, Vertov calls for a resistance against the newly rising National Socialist party in Germany. His political position is clear, and it is further sharpened when we recall that the beer establishment that clouded the mind and produced a drunken haze was identified by its German designation, “Bier Halle,” the type of site where Hitler recruited his first followers. In the same spirit, *Man with a Movie Camera* is also replete with images of modern machinery, a sign of its age, but also mass communications media: typewriters, telephones, telegraph wires, posters, advertising, and the like. With this film, Vertov clearly situated cinema within the expansion of the twentieth-century media network.

Most of the focus in *Man with a Movie Camera* relates to Vertov’s concept of the kino-eye, which foregrounds the transformation of vision, and

the role of cinema in working to change the way one sees. As Vertov subsequently claimed, "I make the viewer see in the manner best suited to my presentation of this or that visual phenomenon. . . . I am a kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. . . . I free myself from human immobility."<sup>58</sup> This realignment of vision is achieved in part by the director's meticulous system of montage, and especially by the calculated intervals between shots. Vertov conceived of *Man with a Movie Camera* as an audiovisual project, structuring the film rhythmically to music that was meant to accompany it. Although it was made the year of the first sound film, the technology lagged one small step behind, preventing its full actualization. Sound is used to set the pace, to structure movement, but it corresponds to no diegetic images. Like Ruttman and Richter, Vertov used sound conceptually as music and rhythm, and to that extent it is mainly nonrepresentational. However, there is an exception that comes close towards the end of the film. The cameraman goes to a second Lenin Club, called the "First Five Year Plan." Inside, the camera locates a bust of Marx, checkers and chess sets, a radio transmitter and receiver, and a loudspeaker. Then follows a remarkable montage sequence: the image of the loudspeaker fills the screen, and superimposed inside of it is an image of an accordion being played; cut to someone playing chess; cut back to the loudspeaker (this time with an image of an ear inside it); cut to women playing checkers; then back to the loudspeaker (this time with fingers playing piano keys); and finally a dissolve to a close-up of a mouth inside the loudspeaker clearly forming words. This sequence is followed by a rapid series of images of spoons playing on bottles and washboards and random shots of people laughing, smiling, *talking*. The effect is so close to aural sequences that one can almost "hear" the image track: accordion strains, piano chords, a voice singing, the joy and laughter surrounding the improvised beat. Music is produced with whatever household items are at hand. With the shots of the mouth and the people laughing, Vertov asks the spectator to imagine the human voice in particular. In 1931, acknowledging that the sound revolution had caught the world off guard, he called for the development of "portable sound equipment" and the establishment of a "*sound-producing and sound-recording radio-cinema station*."<sup>59</sup> Vertov's kino-eye prefigures the not-so-distant future when recorded sound radically alters cinematic form and the essay film hits its stride.



FIGURE 2.1 Slatan Dudow and Bertolt Brecht, *Kuhle Wampe, or Who Owns the World?*, 1932.



FIGURE 2.2 Humphrey Jennings, *The True Story of Lili Marlene*, 1944.

## 2

### SPEAKING ESSAYS OR INTERRUPTIONS

*The essay approaches the logic of music, that stringent and yet aconceptual art of transition, in order to appropriate for verbal language something it forfeited under the domination of discursive logic—although that logic cannot be set aside but only outwitted within its own forms by dint of incisive subjective expression.*

—THEODOR W. ADORNO, "THE ESSAY AS FORM"

**W**ith the end of the 1920s came the conclusion of the so-called silent era of cinema. Although cinema was never truly silent, the understanding that it rests on several prejudices or presumptions intimately related to aesthetic considerations and to film's status as a "seventh art." The medium's integration of music rendered redundant the accompanying orchestra common in early film, and the ability to record voices and dialogue in sound film had a direct impact on cinema. Without the need for clumsy and often inadequate intertitles, film narrative could become much more complex. For nonfiction film, recorded sound enabled the technique of the voice-over to accompany the image track and narrate the events—a practice that grew directly out of the illustrated lecture. Feature filmmakers were quick to embrace sound cinema, and the transition was relatively swift, rendering silent productions obsolete within a couple of years. The transition was much slower



in nonfiction film, however, due in part to the high costs associated with sound recording and production, and to various aesthetic prejudices against the new medium.

The advent of synchronized sound significantly affected the two dominant branches of nonfiction cinema: documentary and art films. In “Sound in Films” (1939), Brazilian filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti recalled the common adage among serious filmmakers and artists that “silence meant art.”<sup>1</sup> For artist and writer André Breton, sound ruined the aesthetic form of film, which he thought should be located in the images, and filmmaker René Clair, in “The Art of Sound” (1929), nostalgically observed that sound cinema “has conquered the world of voices, but it has lost the world of dreams.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Cavalcanti, whom John Grierson recruited to Britain to work for the General Post Office (GPO) film unit in 1933, ended his decade-long stay in Paris precisely because of the anti-sound bias among the avant-garde French filmmakers with whom he had been collaborating.

The sequencing or montage of sound and image is crucial for the production of meaning. This effect works both diegetically and nondiegetically. As media theorist Rudolf Arnheim noted, sound is capable of shattering the frame of the visual plane of representation in significant ways.<sup>3</sup> First, it may indicate an off-frame diegesis, which is audible but not visible and thereby creates a double or acousmatic space to which the spectator must attend. Second, sound can direct the audience’s attention to an otherwise overlooked character or object within the visual plane of the film. Sound, in other words, functions to highlight. If the camera captures twenty-five people, it is the one who speaks, cries, or sings that attracts the attention of the spectator. Manipulation of sound is as effective as, and perhaps more subtle than, the use of camera angles and lenses in the production of meaning.

Filmmakers often rely on nondiegetic music to enhance or create a “mood.” Keenly aware of this potential for emotional manipulation, Soviet directors Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov argued in 1929 that sound would “destroy the culture of montage” unless it was used contrapuntally.<sup>4</sup> Sound for these figures was never to be used as a suturing device. Pudovkin vehemently proclaimed that “music . . . in sound film [must] *never be the accompaniment*. It must retain its own line.”<sup>5</sup> Arnheim, following Gotthold Lessing’s separation of the arts and

his call for the purity of media, argued that recorded sound and dialogue belonged to radio and not film. To use sound productively and to ensure that the final product should be considered art, filmmakers devised new tactics for the combination of sounds and images. Arnheim proposed the model of “double-track,” or duet, in which the musical compositions would be distinct but interrelated rather than played on their own. Sound, it was soon discovered, could add new layers of signification to a film, and these layers might even contradict the visual track.

The bias against synchronized sound came from those who saw film primarily as an art form. For them, film should clearly distinguish itself from reality; this was fundamental to its art status. The capacity of sound to increase the effect of verisimilitude to an unprecedented degree was anathema because it threatened to immerse the spectators and lead them to forget that they were watching an artificially constructed world, not reality. Yet the development of sound film catered to documentary’s need to represent reality and therefore had substantial implications for this genre. Indeed, it was this characteristic that most separated documentary from fiction film.

The addition of sound elements, often composed of multiple tracks, complicates and adds to both essay and documentary films in several ways. Relevant to this discussion are three primary types of sound: noise, music, and human utterances. Noise refers to audible signs attached to objects and subjects that fill the screen space, such as the cacophonous sounds of traffic, the rhythmic pounding of a jackhammer, or the shrill of a dog barking—sounds that help locate spectators in the diegesis or, conversely, serve to dislocate and confuse them. In short, sound effects heighten the reality register of documentaries. Similarly, music may emanate from an obvious source within the filmic narrative space, be non-diegetic, or be purposefully intertwined with it. Finally, at the most basic level sound gives a voice to filmed subjects and thereby eliminates the need for intertitles. For example, certain types of documentaries that contain lengthy interviews are inconceivable without sound. The speaking subject in film constituted an enormous step forward, but in Britain, due to technical difficulties in simultaneously recording sound and image, it was not until the 1935 production *Housing Problems* that subjects actually spoke to the camera. The recorded voice has a special place, intensifying the “reality” effect by reproducing the “grain of the voice.”

One of the most important outcomes of the transition to sound is the voice-over, or commentary, which provides nonfiction films with a dominant guiding narrative. The voice-over is the perfect device with which to accomplish documentary's pedagogic goal to warn and to teach. The addition of a voice-over commentary or narrative became a dominant characteristic of traditional documentary as it evolved in the thirties. This was in part due to the fact that early sound equipment did not allow for easy simultaneous sound recording, and sound tracks were usually created during postproduction in the studio. In the early 1960s, implementation of highly portable cameras and sound recording devices such as the Nagra III tape recorder made it possible to record image and sound simultaneously, which radically altered the documentary and established the trend of the type of street interviews that characterize Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un été* (1961) and Marker's *Le joli Mai* (1962). Today, reliance on voice-overs remains one of the most prevalent, and often overused, sound tactics in documentary and essay films. This technique is usually acousmatic, meaning that the voice-overs are not anchored to the diegesis but enter the film from an off-space.

Recourse to the voice-over is manifest in many essay films, adding an additional layer of meaning that vies with that emanating from the dialogue and written text. This nondiegetic commentary sometimes resembles the reading of a diary or of personal letters, as in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) or Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977). In other instances, the voice remains "neutral" and relatively toneless, as if delivering a lecture to the viewer, as in Harun Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989). Usually there is a direct correspondence between the commentary and the images and other sounds projected on the screen, with the former illustrating, commenting on, or in some way relating to the latter. In some instances, however, the connection between the visual and the audible is intentionally unrelated, as in Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys from Berlin/1971* (1980). More often than not voice-over commentaries hold a special place in nonfiction film, where they are often granted an authority that is readily accepted and rarely challenged. Many essay filmmakers consciously play with this false authority, however, beckoning the viewer not to accept such commentary but instead to seek out its contradictions, errors, and other kinds of manipulation. Walter Wippersberg's *Festival of Chickens* (1992) constitutes an essay film in the

form of a mock ethnographic documentary in which the voice-over plays the key role in delivering the subversive, irreverent punch line.

The addition of sound enabled the combination of text and image to be carried out in multiple ways. Film was no longer limited to images with an occasional abbreviated text; now a voice-over accompanied the visual track (which might still include text), supplying one more source of information. Messages were effectively transmitted simultaneously through several channels of communication. Overall, then, the addition of sound to film imbued the essay film with myriad possible new threads for weaving into a dense audiovisual text. Adorno used this analogy in arguing that thought and, by extension, the essay do not “progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of texture,” a density that is magnified with the addition of a soundtrack.<sup>6</sup>

The composition of a soundtrack entails more than just music, voices, and noise. With the full integration of sound into cinema, the absence of sound—silence—also became something with which to contend. Sound as an ephemeral, invasive, and pervasive element that could exist everywhere and nowhere at once was particularly intriguing for filmmakers. Unlike the image, which could be tightly framed and existed only on the screen, sound could exist off-screen and thereby explode the aesthetic frame into a realm of the unseen or the nondiegetic. As Cavalcanti observed, “pictures speak to the intelligence. Noise seems to by-pass the intelligence and speak to something very deep and inborn. . . . The picture lends itself to clear statement, while the sound lends itself to suggestion.”<sup>7</sup> Very early on, as we shall see, sound was employed to create an alternative site counter to that of the visual. As Jean-Luc Godard put it decades later in *Ici et Ailleurs* (“Here and elsewhere,” 1974), sound allows us to “hear elsewhere” and thereby to see “elsewhere” as well.

In addition to the aesthetic bias against sound, the exorbitant cost of producing a sound film made the medium inaccessible to smaller commercial studios and independent releases. Sound equipment was not available to John Grierson and his colleagues until they joined the GPO in 1933. In addition to its high cost, optical sound production equipment was bulky and heavy, making location recording almost impossible. The standard practice for nonfiction films in the 1930s was to construct a soundtrack during the postproduction period. For example, Basil Wright’s

*Song of Ceylon* (1934) was shot on location, but Cavalcanti designed and constructed the soundtrack in the GPO studios.

With the advent of sound, the nonfiction genre became concomitantly more limited in its narrative structure and more experimental. During the 1930s, many documentary filmmakers relied on the authoritative voice-over to guide the narrative and to tell a story in a clear and “objective” manner. Ambiguities, ambivalences, contradictions, and playful interludes were gradually eliminated in favor of commentators who presented facts under the misleading guise of truth. A case in point is Luis Buñuel’s *Las Hurdes/Tierra sin Pan* (“Land without bread,” 1932) with its omniscient narrator who tells the spectator at every turn exactly what he or she is seeing. The subjects in front of the camera do not speak; their stories are never told.<sup>8</sup> Nonfiction films became increasingly like newsreels and, in some cases, served as propaganda. At the same time, however, resistance to such streamlining of the documentary genre arose among filmmakers who refused to conform to the strict categories of fiction and nonfiction, instead weaving the two genres into hybrid essays that discouraged passive consumption and promoted active thought. Often these experimental filmmakers explored the possibility of producing additional tracks of meaning through elaborate sound and image montages.

#### BERTOLT BRECHT’S *KUHLE WAMPE* (1931) AND SERGEI EISENSTEIN’S *¡QUE VIVA MEXICO!* (1931)

In 1931 two remarkable films were in production: Sergei Eisenstein’s *¡Que viva Mexico!* and Bertolt Brecht and Slatan Dudow’s *Kuhle Wampe, oder Wem gehört die Welt?* (“Kuhle Wampe, or who owns the world?”). Although the subject matter of the films differ—the former a broad ethnographic study of the different peoples and their cultures in Mexico and the latter a narrowly focused presentation of the working class in Berlin, Germany—their formal methods of presentation and ideological motivations are similar. Both works are montage-based and fragmentary, consisting of episodic documentary footage loosely linked by melodramatic romances. It is significant that both films are their directors’ first forays into sound cinema and music, and they use songs as fundamental

structuring principles. Sound thus orchestrates a complicated interplay between narrative fiction and documentary reality.

In a newspaper article on *Kuhle Wampe* published soon after the film's debut, a critic identified only as E.J. observed that within German cinema it is rare to find productions that do "not show 'people in the theatre,'" by which he meant imaginary stories filmed on artificial sets with professional actors in the false world of the Babelsberg Film Studio. When people are represented in conventional filmic productions, he remarked, those individuals are never from the working class, even if it is the working class that they are meant to represent. By contrast, in *Kuhle Wampe*, "the everyday story of an entire class is constructed—a class that, despite its protection under the constitution and its natural human dignity, barely manages to exist in today's epoch."<sup>9</sup> Brecht and Dudow conceived of *Kuhle Wampe* as a fully collaborative project with the working class, a process in which the directors sought to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of the filmic medium by combining avant-garde formal strategies with socialist realism. Although the social revolution had failed in Germany, left-wing parties and activities remained strong amid optimism that change could still be initiated, despite the growth of fascism.

¡*Que viva Mexico!* evinces a similar revolutionary and utopian spirit. Mexico in the early 1930s was seen by many to be a context ripe for the birth of a new society, sharing many of the conditions that characterized Russia just over a decade earlier. Parallels between the Mexican Renaissance and the Russian avant-garde in these years established a cultural framework conducive for the production of the type of revolutionary film Eisenstein envisioned. Throughout Eisenstein's film there is a dialectic play between the premodern and the contemporary, the rural and the modern.<sup>10</sup>

*Kuhle Wampe* was a collaborative production involving a number of acclaimed left-wing intellectuals and cultural workers: the screenwriter Brecht, the novelist Ernst Ottwalt, the musical composer Hanns Eisler, and the Bulgarian film director Dudow. Ottwalt had just published *Denn sie wissen, was sie tun* ("For they know what they do," 1931), a novel that sharply critiques capitalism, and Dudow had recently made a documentary film on the conditions of workers in *Berlin: Wie der Berliner Arbeiter wohnt* ("How the Berliner worker lives," 1930). Ottwalt's novel, which employs an innovative antirealist technique that relies on a series

of episodes incorporating documentary material and repeated interruption of the narrative flow with an external commentary, clearly influenced Brecht and Dudow's structuring of *Kuhle Wampe* around independent narrative units interspersed with documentary footage. The novel bears structural similarities to Alfred Döblin's *Berlin, Alexanderplatz*, as well as to Robert Musil's fragmentary, essayistic *The Man Without Qualities*. In place of the external commentary of Ottwalt's novel, however, songs interrupt the film's narrative flow. Music, together with a number of documentary shots, both organizes the episodes of *Kuhle Wampe* and structures the viewer's relation of identification or distance.

Eisenstein never finished *¡Que viva Mexico!*, although he filmed more than 170,000 feet of material in 1931. As put together in 1979 by Alexandrov in the spirit of Eisenstein's original intentions, the film consists of a prologue, three independent sequences ("Sandunga," "Fiesta," and "Maguey,"), and an epilogue.<sup>11</sup> Eisenstein shot the entire footage on location in Mexico, and the film is composed primarily of documentary material. Much in the same spirit as *Nanook of the North*, *¡Que viva Mexico!* is an ethnographic project carried out by a Western filmmaker on a "foreign people" in an "exotic" location. Intrigued by Robert Flaherty's "ethnodocumentary style," Eisenstein visited Flaherty in the United States prior to traveling to Mexico. Just as Flaherty's camera captured thrilling activities, such as hunting a walrus (albeit re-created to conform to the director's romantic expectations), so too Eisenstein recorded the spectacular performance of a matador engaged in a traditional bullfight. In *¡Que viva Mexico!* Eisenstein also documented religious festivals, weddings, funerals, and the festivities surrounding the Day of the Dead. Like a tourist guide, the voice-over of the commentator leads the viewer through the film; however, in the narrative a counterhistory erupts in a series of contradictions. For example, in the presentation of the ceremony honoring the Virgin of Guadalupe, the spectator is informed that this rite also (and more significantly) observes the day when the Spanish determined to take possession of Mexico and transform the territory into a colony. Over the image track of Mexicans honoring the Virgin and shots of the pyramids, the voice-over informs the viewer that Cortez conquered the indigenous population with the assistance of monks and priests, who built churches and Christian edifices on top of the ancient native structures. Through its commentary the film lodges a harsh critique of colonialism and its

maidservant, religion. In subsequent sequences, this condemnation of colonialism emerges in the layering of fictional narratives on the documentary footage. Whereas Flaherty used fiction to reinforce European ideals in *Nanook of the North*, Eisenstein employed it to undercut and critique Western capitalist ideology.

In the brutal third chapter of *¡Que viva Mexico!*, a fictional narrative takes over the documentary footage. The story concerns two young peasants who plan to marry. As was common practice in Mexico at the time, the *patrón* of the estate rapes his worker's bride. Unwilling to accept this insulting affront, the young man and a relative of the woman set fire to the estate with the assistance of a friend. After a series of confrontations and chases in which the *patrón's* daughter is shot, the three protagonists are captured and taken out to the desert, where they are forced to dig the holes in which they are then buried up to their shoulders. Trapped and unable to move, they are violently trampled to death by members of the ruling class. In this startling episode, the film rapidly shifts genres from the documentary mode of the opening sequences that record the workers extracting pulque from gigantic maguey cacti to the fictional narrative concerning the characters who play the principal roles in this drama. One of the workers from the opening sequence becomes the future groom, and a young woman initially seen riding a donkey becomes his bride. In contrast to the introductory "chapter" of the film, which follows an anonymous courtship, wedding, and marriage, in this last act the subjects are individualized and given names. Whereas in the earlier sequence the camera tracks anonymous "types," in the later episode a fully fleshed out drama ensues, complete with characters with whom the audience can identify. Eisenstein used the form of semifictional tragedy to underscore the horrific consequences of the abuses enacted under the alleged civilizing mission of Western colonialism. In *¡Que viva Mexico!* he relied on a strategic interplay of fact and fiction to create a cinematic essay that critiques capitalism and its colonial structures.

*Kuhle Wampe* is also a montage of fact and fiction. Over half of the film was shot outside the studio, and its reliance on documentary footage impressed local reviewers. Unlike previous attempts to represent the working class in German feature films, such as Piel Jutzi's *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness* (1929), which was produced in the confines of the Babelsberg Film Studio, *Kuhle Wampe* was shot on location. The film



features footage of the workers' actual living quarters in Wedding and the wooded camping park of Kuhle Wampe, as well as sporting events at Müggelsee, a nearby lake. In addition, most of the film's actors were amateurs; the participation of 4,000 workers, in their capacity as sports club members, was unprecedented in film history.<sup>12</sup> The final scene, shot in a fully operative Berlin streetcar, also struck many early commentators because it featured a degree of spontaneity that no studio could ever hope to reproduce. In short, such use of documentary material was seen to be one of the most novel features of *Kuhle Wampe*, especially insofar as that material was thought to enable the audience to see their lives the way they really were, with a minimum amount of distortion and artificial creation in the studios. As an astute critic observed in reference to the film's initial censorship, "herein lies the true motive behind the ban: Germany can only be photographed within the fences of New Babelsberg."<sup>13</sup> Thus what was initially fascinating about *Kuhle Wampe* was its documentary appeal.

The mixture of fact and fiction in *Kuhle Wampe* raises a number of key questions. What purpose was served by such hybridity? And why didn't it suffice to make either a fully documentary film or a purely fictional studio product? One explanation might be related to Brecht's recent clashes with the studio system, which, as his *Threepenny Opera* lawsuit made bitterly clear, privileged rights of the studio over those of the author. From this perspective, Brecht may have considered it desirable to make a film outside the studio system. But a number of theoretical motives also underlay his use of this hybridity. Brecht was aware of the inherent differences between theater and film, and he was careful not to confuse the two; as a result, he made *Kuhle Wampe* as far from the genre of theater as possible. In sharp contrast to either a studio production or a play, with their artificial sets and enclosures, the film's extensive shots of nature, as well as those of architecture, the cityscape, and the 4,000 athletes rowing on the Müggelsee, would be virtually impossible to stage. With this film Brecht not only made a clear and distinct break with the medium of theater but also used film precisely and specifically to do what theater could not, namely, represent everyday life and—through shots of large crowds—a mobilized collectivity. Whereas theater is grounded in performance and artificiality, film has its roots in photographic realism and therefore lends itself to the documentary form. Moreover, with *Kuhle Wampe* Brecht sought to check what he considered to be the most problematic features of

film: its passive nature and the resulting, often characteristic, lack of interaction between spectator and representation.<sup>14</sup> The challenge was to make a film that would produce an active spectator. This, he thought, could be accomplished through the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, which would break the audience's identification with the characters and their actions.<sup>15</sup> For Brecht the alienation effect existed in tandem with identification. He noted that in Chinese theater (which had a great influence on him), "the alienation effect intervenes not in the form of an absence of emotion, but in the form of emotions which need not correspond to those of the character portrayed."<sup>16</sup> Working in the medium of film, Brecht tried to strike a balance between identification and distancing, and he found the possibility of such an accord in the montage of documentary footage and fictional narrative.

While *Kuhle Wampe* was in production, Brecht engaged in a debate with Georg Lukács concerning the nature of realism. Unlike Lukács, Brecht felt that realistic representation could no longer be based on a nineteenth-century model because the context was so different; both society and its regimes of visibility had evolved greatly.<sup>17</sup> "We must not abstract the one and only realism from certain given works," he wrote in the mid-thirties, "but shall make a lively use of all means, old and new, tried and untried, deriving from art and deriving from other sources, in order to put living reality in the hands of living people in such a way that it can be mastered. . . . We will not stick to unduly detailed literary models or force the artist to follow over-precise rules for telling a story." Accordingly, Brecht imagined that a new form of realism might be located within cinematic practice. His use of documentary footage in *Kuhle Wampe* created this type of "realistic effect," encouraging the audience to identify with the film and fulfilling his dictum that "one need never be frightened of putting bold and unaccustomed things before the proletariat, so long as they have to do with reality."<sup>18</sup> The inherent realism of actual documentary footage functioned to reassure the audience, presenting it with familiar imagery and thereby heightening the impact of the alienating effects, such as the unusual soundtrack and the antinarrative, episodic, and disorienting visual composition of images produced in the editing process. *Kuhle Wampe* encouraged a new form of interaction, one based not on a passive consumption of images but on the viewer's active participation in the construction of meaning. In this respect, Brecht's further

thoughts on Chinese theater are again relevant: “The spectator’s empathy is not entirely rejected. The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on.”<sup>19</sup> As with Chinese theater, the film viewer’s response would dialectically alternate between identification and distanciation, and the contradiction between the two responses would culminate in the audience’s “awakening.” The filmmaker, according to Brecht, like “our best painters, . . . should deliver more than mere reflections. The object before them splits into two parts, one that is present and one that is to be created, a visible one and one that is yet to be made visible; something is there and something is behind it.”<sup>20</sup>

One particularly powerful example of this phenomenon is the shot of the Brandenburg Gate—an important symbol of Berlin—that opens *Kuhle Wampe*. Serving at the most immediate level to establish the location of the film, the shot reminds the spectator that the revolutionaries of 1848 and 1918, although now invisible, once met under that historic gateway. Reigniting this memory functions as a galvanizing force, encouraging future revolutionary groups to become visible there once again. The establishing shot of the gateway parallels Eisenstein’s shots of pyramids in the prologue of *¡Que viva Mexico!*, where the accompanying voice-over states, “eternity: it could take place today, twenty years ago, 1,000 years ago.” In both films the historic monuments stand for a past that continues into the present. The camera eye has captured their images and preserves them as a record of a past presence. But what do these visual traces tell us? Not much. As Brecht wrote of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* photograph of an AEG factory, the single image is inadequate; it is incapable of relating any of the “reality” beneath the surface.<sup>21</sup> As we have seen, Richter addressed this issue directly, positing instead that film, with its narrative, movement, and sound, has the potential to bring the invisible forward to produce an active spectator. *Kuhle Wampe* tells the stories of the working class who live in the shadow of the Brandenburg Gate. The same impulse is at play in *¡Que viva Mexico!* where long shots of the pyramids are followed by close-ups of the freestanding and relief sculptures upon them. Moreover, whereas Eisenstein’s images of the pyramids stand alone in the long shots, in the close-ups he posed “natives” whose physiognomies he thought bore a strong resemblance to the stone totems. The commentator’s voice intones, “the past dominates the present.” In both instances,

film is presented as a medium that has the potential to reveal a “reality” beyond what can be represented by a static photograph; it has the ability to move freely in time from the past to the present and back again. In addition, as Masha Salazkina notes about Eisenstein’s filmic technique: “Although the shots themselves are static, their multiplicity appears to give an illusion of movement and varying perspectives that brings this image to life, while simultaneously performing a kind of dissection of the shot, breaking it into fragments.”<sup>22</sup> The camera reanimates the figures and launches them into movement, a cinematic strategy that will be employed in Marker and Alain Resnais’s *Les Statues meurent aussi* (“Statues also die,” 1953), Alexander Kluge and Peter Schamoni’s *Brutalität in Stein* (“Brutality in stone,” 1961), and much later in Ulrike Ottinger’s *Still Moving* (2009).<sup>23</sup> Not only is a petrified life moved temporally and historically forward, but a continuum is thereby forged between the ancient past and the present day, underscoring the latter’s “timelessness” and reinforcing larger theories of cyclical return.

*Kuhle Wampe* was heralded as the left’s first sound film, and it was precisely in the arrangement of the soundtrack that it was deemed to be exceptional. Prometheus, the studio that produced the film, had experienced severe financial problems since the advent of sound in 1927; *Kuhle Wampe* was its first major release in several years. According to its producers, the division of the film into four episodes was determined by the function of sound, which, from all accounts, arranged the image, and not vice versa. Although the sound in *Kuhle Wampe* is limited to a single channel, a review written immediately upon the film’s release makes clear that “from an artistic-technical standpoint, ‘Kuhle Wampe’ is a positive attempt because it undertakes, out of all of the features and possibilities of a sound-film, to create a sound picture, and the effect reached is that it is the first German sound-film that seriously and substantially breaks away from ‘filmed theater’ or from superficial artistic tricks.”<sup>24</sup> In the early 1930s, film theoreticians such as Arnheim made a distinction between “Tonfilm” and “Sprechfilm” (sound-film and dialogue-film). For Arnheim, it was primarily the *Sprechfilm* that destroyed the development of film as an art. This was due, in part, to the fact that dialogue in cinema resulted in poor theatrical imitations, whereas the use of a sound montage opened up numerous intriguing possibilities. Arnheim also noted that background recorded sound increased verisimilitude. Interpreted in

this manner, sound is a component of realism and contributes to a film's overall documentary authority.

In *Kuhle Wampe* the soundtrack operates on three distinct recorded registers: the music (both diegetic and nondiegetic), the dialogue, and the ambient background noise synchronized with the film.<sup>25</sup> Eisler, the leftist Austrian composer and student of Arnold Schoenberg who immigrated to Hollywood in the 1930s, composed most of the music. At the time of *Kuhle Wampe*, Eisler had limited film expertise; he had been involved in several Brechtian theater productions, but *Kuhle Wampe* was his first foray into the world of sound film. The film was a collaborative project, and Brecht had his own sophisticated theories on the use of music in film, so it is difficult to establish the extent of Eisler's contribution. Although the latter was credited with the composition, Brecht and Dudow were surely instrumental in determining how the music was employed.

While working collaboratively on *Kuhle Wampe*, Eisler, Brecht, and Dudow developed a theory of dialectic music for film. As a starting point, they turned to Soviet filmmakers, in particular, Eisenstein and Pudovkin. Eisler's composition was based on the twelve-tone scale introduced by Schoenberg, with the result that it was both unusual and unexpected. He attempted to produce a soundtrack that would not lend itself to cooption and assimilation but would constantly draw attention to itself. As one particularly astute critic observed, the music in *Kuhle Wampe* "is presented as a self-standing element and not, as was the case in silent films, [as] a mere illustrative accompaniment to the image track."<sup>26</sup> Brecht had also developed a theory of music as an independent element, maintaining that the "separation of the elements of music and of action could bring about some new effects for the feature film as well."<sup>27</sup> As a result, the musical soundtrack in *Kuhle Wampe* is jarring and at times discordant. Film critic Lotte Eisner noted that the "miserable existence" of the unemployed in *Kuhle Wampe* is "portrayed with documentary restraint, enhanced by the rhythm of the montage and the violence of the music. . . . Hanns Eisler's sublimely impetuous music bursts onto the screen in a paroxysmal fortissimo of sound and image."<sup>28</sup> Eisler described the relationship of the flow of images to the soundtrack in one sequence in particularly striking terms: "Deteriorated houses on the edge of the city, slum district in all its misery and filth. The mood of the image is passive, depressing; it invites melancholy. Counterposed to that is fast-paced, sharp music,

a polyphonic prelude [in] marcato style. The contrast of the music . . . to the straightforward montage of image creates a shock that, according to the intention, stimulates opposition more than sympathetic sentimentality.”<sup>29</sup> True to a dialectical theory of montage, the contrapuntal acoustic composition contradicts the visual track.

According to Eisler, certain music was not only supposed to illustrate “the superficial meaning of the image, but should also be connected to its deeper meaning.”<sup>30</sup> For example, when Boenike, the young, doomed protagonist of the film’s first episode returns home after a fruitless day of searching for work, he encounters a group of street musicians playing the polka “*In Rixdorf ist Musike*.” Boenike pauses for a few seconds to listen to them. The irony of the gaiety of the music in contrast to Boenike’s plight is striking. The song refers to Rixdorfe, a working-class neighborhood of Berlin to which Boenike, now out of work, no longer belongs. In this juxtaposition, the film underscores his sliding status. A similar irony occurs when, as Boenike’s family moves to the tent community of Kuhle Wampe, the soundtrack features Prussian military marches, cynically evoking the glorious days of the Kaiser as a bygone era of full employment—even if much of that employment was on the battlefield. Later, during the engagement party, the first song played is “*Einzug der Gladiatoren*” (“Entry of the gladiators”), a triumphant melody of conquest and celebration. Then, when Fritz announces that he does not want to marry Anni, the music shifts to “*Schöner Gigolo, armer Gigolo*” (“Handsome Gigolo, poor Gigolo”). The final song in the film is, appropriately, Brecht’s “*Solidaritätslied*” (“Solidarity song”). The interplay between Eisler’s nondiegetic composition on one hand and diegetic inserts on the other is particularly striking when Anni discovers that she is pregnant and contemplates an abortion. At first, sharp, nondiegetic music plays over the images of children, advertisements, and Anni’s agitated stride. Then there is a cut to an announcement that states the cost of a funeral while the image track records the death of Boenike, Anni’s brother, who, in despair, has taken his own life. At this point, the music becomes diegetic; the source is a loudspeaker, and the popular song that plays is “*Leben ohne Lieben*” (“Life without love”). The question of whether the song refers to Boenike’s fate or to Anni’s present condition is left open.

Beyond the significance of the oscillation between diegetic and nondiegetic soundtracks, the use of songs in *Kuhle Wampe* recalls the socially

critical function of music in *Threepenny Opera* where, as Brecht explains, “music, just because it took up a purely emotional attitude and spurned none of the stock narcotic attractions, became an active collaborator in the stripping bare of the middle class corpus of ideas. [Music] became, so to speak, a muckraker, an informer, a narc.”<sup>31</sup> Music plays its own role as commentary; it has its own voice that is not always affirmative. This is the trademark of contrapuntal composition, which is based on the theory that there are two tracks or compositions—one that is steady and another that varies against the stable track to become a contra or opposite to that track. The use of music, and of a soundtrack more generally, to produce an additional, and at times contradictory, meaning to the image track is a crucial development in the evolution of the essay film. The exploitation of this effect will only increase as the advent of digital production systems facilitate such ever-greater technological manipulation.

An exchange is established in *Kuhle Wampe* between two strains of music: popular lyrical songs and modern compositions. Brecht and Dudow juxtaposed “low” and “high” art musical forms in their film to cross class boundaries and erase social hierarchy. The low and the high play as parallel tracks, making *both* equally accessible.<sup>32</sup> The popular songs are grounded in the “real” and the narrative of the film, whereas the modern compositions operate in the realm of the imaginary and the fantastic. The juxtaposition in the integrated soundtrack parallels the coexistence of fiction and documentary material on the visual track. This tactic seems to have been met with considerable success, for, as a perceptive critic writing in 1931 observed after commenting on Eisler’s soundtrack, “Dudow makes an interesting attempt to use the sound film as a means by which to conquer reality. He does not film his actors in the studio, but takes them to factories, tent sites, a streetcar, and a sports meeting.”<sup>33</sup> Through this device Dudow establishes the link between the film’s realism and its soundtrack, thereby representing the working class as acoustically connected to external reality. Just as the nonstudio visual or documentary elements create a sense of realism, so too does the soundtrack, which provides the noises of everyday life. The noise of work and of labor in particular is stressed throughout the film, such as in the deafeningly loud auto shop where Fritz works, the sirens of the ambulance that take the body of Boenike away, the machines in the factory that employs Anni, and even the hammering of tent pins in *Kuhle Wampe*. In short, just as sound is used to increase the reality effect,

so too does labor become acoustically defined. Following Eisenstein, who as early as 1928 had praised Japanese Kabuki theater because it allowed the audience to “actually ‘hear movement’ and ‘see sound,’” Brecht and Dudow strategically employed sound in such a way that the film audience “hears labor.”<sup>34</sup> Following Eisenstein, their goal was not an aesthetic of reproduction but one of transformation; sound was to function dialectically. This is nowhere clearer than in the (subsequently censored) scene that features several residents swimming nude in the Müggelsee, accompanied by the sounds of church bells in the background. Significantly, what bothered the censors was less the naked bodies than their conjunction with the church bells, a juxtaposition that was interpreted as a critique of Christian culture from the standpoint of a naked communist one.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas *Kuhle Wampe* constitutes a complex medley of musical pieces, Eisenstein adopted a related but different strategy in *¡Que viva Mexico!*. He saw music as a structuring principle, referring to his film as a “vast and multi-coloured Film-Symphony,” and to its script as a libretto.<sup>36</sup> Each of the six parts is based on a popular Mexican folksong. “*Sanduga*,” for instance, relates to the title of a popular wedding song from the Oaxaca region where Eisenstein was filming, and “*La Adelita*,” intended as the base for the never-completed episode “*Soldadera*,” evokes a revolutionary tune.

In addition to their innovations with music in *Kuhle Wampe*, Brecht and Dudow experimented with dialogue. Their efforts to ward off possible accusations that their film was merely recorded theater led them to mobilize several tactics, including quotations and clichés as well as improvisational passages. Speaking in quotations effects a stark detachment or distance between the actors and what they actually say. A good example of this is the fragmentary, matter-of-fact statement that Boenicke has fallen from the window (“*aus dem Fenster gestürzt*”), which could mean that he was either pushed or went out of his own volition, leaving open the possibility that the state was responsible for his death.<sup>37</sup> The sequence gains its force from the dispassionate way in which the tragic ending of a young life due to unemployment is treated. The blunt, matter-of-factness of Boenicke’s suicide is underscored by the objective narrative, which serves to render it all the more horrific. As Boenicke falls, however, a highly exaggerated gestic scream fills the acoustic space, punctuating the event with an aural exclamation point. In another dialectical juxtaposition of sound and image, Anni’s elderly father stumbles hesitatingly through a



newspaper article on Mata Hari while his wife sits at the kitchen table trying to balance the family's budget. As his voice describes the seductive curves and sexual prowess of the infamous spy, the aging body of a poor woman fills the screen, and this image is intercut with her household calculations on the price of food and other bare necessities. In this instance, the audial world is one of greed, capital, and the imaginary, and the image track presents the real as the site of mundane chores. The husband "reads" from the newspaper; the words are not his but are found material that functions as audial "ready-mades." The quotations are appropriated and woven into the fictional narrative as documentary inserts, much in the way that Brecht mobilized popular songs or that photographs and documentary film footage are often employed in feature films.

Dialogue is not always used contrapuntally in *Kuhle Wampe*; sometimes it is employed to reinforce reality and produce identification. Class, for instance, is prominently figured through accent and dialect. Brecht and Dudow abandoned the clear educated High German format of most theater, radio, and film productions of the time in favor of a dialogue sharply marked by colloquialisms and informalities. In the last allegedly "improvised" scene of the film, shot on site in a Berlin streetcar, each person's class position can be identified clearly through the audial track. A worker says "*Jib dem Ollen doch ne Appelsine und schick'n ins Waisenhaus!*" ("Give the old guy an apple and throw him in an orphanage"), and the bourgeois officer intones "*Bei Ihnen merkt man auch, dass Sie nicht mehr beim Kommiss gewesen sind!*" ("You are obviously someone who has not served in the military"). In this sequence the "real speech" on the soundtrack combines with the documentary visual track to draw the viewer into the film's diegesis. The addition of sound to the filmic product increases the likelihood of audience identification. More than merely complementing the visual dimension, the sounds of labor, accents, dialects, and manners of eating and drinking represent the working class aurally. In contrast to these tactics of identification, however, Brecht and Dudow mobilized Eisler's contrapuntal music, various popular "songs" featured in the film, clichéd dialogue, and a number of highly exaggerated noises (such as young Boenicke's scream) to extend the parameters of the soundtrack beyond an aesthetic of identification to one of transformation. The same tactic of interplay between documentary and fiction, truth and artifice, that characterizes the visual track is at work in the audial track as well.

*Kuhle Wampe* presents an oppositional, nonfusion of elements at every level, resulting in a fully dialectical production that operates at the interstices between identification and distancing, fact and fiction.

Brecht's ideas greatly influenced 1960s and 1970s avant-garde film theory and practice. Journals such as *Screen* devoted entire issues to Brecht, and Martin Walsh's book *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema* (1981) as well as several studies on emergent Latin American cinema underscored how the German playwright's concepts of alienation, distancing, and labor were taken up by the Western avant-garde and Third Cinema alike (see chapter 6). Several postwar film essayists such as Godard, Farocki, Octavio Getino, and Fernando Solanas also openly referenced Brecht in their work. But it was Brecht's theoretical writings, and in particular his notions of theater and its applicability to film, to which these filmmakers turned, virtually ignoring or hastily dismissing *Kuhle Wampe*. Yet a purely cinematic theory emerges in *Kuhle Wampe*—one that clouds the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction by bringing the two together on both image tracks and soundtracks. Similarly, although Eisenstein's theory of montage would remain crucial for future generations of film essayists, what was often forgotten is the fragmentary and hybrid mixing of fact and fiction that is prevalent in *¡Que viva Mexico!*, a blurring that is compositional and not just a product of the film's unfinished state. Indeed, as several historians have argued, *¡Que viva Mexico!* constitutes a watershed moment in Eisenstein's career when he was still formally experimental and innovative. Upon his return to Moscow from Mexico, his filmmaking became more "holistic" and, some would say, closer to Socialist Realism. In their fusion of fact and fiction in *Kuhle Wampe* and *¡Que viva Mexico!*, Brecht/Dudow and Eisenstein provide support for the philosopher Jacques Rancière's much later conclusions concerning Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik*, namely, that "the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought."<sup>38</sup>

## THE ESSAY FILM IN SERVICE OF THE STATE

Nonfiction cinema, and especially the documentary genre, continued to develop throughout the thirties. With the rise of nationalism and fascism and the onset of World War II, newsreels, propaganda, and other

information films proliferated, often sponsored by government agencies. Some documentaries, such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), took propaganda to new extremes. Several characteristics of the essay film, including the way it mixes fact and fiction and its inherently subjective nature, made it a particularly suitable genre for the manipulation of information and the production of myth. Walter Ruttmann, who became increasingly preoccupied with instilling the spectator with feelings of pride and nationalism, continued to make cinematic essays focused on cities, such as *Stuttgart* (1935) and *Düsseldorf* (1936), and in 1940 made an essay film that celebrates military technology.

Willy Zielke's remarkable *Das Stahltier* ("The steel animal," 1935) stands out among these examples of fascist essay films. *Das Stahltier* constitutes a complex audiovisual essay that purports to construct the history of the German steam engine. Seeking to make a film championing German technology and superior engineering, Zielke was confronted with a number of historical facts that contradicted the dominance of the German model, such as the uncomfortable reality that the steam engine originated in Britain. Zielke undercut the brilliance of the initial invention by demonstrating that pivotal historic period through a series of highly comical reenactments in which the British appear as hapless, blundering fools who inadvertently stumble onto an invention. By contrast, the Germans are presented as level-headed, rational thinkers who master science and technology. Filmmakers, who often see themselves as pseudo-historians, commonly use reenactments such as this. Recall that for large parts of *Nanook of the North* Flaherty directed the protagonist to restage early hunting practices.<sup>39</sup> More recently, there has been a resurgence in the deployment of fictional reenactments in the essay films of Jeremy Deller, Yael Bartana, and Peter Watkins.

*Das Stahltier* focuses on a young German engineer, Klassen (Aribert Mog), who seeks to perfect the steam engine to create the ideal modern locomotive. The engineer bears all the characteristics of the romantic genius inventor who ultimately achieves his dream. The film's final scenes are marked by his fantastical trek "riding" the machine, driving it faster and faster, and in its frenzied journey the locomotive comes to resemble a human, with headlights for eyes and a grill for a mouth. The high-speed journey is matched visually by a series of very sharp cuts and edits that alternate from shots of Klassen's face, to shots of the engine, and then to the instrument panel that gauges the speed. Aesthetically, the scene recalls

both the opening montage sequence of the locomotive in Able Gance's *La Roue* (1923) and anticipate the sequence of the train coursing across the British countryside in Basil Wright and Harry Watt's *Night Mail* (1936). Once climax is achieved, the entire film and engine slow down, culminating in a shot of the engineer lying on the grass and smoking a cigarette in front of his now static engine.

Zielke's loose mix of narrative fiction and documentary footage drew the attention of Riefenstahl, who employed him to assist her on *Olympia* (1938). Indeed, the prologue to that film has been unofficially credited to Zielke. But differences soon arose between the two directors, and Zielke was arrested and sent to a mental asylum, where he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and sterilized. Once war was declared, Goebbels banned *Das Stahltier*, and the creative intermixture of truth and reality turned sharply to the right in German propaganda films such as Franz Hippler's *Der ewige Jude* ("The eternal Jew," 1940) and *Die Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* ("The Führer gives a city to the Jews," 1944), filmed inside the concentration camp at Theresienstadt, where fiction gives way to lies with deadly, catastrophic consequences.

## THE ESSAY FILMS OF THE GPO

Following the onset of World War II in 1939, governments throughout Western Europe mobilized film not only as a tool for propaganda but also as a medium to inspire and instill nationalism and patriotism. As the wartime mission of nonfiction films became more urgent, cinematic productions depicting facts and "harsh reality" increased and aestheticism and experimentation waned. In Britain, for example, what began in the 1930s as an enormously rich and highly experimental tradition of nonfiction, essayistic filmmaking transformed into a rigid, rules-bound genre known as the British Documentary, which came to serve as a gatekeeper for nonfiction filmmaking for the next quarter-century. During the decade of the 1930s, however, the British essay film flourished, especially with respect to its acoustic expansion.

The key figure in establishing nonfiction film as a major force in Britain was John Grierson. Fascinated by *Nanook of the North* and other

nonfiction films, Grierson was determined to find a strong documentary filmmaking tradition in Britain. He saw the genre's potential to serve as a lectern from which to deliver educational lessons and reach a broad-ranging public. The British film industry had failed to capture an audience for feature films and was falling behind its major competitor, the United States. By the early 1930s, 70 percent of all films screened in Britain were American imports. The response in Britain, as in Germany, was to produce a quota of homegrown films that had little production value and were never intended for mass release. Unlike in Germany, however, nonfiction films in Britain did not count as "quota quickies." There was neither funding nor financial incentive for making them, and even if such films were produced, there was little chance of broad distribution. Keenly aware of these impediments, Grierson realized that he would have to effect two important changes: secure sponsorship for such projects and find a system of distribution. Inspired by his experiences during a trip to the United States, Grierson tackled the problem of distribution first. He proposed that nonfiction films be distributed to, and screened in, museums, libraries, schools, community halls, and the like. In this way, the productions would circumvent the studio system, which controlled distribution, yet reach a mass public. He was impressed that *Nanook of the North* had been sponsored by the Révillon Frères fur-trading company and, as such, served as an "advertisement" for its products. Seeking a more stable and steady form of support for his productions, Grierson approached various government agencies in an effort to convince them that film was an important source of information for the public and should therefore be sustained and developed in the manner of educational institutions. Through a series of adept moves, he managed to persuade government officials of the pedagogical value of films, and in 1933 he established and headed a film production unit within the General Post Office. Through the GPO, Grierson recruited and assembled a diverse group of talented international filmmakers, artists, and writers, including, among others, W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Cavalcanti, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Evelyn Spice, Dylan Thomas, Harry Watt, and Basil Wright. Early productions included *The Coming of the Dial* (1933), a short about the telephone that includes footage from Lázló Moholy-Nagy's film experiments in lighting; Lye's four-minute abstract *A Colour Box* (1935), which the filmmaker composed by painting and scratching the celluloid; and Evelyn Spice's *The*

*Weather Forecast* (1934), complete with an experimental soundtrack that uses sound bridges and overlaps to create connections among its disparate images. Throughout the 1930s, the GPO produced a number of interesting experimental films and essays. This ceased abruptly with the advent of World War II, and in 1939 the film production unit was transferred to the Ministry of Information and became the Crown Film Unit.

Sound was a particular focus of the GPO effort. From the outset, Grierson realized its untapped potential for nonfiction film. In October 1934 he penned an essay, "Introduction to a New Art," in the new journal *Sight and Sound*, which began with a question: "How are we to use sound creatively rather than reproductively?" Grierson advocated an experimental use of sound, which, he argued, should be used as malleably as images. He proposed:

If your sounds are on film you can with a pair of scissors and a pot of paste join any single sound to any other. You can orchestrate bits and pieces of sound as you please. Call that horizontal orchestration. You can also, by re-recording, put any single sound on top of another sound. A simple case is music in the background and a voice in the foreground, but, for that matter, you can have a dozen sounds all with their different reference sounding together. Call that vertical orchestration.<sup>40</sup>

Because sound recording systems were expensive and Grierson had no prior experience with the medium when he formed the film unit of the GPO, he considered it crucial to have a highly skilled sound designer as part of his team. To that end he recruited Cavalcanti, who was then living in France and whose earlier *Rien que les heures* (1926) had deeply impressed him. *Rien que les heures* is a highly meditative and poetic silent film about one day in Paris. Although made a year earlier than *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, both films were released in 1930 in Britain and in the United States. For the British screening, Cavalcanti organized a program of "light Parisian songs" that, through their juxtapositions, created a "bizarre, incongruous, even comical" effect.<sup>41</sup> Grierson invited Cavalcanti to join the GPO team in 1934, and his acceptance was in large part due to the fact that the Surrealists, with whom Cavalcanti had been working, did not believe that sound should be a part of art films. Cavalcanti had also begun to find his work with the commercial Paramount Studios

increasingly frustrating.<sup>42</sup> From early on, Cavalcanti had experimented with the different possibilities that music brought to film. In 1928 he traveled to the Baden-Baden music festival where he met Kurt Weill and Brecht.<sup>43</sup> Cavalcanti served as editor and sound designer for Marquis de Wavrin's semifictional quasi-ethnographic film, *Au pays du scalp* ("In the scalp country," 1931), in which he used music contrapuntally.

One of the GPO's first films was Basil Wright's *The Song of Ceylon* (1934).<sup>44</sup> Although the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board initially commissioned the film, the GPO took it on when Wright joined Grierson's team. Wright was influenced by Eisenstein's theory of montage and had attended a series of the Russian director's lectures shortly before Eisenstein departed for Mexico. In particular, Wright seems to have been struck by Eisenstein's appeal to a certain open-endedness of the filmmaking process, one that recalls the structure of an essay with no predetermined path or conclusion. His film notes read, "Go the way the material calls you. . . . The scenario changes on location and the location shots change in the montage."<sup>45</sup> Wright followed Eisenstein's dictum in this remarkable montage film. The structure of *Song of Ceylon* bears a resemblance to *¡Que viva Mexico!*. Although *Song of Ceylon* was initially intended as four separate travelogues, the final product is one film divided into four sections: "The Buddha," centering on spiritualism; "The Virgin Island," depicting "native" village life; "The Voices of Commerce," conveying the colonizing presence of modernity; and "The Apparel of a God," detailing religious rituals. The opening and closing shots of a stone Buddha contribute to the film's circular, holistic unity. Colonialism in the form of the tea industry is conveyed as an integral part of Sinhalese culture rather than as a disruptive force.

*Song of Ceylon* was shot on location in Sri Lanka, and the silent footage was then developed and edited in the GPO studios in London, and an elaborate soundtrack was constructed. As the GPO's first sound film, it was aptly referred to as a "song." Like most GPO productions, *Song of Ceylon* was a collaborative work involving many different individuals who were part of Grierson's crew. Walter Leigh, a student of Cavalcanti and Paul Hindemith, worked specifically on sound design. Together the team produced a complex multilayered composition that interweaves music, noises, and dialogue with a voice-over of Lionel Wendt reading a narrative written in 1680 by a British sailor, Robert Knox. All the sounds

were created synthetically to correspond to the images to which they are matched. At this stage in the development of nonfiction film, the aesthetic of making a soundtrack was extolled over any attempts at direct recording of sound and image with a microphone attached to the actors. The latter method was viewed as too similar to theater, a medium from which filmmakers sought to distinguish their productions. Grierson, echoing Arnheim and Brecht, stressed the importance of breaking from the theater model, maintaining that a “breakaway must come. The documentary film will do pioneer work for cinema if it emancipates the microphone from the studio and demonstrates at the cutting and the re-recording benches how many more dramatic uses can be made of sound than the studios at present realize.”<sup>46</sup> The team set to work on creating its first soundtrack, which was a mixture of diegetic and nondiegetic sound as well as of seemingly “real” and obviously artificial sounds. For the “authentic” background music, a traditional Sinhalese dancer and drummer were brought to London to help instruct the church choir responsible for re-creating Sinhalese music. Added to this, the surreal sound of a gong punctuates the film. Traditional music is interrupted in the “Voices of Commerce” section by a recognizable “modern” cacophony of sounds, such as radio news clips, announcements, ship horns, street traffic, and the like. In contrast to the visible “real” that the camera recorded, the “really real” of the soundtrack was an elaborate artificial construction that remained invisible. In addition to the guiding seventeenth-century narrative spoken as a voice-over, contemporary utterances articulated by Cavalcanti, Grierson, Wright, and Stuart Legg intrude in a complex audial montage.<sup>47</sup> The effect brings together two different time periods: the one “timeless,” precolonial, indigenous and authentic; and the other “modern” and contemporary. This temporal juxtaposition is similar to that in *¡Que viva Mexico!*, with the crucial difference being that in Eisenstein’s film modernity is the post-revolutionary hope for a new society, whereas in Wright’s film it brings the “civilizing” presence of colonialism.

Under Grierson’s leadership, the GPO continued to make some of the most innovative productions in the history of nonfiction filmmaking. Recall that Grierson initially stressed that documentaries should be the creative shaping of reality, and he praised Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* for its imaginative representation of the struggles of an Inuit family living in the Canadian Arctic. Well into the mid-1930s Grierson believed in



the creative and aesthetic possibilities of the documentary because, as a new genre, it was still in its initial stage of experimentation. Some of the most interesting innovations of these early GPO essay films took place on the soundtrack. For example, following the success of *The Song of Ceylon*, the GPO produced the audiovisual montage film *Coal Face* (1935). Once again, it was the soundtrack, where free play and a lack of rules were most evident, that was particularly innovative. Under Cavalcanti's guidance, Auden wrote the lyrical script and Britten composed the musical score. The visual montage was edited and cut to the music. The soundtrack functioned as a parallel track, carrying forth Pudovkin's earlier dictum that music in film "must retain its own line." Half a century later Marcel Ophuls would adopt this strategy in his politically satirical musical essay films.

As the documentary movement became institutionalized within the GPO, the genre became increasingly bound by rules: an evolution in which Grierson played no small part. Whereas in his early films, such as *The Drifters*, Grierson relied on montage and freely mixed fact and fiction, in his later works he rigidly adhered to a set of guidelines where facts dominated aesthetic considerations.<sup>48</sup> Grierson's collaborative *Night Mail* (1936) was the last montage-based film he made. Produced just one year after *Das Stahl-tier*, it celebrates the importance of Great Britain's vast rail networks for the transportation of mail and consumer goods, which by extension leads to the unification of different parts of the country. *Night Mail* consists of a multilayered audiovisual montage that includes sequences of a train gaining in speed, with the rhythm of the locomotive edited and matched to a musical composition by Britten. The film is accompanied by a poem that Auden wrote specifically for it and a voice-over spoken by Grierson. *Night Mail* has been received as Grierson's final attempt to make a nonfiction film along the lines of his earlier belief in the documentary genre as a creative, aesthetic, and fictional rendering of reality. Grierson claims to have employed both sound and visuals to move beyond "plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material to arrangement, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it."<sup>49</sup> As the 1930s progressed, Grierson refined his definition of documentary to align it more closely with the mission of public education. At the onset of World War II, he embraced the role of film both as a "fifth column" and as a part of "total war." Writing in 1942, he recalled the significance of the Munich

Agreement of 1938: “I look back on it as representing a milestone in my own outlook on documentary. From that time on the social work in which we had been engaged seemed to me relatively beside the point.”<sup>50</sup> What has come to be described as the Griersonian documentary style derives from the filmmaker’s production after he immigrated to Canada, yet both the films he extolled and those he made during the early period of the GPO were closer to essay films than to documentaries.

When Grierson left the GPO in 1936, Cavalcanti took over the directorship of the film unit. He remained in that position until 1940, when the GPO was renamed the Ministry of Information and its film unit retitled the Crown Film Unit. As we have seen, Cavalcanti came from a very different filmic background than Grierson; trained as an artist, he had worked with the Surrealists as well as in the commercial film industry. Moreover, he held that fiction, when intermixed with fact and documentary, could produce effective results. Cavalcanti recalled that he had disagreed with Grierson about “the label ‘documentary,’ which I was definitely against. I thought that ‘documentary’ was something that smelled of dust and boredom. Grierson, on the contrary, defended it because it was an argument for selling stuff to the GPO.”<sup>51</sup>

Cavalcanti was a highly skilled sound designer who believed the soundtrack had great potential.<sup>52</sup> Among filmmakers at the GPO, he was particularly close to Humphrey Jennings, who had also trained in the visual arts and in 1936 organized London’s first Surrealist exhibition. Jennings’s participation in that event proved to be consequential for his film career; through the use of the soundtrack, the Surrealist methodology of bizarre juxtapositions and focus on the importance of dreams found their way into Cavalcanti and Jennings’s films. Surrealism as an underpinning current is evident in the subsequent work of Chris Marker, Georges Franju, and Agnès Varda, as well as in Hans Richter’s *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947). In 1937, Jennings founded the organization “Mass Observation,” which, as the name implies, focused on recording everyday life. Jennings’s directorial debut was *Spare Time* (1939). Produced by Cavalcanti, this observational film recorded working-class life in the industrial north of England. Some have viewed *Spare Time* as a precursor to the style of documentary film known as Direct Cinema or, with a different twist, Cinéma Verité, as both rely on the observational method of recording imagery without accompanying commentary or critique.

Jennings's film career developed significantly after Britain's declaration of war on Germany in September 1939. Under the Crown Film Unit, he created nationally inspired essay films such as *London Can Take It* (1940), *Words for Battle* (1941), and *Listen to Britain* (1942), all intended to bolster the British war effort and reinforce nationalism. None of these films are simple exercises in propaganda; they are far more complicated and challenge the generic limits of nonfiction film. For example, *Words for Battle* (1941) is a compilation film comprised entirely of found footage: previous film sequences that were appropriated, recycled, and reused. This aesthetic strategy harkens back to the films of 1920s Soviet filmmaker Esther Schub; it had not only practical and economic dimensions (in this instance thriftiness during the war) but also strong ideological aspects emanating from the beliefs of the film unit members who worked collaboratively.<sup>53</sup> This stance of relying on previously found material as a political position of filmmaking was fundamental to later film essayists such as Farocki, who questioned the production of new images when so many already exist. In *Words for Battle*, Jennings took Schub's practice to a new level, not only using many appropriated images but also assembling the soundtrack entirely from earlier sound recordings. Thus we hear a pastiche of speeches from John Milton, William Blake, Robert Browning, Rudyard Kipling, Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, and others, all read by Lawrence Olivier. The consistency of Olivier's voice and the continuous playing of G. F. Handel's *Water Music* in the background serve to suture the sonic montage together. The soundtrack functions in the form of a ready-made, surrealistically placed into a new constellation.

Jennings furthered his explorations in sound in his next film, *Listen to Britain*. Corrigan, in his analysis of the film, concludes that the "play between expressive sound and a collage of public images anticipates the essayistic in both its restraint and its dispersion of a communal expressivity into the crisis of public life."<sup>54</sup> Strongly reminiscent of Ruttman's experimental sound film without images, *Listen to Britain* presents an assemblage of sounds: military bugles; the mechanical noise of planes, trains, and tractors; industrial sounds of labor and the work of miners; natural sounds of the wind, horses, and birds; snippets from songs such as "Where the Buffalo Roam" sung by children; sirens whining; whistles blowing; and church bells pealing. These culminate in a medley of radio broadcasts, including "This Is London Calling," as well as foreign

language broadcasts from Austria and Germany. The film concludes with a free lunchtime concert of classical music given by the Royal Air Force Band. In contrast to *Words for Battle*, there is no voice-over narrator or commentator. Jennings referred to *Listen to Britain* as his “music film.” Indeed, there is no dialogue, and, except for the words spoken by the radio announcers, there is practically no spoken language. Instead, the soundtrack of *Listen to Britain*, like that of *Weekend* (1930), is filled with recognizable noises, all of which are as much a part of the fabric of the nation as would be a scripted text. The absence of the spoken word on the soundtrack allows a different type of text to be heard—one that is unusual in film. The audience is asked to “listen” and thereby engage its second sense more fully.

Sound as an alternative to traditional storytelling and the historical narrative is at the root of Jennings’s *The True Story of Lili Marlene* (1944).<sup>55</sup> In this essay film, Jennings tells two stories: the first of the British Eighth Army’s victory over the Axis powers in Africa; the second a history of the vastly popular war melody “Lili Marlene,” which was also referred to as the “anthem of the desert warrior.” Although the credits identify the film as a reconstruction and reenactment, it presents a highly imaginative version of historic events, which Jennings dramatized to point to the manner in which sound can take on new meanings. The film opens with the narrator smoking a pipe before a map of Europe, casually introducing the story of Lili Marlene—a song and a “modern fairy story, really.” The narrator’s corporeal presence soon fades, to be replaced by an actor playing a soldier who has just returned home from the front. The voice-over continues, however, explaining that when the Eighth Army defeated the enemy, it also confiscated an array of souvenirs, including an Electrola disk recording of “Lili Marlene.” A close-up of the record fills the screen, and the title tune becomes recognizable. The film then cuts to a World War I memorial and documentary newsreel footage from Germany in 1923. Referring to the Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923, the commentator intones, “out of this chaos Hitler made his first attempt to gain power.” The voice-over also cites 1923 as the year the song “Lili Marlene” was written, and the camera cuts to a staged scene of a young poet busy at his typewriter in a garret studio in Hamburg, hammering out the words that would subsequently be used as lyrics to the tune. Hamburg, we are informed, was the last port that resisted Hitler. The music accompanying the poem was composed

in 1938, and, according to our commentator, a young “Swedish girl,” the singer Lale Andersen, first performed the song in a Berlin nightclub. Footage is included of Andersen singing, first in German then in English. A historical inaccuracy is immediately apparent because Andersen’s national identity was German. Jennings intercut this staged studio footage with newsreel clips of Hitler saluting fanatical crowds from his car. In a quick montage sequence drawn from documentary sources, the film then shows the fall of France in 1940, the formation of the Afrika Korps in the desert, and other military shots. The commentator notes that at that time “Lili Marlene was still unknown.” In the spring of 1941, however, a significant event occurred: German troops of the fifth column captured the Belgrade radio station. Jennings had professional actors reenact this event as well as a dramatic scene of the German occupiers broadcasting from Radio Belgrade for the first time as the “*Deutsche Soldatensender Belgrad*.” At the end of their program, amid the chaos of the war-damaged radio station, they find a disk to play that happens to be “Lili Marlene.” The song is immediately a hit; it becomes the signature closing tune after every evening’s broadcast, and “Lili Marlene” is transmitted to all German troops. From the Eastern front, to Africa, to the U-boats, “Lili Marlene” is sung in English against images of German troops. Ironically, the song also became popular among the Allied troops who would listen to it on Axis broadcasts. Interspliced throughout the film are shots of war, including marching troops, tanks, air raids, and bombings. The film cuts to Africa, where the Eighth Army is battling the Afrika Korps led by Erwin Rommel, and to a decisive battle in which the record “Lili Marlene” is captured. The Germans continue to broadcast “Lili Marlene” until the moment when the ominous voice of the commentator informs us: “Then Came Stalingrad.” Once again historical footage of the battle is included showing Field Marshall von Paulus surrendering on February 2, 1943. Clips of the official proclamation that Berlin must close all entertainment venues for three days, thereby silencing “Lili Marlene,” are also inserted. The song had been played by radio Belgrade for 500 consecutive nights. The spectator learns that Lale Andersen, never a favorite of Goebbels, was sent briefly to a concentration camp for the insidious behavior of frequenting with and protecting Jews—a story popularized decades later by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in his masterpiece, *Lili Marleen* (1981). By 1942, Andersen had recorded several versions of “Lili Marlene,” with the

first dating from 1938. In 1939, after the declaration of war, she made a new version in which the marching beat is enhanced and her voice is crisper. In 1942 Andersen recorded the English version that serves as a leitmotif throughout the film.<sup>56</sup> Throughout Jennings's film, only fragments of the original German version are heard, perhaps because with the war raging it was considered too seditious to include the full recording. Stalingrad was the decisive turning point in World War II, and Jennings indicates the Allied victories through their versions of the song. Thus "Lili Marlene" is employed as part of the war effort; we hear a British version sung by Lucy Mannheim for the BBC and transmitted to Germany with the changed lyrics: "Your man is dead, I hear it, his grave the Russian snow . . . oh could we only meet once more our countries free of hate and war. . . . Führer, I thank and greet you . . . widows and orphans meet you, Hitler! Hang him up from the lantern here, hang him up on the lantern here!" The film includes another version of the song made for the troops in Italy and yet another for the troops at sea. Toward the end, the narrator concludes: "Lili Marlene was born in the docks of Hamburg, then went to Berlin, flew to Belgrade, was captured in the desert, upon which she was transformed and marched with the troops of liberation into the heart of Europe. Now look into the future: peace. Come to the London docks on a Saturday night in peacetime, here you will see the scene set for the last appearance of Lili Marlene." Jennings propels us into an uncertain future as the camera ranges over people amusing and entertaining themselves. A mother bathes her young son in front of a photograph of her husband in uniform displayed on the nightstand. The voice-over urges the spectator to "keep fascism off the face of the earth and make it really the last war." A single burning candle fills the screen, then dissolves into a candle on the plaque of the unknown soldier.

This essay film is about cultural transfer, addressing how a particular song can cross "enemy lines," be appropriated, and take on new meanings. *The True Story of Lili Marlene* is based on the principle of refunctioning (*umfunktionierung*), one of Brecht's core aesthetic concepts, before such tactics became popularized. It recalls Jennings's earlier films in which he explicitly included music by German composers such as Handel, Beethoven, and Mozart being performed by British musicians, thereby wresting them away from German dominion. *The True Story of Lili Marlene* is a testimony that cultural meaning is never stable and cannot be completely

controlled. Here Jennings's Surrealist interests come to the foreground. To structure a film about war around a song was remarkably innovative. The result is neither documentary nor art film, neither biopic nor fictional feature; rather, it constitutes a complex intellectual project. With *The True Story of Lili Marlene*, Jennings produced a musical essay that eludes facile categorization. He employed both image track and soundtrack to tell two stories. The film artfully blends fact and fiction. Whereas in the 1920s music served as a structuring principle for editing films such as *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, with the advent of sound technology in the following decade, music came to encompass its own separate track of meaning in films. It was at times used either contrapuntally or as an additional layer of signification, often in excess of the visual track.

With Jennings's premature death and Cavalcanti's return to Brazil, the experimental and innovative phase of British nonfiction films came to an abrupt end. Jennings's method of recording everyday reality as developed in the collaborative project *Mass Observation* was his legacy to documentary filmmaking rather than his essay films. Postwar British documentaries took on an observational style that decried the subjective use of voice-overs. Jennings was to have a significant influence on Lindsay Anderson and the Free Cinema movement of the mid-1950s. One of Anderson's first films was the essay *O, Dreamland* (1953), a brief, twelve-minute short shot on location at Britain's "Adventure Land" amusement park in Margate. The viewer enters the theme park and is immediately confronted with a house of horrors in which "real-life" scenes of historic atrocities are re-created using automatons and mannequins. The first of these is the execution by electric chair of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. This is followed by a scene of Jack the Ripper assaulting naked mannequins. Rounding off these violent images, a naked body is tortured on a wheel rack. All the while, these scenes are accompanied by a maniacal mechanical laughter that resounds relentlessly. This sequence is followed by other amusements provided at the park, including rides, game machines, bingo, slot machines, and the exhibition of a variety of caged wild animals (including foxes, wolves, a leopard, a lion, and a monkey). In the tradition initiated by Jennings, it is the soundtrack of *O, Dreamland* that marks the film as essayistic and strange. A repeated shot shows a close-up of the jukebox playing the popular songs that dominate the

soundtrack. Accompanying the caged animals is Frankie Laine's hit "I Believe," and over the exhilarating rides blares the tune of Muriel Smith's "Kiss Me—Thrill Me." As the camera enters "Magic Land" with its Swiss Beer Garden, a hand-painted sign ironically reads: "The dreams I dream are yours to see, over there, in reality." Without voice-over or commentary, this perplexing essay film reveals the contradictory and ambivalent status of pleasure. Anderson shows the spectator's vicarious delight in witnessing re-creations of death, dismemberment, execution, gambling, caged animals, and other amusements.

At the time it appeared, *O, Dreamland* was an anomaly. Other Free Cinema and documentary film directors sought instead to render a reality that was visible, tangible, and unambiguous in a manner that was equally straightforward and clear in its presentation style, dominated by an aesthetics of verisimilitude and realism. The firm grip on reality and truth that led to the development of Direct Cinema and became known as the Griersonian style of documentary filmmaking was only loosened in the 1970s and 1980s with the emergence of film co-ops and collectives such as *Sankofa* and the *Black Audio Film Collective*. The highly creative forms of experimentation that characterized the British essay films of the 1930s would have to wait several decades before directors such as Derek Jarman, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, Peter Watkins, and others took them up again. In postwar Germany, too, there was silence in the filmmaking industry. In France, however, the essay film continued to develop at midcentury.





FIGURE 3.1 Alain Resnais, *All the Memory of the World*, 1956.



FIGURE 3.2 Agnes Varda, *O saisons, ô châteaux*, 1957.

# 3

## THE ESSAY FILM AS ARCHIVE AND REPOSITORY OF MEMORIES, 1947-1961

*“You generalize, Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.”*

*“Because they have no memory,” he dejectedly replied; “because they are not human.”*

—HERMAN MELVILLE, *BENITO CERENO*

**W**ith the conclusion of World War II, Europe lay in ruins: materially destroyed and psychically shattered. As the full details of the Holocaust became apparent, a crisis of identity emerged that reached to the depths of the fundamental tenets of humanity and continues to occupy Western philosophical thought. The question repeated over and over again was: “How could such systematic annihilation have occurred, and why was it not stopped?” During the next two decades philosophers sought answers, survivors tried to tell their stories, and filmmakers such as Wolfgang Staudte, Alain Resnais, and Andrzej Wajda tackled representing the “unrepresentable.”

Several theoreticians of the essay film trace the emergence of the cinematic essay to this period when Europe was viewed as a landscape of ruin. As Timothy Corrigan observes, “the crisis of World War II, the

Holocaust, the trauma that traveled from Hiroshima around the world, and the impending cold war inform[ed], in short, a social, existential, and representational crisis that would galvanize an essayistic imperative.”<sup>1</sup> A number of nonfiction films made in France during this period include renditions of extreme violence that had an immediate impact on their international, mainly Western, audiences: Georges Franju’s *Le sang des bêtes* (*Blood of the Beasts*, 1949) graphically depicts animals being slaughtered; Alain Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955) traces the systematic annihilation of European Jewry in the concentration camps; and Jean Rouch’s *Les maîtres fous* (“The mad masters,” 1955) addresses the brutal rituals of the Hauka cult in Ghana. These three examples have become canonical in nonfiction film studies generally, as well as specifically with respect to the documentary subfields of Holocaust studies and ethnography. They have also been identified by a number of film historians as originary essay films. For instance, Noël Burch pronounced the first essay film to be Franju’s *Blood of the Beasts*, both thematically, owing to its highly meditative, interpretative, and sometimes conflicting treatment of objective reality (facts), and formally, due to its aesthetic properties, which he claimed followed the conventions of fictional cinema and not documentary.<sup>2</sup> Burch concluded that *Blood of the Beasts* was an essay film because of its formal hybridity, its provocative combination of thesis and antithesis, fact and fiction, and subjective and objective commentary, all delivered in beautifully composed shots. Phillip Lopate subsequently challenged this claim because “conveying a message of politics through images does not alone make an essay.” Rather, Lopate argued that his “first glimpse of the centaur that is the essay-film was Alain Resnais’ *Night and Fog* (1955),” precisely because of its voice-over commentary, which intimately draws the viewer into a conversation as it actively interrogates its subject matter.<sup>3</sup> Following and expanding on Lopate, Paul Arthur proclaimed that “Jean Rouch’s *Les Maîtres fous* (1955), Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1955), and Chris Marker’s *Letter from Siberia* (1958) are crucial milestones.”<sup>4</sup> At issue with the above claims, which locate the emergence of the essay film in French cinema of the late forties and fifties, is that such a monocular view not only negates significant aspects of the genre’s history but also obscures both the transnational and transdisciplinary characteristics of its postwar iterations. Furthermore, to locate the emergence of the postwar essay film in examples that directly or indirectly address

the horrors of the concentration camps eclipses other pressing histories and issues.

Nonetheless, there are several reasons for the primacy of the French model for the emergence of the essay film. The most relevant is the cultural atmosphere in Paris during the late forties and fifties—a rich, fertile territory in which the genre of the essay film was cultivated. The organization of a variety of ciné clubs, cinémathèques, and the foundation of a European confederation of Cinéma d'Art et d'Essai provided spaces not only for screenings but also for debates, fostering a loyal public that was actively involved in ongoing, critical cinematic dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Several serious film journals, including *Cahiers du Cinéma* (from 1951) and *Cinéma* (1954–1999), were established during this period, and essays on film criticism, theory, and practice were interwoven with film reviews and analyses by filmmakers, furthering discussion and helping to establish the field of critical cinema studies. The overarching characterization of the essay film as French during this period is also no doubt due to the enormous productivity and longevity of many of its practitioners. With the exception of Franju, who died in his late seventies, Jean-Luc Godard, Marker, Resnais, Rouch, and Agnès Varda all continued to be successful filmmakers in their eighties, and some remained active into their nineties. Equally important to this argument are two short texts by the filmmaker, writer, and theoretician Alexandre Astruc that appeared in 1948: “The Birth of a New Avant-garde: The Camera-Stylo,” and “The Future of Cinema.”<sup>6</sup> Of these two texts, the former, widely circulated in English translation, has been one of the most influential articulations of the essay film for non-German speakers. In contrast to Hans Richter, who conceived of the essay film institutionally as bridging several disciplines, Astruc conceptualized it as a type of cinematic writing, with the camera serving as a pen.

Two films of 1947, Rouch's *Au pays des mages noirs* (“In the land of the black magi”) and Richter's *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, point to another postwar theme parallel to that of the Holocaust, namely, that of decolonization and the displacement, exile, and the unprecedented global movement of peoples that marked the postwar period. Neither was filmed in France or even on the European continent but in Nigeria and the United States, respectively. At first glance, *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, sited in New York City at the center of the postwar art world, appears to be the antithesis of *The Land of the Black Magi*, set in a remote region of Africa.

Yet both films contain an undercurrent of migration and mobility, the by-products of war or colonization.

*The Land of the Black Magi*, Rouch's first film, is an ethnographic record of a hippopotamus hunt by the Sorko tribe of Niger and is part of the broader genealogy of ethnographic or anthropological films such as *Nanook of the North* that continued with films such as *Voyage au Congo* ("Voyage to the Congo," 1927), a collaborative film made in France by Alberto Cavalcanti, Marc Allégret, and André Gide, and Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1937). The fact that British and French filmmakers produced these highly essayistic ethnographic films is not coincidental and is directly related to their history as colonial empires. Yet analyses of the essay film from this time period disregard these parallel ethnographic forays in other continents and instead direct their gaze to France.

*Dreams That Money Can Buy* opens another path that is equally overlooked but fruitful for navigating a history of the essay film: one practiced by individuals trained and self-identified as artists, rather than as filmmakers or ethnographers, and emerging primarily out of the United States. Despite Richter's earlier penning of "The Essay Film," critics discuss *Dreams That Money Can Buy* as an art film and overlook its contribution to the genre of essay film. At first glance, the themes addressed in *Dreams That Money Can Buy* seem far from European concerns with the trauma of World War II, and the film does not appear to conform to the accepted postwar narrative of the French essay film. Although situated far from Europe, *Dreams That Money Can Buy* is nevertheless imbued with prewar memories stemming from the continent and contains many parallels with the French essay film tradition. At the same time, it introduces important new qualities to the genre: a self-consciousness of the filmic medium generally and of the essay film in particular as a mode to record, preserve, and archive the past; and a recognition of the essay as a form of expression for the diaspora.

#### *DREAMS THAT MONEY CAN BUY (1947)*

In 1941, the year after he wrote "The Film Essay," Richter immigrated to the United States and joined fellow members of the European avant-garde such as Max Ernst, Fernand Léger, and Marcel Duchamp in New York

City.<sup>7</sup> Instead of relocating to southern California, as did the majority of German filmmakers including Oskar Fischinger, Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder, and Fred Zinneman, Richter joined the community of avant-garde artists in New York, thereby aligning himself with modern art rather than with commercial cinema. In immigrating to New York, Richter sought to continue the avant-garde project he had begun in Europe. It made sense to be part of the city's modern art scene, and it was there that he would make several essay films, including *Dreams That Money Can Buy*—his first film in eighteen years. Much had passed conceptually (the deep philosophical crisis engulfing Western humanity), practically (the ruined state of Germany), and technologically (the advent of sound film and the portable 16 mm camera) since *Inflation*. In New York, Richter resumed his stalled project to make essay films, but these efforts met with mixed success. Although reception of Richter's work from the 1920s was quite positive, his contemporary New York-based work was quickly dismissed by most historians and critics (Jay Leyda was an exception). Richter's earlier abstract films continued to be screened regularly and had a direct impact on a young generation of filmmakers, such as Kenneth Anger, Jonas Mekas, Maya Deren, and Andy Warhol.<sup>8</sup> Testifying to the significance of this early work was the inclusion of *Rhythmus 21* in the 1967 contemporary art journal *Aspen*.

*Dreams That Money Can Buy* is composed of loosely connected segments devoted to a range of contemporary artistic work, with Richter serving less in the role of director than in that of editor of a volume, or curator of an exhibition. The film is comprised of seven parts, each scripted by a different artist who has connections to New York. Richter was responsible for bringing together the contributors, creating the overarching narrative structure, and framing the story. Part one, "Desire," by Max Ernst, is based on the surrealist artist's 1934 novel in collage, *Une semaine de bonté*. The second segment, "The Girl with the Prefabricated Heart," is by Fernand Léger and features references not only to his works in film, such as *Ballet mécanique* (1924), but also to paintings such as *La Grande Julie* (1945), which he made in France immediately after the war. Part three, "Ruth, Roses and Revolvers" by Man Ray, is essentially a self-portrait of the artist, and the fourth part, "The Street Without Law" by Marcel Duchamp, restages his infamous *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1913) and includes extended camera shots of his "Chinese Lantern" and "Goldfish" *Rotoreliefs* (1926).

Duchamp appears in the character of a New York City policeman. Episodes five and six are by Alexander Calder and revolve around his signature mobiles. Both Léger and Man Ray had attracted Richter's attention in the 1920s for their exemplary attempts to advance the film medium in innovative directions. Each episode in *Dreams That Money Can Buy* is not only a personal essay about the individual artist's oeuvre but also a commentary on the film medium. The overarching structure provides a historical narrative or archive of Surrealism and its migration.

The narrative concerns a business venture in which the protagonist, "Joe," has just returned from the war to set up a pseudo-psychoanalytic practice that allows its patients/clients to have their dreams and desires realized for a price. In the postwar New World of New York City, even the unconscious can be bought and sold. What unfolds is a series of episodes, each corresponding to the secret fantasies of prospective consumers of psychoanalysis. The role of the unconscious is central to Surrealism, and on a meta level *Dreams That Money Can Buy* comments on what happened to that art movement when it made its way to the United States, raising questions about the migration and translation of aesthetic practice across time and space. On another level, the film's recourse to the unconscious and the realm of dreams as a structuring principle harkens back to Richter's earlier attempts to find a "universal film language"—with the unconscious now replacing abstract geometric principles. Further, the oneiric space of the dream world, like that of myth with its pretense to "universal appeal," serves as both a site for identification on the part of the audience and a focus around which to gather the disparate exile artists for whom stable concepts of culture or nation have been eradicated. The transition from the world of the psychoanalytic office to that of fantasies and dreams becomes a metaphorical journey that many of these artists had undergone in real life.

The frame story directly references Richter's personal exile status with Joe as his stand-in. Joe asks: "Why do you look at me as if I was a foreigner who speaks a strange language and refuses to assimilate?" Later, in an ambiguous statement, Joe proclaims: "the invasion of Holland, May 10, 1940—I had to go and so I did." Musing in his autobiography, Richter acknowledged the trauma associated with his departure and its impact on this particular film sequence: "To leave Europe became more and more urgent and this task absorbed all my energies. My patience daily snapping

and breaking, daily restored and redressed again, I felt like I was climbing a ladder leading to the sky, rungs disappearing one after the other. Five years later, I filmed such a scene in the last episode of *Dreams That Money Can Buy* without realizing that I was recounting my earlier experiences when leaving Europe.<sup>9</sup> Such paranoid scenarios, replete with claustrophobic scenes and situations imbued with panic, fear, pursuit, and escape, are typical of what Hafid Naficy terms “exile cinema.”<sup>10</sup> The self-reflexive, fragmented, and episodic nature of the film stands in radical opposition to standard Hollywood fare of the time, serving as yet another marker of the displaced status of its various contributors. *Dreams That Money Can Buy* tells the story of the dislocated European intelligentsia’s perception of the United States as a place where everything, including the unconscious, has been commodified. It does so via the experiences of a specific group of avant-garde artists who, having earlier decried the increasing instrumentalization of art, ultimately found themselves located geographically deep within that system.

In his 1948 review of *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, Siegfried Kracauer, another recent emigré, maintained that Richter was making a vital contribution to the visual arts in terms of the intersections among film, sound, and sculpture. According to Kracauer, Richter “transfers for the first time essential forms of modern art to the projection screen. . . . *Dreams That Money Can Buy* confirms the secret dream-life of drawings, paintings, and sculpture.”<sup>11</sup> Singling out the particular film sequences that Richter made in collaboration with Calder, Duchamp, and Léger, Kracauer commented in particular on the manner in which the soundtrack and the visuals work in tandem to break new ground. Kracauer’s review is significant because it not only draws attention to the ways in which Richter’s creative use of the camera in filming the sculpture produced novel forms on the celluloid but also suggests that endowing sculpture with directed movement, temporality, and sound shifts it to a new register. Kracauer’s stress on music is also significant, for he suggests that the addition of sound serves to mediate *between* film and sculpture while at the same time expanding the conceptual horizons of both media. Through the filmic process, dynamism is introduced to sculpture that is visually and temporally fixed by the addition of the acoustic layer as well as by the effects of the moving camera. Thus, the film’s fourth sequence, “The Street Without Law,” includes the reworking of Duchamp’s kinetic *Rotorelief* sculptures featured in his early



spiral film *Anemic Cinema* (1926). In Richter's film, Duchamp's sculptures are spun to a soundtrack composed by John Cage. The speed of rotation as well as details such as the fish circling in the cinematic frame are synchronized musically; notes and chords in Cage's composition are matched to the visual blur of the fish, accenting both audio and visual components. Cage's modern music, combined with the visually compelling and transfixing rotations, creates a hypnotic audiovisual sequence that suspends time and place as it temporally distracts the spectator from the film's diegesis. In *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, music compounds and exaggerates the abstract visuals, working in tandem with the pictorial aspects of the film to open up a contemplative space outside the frame of the narrative.

Similarly, in "A Ballet in the Universe," Calder's mobiles are viewed in motion, accompanied by music composed by Paul Bowles and David Diamond. Their compositions expand the cinematic frame beyond the diegesis and expand the sculptural parameters of the mobiles beyond the purely visual. The silent forms captured by the camera eye are amplified and dynamized through direct aural interference to register a space beyond that which is visible and contained within the mute cinematic frame. Léger's contribution, "The Girl with the Prefabricated Heart," involves the animation—or "birth"—of a female window mannequin and follows the figure through her meeting and courtship with a male mannequin, their engagement, and her flight from marriage. The camera films the static mannequins whose physical positions change in a rudimentary fashion while their expressions remain constant. The mannequins do not speak; instead, the narrative is produced entirely by the soundtrack on which the voices of Libby Holman and Josh White sing the ironic ballad "The Girl with the Prefabricated Heart" to lyrics written by John Latouche. The lyrics provide the bittersweet storyline and propel the sculptures into an animated diegesis. The song structure proceeds chronologically, conveying a sense of temporality and forward movement. At the same time, by visually matching the song to the mannequins, Richter expanded the meaning of the ballad to include a commentary on the possible effects of mass production and advertising on constructions of the self.

In *Dreams That Money Can Buy* Richter and his collaborators re-created historical moments for the camera, providing vignettes that "capture" the identity that each artist chose to represent himself to the public. This journey into the past and performance of a previous identity is a typical

feature of exile cinema. *Dreams That Money Can Buy* is not just an artist film, however; it contains a fictional narrative and is a hybrid of documentary and art cinema—an essay film. The importance of visually and acoustically resurrecting a certain moment in history cannot be overestimated for the significance of the prewar European avant-garde was rapidly being forgotten in the New World. While names like Man Ray, Duchamp, Hans Arp, Léger, Jean Cocteau, and Max Ernst resonate today, during the immediate postwar period their art was marginalized in the United States. Modernist critics such as Clement Greenberg and other supporters of the New York School dismissed both Dadaism and Surrealism as minor art movements, instead championing Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. As Richter noted retrospectively in an interview, the historical avant-garde of the interwar period had all but been forgotten until 1953. That year marks the advent of Neo-Dada, practiced by a new generation of artists that included Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly. From this perspective, Richter's postwar productions, which included *8X8 Chess Sonata* (1957) and the two-part *Dadascope* (completed in 1963), all featured a coterie of Dada and Surrealist artists and can be seen as attempts to redeem and revitalize the historical avant-garde in the cultural context of what Peter Bürger has termed the “neo-avant-garde.” The figures Richter mobilized for these films do not so much self-consciously play roles as they appear self-referentially as themselves. As Richter explained his choice of cast for *8x8 Chess Sonata*: “I love to work with my old crowd of friends. . . . I prefer to work with people I know rather than professional actors, people to whom I can adapt a role. I work with them in a kind of documentary way.”<sup>12</sup>

At the time he was making these neo-avant-garde films, Richter was also writing a number of books in German and English, the most prominent being *Dada Profile* (1961), *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (1964), *The Struggle for Film* (1976), and the autobiographical *Hans Richter by Hans Richter* (1971). Richter's period in the United States was marked not only by displacement but also by awareness of the importance of recording and archiving a recent past. Richter's historical reconstruction of Dada and his own identification with it are typical of the condition of exile in which personal identity becomes frozen in a past life and seems to stop in its development and evolution. Richter was clearly subject to this pressure to deal with his identity as part of the Old World, and it was his history

as a Dadaist that governed the nature of his cultural production after the war. This is in part what led to his exceptional project of narrating—and performing cinematographically—a history of the avant-garde through the form of audiovisual essays.

Equally important to Richter's project of reconstituting or at least restaging the European avant-garde was his commitment to explore the medium of film and devise new strategies of cinematic representation that would challenge the genre of feature narrative. The form of the essay film became particularly significant for Richter during this period. In his 1951 essay, "The Film as an Original Art Form," he underscored his earlier theories on the essay film, which held that documentary was one of two genres—the other being experimental or art film—capable of challenging dominant commercial cinema.<sup>13</sup> In Richter's estimation, however, neither genre went far enough. Indeed, in his postwar production, Richter strove to rethink the latter two genres, and his films such as *Dreams That Money Can Buy* can best be understood as a fusion of these two forms. They creatively mix fact and fiction and blur the distinctions among documentary, narrative, and experimental genres. The opening credits of *Dreams That Money Can Buy* announce: "This is a story of dreams mixed with reality." For Richter, this particular form of filmmaking seemed most appropriate for the condition of exile in which he and others of the Dada and Surrealist avant-gardes found themselves during World War II. It combined the external, material, physical, and geographical conditions of their displacement—the "facts" as it were—with their highly emotional, subjective responses to that displacement, which might be marked by paranoia, fantasy, illusion, and memories both real and imagined. The essay genre, which encourages such free play between the poles of representation and does not claim to produce either truth or fiction, is in many ways the ideal form for the exile film.

In his study of the cultural production of history, Michel-Rolph Trouillot isolates four important components of historical construction: "1) . . . fact creation (the making of sources); 2) . . . fact assembly (the making of *archives*); 3) . . . fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and 4) . . . retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)."<sup>14</sup> Richter's postwar exile films feature an archival process of this sort, reflecting his attempts to produce a record of a historical avant-garde. Richter's archival record, however, is performed filmically rather than textually. Indeed, he explicitly observed that film is inherently predisposed to the

act of historical preservation: “Even to the sincere lover of the film in its present form it must seem that the film is overwhelmingly used for keeping *records* of creative achievements: of plays, actors, novels, or just plain nature.”<sup>15</sup> Just as fictional narratives, memoirs, and autobiographies of the migrant or the diaspora often lead writing in new directions and into novel forms, Richter steered the nonfiction film toward the essay film to produce history.<sup>16</sup> Richter developed his essay films during a time of both personal and public crisis, and they function to commemorate, restore, and re-present a “history interrupted.” Both the pure art film and the documentary would fall short of fulfilling such a mission.

In “The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film,” Richter explains that he employs the term “essay” because it signifies a genre between genres, one that combines documentary with experimental or artistic film. It is precisely this formal resistance to binary categories and oppositions that the process of exile solidifies, because, according to Naficy, “border consciousness, like exilic liminality, is theoretically against binarism and duality and for a third optique, which is multi-perspectival and tolerant of ambiguity, ambivalence, and chaos.” In the case of the essay film, that “third optique” is the fusion of three genres—narrative, documentary, and art—thereby confirming Naficy’s theory that “accented films in general derive their power not from purity and refusal but from impurity and refusion.”<sup>17</sup> In his exile essay films, *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, *8X8: Chess Sonata*, and *Dadascope*, Richter sought not only to provide a documentary record of an artistic movement but also to develop a new mode of aesthetic production. Each film attempts to chart the dream world of the unconscious as it is conditioned by the condition of exile. In organizing a historical account of the aims and aspirations of Dada and Surrealism, Richter transformed the notion of the historical archive from its written or graphic form to the audiovisual register. His essay films involve not only a geopolitical translation, from a European to an American context, but also the translation of media, from painting and sculpture to film. As such, these films, like his earlier abstract productions, constitute important precedents for future artistic essay films. As Peter Wollen has put it, “history in the arts” is achieved through “knight’s moves.”<sup>18</sup> It is precisely this type of leap, not only spatially across oceans and continents but also temporally across periods and contexts, that culminates in the contemporary essay film.

“BIRTH OF A NEW AVANT-GARDE: THE CAMERA-STYLO” (1948) AND “THE FUTURE OF CINEMA” (1948)

While Richter was exploring the archival and memorial aspects of the essay film in the United States, the genre was increasingly becoming a recognized form of practice in Paris. As important in articulating the formal concepts of the essay film as Richter’s “The Film Essay” were Astruc’s “Birth of a New Avant-garde: The Camera-Stylo” and “The Future of Cinema.” Like Richter, Astruc was a filmmaker and theoretician, and a close associate of Marker, Resnais, and Varda. He defined the new sub-genre as “filmed philosophy” and advanced the notion of a camera-pen that, within the context of cinema, would “become a means of writing, just as flexible and subtle as written language.” Cinema, he wrote, will now be able “to produce works which are the equivalent in their profundity and meaning . . . to the essays of Sartre and Camus.” In the French tradition derived from Michel de Montaigne, to “essai” means to “assay,” “to weigh,” as well as “to attempt,” suggesting an open-ended, evaluative, and speculative search. With the full integration of sound recording, Astruc felt that cinema had reached a stage in its development such that it could achieve a new level of sophistication. He acknowledged that both Jacques Feyder and Eisenstein had wanted to produce essays films but were constrained by the lack of sound. He explained: “Cinema is now moving towards a form that is making it such a precise language that it will soon be possible to write ideas directly on film without having to resort to those heavy associations of images that were the delight of silent cinema.”<sup>19</sup> Astruc also understood that technical changes, including the lightweight and easily portable 16 mm camera—a significant by-product of World War II—would contribute to the ease of producing nonfiction films. Relatively inexpensive and easy to use, the 16 mm camera rapidly became popular with amateur filmmakers. Finally, Astruc anticipates the era of mobile handheld devices as he imagines a future with portable cameras small enough to fit into a pant’s pocket and thereby enable a filmmaker to capture images and sounds spontaneously while meandering through his or her everyday life.<sup>20</sup>

Astruc considered the new venues available for film exhibition and distribution to be as important to this development as technical progress. He

positioned the essay film against the “spectacle” of features shown in large auditoriums, concluding that with “the development of 16 mm and television, the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector, will go to the local bookstore and hire films on any subject, of any form. . . . From that moment on, it will no longer be possible to speak of *the* cinema. There will be *several* cinemas.”<sup>21</sup> Like Grierson a decade earlier, Astruc recognized the importance of alternative screening venues for freeing cinema from the constraints of the feature-length spectacle and fostering the formation of a counter public sphere that would challenge film’s status as pure mass cultural entertainment. Echoing the frustration Richter expressed in “The Essay Film,” Astruc elaborated: “between the pure cinema of the 1920s and filmed theater, there is plenty of room for a different and individual kind of film-making,” and he argued that the “*avant-garde*” is already old hat.<sup>22</sup> Exasperated by the dominance of commercial feature-length “spectacles,” many of them American, Astruc asserted the emergence of the new genre even more forcefully in “The Future of Cinema,” published a few months later: “The cinema that is being born will be closer to the book than the spectacle, its language will be that of the essay, poetic, dramatic, and dialectic all at once.”<sup>23</sup>

Like Richter before him, Astruc was irritated by the categorical distinction between fiction and documentary films. Drawing an analogy to the creative possibilities of a more commonplace, lightweight implement, he foresaw the possibility for a new filmic genre to emerge, maintaining that “cinema can evolve only if the camera ends up replacing the pen: this is why I say that its language cannot be that of fiction or documentary, but that of the essay.”<sup>24</sup> To employ such a form is to break with what had, by 1948, already become rigidly prescribed rules and regulations governing commercial cinema as an institution. Astruc was adamant, however, that cinema could still be rescued from potential ossification because it was a relatively new form, only half a century old. If it was to progress and diverge from the path of mass entertainment, it would have to take the form of art. As he concluded: “The future of cinema merges already today with the future of art. It is, in the twentieth century, that unique and privileged form, destined to replace all those that preceded it, and outside of which there will soon be no other expression possible.”<sup>25</sup>

VAN GOGH (1948) AND *BLOOD OF THE BEASTS* (1949).

Within a year of the publication of Astruc's texts, two short films were made that directly related to the form of the essay film: Resnais's *Van Gogh* (1948), and Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* (1949). *Van Gogh* was commissioned as part of an exhibition of Van Gogh's work in Paris. Composed entirely of images from the artist's oeuvre, the film was originally shot in 16 mm. Based on its initial success, however, Resnais reshot it in 35 mm, and it was awarded a prize at the Venice film festival as well as an Oscar for the best two-reel short. In this black and white film, Resnais used pans, zooms, and horizontal and vertical tracking shots of Van Gogh's paintings and drawings to create a dynamic account of the turbulent last seven years of the painter's life. Constant movement of the camera over the Van Gogh images combines with original music composed by Jacques Besse and the commanding voice of the commentator Claude Dauphin to propel the narrative forward to the artist's calamitous end. Van Gogh's early paintings of rural life are connected to the artist's pre-Paris period when, as the narrator informs us, he "captures the misery of peasants" through his intense depiction of their everyday life. The camera cuts from larger tableaux to details such as clogs, a pipe, a hand lifting a fork, and a furrowed face. The film then follows the artist to Paris through his paintings of the windmills of Montmartre, the factories, and various scenes of the city. Resnais used repeated shots of several paintings of disorganized piles of books to depict the period when Van Gogh began to read profusely, gradually losing his grip on reality. In a sequence of different images interspersed with self-portraits, the cutting becomes more rapid until the film reaches a narrative and musical crescendo with the announcement that "one Christmas Eve the drama burst into an act of madness," as a self-portrait depicting the artist with his bandaged head fills the screen. To cover Van Gogh's subsequent period in a mental hospital, the footage alternates repeatedly among the artist's renditions of the bricked-in exercise courtyard, shadowy images of other patients, long hallways with doors of cells, large rooms filled with hospital beds, and portraits of doctors and administrators. Resnais interspersed these images depicting the grimness of the artist's confines with details from his paintings of nature, butterflies, flowers, and trees. As Van Gogh is released from the hospital and continues to paint, familiar landscapes fill the screen, culminating in

“Cornfield with Crows,” when the narrator announces that Van Gogh “has to make a decision” and shoots himself. The camera lingers on this final painting, then pans slowly to the right as the field gives way to a blackness that gradually envelops the entire screen. The word “*Fin*” (“End”) then appears.

*Van Gogh* was unlike any preceding film about an artist, and to that extent it was as significant as Richter’s *Dreams That Money Can Buy* in complicating the genre of the artist film. Remarkable for the time, the visual track was composed entirely of Van Gogh’s own works. In other words, the film was to a certain extent coming out of the compilation tradition; in this case, however, the images were translated from the medium of painting and drawing based on an original to the mechanically reproducible one of celluloid. Praising Resnais for inventing the form of the short film, Godard remarked, “In *Van Gogh*, one has the impression that this is not just a camera movement but an investigation into the secret of that movement.”<sup>26</sup> The camera is never still, putting the artist’s static images into perpetual motion. It is not just the moving camera but the additional change of temporality that animates Van Gogh’s works, a combination that, according to Marker, is the essence of cinema. The film reconstitutes the time period in which the paintings were made, transporting the spectator from the here and now to a prior history, which is one of the fundamental qualities of screen time—that it can be anytime.<sup>27</sup> Resnais and Marker would repeat this audiovisual technique of animating a subject matter from a previous time and place in *Statues Also Die* (1953), where they employed languorous and at times rapid camera movement to film African sculptures and masks.

Resnais’s narrative is derived entirely from Van Gogh’s paintings. The film is an exercise in aesthetic interpretation, or what the French call “*explication du texte*,” an exploration of how to read images and construct a narrative, in this instance a life story. It is not meant to extol or glorify Van Gogh; rather, as Resnais explained, “For me, *Van Gogh*, is less a film about Van Gogh than an attempt to narrate the imaginary life of a painter through his paintings. It was never for their pictorial or didactic value that we chose this or that detail from the canvas.”<sup>28</sup> The essayistic emerges in this act of critique and analysis, not in the form of a written catalog essay on Van Gogh but through an audiovisual critique that uses the camera as a surrogate for the eye to draw out meaning. According to Resnais,



the interior world of the painting is transformed into an external world revealed by photography.<sup>29</sup>

Just as *Van Gogh* departed from the traditional style of films about artists, *Blood of the Beasts*, made the following year, approached a documentary subject in a radically different way. Franju divided the commentary into two voice-overs, female (Natalie Ladmiral) and male (George Hubert), each narrating different sections of the film. The female narrator opens Franju's work through her description of the neighborhood located just outside one of the "portes" of Paris on the "outer edge of traffic, trucks, and trains." It is in this landscape in the outskirts of the metropolis, marked as a liminal space between city and country, that the city's slaughterhouses are located. The camera tracks isolated and disconnected objects and people. A high-angle shot shows a new apartment complex in the distance; train tracks run around the periphery, demarcating the urban boundary; and people as small as ants rush toward the city in their morning commute. A low-angle shot follows a woman's back and shoulders as she walks across a barren field toward the urban development; only a bare tree punctures the desolate horizon. In this alienated and strange space, we see the temporary stands of a flea market where a series of disconnected objects are displayed, all shot to the accompaniment of cloying sentimental music. The soundtrack changes abruptly as the rhythmic rumble of trains, trucks, and cars announces the passage of traffic across the screen. With these signs of commerce and transportation, the narrator informs us that this peripheral space is the location of a slaughterhouse that specializes in killing horses. The camera then zooms to a close-up of a bust of the abattoir's founder located sovereignly above the stately entrance to the processing plant. In an abrupt audial cut, a male voice assumes the narrative to describe the different "tools used according to the animal [being processed]." A quick shot of a close-up on an instrument display appears as a hand enters the screen and grabs for "the bear pistol whose captive bolt kills the animal by impact." A rapid cut shifts to a magnificent white horse being led into a stall, where it is felled in a matter of seconds by the expert use of the bear pistol. This entire opening sequence takes no longer than three and a half minutes, and the transition from the desolate but poetic setting to the shock of the slaughter occurs explosively, rapid-fire, and without warning. The film records in painstaking detail the further skinning, bleeding, and dismemberment of the beast. The first chapter

ends with a nineteenth-century engraving of a large man sitting over the corpse of a flayed horse, who, the narrator informs us, is famous for having initiated industrial quartering at the end of the century. The frame of the film turns into an old-fashioned photo album, closing this sequence.

The opening of the following chapter follows a pattern similar to that of the first: the female narrator describes a different depopulated exterior landscape, with the imagery this time focused on a canal in the city where another slaughterhouse devoted to cattle is located. The female voice is again a poetic guiding tone describing the canals and the landscape. Once the camera penetrates the slaughterhouse interior, however, the male voice takes over as visual depictions and linguistic descriptions of the art of killing continue. Franju's film portrays the work performed in the abattoir with a highly developed audiovisual aesthetic so that the endless images of slaying and flaying appear as a poetic meditation or study in black and white. Some images are shot through reflective pools of blood and gore, for example, rendering them horrible and beautiful at the same time, as the steam produced by the warm fluid coming into contact with the frigid air produces an ethereal quality. The objective, matter-of-fact delivery of the narrative in conjunction with these poetic images propels the film away from the genre of pure documentary.

The film's combination of documentary and artistic qualities can be explained in part by the fact that the script was written by Jean Painlevé, a film director and biologist known not only for his skill at producing marine science films but also for his abiding interest in Surrealism. In 1924, Painlevé wrote "Exemple de surrealism: le cinéma" ("Example of surrealism: The cinema") for the journal *Surréalisme*. In it he extolled film as the ideal surrealist medium because it could combine the reality captured by the apparatus with the imagination and creativity of the screenwriter to produce aesthetic techniques such as slow motion, footage reversal, and other visual tricks. Indeed, as Adam Lowenstein has detailed, Surrealism was an important influence on Franju, and surrealist traits appear throughout *Blood of the Beasts*.<sup>30</sup> The opening sequence, with its odd juxtapositions and dislocations of both objects and people in the liminal space outside the former city gates, is nothing short of a surrealist tableau. Seemingly echoing Painlevé's earlier proclamation, Franju explained that for him the documentary form allowed for surrealist interventions "by displacing the object in another context. In this new setting, the object

rediscovers its quality as an object.<sup>31</sup> The surrealist tactic of nonsensical juxtaposition appears repeatedly in this cinematic essay, which progresses not in a clear narrative fashion but through playful leaps and bounds akin to Adorno's description of the literary essay.

Some film historians consider Franju's film to be inherently violent and sadistic: a cinema of cruelty.<sup>32</sup> The beautiful shots that permeate the film serve to enhance the visual assault on the viewer, a dichotomy echoed in the soundtrack where happy voices of workers singing as they perform their gruesome tasks accompany shots tracking pools of blood. The film's penultimate sequence begins with a medium close-up of two nuns with their backs to the camera as they traverse the square in front of the abattoir. This is followed by a shot of sheep herded together in a pen, with the narrator informing us: "They have been spared for one more night. They won't hear the prison doors close on the train which leaves for the countryside at sunset to collect new victims for tomorrow." The trope of the "sacrificial lamb of God" is literalized in this instance, and the text alludes to other victims gathered up in the fog of night to be transported by train to their slaughter.

In the striking final shot of *Blood of the Beasts*, the camera records a field with the city in the background. Suddenly the prow of a barge enters the frame from the left-hand side of the screen and glides noiselessly across it, making the viewer aware that what was assumed to be solid land is in fact bifurcated by a canal, its presence hidden by vegetation. This image functions in multiple ways. First, it reconnects the surreal juxtapositions of the opening three-minute sequence, reminding us of the possible entry of the irrational into the ordered world of rationalized modernity and industrialization. Next, in the juxtaposition of industrialization and constructed nature—a barge traversing a cultivated field on a manmade waterway—the image and its filming have no parallel in the natural world because "nature" is itself a cultural construct; it is entirely a product of human ingenuity like the slaughterhouses and the industrial quartering of the beasts. Finally, the image of the canal calls into question our ability to trust what we see. The sequence reveals that the camera as a recording device is also one of manipulation and deception. It is this multilayered, palimpsestic quality, with its associated ambiguity of meaning and its highly aestheticized images, that has led film theorists such as Burch to refer to *Blood of the Beasts* as one of the first essay films.

*STATUES ALSO DIE* (1953)

In 1953, Astruc, Marker, Resnais, and Varda formed the filmmaker's organization *Groupe des Trente* ("The Group of Thirty") to promote the development of the short film, the maximum length of which was not to exceed thirty minutes. Their initial proclamation reads: "Next to the novel and other extensive works, there is the poem, the short story, or the essay, which often plays the role of a hothouse; it has the function of revitalizing a field with the contribution of fresh blood."<sup>33</sup> The group used the form of the short film to experiment with the filmic medium and to shift it in new directions, including that of the essay film.<sup>34</sup> By the 1950s the term "*cinéma d'essai*" was in use, marking the broad acknowledgment of the genre among French filmmakers and critics, and in Paris there was even a theater called *Cinéma d'essai*.

During this period, Marker and Resnais were working on what they referred to as a "pamphlet" essay film, *Statues Also Die* (1953). Because the French authorities interpreted *Statues Also Die* as a critique of the lingering effects of African colonialization, the Film Commission censored the film, refusing to grant it a visa until the midsixties; indeed, in pointing to contradictions that permeate the social condition of the African diaspora, the film constitutes a broad critique of the era's cultural values. It was commissioned by *Presence Africaine: Revue Culturelle du Monde Noir*, a cultural journal established in 1947 by Alioune Diop, a Senegalese writer and editor whose advisory board included Albert Camus, Aimé Césaire, André Gide, Michel Leiris, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others. The journal focused on various texts and cultural products of the African diaspora as they related to the process of decolonization. Despite its official censure, the film was screened in private venues and was awarded the Jean Vigo Prize in 1954. When submitted to the selection jury at Cannes, it was also well received; because it was not granted a screening visa, however, it had to be withdrawn from competition.<sup>35</sup> In Marker's preamble to his published commentary on the film of 1961, he observed: "Here is a film about which much has been spoken, too much, no doubt. When released from a censorship that has been keeping it under lock and key for ten years, it will disappoint."<sup>36</sup> Marker noted that while the first two reels, which focus primarily on African masks and other cultural objects, were deemed permissible, the third reel, which directly addresses the present aftereffects

of colonization and slavery, was found to be offensive. In addition, the commission took issue with the open-ended form of the film, which eschewed the standard rules of the documentary genre.<sup>37</sup> Marker wryly observed that he could publish a written version of a film that still could not be shown publicly: “Now, it is well established that, the pamphlet, a genre that is accepted and honored in literature, is unacceptable in film, the entertainment of the masses.”<sup>38</sup>

*Statues Also Die* addresses the process whereby culture becomes mummified when placed in a museum. It explores how cinema, by its very nature, participates in this process, documenting and recording events, people, objects, the past, and the present, and freezing them in a two-dimensional visual verisimilitude. The film opens to a dark screen followed by a series of still shots of African masks and statues filmed in the old Musée de l’Homme in Paris. A voice-over commentary animates this image track of detached images floating on a black backdrop by introducing themes of animism, history, culture, art, and preservation: “When people die they enter into history; when statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture.” As in *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, the camera does not discriminate between living beings and inanimate works of art. Rather, it freezes whatever material is before it on a single representational plane, rendering all that it captures interchangeable. Animation and differentiation occur instead on the level of the soundtrack, in which the voice-over and nondiegetic music unfreeze the sculptures and place them in a dynamic historical condition. Because the camera does not differentiate among humans, statues, animals, landscapes, architecture, or signs, the magic of cinema imbues inanimate objects with life while it carries out the mortification of living subjects. The resulting animism results in Marker and Resnais filming statues and masks as if they were alive so that images of objects return the gaze of the spectator.

The opening sequence, which juxtaposes statues and masks with contemporary faces of museum visitors, recalls the beginning of Eisenstein’s *¡Que viva Mexico!*—a film with which Marker was familiar. In his notes to *¡Que viva Mexico!* Eisenstein described the prologue as follows: “In the corresponding grouping of the stone images, the masks, the bas-reliefs and the living people, the immobile act of the funeral is displayed. The people bear resemblance to the stone images, for those images represent

the faces of their ancestors.”<sup>39</sup> In that opening sequence images of statues adjoin those of contemporary Mayan Indian faces next to statues: “faces of stone, faces of flesh.” A dozen years later Marker referenced Eisenstein’s film in his photo-essay *Soy Mexico* (1965), based on his plans to make an eponymous film. Concerning a still from Eisenstein’s film, Marker observed, “This image still exists: the profile in front of the pyramids,” and he continued with a citation from Octavio Paz: “And first the masks . . . ‘who mime their own history, that which forced them to put masks on, veils hanging over their souls, which smile for others and suffer.’”<sup>40</sup> In another passage of the same photo essay, Marker cited a portrait of Eisenstein holding up a skull death mask, noting, “This mask of death, it is the very one that the great Russian film director showed us (well, would have wanted to show us) at the end of a film called *¡Que viva Mexico!*—and that a child has torn from his face in order to offer to life a gesture of trust.”<sup>41</sup> Ironically, like Eisenstein, Marker was unable to complete *Soy Mexico*, and the film exists only in printed form.

In the voice-over of *Statues Also Die*, Marker and Resnais pronounce: “An object is dead when the living gaze directed at it disappears.” Masks and statues are what remain after death. They are the testament to a prior existence, just as film itself also becomes a mask—a two-dimensional mask as it were. The commentator observes that signs of death in the form of doubles exist throughout life: “During life, this double sometimes takes the form of a shadow or a reflection in the water.” Thus one could say that the double of the photographic camera is the negative of life. In a scene reminiscent of *The Blood of the Beasts*, the narrator announces, “but death is not just something to which one submits, it is also an act that one gives.” A graphic sequence featuring the violent death of a disemboweled gorilla follows this statement. To film the dying animal doubles the mortification process; on one hand there is the aesthetic and symbolic death that occurs when life is fixed in filmic and other aesthetic objects, and on the other there is the literal death captured, replayed, and relived filmically. Just as humans and animals die, so do civilizations and their artifacts. The narrator’s commentary in *Statues Also Die* reminds us that the inanimate figures represented in the film once had special practical or symbolic functions or roles: serving as tributes to fertility, to the health or beauty of children, to the gods, to the telling of stories—all features of a civilization that has been lost. With bitter irony the film notes that in the West the

history of Europe from the Middle Ages to the present is relatively well known, whereas that of Africa is an epistemological void. It remains for film to restore those stories, to record those histories, to redirect the gaze back to those objects, thereby reanimating them.

*Statues Also Die* underscores the notion that the process of disenchantment and demystification of African statues persists to the present day and is directly related to colonialism. Art and culture are promptly reified when money is introduced into an economy that had previously relied on barter for exchange. The inclusion of a clip depicting the factory production of African “objets d’art” in the Congo reinforces this point, as the voice-over intones, “and because the white man is the buyer, and the demand exceeds the supply, and one is in a hurry, African artists are turned into mere native craftsmen.” In this way *Statues Also Die* illustrates the process wherein Western civilization transforms a religious fetish into a commodity fetish. Just as “art” came to be produced to satisfy the desires of the Western consumer, so too colonization produced Africans to meet the expectations of the colonizer. Over images of white rats in a laboratory, the commentary remarks, “from this perspective, Africa is a marvelous laboratory where one patiently prefabricates, in spite of a few bloodlettings, the good black African type dreamed about by the good whites.” The effects of colonialization are perceived not only economically and in terms of subject formation but also in the form of Christianity that is imposed from without, which results in the production of “*l’art nègre-chrétien*” in the form of black Madonnas and similar icons reminiscent of syncretism filmed by Eisenstein in *Que viva Mexico!*.

Amid this totalizing apparatus, however, there are exceptions, as the commentary vehemently proclaims: “one says: yes, yes, yes. . . . Sometimes, one says: No!” And that “No!” of resistance has the potential to become the “No!” of revolution. It is to be found in the black artist who represents contemporary subjects, in the art of struggle, a transitory art whose goal is not to eternalize but “*de témoigner*,” to testify or witness, much like the act of filming. It is with this “No!,” however, that *Statues Also Die* begins its last, most “controversial” critique, as the film moves from a focus on inanimate statues to the consumption of Africa ritual performances and dances in the West, where black performers entertain white audiences. Anticipating by half a century Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000), this phenomenon of Western consumption of the exotic marks the

emergence of a new figure—the “*nègre-guignol*,” or black puppet. Colonialization has completely degraded the African, and Marker and Resnais track the instrumentalization of the African body by Western culture, not just in the form of a comedy, but also in watching sports, whether of Jesse Owens defeating Hitler’s Aryan runners or prizefighters knocking out their white counterparts. Meanwhile, over contemporary footage from a riot in the United States, the commentary ironically reminds the spectator that the blows that are applauded when delivered in the boxing ring are met by shots from policemen when they are given by protest marchers in the streets. The film’s penultimate pronouncement is that among all the ambiguities and chiasmic reversals there is one undisputable fact: “That of repression.”

#### *LES MAÎTRES FOUS* (1955)

Owing to his training as an ethnographer, Rouch undertook an alternate approach to understanding and exposing the issues surrounding colonialization. Whereas Marker and Resnais leveled a harsh sociopolitical critique that focused primarily on the legacy of colonialism in France, Rouch went on site to Africa to explore the effects of modernity and colonization on that continent’s indigenous populations. Marker and Resnais directed their camera to the historical narratives and cultural artifacts preserved in museums, while Rouch focused directly on the African people and their rituals, thereby solidifying what might be called an anthropological/ethnographic branch of essay filmmaking begun already with *Nanook of the North*. Rouch’s *Les Maîtres fous* is an exposition of the Hauka cult practices of spirit possession, trances, and the occult in Ghana. Because Rouch directed his critique to British colonial practices rather than to those of the French, his work did not risk censorship in France.<sup>42</sup> The film’s commentary describes Ghana as an “African Babylon” because it drew people from all over western Africa, including Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, and Upper Volta. Ghana was the first African nation to achieve independence (in 1957), and Rouch’s film depicts the complicated psychical tactic by which the subjects of British colonization manage to work through their degraded status.



The film takes place over three days; the first is set in Accra, the capital of present-day Ghana, and the second and third days take place in a remote rural area where the cult rituals are performed. It opens with a sign of modernity: a train that cuts across the screen followed by shots of the active, vibrant urban center of Accra, where neither “traffic” nor “noise” ever stops. The city pulls young men from different tribes throughout western Africa who perform a variety of hard labor tasks, serving as dockworkers, smugglers, porters, grass cutters, cattle boys, water boys, mine workers, and the like. During the evenings they entertain themselves listening to music from the West Indies in clubs with names such as “Weekend California” or “Weekend Havana.” The film records a series of processions that take place in the city on the weekends, including a Yoruba wedding ceremony, a protest of prostitutes demonstrating against low wages, religious “small sisters of Christ” parading through the streets, and military bands performing. The sequence with the prostitutes occurs between those of the “holy” institutions of matrimony and the church, a juxtaposition that is not without irony. Rouch’s montage structure harkens back dialectically to Eisenstein, and its employment of shock to Surrealism.<sup>43</sup>

The commentary and images shift abruptly from these publicly sanctioned urban displays and ceremonies to the secret, more obscure rituals taking place in the outskirts of the city—away from any signs of modernity. There, we are informed, on Sunday evenings new gods of strength, “the Hauka,” are created. Every Sunday morning, members of the sect leave Accra for the jungle where, in a remote village decorated with banners bearing titles such as “Union Jack,” a primitive effigy of the colonial governor is erected. With the help of the ingestion of a very powerful cocoa, the weekly ritual begins. This includes a series of ceremonies, each of which is a powerful performance of the trauma inflicted on the colonized subject by the imposition of Christian morals and the subjection to humiliating slavlike labor conditions. The Hauka, who exchange roles of colonized and colonizer as they enact their ceremonies on the set of the “governor’s palace,” perform harsh rituals of punishment, purification, and sacrifice (of a dog). Through this extensive process of role playing and performance of traumatic acts, the participants exorcise the colonial power and imbue themselves with certain powers of the colonizer.<sup>44</sup> In the final sequence, the cult members, bearing little resemblance to their

possessed selves from the prior evening, return to the urban center to begin their workweek. By intercutting images from their imaginary roles of positions of power with those of their working selves, the film asks whether, through these rituals, the Africans might perhaps have found some method to maintain normalcy in the all too abnormal condition of colonization.<sup>45</sup> In the final scene the men are resubjugated—engaged in backbreaking work, digging a ditch while their white overseers look on.

Rouch made over fifty films, and he is said to have established the genre of what in North America is called visual anthropology but in France is still classified as ethnography. He trained his camera on “others” and recorded their lives in a seemingly objective and neutral fashion. Working in the tradition of Robert Flaherty, however, he consciously manipulated the reality before the camera to create fictions, which has led to him being called the father of “ethnofiction.”<sup>46</sup> Because of this departure from straight documentary in its blending of fictional narratives and factual footage and its interpretative, subjective commentary, Rouch’s work features essayistic qualities. Nevertheless, the voice-over in *Les Maîtres fous* stops short of critiquing colonial practices directly, unlike the more overt condemnation Marker and Resnais articulated in *Statues Also Die*. In addition, the latter sought to make the viewer aware of the potentially misleading or duplicitous nature of the filmmaking process, whereas Rouch disguised such deceptions. Rouch’s focus on countries and peoples seemingly far removed from the West is part of the essayistic tradition that often finds its form in the travelogue. In this manifestation, the essay film is part of the process by which the non-Western becomes exoticized and packaged for Western consumption. At the same time, however, the foreign “other” serves as a substitute or stand-in for that which is closest to home.

#### NIGHT AND FOG (1955)

Upon completing *Statues Also Die*, Resnais immediately began one of his most significant and important cinematic projects—*Night and Fog*. This film has not only reached a broad international audience but has also attracted the most critical attention of all his oeuvre. Commissioned by

the Historic Committee of the Second World War, *Night and Fog* is composed of found footage as well as new material shot on site at Auschwitz. The film was produced by Anatole Dauman who asked Resnais to direct a film honoring the victims of the Holocaust.<sup>47</sup> A number of Jewish exiles and camp survivors were involved in the production. Because Dauman was originally from Warsaw, he was able to facilitate the filming on location in Poland. Jean Cayrol, a camp survivor whose brother had perished in Oranienburg, penned the commentary, and Hanns Eisler composed the music. Although Marker took no credit as codirector, he assisted Resnais on *Night and Fog*, focusing primarily on constructing the soundtrack and encouraging and supporting Cayrol in completing the narrative.

Much has been written about the film's poetic and meditative qualities. The contemporary scenes are filmed in color, and those from the past consist entirely of black and white documentary footage. This interplay between past and present establishes a subtle continuity that is a commentary on contemporary politics as well as on the complex structure of memory and forgetting. Although the film is generally classified as a documentary, in order no doubt to preserve its truth claims, its fragmentary nature and traumatic theme have led critics such as Paul Arthur to position it as an Ur-essay film. Reasoning that the reliance on found footage in *Night and Fog* is a key characteristic of the essay film, particularly in the way such footage is framed by a subjective voice-over, Arthur writes, "in essay films such materials are neither fetishized nor passed along as neutral carriers of information; instead, they are prone to oppositional readings produced by visual juxtaposition, voice-over commentary, and other tactics."<sup>48</sup> The film's powerful, shaping voice-over, with its intimate commentary delivered in the "nous/we" form of address, has led Corrigan to also identify *Night and Fog* as an essay film. Corrigan draws particular attention to the active engagement in dialogue that the film forges with the viewer in the hope of fostering a critical conversation.<sup>49</sup>

Cayrol composed the film's intimate commentary, and his narrative is a carefully crafted prose.<sup>50</sup> To maintain the precision of Cayrol's evocative language, Marker and Resnais solicited another camp survivor, poet Paul Celan, to make the translation for the German language version of the film.<sup>51</sup> Each poet synchronized his writing with the visual track in both the French and German language versions of the film to ensure that every word or phrase was precisely selected to match the associated imagery.

Both channels of meaning, however, come up against the aporia of the impossibility of signification: the unspeakability and unrepresentability of the Holocaust.<sup>52</sup> This ineffable quality is what renders the film essayistic; it reflects an *attempt* to represent that which is impossible to represent, thereby engaging in and enacting a continuous aesthetic form of contradiction and negation.

Film historians and critics have paid significant attention to both the visual track and the commentary of *Night and Fog*, yet little note has been made of Eisler's musical composition. The music track operates essayistically to provide further layers of meaning—ones that exist below the surface of the film and that, had they been detected, might have resulted in further attempts to censor it. These subtle layers of signification emerge in relation to the complex prior history of the musical composition. The film opens with white credits against a black screen, and on the soundtrack the music is a slow, legato string line that echoes repeatedly. The iterative opening bars produced by the first and second violin pierce the image track, followed by the call of a trumpet that heralds the unknown. Eisler's opening score recurs several times throughout the film, including during the final sequence when the commentator asks: "Who among us watch this strange observatory that warns us against the coming of new tortures? Do they [i.e. the Nazis] really have a face different from ours?" The commentator's use of the shifters "us" and "ours" sutures the mid-1950s French public to the perpetrators of genocide in the 1940s. The phrase "the coming of new tortures" alludes directly to the increasing violence of the French colonial war in Algeria. By not explicitly mentioning Algeria, however, the commentary leaves open the possibility of pointing to future violence anywhere. The voice-over concludes:

We sincerely look at these ruins as if the old monster of the concentration camp is dead under the rubble; we pretend to regain hope in the face of this vanishing image, as if one could be cured of the plague of the concentration camp, we who pretend to believe all this belongs to only one time and one country and do not think to look around us and do not hear the endless screams.

Such screams echo through time and space, from the death camps of World War II to the bloody struggle for Algerian independence; they

extend, as we will see, to the horrors of the Gulag and the Vietnam War. Screams that have yet to cease. As Cayrol commented in 1956, “In the indifferent sky of these images, there are the menacing clouds of eternal racism, always in motion. They grow and burst in certain places and destroy those who remain standing.”<sup>53</sup>

Although Resnais thought he received an original score from the German composer, Eisler delivered a composition, parts of which he had written in 1954 for a theater production of Johannes Becher’s play *Winterschlacht: Eine deutsche Tragödie* (“Winter slaughter: A German tragedy”), staged by Bertolt Brecht, which premiered at the East German Berliner Ensemble in January 1955. The play is set during the battle of Moscow that in East Germany was viewed as an important watershed in the ultimate triumph of communism over fascism. Upon Brecht’s request, Eisler subsequently composed the score and wrote the libretto, incorporating certain passages of Becher’s words that are spoken over the music. The drama concerns the tragedy of a young idealistic German soldier, Hoerder, who, horrified by his military experience, disavows war and becomes a pacifist. When he refuses to obey his commander’s order to slay two Russians, he is summarily executed on the battlefield.

The music track of *Night and Fog* opens with the same bars and strains of stringed instruments—a first and second violin, bass, and trumpet—as the *Winterschlacht* prelude. This passage will appear again, as we will see, in Marker’s *Letter from Siberia*, and in his collaborative film *Far from Vietnam*. Resnais used Eisler’s leitmotif from *Winterschlacht* during the opening and closing sequences of *Night and Fog* as well as during key moments of the narrative. In *Winterschlacht*, it resumes during the section titled “The Horror of War” when the young protagonist is executed in the midst of the German defeat. Here the music is meant to evoke images of the battle and conflicting emotions of mourning and triumph. In *Night and Fog* the same music reemerges in a sequence to which the narrative slowly builds: the exploration of the gas chamber interior. The music continues as a series of still photographs of corpses fill the screen. In this passage there are no live witnesses—only abandoned buildings and photographs. The images are indexical traces of the former living; they are all that remains. In this space without witness, the index points to a “there was.” Yet the music animates the scene, restoring a faint sign of bare life.<sup>54</sup> That dim sign of life is what echoes in the present. Through the montage

of documents from the camps of the 1940s and Eisler's music of the 1950s, the past and the present, *the historical and the contemporary*, are brought together to serve as a perpetual warning.

There is another essayistic path opened up by following Eisler's score because *Winterschlacht* is not the beginning of the story of this music. Eisler initially composed the lietmotif he presented to Brecht—and to Renais following him—to accompany Horatio's monologue in the last scene of Act V of *Hamlet* in a production at the Burg Theater in Vienna in 1954. Hamlet has just died and in his final gasp commands Horatio to "report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied." Horatio's response is as follows:

And let me speak to the yet unknowing world  
How these things came about: so shall you hear  
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,  
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook  
Fall'n on the inventors' heads: all this can I  
Truly deliver.

Horatio's duty is to bear witness and to tell the "yet unknowing world" how these "casual slaughters" have been brought about by acts of "cunning" and "forced cause." Horatio's voice is tempered and full of warning; his monologue thrusts him into the unwitting role of reporter, narrator, and historian whose goal is to prevent, through the summoning of the past, such "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts" from recurring. Eisler's musical composition thereby follows Vsevolod Pudovkin's dictum of 1929 that "music . . . in sound film must *never be the accompaniment*. It must retain its own line."<sup>55</sup> Marker, who assisted Resnais throughout the film production, was undoubtedly conscious of the nuances of meaning that could be associated with a repetition of Eisler's leitmotif. He subsequently mobilized Eisler's composition tactically in *Far from Vietnam*, where it opens the film and is matched throughout against sequences of resistance, protest, and resilience. By making a sound bridge to the present day, Marker uses Eisler's composition to underscore Cayrol's observation that "*Night and Fog* becomes not only an example on which to meditate,

but a call, an alarm against all the nights and fogs that fall on an earth that was born in the sunlight, and a call for peace.”<sup>56</sup>

Apart from their discrete subjects, *Statues Also Die*, *Night and Fog*, and *Les maîtres fous* all manifest a common self-consciousness concerning the attribute of film as a repository of memory. Like *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, these three films reflect an urgency to record, document, capture, and provide a space for contemplation of that which might slip away. In this way they become components of an audiovisual archive and, in turn, part of the historical process. The filmic medium records and preserves its subjects in both aural and visual terms. This self-consciousness of film, whether fiction or nonfiction, as an index document attesting to a “there was” emerges during this historical moment. Owing to the subsequent transition from analog to digital recording, where a negative print no longer exists, this indelible quality will resurface as a crisis in essay films of the late eighties and early nineties.

#### ALL THE MEMORY OF THE WORLD (1956)

As if to underscore film’s innate attribute as a holder and producer of history—a vast archive—Resnais next turned his camera self-consciously to what was then one of the largest and most comprehensive libraries in Europe, with a collection dating from the fifteenth century: the Bibliothèque Nationale de France designed by Henri Labrousse. Completed in 1868, the library building was *the* site for scholars from around the world to conduct research at the time. Resnais’s film, *Toute la mémoire du monde* (“All the memory of the world,” 1956), opens in a dark space with a close-up of several sound recording devices as the commentary announces, “Because he has a short memory, man amasses countless memory aids.” The camera then pans to stacks of dusty volumes of books, wooden crates, and rows upon rows of documents stored haphazardly in a vast repository. As the camera glides through the space, the objects in its path become illuminated. After a minute of tracking through this disorderly warehouse, a microphone drops into the center of the screen as the commentary announces that humankind threatens to be overwhelmed by so many words and so constructs fortresses to contain them. This is

followed by a cut to a high-angle shot of the exterior of the nineteenth-century dome, recognizable as the central structure of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The camera tracks circularly around the iron dome, offering close-up shots of details of its support system, then, in a subtle cut, moves from the exterior to the interior, looking down on a man walking along an iron catwalk among rows of books. The iron grate of an industrial elevator appears; the camera moves upward with the elevator and progresses through large depopulated hallways, cupolas, and staircases, catching endless stacks of books as it navigates through the now penetrated fortress of knowledge. The voice-over imparts that not just books, newspapers, manuscripts, and periodicals are housed here, but also engravings, prints, medallions, maps, and all forms of printed matter, concluding that this is not just a library but a museum. Because the library is in a constant state of accretion, it has to keep expanding, an aspect that is indicated through up and down shots of renovations and new construction.

Crucial to the functioning of this repository of knowledge and vital to accessing the memories it holds is the archivist who manages, organizes, maintains, and ultimately controls the catalog. The film records the complicated archival process. Stacks of bound comic books such as *Dick Tracy* appear alongside rare first editions of Rimbaud. The preservation and restoration facilities of the Bibliothèque Nationale are also featured, including climate control, page mending, and even the inoculation of books with a syringe to protect against insects. The film captures the process of microfilming, a method of storage and preservation. It concludes with the removal of a volume from storage and its delivery to a reader in Labrouste's grand reading room. The commentary notes that when a volume crosses the threshold from the reserves to the reading room, it loses its anonymity and becomes significant for the reader. It is the reader who thus activates the text and gives each volume its special meaning. From a high angle the camera looks down on the crowded hall filled with people reading and researching, all focused on their own areas of specialization. In the commentator's final words, "Each reader working on his slice of universal memory will have laid the fragments of a single secret end to end. Perhaps the secret bears the beautiful name of 'happiness' (*bonheur*)."

*All the Memory of the World* constitutes a serious meditation on the concept of the archive and its place in history for the preservation of memory. But there are humorous interludes, such as when the camera



zooms in on a new, imaginary volume, *Mars*, part of Chris Marker's Petite Planète series of guidebooks with their signature photograph of a beautiful woman's face on each cover. We see the book cataloged and archived, and then follow its passage through the library from the basement, up an elevator, and down a long passage of bookshelves, until it reaches its resting place nestled between leather-bound volumes from the nineteenth century. As Resnais's mobile camera glides effortlessly through the building's passageways, the film features remarkable tracking shots of a sort that will reappear two years later in his poetic essay film, *Le Chant du Styrene* (1958), which focuses on the manufacturing of plastic.<sup>57</sup>

In *All the Memory of the World* Resnais used the soundtrack to reiterate the theme of the library as a repository of historical memory. In an earlier sequence, as porters bring bags of books into the library, we hear the melody from "Singin' in the Rain"—the 1952 feature film that addressed the transition from silent film to the "talkies"—playing in the background. By embedding this snippet of melody in his film, Resnais suggests that cinema is capable of representing the audiovisual history of its own development. This subtle reference—to a feature film that in turn captures a moment in cinematic history that might otherwise have been lost—points to the potential of cinema as an archival medium. Yet in this vast repository of all printed material, film is excluded. Resnais seems to ponder the fate of film, which, like the printed page, is a recorder of memory. During the fifties, film and television were not systematically archived, and as a result the early work of many filmmakers was lost or destroyed. In this way *All the Memory of the World* constitutes a compelling appeal for the preservation and archiving of film.

*SUNDAY IN PEKING* (1956) AND  
*LETTER FROM SIBERIA* (1958)

Marker has been most associated with essay films for many years. In many ways he has come to represent the genre during its renaissance of the past two decades.<sup>58</sup> Marker wore many hats; he was at once a writer, critic, essayist, musician, filmmaker, animator, and traveler. As François Porcile, in a moment of frustration, remarks: "To define Chris Marker is

like attacking a hydra, with which head should one begin?" Yet, by 1962, Marker self-identified above all as an "essayist," declaring famously in an interview: "I am an essayist. You speak about a revolutionary cinema as if there exists a blueprint for revolution; cinema is a system that allows Godard to be a novelist, [Armand] Gatti to make theater, and me to make essays, that's all."<sup>59</sup>

Marker began his film essay work in collaboration with Resnais, but he made his own films during this period. He combined his passion for travel with filmmaking, using Helsinki, Peking, Siberia, Israel, and Cuba as locations for his essay films. Contemporary travel writing, whether in the form of letters, journals, notes, postcards, or other fragmentary texts, derives from the work of Montaigne who published his travel journals. Moreover, the cinematic travelogue and the associated ethnographic film are closely allied to the essay film, especially in their mixture of fact and fiction, re-creations of historic events, and staged scenes. Marker was fascinated by the utopian promise of the new societies emerging in revolutionary contexts. *Dimanche à Pékin* ("Sunday in Peking," 1956) casts a glimpse at China six years after Mao Tse-tung's victory; *Letter from Siberia* (1958) explores the Soviet Union four years after the death of Stalin; *Description d'un Combat* ("Description of a struggle," 1960) examines Israel twelve years following the birth of the nation; and *Cuba Si!* (1961), perhaps the most optimistic of the four, celebrates the two-year anniversary of the Cuban revolution. In each instance, Marker's camera probes beneath the surface of the local culture and political situation, always questioning and never hesitating to expose contradictions. Indeed, these films are devoid of blind commitment and informed by a social philosophy that aligns with those oppressed by power, regardless of their ideological leanings or nationality. Decades later, the commentary in his film *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977) categorically asserts, "The cat is never on the side of power."

*Sunday in Peking*, a twenty-two minute short produced as part of the Groupe des Trente films, was Marker's first film to achieve international acclaim, winning prizes at Tours and Moscow. Although Marker stressed that "this film is not, cannot, does not want to be an essay on China," that is precisely what it is.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, its resistance to classification within a recognized film category—a quality André Bazin noted in his review: "an original work, belonging at the same time to literature, cinema, and

photography . . . [n]either a poem, nor a reportage, nor a film, but a dazzling synthesis of all of the above”—shifts *Sunday in Peking* away from pure travelogue/documentary and toward a meditative reflection.<sup>61</sup> The personal, conversational tone of the voice-over commentary contributes to the film’s essayistic qualities, drawing the spectator into an intimate relationship with the film’s text through its opening words: “Nothing is more beautiful than Paris, unless it is the memory of Paris. And nothing is more beautiful than Peking unless it is the memory of Peking.” The idea presented is not that the two cities are beautiful but that the *memory* of the two cities is beautiful. Memory of the past replaces the contemporary image of each city. The opening shots are equally intriguing: a close-up of a fabric that is vaguely “oriental” or “exotic” fills the screen; as the camera pulls away, this image gives way to a view of the Eiffel Tower emerging at an odd angle in the frame. This disorienting sequence destabilizes the viewer by challenging traditional visual perspective and conventional framing. It is reminiscent of the visual experiments of the Russian Constructivists and the associated literary theory of Victor Shklovsky, who argued that the task of literature was “to make strange” (*ostranienie*), and hence interesting, even the most ordinary events. This tactic of stripping away the varnish of habit and ideology to make the banalities of life look as if they were being seen for the first time is a defining characteristic of the essay film.

The film recalls Marker’s actual entry into Peking through an image from a children’s book of a statue-lined alley leading to the Ming tombs. The narrator, who ambiguously stands in for Marker himself, remarks, “It is rather rare to be able to walk in an image from childhood.” This oneiric opening sets the tone for a meditation characterized by a blurring of past, present, and future, making these time frames as hazy as the mist through which Marker’s camera shoots its images. The day begins at dawn, as the narrator intones, with the “gates of Peking still enshrouded in mist, as if the entire city was getting out of its bath. . . . The fog is, perhaps an other.” In this essay film, time and space are contrasted with each other as Marker purposefully confuses reality with dreams and memories, as in a surrealist reverie spoken by the voice-over: “All of that is far away like China, but at the same time as familiar as the Bois de Boulogne or the river banks of the Loing. . . . In this décor filled with a bygone grandeur, in the avenues of this Mongolian Versailles, one can easily ask questions about the past and

the future.” Such comparisons will be similarly mobilized in *Letter from Siberia* and serve both to de-exoticize the unfamiliar as well as to question the “naturalness” of the familiar.

The presentation of historical “fact” in *Sunday in Peking* is just as disorienting. The film betrays a distinct lack of concern for historical veracity; the aforementioned statue-lined alley does not lead to where the Mings are buried. As the narrator slyly acknowledges, “where they are [buried] that’s their business.” The alley is thus a misleading or false path without a teleological direction, similar to what in German is called a *holzweg*, a philosophical trope that literally means a woodcutter’s path leading nowhere and rhetorically refers to the way that essayistic thoughts often digress without a clear end in sight. The structure of the literary essay emphasizes process over conclusions. For the film’s narrator, it does not matter whether the Mings are actually buried at the end of the alley; what is important is the beauty of the path, the figures of animals erected to guide the traveler, the experience of the journey down the alley, and the memories that this journey evokes.

*Sunday in Peking* is a travelogue, but it is also a dream, an imaginary voyage into a past that is viewed through the present and with eyes on the future. In it Marker visits all the city’s main tourist sites, places he recognizes from films starring Humphrey Bogart, the novels of Jules Verne, or the records of Marco Polo. China is swathed in dreams, as the voice-over explains: “one dreams of the China of fables, an untouchable past with an obscured face like the moon that can only be illuminated by the cry of roosters during the night or by lionesses that stare at the sun.” Marker dreams of Ghengis Khan and the Great Wall and of battles of old, all of which the film replays not only in the famed Peking Opera but also in puppet plays, where “monsters, tigers, or dragons eat out of the hands of young girls and grow tame under their caresses.” Marker’s camera captures these ritual performances, archiving them for the future. These annals are not just visual but also acoustic, incorporating the sounds of both past and future by including recordings of the associated music.

In *Sunday in Peking* Marker self-reflexively inserted references to his own works. For example, his crew visits a new “model quarter,” where, in a “model school,” a “model group of young girls” amuse the filmmaker in “an open-air classroom, a class on [Jean] Giraudoux.” During Marker’s early successes as a writer, he authored an academic study, *Giraudoux par*

*lui-même* (1952). In the film, Marker, in his alias as the narrator, gives the schoolgirls a French book for their amusement, noting humorously, “I am ashamed to say that I interrupted for a moment the march of history and gave the class a book of images that came from Paris, I caused a traffic jam. But it is true that the book was written in French and that for the young Chinese, to view the bizarre Western letters gave them an incomparable pleasure of experiencing the exotic.” Not only is this passage comedic, but it also reverses the classical trope whereby the West exoticizes the East. The commentator’s tone throughout is at once gently mocking and ironic, and it is precisely this sly humor and jesting tone that often separates the commentary of an essay film from that of a documentary. The playful, almost teasing nature of the essay film recalls Montaigne, who openly admitted, “I naturally have *un style comique* (humorous, playful, facetious) and *privé* (familiar, conversational).”<sup>62</sup> It is Marker’s playful tone and comedic insertions that sustain the viewer through some of the most trenchant critiques in his essay films.

This sense of humor is omnipresent in one of Marker’s most celebrated essay films, *Letter from Siberia* of 1958.<sup>63</sup> The original identification of this film as an “essay” was due in large measure to André Bazin’s pronouncement that same year that it was unlike any other documentary. Bazin praised *Letter from Siberia* for its formal innovations, and in particular for its introduction of a new mode of editing and the related establishment of what Bazin referred to as “horizontal montage.”<sup>64</sup> He explained that instead of traditional montage, which occurs frame by frame throughout the length of a filmstrip, in *Letter from Siberia* one image neither follows from the previous one nor anticipates the next, but rather follows “laterally” from what is said. Bazin noted that the “primordial element” of the film is its “sonorous beauty,” which creates a montage that moves “from ear to eye” (*de l’oreille à l’œil*). He also applauded Marker’s insertion of playful sequences such as animated images of woolly mammoths in the flow of the film. But it was the guiding “intelligence” driving the film that Bazin found most remarkable. As he put it: “The primary material is intelligence, and language is its direct expression. The image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence.” He also praised one narrative sequence, which features a triad of different commentaries superimposed over the same visual sequence. According to Bazin, these commentaries project “three intellectual beams” onto a single track and,

in return, receive “their reverberation” (*envoyer trois faisceaux intellectuels et recevoir l'écho*). Bazin’s metaphor of beams evokes the dynamic and vibrating rays of light projected by cinema. With his suggestion that the intellectual beams simultaneously originate from three directions and cast a medley of equally dynamic and vibrant images on the screen, Bazin crystallized Marker’s essayistic filmic practice as sensitive both to the intellectual nature of texts and to the traces of their audiovisual echoes—a practice in which sound drives the images “from ear to eye.” Finally, Bazin stressed that *Letter from Siberia* is “an essay in the form of a filmic reportage on the past and present reality of Siberia . . . an essay documented by film.” The term “essay,” he concluded, should be “understood in the same way as it is in literature: an essay is both historical and political, while being written by a poet.”<sup>65</sup> In these terms it is the poetic or artistic treatment of facts that moves the film away from reportage or documentary into the essayistic.

In *Letter from Siberia*, Marker rejected the documentary style of Soviet social realism in which he argued, “the rule was that all images, like the wife of Stalin, had to be above suspicion. Positive + Positive + Positive until infinity—something which is very strange coming from the country of the dialectic.”<sup>66</sup> To distance himself from the documentary style sanctioned by the Soviet state, Marker presented his film in the form of a personal letter. The voice-over begins, “I write to you from a faraway country,” followed by images of trees in a forest. Minutes later a slight variation of the opening sentence is spoken over more shots of trees. This time, quoting from a poem by Henri Michaux, the narrator intones: “I am writing to you from the end of the world. You should know it. The trees are often shivering. Leaves are gathered.” The words impart a new meaning to the shots of woods, as if the visual track was there to visually represent and continue the lines of the poem that the commentator has started to read aloud. The epistolary form signals the essayistic nature of the film. Essay travelogues have traditionally been cast as meditative letters, a genealogy that harkens back to the public documents of classical antiquity. Late Renaissance and early modern essayists also used public letters to convey their ideas. Montaigne, for instance, turned to the epistolary essay after the death of his interlocutor, Étienne de la Boétie, to maintain the spirit of their dialogue.

*Letter from Siberia* opens with a long tracking shot that depicts a rich and colorfully textured landscape: nothing gray, bleak, or frozen here.

A Russian song bursts from the soundtrack, threatening to overwhelm the image, and the countryside passes by viewed from the window of a moving train. Throughout the film the camera tracks slowly from right to left and then back again, traversing space like a dancer. After a few minutes the first cut leads to shots of men working on telephone poles and electric lines; they are installing the technology that abolishes distance and brings the region into the twentieth century. This is followed by a series of sharp cuts, most of which are announced by the ring of a bell, recalling Bazin's observation that "editing is done from ear to eye." The rich soundtrack of *Letter from Siberia*, composed of music, dramatic noises, and the guiding voice of the narrator, is entirely nondiegetic. Many of the subtle connections and undercurrents are produced through music. For instance, a local song about the effect that Yves Montand's voice has on its Siberian singer summons thoughts of Paris in Siberia, just as earlier Marker evoked Paris in Peking. In another instance, although no mention is made of Stalin's horrific gulags where so many met their death, at the very end of the film we hear the faint, but familiar, echoes of Eisler's haunting leitmotif from *Night and Fog*, suggesting a link between the concentration camps of Europe and those of the Soviet Union.

The commentator's role in Marker's films is both to breathe life into the pictures and to listen to their accompanying sounds. In one of the most celebrated passages of *Letter from Siberia*, three different commentaries (Bazin's "three intellectual beams"), reflecting three ideological positions, accompany the same visual sequence of a road construction project in Yakutsk. In each case, the ideological subject position assumed by the narrator dramatically affects the reception of the images. Yakutsk is alternatively a "modern city," one with a "terrible reputation," or a place where modern housing replaces, little by little, the "dark old districts." Each commentary is accompanied by appropriate, albeit clichéd, "mood" music, illustrating the manipulative and deceptive effects of soundtracks and their ability to alter the meaning of an image. By the same token, it calls into question the possibility of a true or pure cinematic image with a stable meaning because the medium rarely exists without a soundtrack. When this sequence is initially introduced, the commentary self-reflexively underscores the essayistic nature of the film, as the voice-over muses: "While recording as objectively as possible these images of the Yakut capital, I confess I wondered whom they would please, since it is well known

that the only way to talk about the USSR is in terms of hell or paradise.” The binary of hell and paradise is equivalent to that of truth and nontruth. Yet essays—including their filmic form—by their very nature disrupt all such rigid and absolute modes of categorization in favor of an in-between that reserves a place for contradictions and presents them in a productive and thought-provoking manner. There are no orthodoxies, no clear definitions, in the ideal essay. As the narrator stresses at the end of the sequence, although binary thinking is insufficient, “objectivity is not right either. It does not deform Siberian reality, but it stops it for a moment—the time needed for judgment—and thereby it deforms it all the same. . . . A walk through Yakutsk’s streets will not make you understand Siberia; you would need an imaginary newsreel.” Presenting an imaginary newsreel is precisely what Marker set out to do in the rest of the film, which comprises a series of “actualities” or snapshots of life in Siberia: the gold rush, a mythical bear, space exploration. Fleeting images of reality flash before the viewer amid scenes from the fictive world of the imagination. For Marker it is often in the imaginary that reality reveals itself.

Although the soundtrack of *Letter from Siberia* calls into question the veracity of the visual track, the film retains a documentary quality in terms of its contemporaneity in the insertion of the present into a mythical “timeless” past. The dialectical nature of certain images is particularly striking, such as a modern forty-ton truck meeting a donkey drawn cart, or a Soviet airplane landing in an ice field, greeted by riders on reindeer and dog sleds. For the first of these two scenes, the narrator observes: “These are just the images that I have been waiting for, that the whole world has been waiting for, without which there could not be a serious film about a country undergoing a transformation: the opposition between the past and the future.” He continues by exhorting the viewer, “look at them closely, I am not going to show you again.” This explanation is somewhat spurious since such tenuous juxtapositions occur throughout the film, yet the commentary reflects full awareness of the conventions associated with this type of film and the stock scenes required to lend it a reassuring predictability.

The camera tracks detectable manifestations of daily life in the dense forests of the remote Siberian taiga as it pauses to record scenes of sheep and cattle being herded and fields populated by ducks. Marker’s commentary playfully directs the meaning of these scenes. The ducks, for instance,



are presented as “naturally collective animals [who], despite the frigid morning temperatures, agree, out of sympathy for the cinematographers and out of friendship between the two peoples,” to go swimming in the glacial waters at the risk of being frozen—“a misfortune that occurred in this vicinity to a much larger animal, more celebrated and, moreover, more rare: the mammoth.” Marker often used such anthropomorphic references to animals as markers or as placeholders that grant the viewer a moment to pause, to breathe, and to catch his or her breath before moving on to the next section. Then, as if the denotative elements of the footage were not sufficiently mediated by the subjective and playful commentary on the soundtrack, a visual element appears that ruptures the remaining vestiges of objectivity. A funny animated cartoon sequence of mammoths marching across the terrain suddenly interrupts the documentary passages of landscapes and domesticated animals as the narrator chants a silly rhyme. The charming cartoon sequence about mammoths—their possible affinity with moles; the initial discovery of their frozen bodies; and problems in removing, transporting, and reconstituting their remains—dramatically shifts the genre. The insertion of this amusing digression is consistent with the tacit parameters of the essay, where the element of play constitutes a crucial rhetorical device, at once complex and disarming. The scene provides a comic interlude that supplies an alternative history—one in which China and the Soviet Union are linked through prehistoric creatures preserved deep in the ice-covered Siberian tundra instead of through communism.

Marker’s recourse to the figure of the mammoth is particularly significant. Although it has been extinct for thousands of years, frozen remains of this woolly creature have been found in retreating ice floes. Unlike dinosaur fossils, which must be reconfigured and leave many details about the animal to the imagination, the remains of mammoths are sometimes discovered whole. The effect is uncanny and can be linked to Bazin’s theory of the “mummy complex” of film, in which aesthetic preservation is the driving force behind all representation. The recording of life by photographic or filmic means serves to freeze it in a way that parallels the preservation of the woolly mammoth. The recourse to animation within a film that allegedly presents documentary reality throws into question the truth claims of the genre and instead provides an imaginative and playful flight of fancy, one in which the “hand of the filmmaker”—as artist, creator, and

manipulator—is obvious. To give the woolly mammoth a story, a fabrication, is a surrealist intervention in Marker's cinematic reality of 1957 Siberia.<sup>67</sup> Animation, as a hybrid medium bringing together the drawn image and movement, is entirely imaginary. It is the antithesis of film, in which trace elements always link back to the analogical surface. Hand drawn, animated images rely entirely on connotation; they have as much or as little resemblance to objective reality as the animator desires. The experimental aspects of animation allow the characters and themes to elude easy classification. Given the highly creative dimension of the essay film, it is not surprising that Marker would have recourse to the technique of animation.

In another scene from *Letter from Siberia*, Marker's camera visits a subterranean science station where experiments on the effects of freezing are performed. Amid the battery of studies calculating a variety of pressures, melting points, and material transformations, it closes in on astonishing specimens of frozen flowers. These represent what the narrator refers to as "a pretty parentheses in the work of the technicians of Yakutsk," who have invented "the refrigeration of nostalgia." Nostalgia is thus linked to frozen time without any problematic connotations. Marker uses these sequences to comment on his own filmmaking practice, which will forever freeze the late Siberian summer of 1957 in celluloid. Returning back above ground, Marker (again in his alias as narrator) visits the counterpart of the underground scientific activity: empty spaces designated as "culture parks." This in turn leads to the skeptical and somewhat morbid reflection that "culture is what remains when everyone has left." This sentiment echoes the opening words of *Statues Also Die*: "When people die they enter into history, when statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture."

Marker's camera comprehensively records a series of ritualistic and theatrical performances in Siberia; one features an annual reindeer race, another the festival of spring, and another a play about a young Mongolian warrior whose fiancée has been stolen by demons. The society that performs these rites is in the midst of a dramatic transformation, rapidly becoming modernized. Like Rouch, Marker was aware of the anthropologist's paradox that the very process of documenting these rituals, openly turning a camera on them, produces a significantly different type of performance and undermines the authenticity of the footage. To nominate an object or act as art necessarily deculturates it. Yet this is a double-edged sword because recording "primitive" rituals before they are

lost or transformed for tourist consumption preserves them in a manner that recalls the mammoth encased in ice.

The second animated sequence in *Letter from Siberia* is a mock publicity spot for the reindeer. Like the brief interlude with the mammoth, this digressive animation sequence functions as a palimpsest with multiple meanings. The sequence is framed by the commentary, which announces with some irony: "And if I had the means, I would make a short publicity in its [the reindeer's] praise. At the intermission, or better yet between two reels of film, the image would be interrupted and suddenly one would see something like . . . United Productions of Siberia Presents."<sup>68</sup> During the commentary, animated reindeer appear in a variety of guises, including as a mode of transportation, as decorative wall pieces, and even as a variety of packaged cereal (Horn Flakes). Through pixilation and montage this amusing sequence draws attention away from the complex technical expertise needed to set the deer in motion. A voice, imitating the intonation of a commercial announcer, introduces the reindeer sequence:

If I interrupt this projection for a small instant, it is not in order to boast of a new product, but to remind you of the existence of an older product, a unique product, an absolute product that will replace all the other products, and it is—the reindeer. . . . Managers of the entire world listen to me, in Moscow, in Rome, in New York, in Peking, or Paris . . . beware of copies: neither the stag nor the elk, always insist on: the reindeer!

The idea of a U.S.-style commercial produced in the Soviet Union, where such advertising was nonexistent, is highly ironic. This interlude obliquely points to the rapidly growing consumerism in which everything, including nature, is reified. But Siberia was not Marker's real target. Consumer culture, proliferating in the United States, was already by the 1950s making deep inroads in France, where it would take greater hold during the 1960s and 1970s, dramatically transforming French society.<sup>69</sup> Thus, *Letter from Siberia* is as much about this moment in the United States and France as it is about this remote region of Eurasia. Analogies and visual quotations reinforce this invasion by American consumer culture; allusions to the gold rush and to the West, with its music, frontier towns, trading posts, and "Cowboys and Indians," abound. As Bazin emphasized in his review, Marker never hesitated "to say the most serious things in the funniest way."<sup>70</sup>

Ô SAISONS, Ô CHÂTEAUX (1958), DU CÔTÉ DE LA CÔTE (1958), AND L'OPÉRA-MOUFFE (1958)

A cofounder of the Groupe des Trente, Agnès Varda was the only female director in this group of French essay filmmakers.<sup>71</sup> Her intimate portraits of women were influential for feminist filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s, and her work continues to have a strong relevance for a younger generation. Indeed, the essay as a literary genre has been characterized as inherently feminist due to its points of undecidability. As Ruth-Ellen Joeres observes insightfully: “One quickly gains the sense that whereas essayists, the actors and agents, are almost always defined as ‘masculine,’ the essay itself is placed over and over again into a space that is uncannily feminine. . . . Essays are called a mixture of anecdote, description and opinion. Essays are said to focus on a little world, on details.”<sup>72</sup> Whereas Resnais and Marker turned their cameras to faraway countries or to grand topics on trauma and memory, Varda looked to her immediate environment for material.<sup>73</sup> In 1958, after completing her first feature film, *La Pointe Courte* (1955), and before she began her second, *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), Varda made three shorts: *Ô saisons, ô châteaux*, *Du côté de la côte*, and *L'Opéra-Mouffe*. Like filmmakers such as Wim Wenders, Varda uses the essay film form to experiment with and work out conceptual and aesthetic issues that subsequently enter into her feature films. The essay film functions for her as a kind of sketch or study. As she explained in an early interview, in *Cléo from 5 to 7* she was interested in freely mixing documentary (*reportage*) footage with carefully constructed and composed scenes, a tactic that she initiated, worked on, and developed in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, resulting in a hybrid mixture of fact and fiction.<sup>74</sup>

Similar to Marker's exploration of the limits of the genre in *Sunday in Peking*, in each of her early essay films Varda focused on a specific neighborhood or region in France to explore the boundaries of what could be done with the travelogue film. Unlike Marker, however, Varda undertook the additional challenge of making strange what for many French, including herself, was everyday and habitual. She did this by experimenting with the method and style of presentation on both the visual track and the soundtrack. Varda described the three films as “*films touristiques*.” *Ô saisons, ô châteaux*, and *Du côté de la côte* concern two major tourist destinations in France in the nineteen fifties: the castles of the Loire Valley

and La Touraine and the beach resorts of the Côte d'Azur, respectively. The French Tourist Board commissioned both films, a proposal that Varda initially found insulting but was ultimately convinced to accept on account of the opportunity it provided for experimentation with the filmic medium. She used the external institutional constraints of the tourist film to produce self-reflexive essay films that, among other things, offer critiques of the sponsoring agency. In other words, she performed a *détournement* (or hijacking) of the form itself to challenge the media culture in which it operates. By contrast, Varda made *L'Opéra-Mouffe* independent of commercial sponsors, and she took advantage of this additional freedom to offer a further commentary on the genre. The film focuses on an old neighborhood in the "Latin Quarter" (fifth arrondissement) of Paris, and in particular on the rue Mouffetard with its open-air market, cafés, clubs, and neighborhood stores.<sup>75</sup> The "Mouffe," as it is called, still bears traits of the "old Paris" before modernization and, as such, constitutes a "*site touristique*," although not one that would appear in a Michelin guide of the 1950s.

*Ô saisons, ô châteaux* takes its title from the eponymous poem by Arthur Rimbaud. The soundtrack comprises a complex interplay between Danièle Delorme's neutral commentary, which provides historical information about the various châteaux and their inhabitants, and Antoine Bourseiller's recitation of Rimbaud's poem. The poem creates a frame for the film that is marked by ambivalence and contradiction. Just as its title refers to the passing seasons, so the poem connotes the range of emotions associated with such a theme. In a recent interview on the importance of poetry in her work, Varda explained that poems are instances of the imaginary, the fictional, that she combines with documentary shots of everyday life. Varda has lauded the surrealists for introducing the element of chance to the reproduction of reality.<sup>76</sup> Recalling Jennings's surrealist employment of poetry and songs in his films, Varda's use of Rimbaud's poem in *Ô saisons, ô châteaux* . . . contributes to the film's jarring juxtaposition of aural and visual tracks. By titling her tourist film after a poem and including its recitation, she brought in elements of reverie and fantasy to a genre conventionally marked by factual information. At the same time, she signaled the false promise of happiness and escapism that drives the tourism industry.

The film opens with French workers putting their hands together to make "calls"—the sounds of a French horn signals the beginning of the

hunt and of the film. The historical progression of the narrative begins with the oldest fortified castles. Shots of the impressive towers and walls of the Château de Chinon, where Joan of Arc once stayed on her way to Orléans, are followed by the fortresses of Langeais, Montrichard, Lôches, Montrésor, and Angers. Varda's camera captures the unique signs for each château, indicating the personality of the particular building complex, unlike the standard, official beige on brown signage that replaces them today. She playfully includes a sign for a "Château Cinéma," which announces an active film series. From the commentary we learn of the different architectural styles and building materials of these castles, from the porous limestone "tuffeau" used on those close to the Loire to the gray slate of those farther away. As the commentary is informing us that "tuffeau" is not a modern material, we see a clear sign of modernity—a speeding train traversing the landscape. After addressing the medieval period, Varda turns to the Renaissance with its fantastical manor houses such as Blois and Chenonceau, which she compares to the highly symmetrical Azay-le-Rideau. We see Villandry, where the decorative formal garden is planted with vegetables—an early twentieth-century interpretation of a traditional French parterre—and the Château de Chambord, an immense hunting lodge that had no other function than to provide a place for the nobility to engage in the *chasse*. Throughout the film, cats are filmed on the grounds of these castles. In one sequence, a cat proudly takes the place of a missing statue atop a plinth, resulting in the comment "a perched cat" (*un chat perché*), which inspired Marker to evoke Varda obliquely in his last film *Les chats perchés* (2008). A double entendre is at play here because the phrase refers to a game of tag in which one cannot be caught when one is off the ground; by extension Marker refers to someone who is always one step ahead, agilely maneuvering herself—perhaps like Varda herself, who does not allow a commercial commission to trap her. Varda, however, demetaphorizes the phrase by filming a cat that is perched literally.

As *Ô saison, ô châteaux* progresses, the film introduces models arrayed on the grounds of the châteaux in colorful haute couture fashions of turquoise, orange, yellow, pink, and red. At first they appear as fleetingly figures, but their presence gradually becomes more central to the narrative. They provide a sharp contrast both to the walls and towers of the historic fortresses, castles, and manor houses and to the local aged population.

Such anachronistic shots defamiliarize the building complexes in the eyes of the viewer and underscore their historic provenance. At Chambord Varda posed the models on terraces as if watching the hunt, and we are reminded that these structures were designed for the extremely wealthy and are as extraordinary and impressive as the haute couture fashions are to us today. The effect of this pageantry on a contemporary audience would be similar to that on the peasantry centuries ago, toiling in the fields and observing the nobility in their full gallantry. The insertion of these fantastical alien models is a visual equivalent to the recitation of Rimbaud's poem; both emanate from the imagination, in contrast to the quasi-documentary footage of the châteaux and accompanying historical commentary. The music, an original composition scored by André Hodeir, constitutes a further flight of fancy because it is nondiegetic and therefore has no place in the milieu of the documentary film. These fantastical components result in a hybrid mixture of fact and fiction, making *Ô saisons, ô châteaux* a self-reflexive critical meditation on the juxtaposition of past and present, the nature of tourism and the driving forces behind it, and the role that film (and photography) plays in reinforcing the ideology behind tourism.

*Du côté de la côte*, dedicated to André Bazin, presented Varda with a similar challenge of how to *detourne* the subject matter of the French Riviera as something other than a promotional advertisement. The film begins with a shot of the blue waters of the Mediterranean and then pans up to the same blue seen in the sky as the voice-over announces "Côte d'Azur" several times and then provides a brief history of the region's tourism dating back to Roman times. The narrator draws the viewers in as accomplices or partners in voyeurism by informing us that, rather than shots of old local citizens who are always picturesque and charming, we are going to see tourists. By positing "tourists" as her subject matter, Varda distances the spectator's identification with them, thereby swerving from the intended aim of a tourist film to attract potential visitors. Instead, "we" are positioned outside the events depicted on screen, for example, observing bodies baking in the sun—some tan, but most pink—in an assortment of bathing suits and summer fashions. In one sequence we see an extraordinary variety of hats. In another we are told that this year's colors are blue and yellow, and the film features multiple examples of French women wearing those colors. Meanwhile, in a humorous gesture to the cliché that Germans have no sense of style, they wear green. The tourists are international; what unites

them is their desire to shed their identity, like their clothes, for the duration of their vacation and enter into the waters of oblivion. The loosening of morals and codes of conduct that seem to be inextricably linked to the sun and sea go back to medieval times.

The specter of another, much earlier critique of this playground of the wealthy—Jean Vigo’s silent poetic film, *À propos de Nice* (1930)—shadows *Du côté de la côte*. Bazin, in his discussion of Marker’s *Letter from Siberia*, cited Vigo’s film as a precursor to the essay film because of its dialectical structure through which he sought to produce an argument. Vigo targeted the wealthy tourists, contrasting the young and beautiful visitors who use and abuse this Mediterranean seaside city with the old and impoverished workers who exist to provide the former with the services necessary to ensure that their vacations are a success. Varda’s *Du côté de la côte* engages in an intertextual dialogue with Vigo’s film—a conversation that extends temporally nearly thirty years. Although Varda matched several shots from *À propos de Nice*, including views of the drunken revelry and hedonistic behavior of tourists, her film expands on Vigo’s point of view, underscoring the continuity and inexorability of the tourists’ behavior—their fantasies and escapism—despite the catastrophe of a world war. To be “on vacation” is both a physical and a psychic departure from an everyday life that includes significant crises, such as the Holocaust, the massive destruction of World War II, mass migration, decolonization, and rapid modernization.

Although the tourists have come to enjoy the European, and specifically French, southern coast, Varda shows how this landscape is populated by faux exotic structures, such as bars, restaurants, hotels and villas in the forms of mosques, pagodas, haciendas, and even Russian teahouses, designed specifically to entertain visitors. As a result, the Côte d’Azur seems like an enormous film studio with any number of artificial settings and backgrounds. Amid these constructed architectural fantasies, however, the most exotic sites, we are told, are the botanical gardens with their vast array of succulents: large cacti, yuccas, and other nonnative species, planted to attract tourists who even engrave their names on the vegetation. In contrast, nearby we see the most ancient of trees, such as the cypresses that have stood for centuries watching over the revelers and an olive tree with roots that date back a thousand years, stand as silent witnesses.

As Varda’s camera probes the coast, the narrative pauses to provide vignettes of cities such as Nice or Cannes, recalling Marker’s account of



his travels in Siberia. For example, Cannes is variously depicted as the site of the annual film festival, a local market, the casino, the tomb of Henri Matisse, and the place where Isadora Duncan met her death. In this place of sun and fun, vestiges of death linger in the air, and the narrator bids us to enter a cemetery, one of the most beautiful in Europe, placed on a hillside overlooking the sea. But before a dreary mood takes over, the film abruptly cuts to a camping site, where the less affluent are able to enjoy the benefits of the coast. In a further self-reflexive gesture to the medium of cinema, Varda's camera discovers an abandoned Cinéma Villa, whose dusty interiors are filled with old projectors and reels of film.

References to "Eden" abound in every town and village along the coast; there is "Avenue de l'Eden," "Hotel de l'Eden," "Restaurant de l'Eden," "Villa de l'Eden," and the like. But where is Eden, the narrator asks as a "do not enter" road sign fills the screen. Eden is for the privileged few, for the elite. Following the search for Eden, Varda inserted a street festival sequence, replete with large papier-mâché puppets, confetti, fireworks, and drunken tourists in all states of alcoholic stupor, indicating that not much has changed since Vigo was there. She also included a series of shots of men harassing young women, taking advantage of the crowds and their inebriated condition. The scene ends with the public ritualistic burning of a large effigy followed by silence. The next morning, surrounded by the quietude of dawn, Varda "discovers" her Eden: a desolate island with a rocky coastline inhabited only by seagulls; a shot of two horses frolicking in the sea on an abandoned beach; and close-up shots of nature, trees, plants, flowers, pebbles, roots, and sand. Interrupting this reverie, two towels in vibrant turquoise and pink suddenly appear in an empty clearing, followed by two pairs of espadrilles in the same colors, then a naked couple. The commentary informs us that paradise is a beach and a pinecone, but that nostalgia for Eden is a garden. But this is a transplanted, artificial garden, and we reenter the commercial world of tourism and the "faux," manufactured "Edens," where nothing is natural and all is private property. This scene, we are told, is "not for us," and the film ends by depicting the last days of the tourist season. Over shots of empty beach chairs and unused umbrellas, a popular song is heard lamenting that "their reveling sun is now jaded . . . , how sad and silly, the end of a party, the end of summer." Here, the lyrics provide an additional layer of commentary.

Such a conscious use of music in a manner that differs substantially from mood enhancement is also at play in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, which, as indicated by its title, is structured like an opera. The soundtrack contains neither commentary nor background noise, resembling the supplementary musical accompaniment to a silent film. Although the songs are sung in an operatic fashion, the music is more akin to that heard in music halls or boulevard opera, recalling Brecht's use of music in *The Threepenny Opera*. Varda wrote many of the lyrics for *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, which were set to music by the composer Georges Delerue. His lively score is appropriate to the theme of the film: the somewhat sordid but colorful neighborhood of the rue Mouffetard.

With *L'Opéra-Mouffe* Varda produced a very different picture of Paris in the late fifties than that popularized in feature films, in which the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, and the Champs Élysées provide exhilarating backdrops. Varda's is the working Paris, the dark side of the City of Light. The film opens with circus music and a shot of a nude seated with her back to the camera; curtains frame her and she appears to be on stage. The next shot features her swollen body seen in profile as her advanced pregnant abdomen fills the screen. This close-up gives way to a quick cut of a man almost violently slicing open a large pumpkin and removing its seeds, followed by scenes of vegetables and fruit displayed in the market stalls that line the rue Mouffetard. Varda has often explained that in this film she wanted to depict a pregnant woman's perspective on her everyday life and surroundings. The opening sequence is accompanied by dramatic music that is meant to suggest the woman's fears and anxieties related to her future labor. Emotion is produced primarily acoustically and is reinforced visually by the disgorgement of the gourd.

The setting for *L'Opéra-Mouffe* is the antithesis of those in Varda's other two travelogues. Whereas the raison d'être of her earlier film sites was to serve the tourist industry, a working city and its denizens provide the pretext for her third essay film. Like her previous explorations of the travelogue, however, *L'Opéra Mouffe* exceeds the form of documentary in its structure, shot composition, and soundtrack. Varda referred to *L'Opéra-Mouffe* as an "experiment," in which she attempted to intermix reality or documentary shots freely with subjective or fictional narrative inserts. Following the scenes from the market, the next sequence, announced by the intertitle "the lovers" (*Des amoureux*), shows an

attractive young couple cavorting in their tiny apartment; although this is not the same woman whose pregnancy was depicted earlier, the sequence serves as a narrative flashback to a relationship prior to pregnancy. The next part, titled “nature,” is followed by “some people” (*quelques’uns*). This segment is filled with extraordinary shots of faces, mainly old people, whose visages are filled with lines, wrinkles, and other marks of age. Unlike the rapid succession of tourists seen in *Du côté de la côté*, and Varda’s proclamation in that film that she wouldn’t be lingering on the old (not something tourists want to think about), in *L’Opéra-Mouffe* she allowed the camera to linger on these elderly Parisian characters. A short interlude follows consisting of humorous shots of individuals blowing their noses, something rarely captured on film. In the section titled “the dearly departed” (*les chers disparus*), we see photographs of the deceased and assorted memento mori; in another, “drunkenness” (*l’ivresse*), destitute alcoholics consume carafes of red table wine at the local cafés.

Although the film reflects the perspective of a woman about to give birth, children appear only rarely. The last section of the film is melancholic, depicting signs of distress, such as the sequence “the sufferings” (*des angoisses*), where the camera tracks a relatively young but worn out woman carrying a sack of potatoes as she trudges along a narrow sidewalk against a graffiti-covered wall. In contrast, the next sequence, “envy” (*l’envie*), shows windows filled with hanging meats and luxury foods, items the poor clearly cannot afford. *L’Opéra-Mouffe* ends with a woman eating a rose, a shot of flowers, window shutters being closed, and the curtain coming down. This highly theatrical and poetic ending returns the film to where it began, with the aestheticized close-up image of a nude pregnant woman. The opening bears the promise of a future, a potentiality, a birth, whereas the ending points to finality and closure. In between these two acts, Varda presents the “opera” of life with its joys and sorrows, its fantasies and realities.

The film stands as an essayist portrait of a neighborhood that was still unmarked by the encroachments of modernization and urban development that the rest of the city was then undergoing. In contrast, a few years later Marker detailed the destruction of some of the older quarters of Paris and the construction of new modern housing units in *Le joli Mai* (1961). Varda was certainly aware of such transformations looming on the horizon, and *L’Opéra-Mouffe* records a way of life that would soon disappear. By coding it as an opera, she signaled an archaic form from another

century that continues to amuse and provide entertainment, much like the rue Mouffetard itself.

Varda's films focus on the transitory aspects of everyday life: those fleeting moments that are on the verge of disappearing. The camera is a recorder, and Varda is an adept archivist. Following Astruc, she refers to her cinematic production as "cinema writing" (*cinécriture*). In these three shorts, she used the genre of the essay film allegorically to comment on far more than the topic at hand. The films are essays on modernity and the transformations taking place in France during the postwar period. Her work displays a self-reflexive awareness of the filmic medium in documenting this process as it unfolds, becomes manifest, and ultimately disappears like the last days of summer on the Côte d'Azur. Varda's nonfictional sketches are in excess of the documentary genre, visually and acoustically including imaginary and fantastic elements beyond the realistic diegesis, which firmly places them in the essay mode. With her close to home subject matter, Varda exemplifies Montaigne's concept that the essay may be highly personal and intimate. She demonstrates that the unusual and the interesting are close by, and it is not necessary to travel around the world seeking exotic locales and others to find provocative subject matter. Nor is it necessary to be a time traveler and reside in the past. Rather, her films interrogate the immediate present—the here and now—and the rapid process of modernization that France was undergoing at that time.

The decade and a half following World War II was extremely important for the development of the essay film. Given the flourishing of activity around the genre in France, including new systems of production, journals, and institutional support, and the prominent local figures involved in its development, and buttressed by the conceptual apparatus provided by critics such as Astruc, and Bazin, it is no wonder that a majority of film scholars and critics view postwar France as the origin of the genre. The postwar period of the late forties and fifties was marked by significant crises, including mass migration, decolonization, and rapid modernization, in addition to technological innovations such as the 16 mm camera, all of which provoked, brought about, and resuscitated new experimental forms of filmmaking that eschewed the dominant formats of feature, documentary, and art films. The initiatives actualized during this period paved the way for the proliferation of essay films over the next few decades.



FIGURE 4.1 Jean-Luc Godard, *Here and Elsewhere*, 1976.

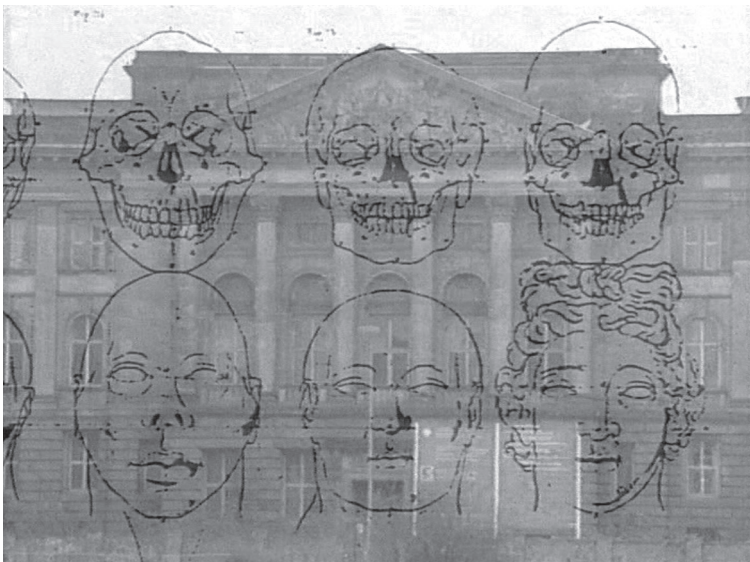


FIGURE 4.2 Hito Steyerl, *The Empty Center*, 1998.

# 4

## THE ESSAY FILM AS THE FOURTH ESTATE

*They knew that, no matter how honestly they worked, their best work would somehow be lost in the wash of news. . . . Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it.*

—MICHAEL HERR, DISPATCHES

*Probably we don't know how to see or to listen or the sounds are too loud and drown out reality. To learn to see in order to hear elsewhere. To learn to hear oneself speaking, in order to see what others are doing.*

—HERE AND ELSEWHERE

**E**ssay films became more frequent in western Europe between the 1960s and the 1990s. Filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, Werner Herzog, Derek Jarman, Johann van der Keuken, Ulrike Ottinger, Raul Ruiz, Piero Pasolini, Helke Sanders, and Peter Watkins turned to the essay form either as political critique, responding directly to the recent past and contemporary events; as a self-reflexive mode, commenting directly on the nature of image-making and the medium itself; or as a personal probe, addressing issues of subjectivity and identity. Although the distinctions among these three strands are rarely clear, and all three are often combined in one film, this discussion of films that fall primarily into the category of political critique draws on the potential

of the essay film to address issues when filmmakers saw failings or gaps in the dominant media coverage of contemporary situations of crisis. Because these filmmakers were motivated to address such issues directly and draw public attention to them, their work falls closer to the genre of documentary than to art. For a variety of reasons, however, they determined that the genre of documentary was inadequate to represent the complexities of the crises under consideration.

In contrast to the plethora of French essay films produced in the late nineteen forties and fifties, this was a relatively dormant period for European experimental nonfiction filmmaking. Foreign films, especially those made in Hollywood, dominated the cinematic landscape in the postwar years; filmmakers in Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and other countries directly affected by WWII were using their limited resources to create feature films and documentaries. In the former fascist countries, the situation was particularly charged because film had been employed strategically as a powerful propaganda weapon. A major overhaul of the film industries in Germany (East and West) and Italy led to attempts to redefine cinema.<sup>1</sup> Both Italian neo-Realism and New German Cinema were national phenomena resulting from filmmakers' efforts to break with the past both formally and institutionally, resulting in feature films that bear essayistic tendencies in their mixture of documentary and fictional material.

André Bazin and Chris Marker were among those seeking to reinvigorate the German film tradition during the postwar period. In 1949 they organized a series of annual retreats, sponsored by the left-wing cultural organization "Travail et Culture" ("Work and culture") and held in different locations throughout West Germany.<sup>2</sup> Numerous future filmmakers and critics such as Frieda Grafe, Ulrich Gregor, Enno Patalas, and Wolfgang Staudte attended these seminars. This cultural initiative was significant because it provided an alternative to the Hollywood staple offered by the U.S. government's cultural affairs division. Marker noted the unique quality of these meetings, which were tainted neither by the commercial market nor by propaganda, but simply brought together individuals who loved film.<sup>3</sup>

One of the first essay films emerging out of this context was Alexander Kluge and Peter Schamoni's twelve-minute *Brutalität in Stein* (*Brutality in Stone*, 1961). The West German production reflects an attempt to recall the past in order not to forget. Eric Rentschler characterizes *Brutality in Stone* as a documentary or anti-*kultur* film, albeit one marked by

“*experimentation*, intervention, and reinterpretation.”<sup>4</sup> With this designation, Rentschler situates the film among the short *Kultur* films that were shown before features and flourished during the Third Reich. *Brutality in Stone* was intended to engage the public actively in dialogue. The film comprises a series of shots of Nuremberg, with its monumental architectural ruins from the Third Reich, accompanied by a voice-over quoting from a variety of sources, both public and private, including songs, radio recordings, and personal reminiscences. The horrific past that haunts the now desolate structures emerges through the soundtrack, where voices come together in a disjointed dialogue, reminding the viewer of the deadly course taken by Germany. The film shares a common theme with Marker and Alain Resnais’s *Statues Also Die* and *Night and Fog* as it focuses on how inanimate structures, when filmed, are capable of embodying the brutality and crimes of the past. The interplay among camera, commentary, prerecorded speeches, and music reanimates these abandoned ruins and imbues them with a narrative: a dark history that many would prefer to forget. In some instances, Kluge and Schamoni seem to take their philosophical position directly from that of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) and translate it into audiovisual images that show the ruins of myth-infused monuments erected to honor a new society purportedly built on scientific rationalism. The film’s experimental form—its meditative and poetic visual style—places it at odds with the documentary recordings heard on the soundtrack, thereby exceeding the generic limits of the documentary or *Kulturfilm* and locating it firmly within the essay genre.

In West Germany Kluge and Schamoni’s film initiated the onset of a serious reconsideration of cinema as an active site for productive exchange in the public sphere. For a younger generation, born either during or immediately after the war and raised in West Germany under the heavy presence of U.S. forces, there was a revolt against both Hollywood and home-grown German films, which were referred to as “Papa’s Kino,” or “daddy’s cinema.” The Nazi past played a special role in the postwar German imaginary, as many struggled to deal not only with that period’s unprecedented crimes against humanity but also with the physical and psychological pain felt by the nation. In contrast to the nearly silent generation of the immediate postwar years, which was crippled by what psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich referred to as an “inability to mourn,” politically active artists and intellectuals of the 1960s



took up the challenge to work through and thereby master their recent history in a process commonly referred to as *Vergangensheitsbewältigung* (“coming to terms with the past”).<sup>5</sup>

The first of a series of manifestoes aimed at reforming cinema in West Germany appeared the year following the release of *Brutality in Stone*. The Oberhausen Manifesto (1962), penned by Kluge and signed by young West German filmmakers, proclaimed that “old filmmaking was dead” and called for a radical restructuring of the West German film industry.<sup>6</sup> What followed during the 1960s and 1970s was a period of experimentation in aesthetic and cultural production as well as in radical politics, with a majority of feature filmmakers and documentarians producing essay films.<sup>7</sup>

While World War II and the Holocaust were the focus of several essay films, as the century advanced individuals used the emerging genre as a means to respond to other contemporary events. Europe had been shattered by the trauma of two world wars. The minimal protest by intellectuals and artists regarding the sweep of fascism across Europe before and during World War II provoked guilt and a renewed sense of social and ethical responsibility to never again remain silent. Jean-Paul Sartre’s post-war appeal to intellectuals to be socially and critically engaged resonated for many, who realized the potential for film to play an active role as an additional voice in a democratic society.<sup>8</sup> Such essay filmmakers saw their role as similar to that of “op-ed” journalists issuing responses to contemporary crises. In *La rabbia* (*The Rage*, 1963), for example, the Italian poet, essayist, critic, and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini mobilized the genre of the essay film to launch a scathing commentary on contemporary politics and the aestheticization of war and violence in post-Fascist Italy. The film is comprised of two parts: the first, representing a left-wing perspective, was directed by Pasolini; the second, offering a right-wing critique, was made by Giovannino Guareschi. Producer Gastone Ferranti charged both directors to address the contemporary political landscape from their partisan perspectives. Pasolini explained that in making *La rabbia* his “ambition was to discover a new genre: Film as ideological-poetic essay.”<sup>9</sup>

*La rabbia* is a compilation film composed entirely of found footage from mass media. It opens with the spectacular, now iconic, footage of the explosion of the atomic bomb, accompanied by a question presented on the screen in typewritten text: “Why is our life dominated by discontent, by anguish, by the fear of war and by war?” Answering this

question, a voice-over commentator responds, "I have *written* this film to answer this question following no chronological or perhaps logical line but only my political reasoning and my poetic feeling" [emphasis added]. The visual material includes shots of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe, Pope Paul VI, and Nikita Krushchev; newsreel footage of significant political events such as the invasion of Hungary in 1956, the Suez crisis, and the Cuban revolution; and sequences from colonial wars of liberation and independence, including Algeria and the Congo. Accompanying this stream of documentary material, the soundtrack plays a medley of Algerian and Cuban revolutionary songs, Russian folksongs, and nineteenth-century classical compositions. Pasolini penned the commentary, an original verse composition, the cadences, delivery, and rhythm of which contrast with the banality of the newsreel images. By relying entirely on found footage, Pasolini investigated the possibility of presenting a critical point of view from newsreels, carefully montaging the image fragments together and separating them from their source material to produce a visual poem and a critical essay. Through his selection of and focus on certain images over others and the constellations in which he placed them, Pasolini forged connections and produced an order out of the seemingly inchoate maelstrom of often banal imagery that confounds the average consumer of mass media. This tactic would become an integral part of the essay film as it developed in the second half of the twentieth century. By employing it, essay filmmakers do not shoot new footage to produce an argument that is reinforced by a guiding voice-over, as is the case in the documentary genre, but form complicated systems of audiovisual montage that use recycled images to contradict, critique, and comment on each other. Drawing from an archive of preexisting material underscores that such information is available and accessible to those who seek it, this method is both anti-auteurist and democratic. In this instance, following the Dadaist tradition in the arts, the filmmaker does not create original images but brings together and recombines a variety of source material. Max Bense characterizes the essayist as a "combiner, . . . because new objects are not created in the imagination, but configurations for objects are, and the configurations do not appear with deduced but with experimental necessity."<sup>10</sup>

Pasolini's title *La rabbia* refers to a poet's rage, a philosophical fury at the present day. This rage, however, is only established through the

critical power of the film's montage of images, music, and commentary. For example, repeated shots of the atomic explosion and its aftermath, with its terrifyingly beautiful cloud formations, are contrasted with the beauty of Marilyn Monroe and of Abstract Expressionist paintings. The sequence devoted to Monroe is accompanied by the words: "Shoot, like a golden dove. The world has taught you. Thus your beauty becomes [that] of the world. A beauty of the stupid ancient world and the ferocious future world which was not ashamed. . . . Shoot like a white shadow of gold." The film is dominated by scenes of death and destruction, leading Thomas Tode to describe it as an elegy that transforms mourning into resistance: a resistance that will come in the form of left-wing politics and new subjectivities. As the voice-over presciently observes in response to the Congolese independence in 1960: "A new problem bursts out into the world; it is called color. . . . The world's new extension is called color. We must acknowledge the idea of thousands of black or brown songs, other voices, other gazes, other dances." This form of resistance will find its articulation and difference in Third Cinema (see chapter 6).

A number of events in the second-half of the twentieth century elicited strong reactions in which the essay film was used as a medium for protest, resistance, witness, or commentary. These events included the U.S. war in Vietnam, violence in the Middle East, terrorism in West Germany, the collapse of the Soviet Union, German reunification, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the first Gulf War. Amid questions of individual responsibility and collective response, each instance elicited awareness of the woe-ful inadequacy of contemporary journalism and mass media to address such issues. At times there had even been media blackouts, resulting in the filmmakers' overriding sense of urgency to bring attention to such events through the essay film as a medium for witnessing and recording, for bringing together aesthetics and ethics.

#### *FAR FROM VIETNAM (1967)*

During the 1960s two important phenomena had an enormous impact on film essayists: the ongoing Vietnam War and the rise of left-wing terrorist organizations such as the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany.

The war in Southeast Asia provoked widespread protest throughout the world and became the focus of numerous writers and artists, including Amira Baraka, Peter Brooks, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Armand Gatti, Günther Grass, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martha Rosler, and Peter Weiss. For West Germans, the topic of Vietnam was mobilized not only as a political call to arms in solidarity with the North Vietnamese but also as an indirect means through which to address Germany's present as well as its recent past.<sup>11</sup> Protest against the war initially served to coalesce student activists, some of whom became members of the RAF. In Germany similarities were drawn between a "free" South Vietnam and a communist North Vietnam on one hand, and a democratic West Germany (controlled and managed by former Allied nations) and a communist East Germany (under Soviet control) on the other. Whereas the Korean War of the 1950s had garnered little popular attention in western Europe, the Vietnam War served as a wake-up call. For the first time since Europe was "liberated" from the throes of fascism, the United States came under criticism as a brutal imperialistic force waging an unethical and murderous campaign against a Third World population that was primarily civilian. The unrelenting carpet bombing of Vietnam and its innumerable casualties reminded Germans of the devastating fire bombing of Dresden at the end of World War II. Further, the war in Southeast Asia called into question the presence of active U.S. military bases throughout West Germany nearly twenty-five years after the conclusion of the war in Europe. For French filmmakers, the conflict in Vietnam had a different focus, as Indochina had been a French colony until 1954. Accordingly, the French viewed the U.S. war in Vietnam with a mixture of sentiments, including nostalgia, broken pride, and arrogance. With their close to seven decades of colonial rule, the French sensed that they knew the Vietnamese far more intimately than the Americans ever could. Further complicating matters was the recent Algerian war of independence against the French (1954–1962), a particularly brutal conflict that extended beyond the borders of Algeria and into France. Both during the Algerian war and in the decade that followed, strict censorship regarding any discussion of the war prevailed in France. To speak about Vietnam in France during the 1960s was both a conscious and unconscious way of speaking about Algeria.

In the area of film production, the anti-Vietnam War movement drew particular attention. Fidel Castro proclaimed 1967 as the global Year of

Vietnam, and it was also the main theme of that year's Leipzig Documentary Film Festival. Film was seen as a weapon for combating imperialism; the camera functioned as a gun, and the shots produced images for the world to see. The war in Vietnam was also referred to as the first "television war," with nightly broadcasts covering events happening halfway around the globe. Like the television broadcasts, early antiwar films relied primarily on the belief in the power of documentary to convey their message. This barrage of "the real," especially in the spectacular mass media images in broad circulation, also provoked a different type of response. Writing in 1968 about the inability of conventional journalism to render an account of the war, Michael Herr observed, "conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it."<sup>12</sup> A parallel response can be found in the work of several filmmakers for whom conventional documentary was woefully inadequate to begin to unpack the complexity of the situation. Instead they turned to the essay film, a genre that could embody all the contradictions, ambiguities, and overall incomprehensibility of such events.

One of the most significant films that year was the omnibus production *Loin du Vietnam* (*Far from Vietnam*, 1967), directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda. It was conceived of and organized by Marker, who sought to bring like-minded filmmakers to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to make a film about the situation there. When the North Vietnamese government denied travel/filming visas to all but one of the members of the collective (Ivens), the filmmakers were forced to reconceptualize their project. The film is comprised of twelve sections and divided into two parts. None of the segments is credited to a specific director with the exception of Godard, who features himself, and certain documentary images that are credited to Ivens. This erasure of individual identity by directors who were known "auteurs" signifies the urgency of their mission: to make a film that had the possibility of intervening in a global crisis that superseded individual reputations and recognition.

The inability to film in Vietnam did not act as a deterrent but instead served to shift the film's focus to the war as a mediated event. *Far from Vietnam* combines existing footage taken in Vietnam, new material filmed outside the country, including lengthy sequences of the loading and unloading of bombs on and from U.S. aircraft carriers maneuvering in the Gulf of

Tonkin, and anti- and pro-Vietnam War protests in the United States and abroad, along with interviews and fictional scenes. Ivens's original footage shot in Vietnam details everyday life in a North Vietnamese community during wartime. In contrast to the massive American war machinery consisting of a powerful arsenal of bombs loaded onto a seemingly infinite number of jets taking off every minute to carpet bomb the north, Ivens shows Vietnamese defusing unexploded cluster bombs, making crude bomb shelters, and otherwise preparing for bombing raids. His camera reveals that no amount of preparation could protect the people completely from the raids whose victims were mostly women and children.

By 1967 when *Far from Vietnam* was released, the war in Vietnam was in the forefront of Western media coverage. Images of the devastation played on the nightly news, articles and books were published analyzing the war from every angle, and the glossy photographs that filled weekly magazines garnered prestigious prizes. War reporting had entered a new phase in which the spectacularization of images and stories obscured the real horror of what was taking place. The result of such media saturation was a general numbing of the public to the reality on the ground. One challenge for the makers of *Far from Vietnam* was how to get the public to contemplate the real horror and act out against the Vietnam War—that is, to make the war relevant to those far from it.

For his contribution, Resnais focused on the dilemma faced by a fictional character, Claude Ridder, who was asked by a film producer to write a review of a recent book by Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (1965). An anonymous voice-over narrator introduces Ridder as an “imaginary character” who will serve as the “voice of bad conscience” and “bad faith.” The voice-over mockingly assures the viewer that “nobody will recognize themselves.” Ridder then begins a monologue conveying his sense of frustration, impotence, and awareness of his own contradictory position with respect to Vietnam. He begins with the fact of the war's broad media coverage, especially on television, which, unlike all previous wars, allows everyone to see what is happening with very little time lag. This results in a knowledgeable public. As Ridder exclaims, “Nobody can say: ‘If I'd known. . . .’ Now they know, they see it.” For Ridder the result of this knowledge is not active engagement to stop the war but an increase in spectatorship of the war and support for the Vietnamese that stems from fashion rather than conviction. Thus he

laments, “Vietnam is perfect, everyone supports Vietnam,” but complains that no one worries about the Yemenites, the Kurds, and the Sudanese. “It’s like the Stock Market,” he states, “Vietnam is at the top, Sudan is at the bottom, and [the] Kurds are a little weak.” Paralyzed by his own inability to leave his living room and take a stance, Ridder ultimately decides to write nothing because he knows nothing. With this narrative, Resnais suggests that this is the bad faith position adopted by intellectual and cultural workers around the globe.

Despite their lack of journalistic expertise and their inability to visit North Vietnam, the filmmakers participating in *Far from Vietnam* opted to intervene by making a film. In a later episode, Godard, playing himself, contrasts his position to that of Ridder, stating, “to make films, that’s the best I can do for Vietnam.” Accordingly, he focuses on “the place it occupies in our everyday lives . . . to create Vietnam in ourselves.” Although Resnais’s staged scene contrasts with the North Vietnamese newsreel footage and Ivens’s documentary sequences, his fiction captures a certain reality, just as the nonfiction sequences do.

The second part of *Far from Vietnam* begins with Godard’s chapter titled “Camera Eye,” with a nod to Dziga Vertov. The lens of a film camera fills the screen, followed by a shot of Godard viewed in profile as he is filming. The disjointed soundtrack consists of a first-person narration describing a bombing raid in North Vietnam. Sounds of explosives, sirens, and chaos complete the scene. We realize that it is Godard’s voice as he shifts to the present, maintaining that “if I had been a camera man for ABC, for New York, or San Francisco, if I had been a Soviet cameraman, that’s what I would have filmed.” Godard explains that the North Vietnamese denied him a visa because he is not a journalist and his political convictions are unclear, so he can only imagine Vietnam and bring it back to France through his fantasy.

Both Resnais and Godard created fictional scenarios in their respective segments that are clearly situated in France. The chapter “Victor Charlie” differs in that it centers on footage taken by a French reporter, Michèle Ray, who spent three weeks with the U.S. troops in Vietnam. While there she witnessed brutality, torture, the wanton destruction of food and medical supplies, and other egregious behavior. She found it increasingly challenging to maintain a neutral and objective stance as a reporter. As she states in the film: “It is always difficult to be a witness, especially a

war witness. Being behind a camera doesn't mean being neutral. I film on one side but my heart is on the other with the suspects." Toward the end of the sequence her relatively coherent and clear images give way to impaired and damaged film stock. The voice-over explains: "Michèle Ray filmed these images of war then her camera went berserk. She tore up the film and perhaps the result resembled the cry she wanted to express." Geometric and abstract shapes obscure the images of tanks and soldiers, psychedelic colors recode the greens of the jungle, and the final minutes resemble an experimental film by Len Lye or Stan Brakhage more than a documentary. But the commentator asserts that this footage, in its altered and damaged state, probably says more about the war than any conventional documentary could. Immediately following this episode is a section of equally blurred scenes. In this instance, however, the static, snow-filled images derive from a television broadcast of General William Westmoreland delivering a public speech in which he justifies the high number of civilian casualties in Vietnam. The image distortion generated through the mass medium of television corresponds to the ideological distortion and obfuscation through language of what was transpiring in Vietnam. The image is blurry and indistinct. Although Westmoreland's voice and its message are seemingly clear on the soundtrack, the intentions behind his words are as obscure as his image on the screen.

*Far from Vietnam* opens with a scene showing bombs transported onto an aircraft carrier, where they are in turn loaded onto jets that take off on their daily raids. A voice-over informs the viewer of the enormous number of bombs dropped on Vietnam in comparison to World War II and concludes that what is taking place in Vietnam is essentially "a war of rich against the poor." The film credits appear in an exact audial and visual match to the opening credits of *Night and Fog*, which features Hanns Eisler's haunting composition as titles appear on a black screen. This sound bridge between the two films further links the U.S. war in Southeast Asia to World War II. To suggest that the conduct of the United States in Vietnam might be compared to the Germans under National Socialism was an explosive concept, especially in western Europe where the United States was widely perceived as the savior from totalitarianism. Yet as Ridder's character admits, "the Americans are the Vietnamese's Germans!" What could not be said or shown explicitly could be suggested through a musical composition and a fictional character. Whereas the director



of *Night and Fog* faced the challenge of being removed temporally from the events he sought to represent, those of *Far from Vietnam* confronted geographical or spatial challenges. Both instances put representation into question as Eisler's score moves each film out of the immediate, visually bracketed cinematic frame.

Eisler's score can be detected elsewhere in the film. It emerges at the beginning of the sequence "A Parade Is a Parade," during which the opening theme plays faintly as the camera records both pro- and anti-Vietnam War protesters in New York, and it echoes during the chapter "Flashback," which provides a brief history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam since 1949. As the voice-over announces a series of dates, the music punctuates each significant event, underscoring the recent political history of Vietnam while at the same time triggering memory of another time (the 1940s) and place (Europe). This part ends with an amplification of the soundtrack of Ho Chi Minh's proclamation that "Victory remains the only possibility" over film footage of the North Vietnamese determinedly rebuilding amid the ruins of their war-devastated country. Here, as Eisler's music surges, montaged against images of grim determination, his composition takes on a less mournful and more triumphal tone than when heard against the backdrop of corpses in *Night and Fog*. Although the soundtrack is the same, it imparts a very different meaning in each case.

Eisler's composition also reemerges at the beginning of an interview with Ann Uyen, the widow of Norman Morrison, a Quaker pacifist who immolated himself on the steps of the Pentagon in November 1965 to protest U.S. involvement in the war. The use of Eisler's music in this segment bridges Morrison's death to that of the soldier from Johannes Becher's *Winterschlacht*, who heroically disavows war at the expense of his own life (see chapter 3). For the attentive spectator, sound *triggers* the connection between the two films and their corresponding scenes across time and space. It colors the footage with a suggestive, affective dimension that could not be conveyed by the visual representation alone.

Eisler's composition vibrates and resonates through scenes of war and injustice, all the while holding onto the possibility of a better future. It shatters particular cinematic frames to forge connections between the events represented. The logic of those connections is not unlike the logic of montage; rather than the montage of sound and image, or that of image and image, it is the montage of sound and sound—or what could be

termed “sound montage.” To overhear these related stories and pursue these flight lines, directors Resnais and Marker rely on a knowledgeable spectator. Eisler’s composition performs acoustically what art historian Ernst Gombrich has referred to in painting as a “phantom precept”; it permits a viewer to extrapolate a unified whole from fragmentary sense data.<sup>13</sup> During the 1960s the directors of *Far from Vietnam* mobilized Eisler’s score to galvanize the public to protest and seek an end to the war. The music forges a counter public sphere to the well-worn spectacle produced by mainstream media.

This is not the only way the directors used sound in *Far from Vietnam* to create an additional layer of critique. They also included Tom Paxton’s song, “Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation” (1965), with its scathing chorus that increases by 10,000 the number of troops sent to Vietnam with each refrain until its grand finale sardonically echoes, “Though it isn’t really war, we’re sending fifty thousand more, to help save Vietnam from the Vietnamese.” As the lyrics are sung, a montage of images of the U.S. military in South Vietnam rolls on the image track. These are comprised primarily of men in uniform walking down streets, military police in their vehicles, smug well-fed officers transported by lean rickshaw drivers, GIs having their boots cleaned by young Vietnamese, and other pictures of domination. The U.S. military is depicted as an invader, replacing the former colonial French presence with a new type of occupation—that of military might. The popular song lyrics point to a different type of protest to the war, one residing in a cultural production rather than in street demonstrations.

The final commentary of *Far from Vietnam* alerts the viewer: “In a few words this film will end. You’ll leave this room, and most of you will go back to a world without war. It is also ours, and we know we are far from Vietnam.” A crowd of Westerners appear on the screen, and the soundtrack features the disconnected sound of explosions, bombs, and mortar fire. War is not figured visually or spectacularly but acoustically. The voice-over continues: “This war isn’t an historical accident, nor an unresolved colonial problem, it’s here. Around us. Inside us. It starts when we begin to understand that Vietnam is fighting for us.” Over an image of a black man sitting on a bus, the commentary warns that if the United States doesn’t change it will have “to accept this war between the poor and the rich as inevitable and to lose it.” In *Far from Vietnam* the war comes

to stand for the growing chasm between the rich and the poor. Typical of many late-twentieth-century essay films, issues of class and capital that transcend nation, race, and ethnicity become the central topic.

### *INEXTINGUISHABLE FIRE* (1969)

Two years after *Far from Vietnam*, German filmmaker Harun Farocki made his first film in this genre, *Unerlöschbares Feuer* (*Inextinguishable Fire*, 1969). It addresses the use and horrific effects of Dow Chemical Company's newly manufactured weapon: napalm. Produced during the height of protest against the war in Vietnam, the film confronts the audience's tacit support of U.S. military tactics through its passivity. As Farocki explained in 1998: "The war which the United States waged against Vietnam was outrageous, first and foremost in its extreme cruelty. It assumed that civil society would regard it without interest or passion."<sup>14</sup> The short is divided into three parts: in Part One Farocki assumes the role of a news reporter reading an account of a napalm attack; Part Two stages several fictional scenes set in a Dow chemical plant; Part Three consists of a short skit of a worker, a student, and an engineer. Similar to *Far from Vietnam*, Farocki's film is a curious blend of fact and fiction, recalling Resnais's character, Claude Ridder, and thereby calling attention to the fact that, due to the relative impossibility of achieving an unmediated connection to Vietnam, filmmakers had to re-create Vietnam for themselves. With this hybrid mixture of fact and fiction, Farocki turns to the essay film, a form that allows for creative reenactments rather than direct recordings of "reality," drawing attention to the heavily mediated nature of found footage.

Like the majority of sequences in *Far from Vietnam*, the war footage in *Inextinguishable Fire* consists entirely of secondhand images appropriated from media sources. With this film, Farocki combined montage, compilation, and extensive use of found footage in a way that would come to define his filmic practice.<sup>15</sup> Assuming an anti-auteurist stance, he once questioned why new images should be made, since so many have already been produced. Embedded in this methodological and ideological position are the difficult material circumstances in which Farocki was working

at the margins of West German film; funding was increasingly difficult to obtain. Farocki's montages repurpose images from feature films, advertisements, documentaries, and photographs to form new thought images (*Denkbilder*).<sup>16</sup> Farocki referred to this working method as a *Verbundsystem* (integrated system): "Following the example of the steel industry . . ., I try to create a *Verbund* with my work. The basic research for a project I finance with a radio broadcast, some of the books I use I review for the book programmes, and many of the things I notice during this kind of work end up in my television features."<sup>17</sup> Due to economic necessity, Farocki developed his filmic practice into a powerful system of critique. He mobilized preexisting media to comment on the system from which it came, and thereby turned it against itself in an act of Brechtian *refunctioning* or situationist *détournement*.

Part One of *Inextinguishable Fire* features Farocki, formally attired in a dark suit with a tie, sitting at a bare office desk. Cast in the role of a television news anchor, he recites the powerful testimony of That Bihn Dahn, a citizen of Vietnam who experienced the horrible effects of napalm: "The flames and unbearable heat engulfed me and I lost consciousness. Napalm burned my face, both arms and legs. . . . For thirteen days I was unconscious." Farocki then turns away from reading the testimony, looks into the camera, and asks, "How can we show you the damage caused by napalm?" A common response to horror, he notes, is to close one's eyes, or to look away. So, rather than showing documentary images, he proposes to "give a weak demonstration of how napalm works." That demonstration consists of burning his left forearm with a lit cigarette. He explains: "A cigarette burns at 400 degrees. Napalm burns at 3000 degrees." With this act, which has been interpreted as a literalization of the idiomatic expression "to put your hand in the fire" used in German and French with reference to political action and responsibility, Farocki implicates the spectator in an affective way.<sup>18</sup> The dynamic starts a chain reaction whereby the effects of napalm are passed from those in the war zone, to those reporting about the horrors of the war zone, and finally to spectators of the reports.

Part Two changes locales. Staged in a Dow chemical plant in Michigan, it includes experiments on rats and a series of fictional conversations between plant managers, scientists, engineers, U.S. State Department officials, and workers, based on official Dow press releases about napalm. The

characters participate in complex economic and philosophical debates about the relation of napalm to the military industrial complex.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the highly stylized dialogues, Farocki employed intertitles and inserted documentary footage of North American nightly news television reports broadcast from Vietnam. His camera closes in on the television set until the image on the screen and that of the set become one. This is followed by a sequence linking the workers in factories that produced the initial atomic bombs to those at the Dow chemical plant, directly connecting Hiroshima and Vietnam. The commentary asserts that by the time the workers who produced the atomic bombs realized their culpability it was “too late.” The film then cuts back from the Michigan factory to arguments made by plant managers that napalm ultimately saves lives, the same argument made about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The final shot focuses on a high-level Dow chemist noting that students protesting Dow Chemical Company forget that napalm is only one of six hundred useful products the company makes, including coconut oil for cooking and pesticides necessary for agricultural productivity.

The final segment of *Inextinguishable Fire*, set in the lavatory of a vacuum cleaner factory, involves three characters, all played by the same actor. The first, a worker, explains that his wife wants a device at home, so he has begun to steal one component every day with the goal of assembling a complete vacuum cleaner. In a punch line, however, he states that the assembly always results in a submachine gun. The second character repeats the scene, but in this case the figure is a student who is convinced that the vacuum cleaner factory is actually manufacturing submachine guns for Portugal. Although he steals parts in the hopes of reconstituting the weapon and thereby exposing the real mission of the factory, the result of his assembly is always a vacuum cleaner. The third character, an engineer working in the same factory, concludes that although the workers think they are making vacuum cleaners and the students think they are making submachine guns, both are right: the vacuum cleaner can become a powerful weapon, and the submachine gun a vacuum cleaner. The two functions become inextricably intertwined. The film concludes with the statement: “What we ‘manufacture’ depends on the workers, the students, and the engineers.” All are implicated in the military industrial complex.

Both *Far from Vietnam* and *Inextinguishable Fire* are hybrid films that do not adhere to the era's strict standards of documentary set forth either in Cinema Verité or in American Direct Cinema. Although composed of short fragments, some of which are clearly fictional constructions, these films are grounded in facts, documents, and records. Various testimonials and official pronouncements are ventriloquized. In Farocki's film, the mode of delivery of these "found speeches" is a highly stylized monotone that functions as an aural Brechtian *gestus*, a single stylized gesture that encodes an ideological position or heightens the alienation effect. His use of intertitles, television footage, theatrical staging, and the like all remind the spectator that she is watching a film. The reliance on found television footage to impart images of the war underscores the mediatization of the first "television war" as a nightly news spectacle. In the post-World War II era, the average Western civilian experiences the war through images alone. By focusing on the Dow chemical plant, which produces both weaponry and domestic products, Farocki, like the directors of *Far from Vietnam*, underscores that only a few degrees separate viewers watching news footage from the comfort of their homes and the war in Vietnam. In these two films, through the replication of stock messages and documentary images against a carefully montaged soundtrack with a tactical use of music, different messages appear and sound forth that counter the dominant perception and reception of the war. If the postwar essay film served as a commentary on the past and the present, the essay film of the 1960s was akin to a manifesto calling for direct action.

#### HERE AND ELSEWHERE (1975)

The radicalization of essay film politics sparked by the Vietnam War soon found outlets elsewhere. Growing tensions in the Middle East due to the displacement of vast segments of the population resulted in the foundation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1964. The Arab-Israeli War of 1967 drew worldwide attention to Israel and constituted for many on the left a watershed moment concerning the manner in which the latter's policies against the Arab states and the Palestinians were made clear.

Following the six-day war, Marker officially withdrew from distribution his pro-Israel film, *Descriptions of a Struggle* (1961). The bellicose nature of the country that emerged with its ruthless expulsion of the Palestinians in the 1960s was a particularly difficult political situation for Europeans. Given the recent history of World War II and the Holocaust, in which so many nations and peoples had willingly assisted, it was considered taboo to judge Israel and its policies of “defense.” Even more dangerous was to sympathize at any level with the displaced Arab populations. Significant examples of critique emerged in film nonetheless, including the production by Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and Anne-Marie Miéville of *Ici et Ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*, 1975).

Commissioned by the Arab League in February 1970, the film was initially conceived by the Dziga Vertov Group. The unit consisted of Godard and Gorin, who traveled to Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria in July of that year to shoot footage about the status of Palestinian refugees. The two spent considerable time with the information department of the Fatah movement. Upon returning to France they began to edit the footage for a film with the intended title *Jusqu'à la victoire* (“Until victory”). However, several incidents interrupted the completion of their project, including the Jordanian civil war in September of 1970, which resulted in the expulsion of thousands of Palestinians from Jordan, and the foundation of the militant Black September organization, which was responsible for the murder of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. The Dziga Vertov Group broke apart in the early 1970s when Godard suffered a serious motorcycle accident and Gorin left France to take up a university teaching position in San Diego. While helping Godard recuperate from his accident, Anne-Marie Miéville began to work on the Palestinian footage, resulting in their collaborative endeavor, *Here and Elsewhere*. The film is narrated by two voice-overs, that of Godard and Miéville, reflecting an awareness of the multiplicity of voices and thereby the stories and perspectives concerning the Palestinian issue.

The first words of *Here and Elsewhere* inform the viewer: “In 1970 this film was called Victory; in 1974 it is called *Here and Elsewhere* and elsewhere and. . .” The conjunction “and” reflects not the fusion or synthesis of two autonomous elements but rather endless dispersal, functioning as a facilitator of diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity. Gilles Deleuze observed that “Godard’s aim is ‘to see the boundaries,’ in other words, to

make the imperceptible visible.” As he explained, “Godard’s use of AND is crucial, . . . It is neither the one nor the other, it is always between the two, it is the boundary.”<sup>20</sup> Godard connected this use of “and” to the numerical “+” sign as in his earlier *One plus One* (1968); it refers to the self-conscious making of a film in which one image follows another and then another, leading to a potentially endless chain.<sup>21</sup> In *Here and Elsewhere* the mathematical meaning of “and” is reflected in several sequences in which the significant historic dates of 1789, 1968, 1936, and 1917 are added together on a calculator. The voice-over then proposes a further series of additions: the “French Revolution and the Arab Revolution,” “être et avoir” (“to be and to have”), “question et réponse” (“question and answer”), “entrer et sortir” (“to enter and to exit”), “noir et blanc” (“black and white”), “rêves et réalité” (“dreams and reality”). This chain, with its connecting beads of “and,” is at the root of Godard’s essayistic process in which one idea is linked to another and another as he moves from point to point to formulate his arguments.<sup>22</sup> Godard follows this series of “ands” in the film by pairing sets based on the oppositional “ou” (“or”): “toujours ou jamais” (“always or never”), “homme ou femme” (“man or woman”), “plus ou moins” (“more or less”), “vivre ou mourir” (“to live or to die”), and “pauvre ou riche” (“poor or rich”). His prior use of “and” instead of “or” constitutes a new system of thought based on accumulation rather than elimination and replacement. Godard is not a dialectician; as the film commentary explains, it is “too simple and too easy to divide the world in two.”

Godard extended this principle of the “and” to his filmic structure and use of montage in *Here and Elsewhere*. As an intertitle announces, the film stresses “to learn to see and not to read.” This is followed by a second sequence with the calculator, this time adding the numbers 1917+36, followed by images of the Popular Front in Spain, plus the word “popular,” while the images of resistance are replaced by another of the era’s “popular” figures: Hitler. The same numbers are then added again, 1917+36=1970, accompanied by the figure of a corpse from Amman. The inclusion of the figure of Hitler “here and elsewhere” in the film suggests that it was National Socialism and its persecution of Jews that led to the formation of Israel and the subsequent removal and persecution of the Palestinians by the Israelis. During this image sequence, the voice-over provides an additional text for the spectator to process that is not related



specifically to the images we have seen but directed more generally toward how cinema functions, as the commentary addresses the spectator: "In cinema you see one image after another . . . this is how film works . . . one image replaces another . . . because film has to keep moving . . . time has been replaced by space. . . . Space is recorded in film in a different way, a translation." Godard offers a new cinematic system, proposing a different way of seeing that places several images in the field of vision simultaneously. Three slide viewers set up in a row fill the screen, dividing it into three different sets of images that are rotated individually according to an internal sequential logic. Each image corresponds to those projected on the other two apparatuses. The three are each accompanied by its own soundtrack. Moving left to right, the first slide viewer shows images of world leaders such as Richard Nixon, Hitler, Leonid Brezhnev, Moshe Dayan, Golda Meir, Augusto Pinochet, and others; the middle viewer cycles through fewer images and then holds one of a fighter bomber plane in place; and the third series of slides consists of images of people offering resistance, including Vietnamese, Chileans, and Palestinians. Snippets of songs of protest are played on the soundtrack. Anticipating the emergence of multichannel installations two decades later, Godard forges a new form of relationships in which the viewer beholds the multiple image tracks simultaneously.

Toward the end of *Here and Elsewhere* the three horizontal screens expand to a quadrangle broken into four images: on the top left a log of a TV Station #3; on the top right images of a map of Israel and a male newscaster alternate; on the bottom left a soccer match plays; and flickerlike film images from the Middle East flash on the bottom right. The two top screens feature static images, whereas the bottom two involve motion—movement *in* the image in the case of the soccer match, and movement *of* the images in the case of the stills. The only sound is from the soccer match. With these two sequences of multiple images, Godard invoked a new type of montage in which one image does not replace another but multiple images coexist in a state of temporal/spatial equivalence. Twenty years later Harun Farocki and Kaja Silverman, in their analysis of Godard and Miéville's *Number Two* (1975), called this technique "soft montage."<sup>23</sup> The technique corresponds to Godard's concept of "and," whereas sequential montage or dialectical montage, based on opposites, corresponds to his "or." In *Here and Elsewhere* the "and"

operates between the image and soundtracks, bringing them together and separating them out again. Meaning is produced not only by what is shown but also by the silences and gaps between images. By placing separate images together in the same spatial field, Godard and Miéville call attention to the space between the visible and the audible. The cuts and sutures are presented through the “and,” with the result that the montage is plainly revealed.

*Here and Elsewhere* is a film about ruins; the ruins of the Palestinian Revolution in particular. Godard and Miéville sought to represent a number of images and sounds that had not yet been heard: “The people’s will, plus the armed struggle, equals the people’s war, plus the political work equals the people’s education, plus the people’s logic equals the popular war extended, until victory of the Palestinian people.” Five parts were planned in 1970, but due to extenuating circumstances in which many of the actors were killed, a new tactic had to be developed. One of these relied on reenactment and the self-conscious highlighting of the film as an artificial construct. For example, a young woman is interviewed on the importance of Palestinian women in the revolution; after a few minutes, though, the camera captures members of the film crew adjusting her scarf and it becomes apparent that this is not original footage but an actor reenacting a scene from five years earlier. Foregrounding this reenactment places all the older scenes in question. Are we seeing “true” recorded images of Fedayeen revolutionaries, or has this been restaged for Godard’s camera.

*Here and Elsewhere* presents what appear to be documentary images of the preparation for revolution, yet the images might well be fictional. They are followed by still news photographs of mutilated corpses in Amman as the revolution collapses in the carnage of the Jordanian civil war of September 1970. The veracity of the images is not called into question. “The actors in the film were filmed in danger of death,” the textual narrative informs the viewer: “Death is represented in this film by a flow of images. A flow of images and sounds that hide silence. A silence that becomes deadly because it is prevented to come out alive.” A purposeful confusion is set in place so that the viewer no longer knows whether she is seeing a documentary or a fictional re-creation. As Godard has infamously stated on more than one occasion: “I have always navigated between documentary and fiction; I do not distinguish between the two.” The fifty-five minute film

that Godard and Miéville produced confronts the psychic, geopolitical, and historical distance between the original media footage and the way the directors manipulated these images to address genocide, social injustice, theatrical presentation, and the endless contradictions and internal complications involved in creating any sound/image construct, whether fiction or documentary. It acknowledges that, although the 1970 film footage is “real,” the editorial decisions involved in constructing the final film are equally “real,” and they shape, distort, reconstruct, and otherwise transform the flickering images of the dead Palestinians into a work that is a mediation on the creation of history and the images that record and transmute that history into the fabric of our lives.

“Revolution until victory,” chant Palestinians in the refugee camps: “By the people, for the people. Revolution until victory.” The narrator responds: “The popular war extended, commanded by the people’s logic. And all that until victory. All that, we had organized like that. All the sounds, all the images, in that order, saying: here is what is beautiful about the Middle East.” In other words, when Godard and Gorin began their project in the spring of 1970, their intentions were clear, and they had a firm outline and conception of their project, but when they returned to France to edit the footage, their thoughts became muddled. Godard’s voice recalls: “Back in France, pretty soon you don’t know what to make of the film. Very soon the contradictions explode, including you.” Reality intervenes. Once again, as with *Far from Vietnam*, Godard was faced with the conundrum of how to film a contemporary event, how to reconcile the role of a filmmaker who makes culture in the wake of deadly acts. This dilemma would continue to engage Godard with his films *For Ever Mozart* (1996) and *Notre Musique* (2004), especially as wars continued to be waged closer to home. In *Here and Elsewhere* the contradictions include not only the reality that a documentary film about victory collapses in the face of defeat but also a more epistemological contradiction concerning beliefs. As Godard states in the commentary: “Too simple and too easy to simply divide the world in two. Too easy or too simple to say simply that the wealthy are wrong and the poor are right. Too simple and too easy to simply say that the poor are right and the wealthy are wrong. Too easy and too simple.” In this way Godard replaced a model of dialectical thought and the montage of Eisenstein with the rhizomatic thought proposed by Deleuze.

Finally, *Here and Elsewhere* is about the ruins of culture as a viable locus of communication. Godard and Miéville maintain that in its ubiquity commercial culture has won the war of images, fully occupying the place that the spectator identifies as “my likeness.” The viewer consumes the image as if she were directing what is seen, even though that space is overdetermined by the instrumentalizing drive of the culture industry. Intercut throughout the film are scenes of a French family watching television, in particular the evening news. The world (elsewhere) is brought into their home (here). As family members argue about the volume level, the shot of the living room is replaced by a close-up of an amplifier that registers bass and treble levels, while the voice of the commentator observes: “One sees that there isn’t only one but two movements, two noises that move in relation to one another. In times of panic and lack of imagination there is always one that takes power.” Godard thus proposes that certain sounds of dominant discourse drown out others to assure their silencing. This phenomenon is illustrated by a voice we hear and recognize as Hitler’s. His speech is juxtaposed to a black screen. The voice-over asks: “How did this sound take power?” This is where the “and” returns, for the void of the black screen is replaced by a still photograph of Hitler as Godard provides the answer to his own question: “It took power because at one given time it makes itself represented by an image.” Sound alone does not produce history and politics, but sound *and* image (Son et Image)—the new name Godard gave his production company—do.

Faced with the reality that the war of images has been lost—a war that was still raging in 1970 when Godard and Gorin shot the original footage for what was to be a dialectical revolutionary film—Godard and Miéville “go back to zero” to deconstruct the film image. “How does one find one’s own image in the other’s order, or disorder?” they self-reflexively ask in the film’s commentary. In this way they problematize the revolutionary impulse in the face of the mass media’s colonization of everyday life in the late-twentieth century. The filmmakers acknowledge that they have fallen prey to that which they critique. Sadly, they observe, “We took images and put the sound too loud.” We see a hand turning up the volume and lowering it on the stereo receiver on which revolutionary music plays. The commentary relates: “Vietnam . . . always the same sound, always too loud. Prague, May ’68, France, Italy, Chinese Cultural revolution, strikes in Poland, torture in Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Chile. The sound always

so loud that it almost drowned the voice it wanted to draw out of the image.” The scene then abruptly switches to a shot of a young Palestinian girl standing in a pile of rubble reciting the poem, “I shall resist. . . .”

### GERMANY IN AUTUMN (1978)

The war in Vietnam and the violence in the Middle East both took place relatively far from Europe. News and information about the events in these combat zones reached the public primarily through the mass media. The impetus behind the work of Farocki, Godard, Miéville, and others was to bridge that geographical and conceptual gap and bring an awareness of the war to everyday life. Their strategy relied on using film to both counter the dominant rhetoric of the mass media and provide alternative views and different perspectives. While they were facing the conundrum of how to represent events to which all access was already necessarily mediated, a violent crisis was emerging at home.

In May 1967, the same year that *Far from Vietnam* was released, the Brussels department store L’Innovation was bombed, resulting in the deaths of three hundred people. The left-wing group claiming responsibility issued a statement that through this action it sought to bring “Vietnam home to Brussels.” A separate flyer circulating on West German campuses stated: “A burning department store with burning people conveys for the first time in a European city what the Vietnamese are experiencing. . . . When will Berlin stores burn?”<sup>24</sup> Out of these events a radical left West German group emerged that called itself the Red Army Faction (Rote Armee Fraktion, or RAF), after the militant Japanese Red Army (Rengō Sekigun) and the Italian Red Brigades (Brigate Rossi). Despite the vast network of individuals associated with the RAF, a few key players commanded most of the attention, including Andreas Baader (1943–1977), Gudrun Ensslin (1940–1977), Ulrike Meinhoff (1934–1976), Holger Meins (1941–1974), and Jan-Carl Raspe (1945–1977). Although their initial actions were violently destructive to property, including setting fire to two Frankfurt department stores in 1968 in protest against the war in Vietnam, they did not seek to harm individuals. However, as the movement grew, its target shifted from the war in Vietnam to West German capitalist consumer culture. The RAF

took on a mission to expose the ongoing presence of former Nazi officials in both government and industry. At the same time, certain members of the RAF aligned themselves with Middle East radical organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and others trained in guerilla warfare in Beirut and Jordan. Revolutionary tactics back in Germany became increasingly violent, resulting in multiple deaths and the eventual arrest and imprisonment in 1972 of Baader, Ensslin, Meinhof, Meins, and Raspe. Although the RAF began as a left-wing organization with a just cause—protest against both the war and capitalism—in very little time its actions became increasingly violent and extremist. Despite the fear of prosecution by the state, a large number of West German citizens gave financial, material, and moral support to the group during its first few years.<sup>25</sup> After the arrest of Baader et al., the RAF began to escalate its terrorist activities by engaging in kidnappings, hostage taking, and executions.

The multiple deaths in prison, first of Meins from a hunger strike in 1974, then of Meinhof from an alleged suicide in 1976, followed by the simultaneous suicides of Ensslin, Baader, and Raspe on October 18, 1977, in the Stammheim maximum-security prison outside Stuttgart, led to a societal crisis as suspicion against the state surged. The ensuing media blackout preventing any coverage of RAF-related activities only increased the atmosphere of paranoia and distrust. The “German Autumn” of 1977, as it was called, provoked a series of responses within the left-leaning West German cultural milieu. Most significant for the articulation of the essay film was the omnibus production *Deutschland im Herbst* (*Germany in Autumn*, 1978), made in the immediate aftermath of the Stammheim deaths and directed by Heinrich Böll, Alf Brustellin, Hans Peter Cloos, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Maximiliane Mainka, Beate Mainka-Jellinhaus, Edgar Reitz, Katja Rupe, Bernhard Sinkel, and Volker Schlöndorff. *Germany in Autumn* is a series of audiovisual sketches comprising fictional segments, archival footage, and interviews by the nine filmmakers, each of whom respond to the “crisis” of violent state power directed against its citizens, the media blackout, and the escalating terrorism by activists.<sup>26</sup> Coming nearly a quarter of a century after the end of World War II, the crisis provided a situation for West Germans to examine its past directly, which in turn led to a series of traumatic confrontations.

*Germany in Autumn* combines both fiction and nonfiction elements, mixing documentary fact and footage with staged scenes and mini-dramas. It does not provide answers or conclusions. Rather, it is an open-ended inquiry meant to provoke thought, following Adorno's dictum that the essay "finds its unity in and through breaks and not by glossing them over," as well as Georg Lukács's remark that "the essential, the value-determining thing about [the essay], is not the verdict . . . but the process of judging."<sup>27</sup> The directors' affinity with Adorno's position is not surprising as one of the principal figures organizing *Germany in Autumn* was Kluge, a close friend and former student of Adorno.

The omnibus collective film as a form of political action, bringing together multiple voices in a single filmic text, pursues a model established in *Far from Vietnam*. The parallels between *Germany in Autumn* and its French precursor were noted and addressed as early as February 1978 by Brustellin, who explained: "It is the first collective attempt of German film auteurs. . . . In Europe it is the second time—1966 was the first time with Joris Ivens, William Klein and others who made *Far from Vietnam*—that a collective attempt is made by auteur cinema to address an international event."<sup>28</sup> *Far from Vietnam* was an interlocutor on both structural and thematic levels. Just as the 1967 film manifests the ambition of some of the most prominent auteurs of the French New Wave to produce a collective film that would cut through the sensationalized media reports on Vietnam while simultaneously joining the protest against the war and self-reflexively commenting on the nature of nonfiction filmmaking, so too the directors of *Germany in Autumn* sought to make a double intervention. Vietnam provided a link between the two films because protest against U.S. imperialism was the impetus behind the initial West German terrorist activity. Moreover, both films evoke a recent past. *Germany in Autumn* mixes events of 1977 visually with spliced-in film footage from the 1920s and newsreels from the Third Reich, stressing the key part played by National Socialism in the present. Kluge's use of Haydn's "Deutschlandlied," part of which became the German national anthem, moves the audience back and forth in time, from a mythical past through the Third Reich to the 1970s and back again. The use of the popular folksong "Mädchen aus Stuttgart" about Ulrike Meinhoff, composed and performed by Wolf Biermann, similarly recalls Tom Paxton's "Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation."

*Far from Vietnam* and *Germany in Autumn* resonate with each other through their participation in protest movements, albeit from radically different perspectives. Whereas *Far from Vietnam* was made during a period of optimism and hope in resistance movements—Paris 1968 and the Prague Spring were a year away—*Germany in Autumn* is concerned with defeat, disillusion, and dissolution of dreams for change, not just in Germany but globally. Just as Marker provided *Far from Vietnam* with the overarching narrative thread that held it together, so Kluge assumed a similar role for *Germany in Autumn*. In both instances, however, the “auteurist” or “directorial” role is downplayed and the collective nature of the projects stressed. To that extent these essay films, like *Here and Elsewhere*, counter the presumption that the genre is necessarily personal and individual. The most telling influence resides in the basic structure of the two films, which offers a mixture of fictional and documentary scenes. This striking hybridity, in which an increasingly complex thread of “objective facts” and “subjective realities” are intertwined, locates both films firmly within the essay film tradition. According to Brustellin, the decision to mix fiction and documentary capped a sustained investigation into the formats available to political filmmaking—montage, documentary, feature—with the result that no particular form could address the issues adequately.<sup>29</sup> For Sinkel, the film’s original mix of perspectives not only conveyed the diversified experiences of October 1977 but also interrogated the limits of representation and what the film as film could or could not address.<sup>30</sup> For his part, Kluge argued that the interplay between fiction and nonfiction corresponded to the “coexistence of fact and desire in the human mind.”<sup>31</sup>

Because the events of 1977 were, like the Vietnam War a decade earlier, both problematic and unresolved, it was crucial to find a form of expression that maintained both openness and ambivalence and was capable of representing contradictory responses to and analyses of the situation. The essay film provided such a form, just as the German written essay was considered the most appropriate form for leftist oppositional critique. It is interesting to note that Meinhof, prior to her involvement in direct political action, had turned to essayistic writing when conventional journalism became too constraining for her political discourse. *Far from Vietnam* and *Germany in Autumn* constituted self-reflexive responses as media to mass media’s treatment of these respective crises. For Kluge, film and television



constitute part of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), the space of public discourse in democratic society. However, as Kluge and Oskar Negt theorized in their 1972 study, *The Public Sphere and Experience*, this realm has become increasingly co-opted by the private sector.<sup>32</sup> What is called for, they maintain, is an “oppositional public sphere” (*Gegenöffentlichkeit*) that challenges dominant rhetoric and discourse. According to Kluge, one way for film and television to pose such a challenge is to change the pattern of spectatorship from one that provides the spectator with a readymade consumable totality to one in which the spectator acts as a collaborator in coproducing the meaning of the film. According to Kluge, “the spectator must simply rely on his sensibilities, allow his phantasy free reign. Rather quickly the spectator will interject his own memories, his own experiences and above all his own phantasy into the film.”<sup>33</sup> The director can achieve this in part by rethinking basic principles of montage so that the emphasis is no longer on the shot as a unit of meaning (Eisenstein) but rather on the gaps (*leerstelle*) between the shots that can be filled by the viewer’s own thoughts and images.

This understanding relates to Adorno’s conviction that montage was the only way to produce progressive film. In lamenting the lag of advancement in film in comparison to the other arts, Adorno found a solution in montage, “which does not interfere with things but rather arranges them in a constellation akin to writing.”<sup>34</sup> For Kluge, “montage is a theory of relationships” that establishes connections between different shots and allows the spectator to distinguish between “time and place.” To explain his theory of montage, Kluge begins with Bertolt Brecht’s observation that a photograph of the Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (AEG) does not represent the reality of the relationships in the factory. As Kluge elaborates: “This is the heart of the problem of realism. If I conceive of realism as the knowledge of relationships, then I must provide a trope for what cannot be shown in the film, for what the camera cannot record. The trope consists in the contrast between the two shots which is only another way of saying montage. . . . Information is hidden in the cut which would not be contained within the shot itself.”<sup>35</sup> Thus montage moves documentary realism out of stasis and places it into a dynamic constellation in which meaning is coproduced by the viewer, who forges new relationships and perspectives. Kluge compares the process of montage to that of the experience of the sailor Odysseus who determined

his location by measuring the distance “between the stars and between the stars and the horizon. . . . Montage involves nothing more than such measurements; it is the art of creating proportions. What is decisive in this case is that Odysseus does not measure the location itself, but rather the relationship; it is this relationship which is contained in the cut.”<sup>36</sup> This transfer of meaning onto the spectator, who becomes activated by drawing on his or her own experience, serves to position cinema as part of the public sphere.<sup>37</sup>

During a time of self-imposed or state-inspired media blackouts, the filmmakers of *Germany and Autumn* sought to create documents that would, in their collective statement, “hold onto memory in the form of a subjective momentary impression.”<sup>38</sup> Trying to track down what really happened during the German autumn and to provide images diverging from the official state version, the directors effectively contributed to producing an “oppositional public sphere”—a subversive source of messages pitted against the dominant media, notably television. By mixing interviews, fictional reconstitutions, and archival footage from the Third Reich with contemporary footage, they sought to add complexity and understanding to the one-dimensional, hysterical picture propagated by the mass media, especially by television. As Miriam Hansen notes, “the challenge to television is present throughout the film . . . [including its] attempt to undercut the overall structure of daily television programs as a unified totality of arbitrary diversity.”<sup>39</sup>

Seven years after *Germany in Autumn*, Kluge made his last film, *Der Angriff der Gegenwart auf die übrige Zeit* (*The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time*, also known as *The Blind Director*, 1985), before turning to nearly a quarter century of television production. In his fragmentary description of the film, Kluge included the heading “Key Term: Essay Film,” under which he wrote, “in cases where experience, or rather its translation is blocked, we need to resort to the format of the essay film. I know of no other possibility to supply so much material so quickly.”<sup>40</sup> During the decades that followed, Kluge would focus his energies on using television to create a counter public sphere. With the financial crisis of 2008, however, he returned to essay filmmaking with his masterpiece *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike—Marx/Eisenstein/Das Kapital* (*News from Ideological Antiquity—Marx/Eisenstein/Das Kapital*, 2008), taking up Eisenstein’s unfinished project from eighty years earlier.

The year following the release of *Germany in Autumn* and seventeen years after the Oberhausen Manifesto, the Hamburg Declaration, a manifesto produced at the Hamburg Film Festival of 1979, called for an end to the artificial separation of “the feature film from the documentary—experienced filmmakers from newcomers—films that reflect on the medium (in a practical way as experiments) from narrative and commercial films.”<sup>41</sup> During the 1980s the German essay film flourished with works such as Helke Sanders’s *The All Around Reduced Personality* (1979), Kluge’s *The Power of Emotion* (1983), Wenders’s *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), Farocki’s *As You See* (1986) and *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988), and Bitomsky’s *Reichsautobahn* (1986). By the 1980s the essay film in Germany was consciously recognized and identified as an independent genre that was neither documentary nor art film.

#### THE EMPTY CENTER (1998)

1989 marked the end of an era both technologically and politically. The ongoing digital revolution, the invention of the World Wide Web, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union contributed to new uncertainties and reflections on previously held concepts of truth and stability. In this undercurrent of anxiety, the unlimited possibilities technological advances opened up for digital film production provoked concerns among filmmakers about the loss of the negative and its attendant “truth” value, which would be a recurring theme for several filmmakers. Wenders grappled with the shift from film to video in his essay film *Nick’s Film—Lightning Over Water* (1980), and he sought to make sense of the transformation from analog to digital production in *Notebooks on Cities and Clothes* (1989). As the voice-over asserts:

Everything changes. And fast. Images above all change faster and faster, and they have been multiplying at a hellish rate ever since the explosion that unleashed electronic images, the very images that are now replacing photography. We have learned to trust the photographic image. With painting, everything was simple, and each copy was a copy, a forgery. In film it began to get complicated. . . . But now with the electronic image

and soon the digital, there is no more negative and no more positive, the very notion of the original is obsolete, everything is copy, all distinctions have become arbitrary.

As important to the last decade of the twentieth century as the conversion to new media was the “revolution” of the post–Cold War world order—the fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the alleged “death of communism” in the Western world, and the triumph of capitalism. Films such as Farocki and Andrei Ujica’s *Videogrammes of a Revolution* (1992) relied on found footage to reconstruct and comment on the official media reports of the final hours of Rumanian dictator Nikolai Ceausescu and his wife. Their compilation of material attests to the role the average citizen played in protesting the regime and enabling change. The video also anticipates the ever-growing audiovisual archive and database, made increasingly accessible by the Internet, which would result in a potentially unlimited and readily available virtual treasure trove of information and images. The digital revolution transformed the production, distribution, and accessibility of images in a fundamental way. The affordability and ease in learning the new digital filming technology enabled amateur filmmaking to proliferate. Digital platforms also increased the possibilities for public access and circulation. Innumerable professional and nonprofessional still and moving image sequences are readily available on the Internet, and cutting, pasting, and sampling resulted in an increased number of compilation films and works that relied extensively on appropriated and recycled footage. In this sense *La rabbia* was far ahead of its time, uncannily forecasting a form of critique that would become pervasive from the 1990s onward.

On the political spectrum, the gradual demise of the Soviet Union and its ceding of governance over its satellite countries was significant for Germany, in particular, because it ended the status of Germany as a divided country. The collapse of communism was condensed in the powerful image of the fall of the Berlin wall on November 9, 1989—conveniently replacing the previous November 9ths of 1938 (Krystallnacht) and 1923 (the Beer Hall Putsch) as national markers—followed by the reunification of Germany the following year. German essay films such as Ulrike Ottinger’s *Countdown* (1990) trace the final days leading to monetary unification in the two sectors. Yet the reunification of Germany and the rebuilding

of its scarred capital, Berlin, was not just a German concern; numerous essay films from around the globe addressed the country's reunification.<sup>42</sup> French-based filmmakers across the Rhine such as Marker, Godard, and Marcel Ophuls trained their lenses on Berlin as it shifted from being a divided island city to the site of Germany's new capital. Godard's essay film *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* (1991) tracks these shifts through the figure of Lemmy Caution, the cold war spy from *Alphaville* (1965) who had spent the past three decades in East Berlin.<sup>43</sup> Cut loose, without a function, Lemmy meanders aimlessly through the urban landscape, like a contemporary Don Quixote, encountering figures from French, German, and Russian philosophy, literature, music, and the visual arts along the way. The film, whose soundtrack is composed entirely of quotations in the native languages of the figures, is a dense montage that ponders abstract dialectic thought and its material realization.

Ophuls's essay film *November Days: Voices and Paths* (1990) takes the form of a musical comedy to cover the complicated, painful, and unequal process of economic unification, among other topics. Ophuls's soundtrack inhabits a space somewhere between diegetic and nondiegetic sound, with melodies both part of and independent of the events unfolding before the camera.<sup>44</sup> Songs such as "September Song," "It's Wonderful," "Song of Freedom," and "Money" perform the role of an invisible chorus offering an ironic commentary. Although much of the film is composed of interviews and footage that Ophuls filmed in Berlin in 1990, the musical inserts and footage from earlier film classics such as *The Blue Angel* (1930) result in a highly subjective essay film that comprises an interesting blend of fact and fiction. Ophuls resorted to the essay film as a genre through which to think or understand. As he explained at the time, "people will be thoroughly fed up and jaded with the subject [unification]. I knew that I wanted to have a highly personal, subjective approach."<sup>45</sup> By introducing this subjectivity on the soundtrack, Ophuls was seemingly following Vsevolod Pudovkin's earlier observation on the contrapuntal use of sound in cinema: "where the sound plays the subjective part in the film, and the image the objective."<sup>46</sup>

French wariness about German reunification stemmed not only from traumatic memories of the First and Second World Wars but also from the foundation of the European Union in November 1993, which initially had planned to include a much smaller West Germany as a member rather

than its unified behemoth. In the post-1989 era, post-World War II divisions of first world, second world, and third world had to be rethought as signifiers, just as “East” came to be replaced by “central.” In cinema many of these issues were played out metonymically in the formerly divided and newly consecrated capital city of Berlin, which overnight had turned into a construction site. Discussions about Berlin and the reunification of Germany could not take place without reflecting on World War II and the Holocaust. Concomitant with the move toward a future was a reckoning with the past. This consideration of the traumatic events that had been addressed in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s came to the fore in part because East Germany had neglected the process of addressing its past. Also serving to resurrect the past were revelations concerning the tactics of surveillance and networks of control of the East German secret police (Stasi), which harkened back to the Gestapo. Even the term “reunification” (*Wiedervereinigung*) was contested as a means to refer to the process of making Germany whole because it served as a reminder of when the country was last united, whereas the term “unification” ignored that past. The concentrated opposition in the reunited city between two radically opposed economic systems, capitalism and communism, with the former triumphant over the latter, played itself out repeatedly over the years, marking every aspect of social exchange. Although the wall was removed, deep psychic scars and wounds continued to run through Berlin and the rest of Germany throughout the 1990s.

In Hito Steyerl’s essay film, *Die leere Mitte* (*The Empty Center*, 1998), Berlin serves both as metaphor and metonym for these changes in Germany, as well as an allegory for the “end of history” and the beginning of a new world order. Filming in Hi-Video 8 and 16 mm—two media on the brink of obsolescence—Steyerl recorded the rapid rebuilding of the city, whose nearly half a century of history will be discarded like the celluloid on which she produced her images. *The Empty Center* tracks two transitions: the sociopolitical one in front of the camera and the mechanical one of the recording process as it shifts from analog to digital. Steyerl shot her images with older methods, but the entire postproduction process used a nonlinear editing system. Steyerl explained that she turned to digital because it enabled her to “visualize the process of excavation and of the visualization of different layers of the terrain. By incorporating not only different strata of history of the place but also layers of

different technologies, video turns into an experimental project of political archeology.<sup>47</sup>

Steyerl sifts through the layers of history that comprise the Potsdamer Platz, once the center of Weimar Germany. The “empty center” of the title refers to the once vibrant hub of Weimar activity, destroyed during the war and left as an empty wasteland, a “death strip” between the two halves of the divided city. The empty center waits to be filled with new architectural structures; it is a physical void replete with the history and memories of different eras where buildings once stood. Steyerl’s film recalls the former edifices of the Potsdamer Platz and their histories, such as Felix Mendelsohn’s nineteenth-century palace, the 1920s entertainment spot Hausvaterland, or the National Socialist’s Reich Chancellery, all of which have been destroyed. In their stead, an oversized vacant lot waits as eager urban planners and architects from around the globe submit their design proposals. Her camera details the area’s state in the mid-1990s: an enormous empty field, home to a tent community of squatters who know they will soon be removed to make way for rebuilding. The “leere mitte” functions like Kluge’s *leerstelle*—that empty place for contemplation, for the imagination; its filling up, Steyerl’s film suggests, constitutes the inevitability of capital: the systematic eradication of public zones and spaces that elude corporate privatization and ownership. Steyerl’s camera records the gap as well as the reconstruction, rebuilding, and repopulation of the former “death strip.” Through elaborate superimpositions and overlays, images from the past are projected onto the present and cast into the future. As she explains, “the film makes use of slow superimpositions to uncover the architectonic and political changes of the last eight years. . . . It traces back the history of ostracism and exclusion, especially against immigrants and minorities, which always have served to define the notion of a powerful national center. Its form evokes an archeology of amnesia where every single item refers to absence and erasure.”<sup>48</sup> She thus encodes a dialogic understanding of history, in which the past informs the present and vice versa in the filmic technology itself.

Creating a discursive scaffold out of Siegfried Kracauer’s writings, Steyerl not only examines a politics of reconstruction, in which she seeks to restore a Weimar surface to the site, but also unearths the latent xenophobia and racism that has erupted in the newly unified German state.

*The Empty Center* opens with the sound of hammering as citizens use simple household tools to dismantle the wall. A quotation by Kracauer fills the screen: “eine Tradition verlorener Prozesse begründen dem bislang Namenlosen Namen geben” (“establishing a tradition of lost causes to give names to those who for so long have been unnamed”). The rush to film the empty place that serves as a scar and constant reminder of a past that all too many want to forget becomes a leitmotif. Steyerl’s cinematic essay rings an alarm bell and signals a serious social and political crises that the dominant media attempt to bulldoze over. The empty space has been void not just of buildings but of people; the former bustling center remained silent for nearly half a century. Gone are the voices of commerce, the music of Felix Mendelsohn or of jazz musicians playing in the entertainment palaces, the bureaucratic issuing of orders, the screams of victims tortured by the Gestapo in their headquarters. *The Empty Center* reveals multiple layers of history and myriad narratives, some well known and others not. Alongside stories of famous figures such as the composer Mendelsohn, we learn the fate of lesser known characters such as Bayume Mohammed Hussein, who served with the Germans during World War I as part of the colonial corps in East Africa, worked in Hausvaterland as a waiter, was deported due to racial laws during the 1930s, and died in a concentration camp. Steyerl provides a mini-history of the role of the Free India Army in collaborating with the Nazis during World War II, as well as details of war profiteering by Mercedes Benz/Daimler and its bid for administrative headquarters in the Potsdamer Platz. She weaves these disparate narrative threads together, forming constellations and nodal points for contemplation. In that process, she recalls at least some of those who would rather be forgotten. The film’s penultimate sequence consists of a slow pan on a series of white crosses commemorating those who lost their lives trying to cross from East to West. The voice-over reads out names, but they are not those on the crosses; presumably they indicate others who have lost their lives seeking to cross borders. The commentary ends with the grim facts surrounding those who have died in their attempts to reach Europe: “they suffocate in containers, buses, trains; they are run over, freeze to death, die of thirst, or are thrown out of boats in the open sea.” *The Empty Center* concludes with the warning that as old borders are torn down new ones will be quickly erected, resulting in new exclusions and countless nameless casualties.



Steyerl films this space between the two halves of Berlin, geographically divided between East and West, and their corresponding opposing governing systems of capitalism and communism. East and West Berlin function as a dialectical montage; the interval between is in the process of being filled to suture the two pieces as a seamless whole. The montage is not just between two parts of the present: Steyerl works diachronically, constantly moving from the present to various periods in the past. This time traveling or temporal montage is effected through superimpositions, dissolves, and the layering of multiple images and sounds upon each other to create a dense palimpsest. For example, in one sequence found footage from a black jazz band playing in Hausvaterland is blended with footage from contemporary construction union members demonstrating against foreign workers taking their jobs; on the soundtrack we hear their protests while the 1920s popular song "*Ich lass mir meinen Körper Schwarz bepinseln*" ("I'll get my body painted black") plays with its refrain: "I'll get my body painted black, painted black, then I'll go to Fiji to the Fiji Islands. . . . I am the Fritz who wants to be a Fiji." The voice-over commentary informs the viewer that in 1930 there was a similarly high unemployment rate, and as a result a law was passed the following year to prevent black musicians from performing. A young Chinese student who was recently beaten by half a dozen young German thugs is interviewed, establishing a parallel between the antifoigner politics of 1930s Berlin and those of the present day, including footage from a 1997 Nazi rally with more than 5,000 participants. *The Empty Center* warns against a reunification process wherein difference and nonconformity are eradicated for the sake of national homogeneity. Comments from Kracauer on the promotion of selective breeding ideology in 1920s advertising are juxtaposed to billboards representing the ideal German family at the end of the twentieth century.

Steyerl employs the form of the essay film to weave a self-reflexive critique of the documentary genre into the sociopolitical theme of reunification. Her film relies heavily on archival material, including historic photographs, to establish a past that was founded on principles of racial exclusion, including a regime of power that preceded National Socialism and can be detected in nineteenth-century ethnographic, colonial, and military documents. Informed by the theories of Michel Foucault, Steyerl links the documentary genre and colonialism to argue that the

documentary genre is a product of regimes of power, as she asserts, “colonial regimes relied on their own brand of documentary, one that was closely related to an ethnographic way of seeing, that was a product of racist science and inextricably linked to military technology.”<sup>49</sup> Because documentary film is linked to truth claims, it reinforces and produces a truth that is determined by those in power. The result is a hegemony of the same regimes of truth and images that circulate globally, reinforcing dominant (capitalist) power structures. Accordingly, the documentary genre is to be understood as a reproducible and imitable system of codes. As Trinh T. Minh-Ha states in “The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,” “there is no such thing as documentary—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques. . . . Truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power.”<sup>50</sup> During the credit sequence at the end of *The Empty Center*, Steyerl includes an outtake that is as humorous as it is telling. She films a U.S. reporter being interviewed by a television crew covering recent union demonstrations. As the reporter recites his opening lines, “whatever the pressure for the German worker . . .,” he is interrupted multiple times as the cameraman positions him to get a better image. At one point the reporter notices Steyerl’s cameraman and asks, “Who’s that guy?” Steyerl uses this footage to draw attention to the contrived and staged nature of the alleged documentary reportage as well as to her own role in media making.

#### THE TROUBLES WE’VE SEEN (1994)

Though fraught with myriad domestic, economic, and political difficulties and conflicts, and haunted by the ghosts of World War II, German reunification was a relatively peaceful process compared to the dissolution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.<sup>51</sup> The bumps encountered along the road to German unification paled in comparison to the horrors that confronted Europeans with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the onset in 1991 of what has become known as the “Yugoslav wars.” While Germany was being monitored for signs of latent fascism and racism, a new spate of violence based in ethnic purification and cleansing broke out

a mere 500 miles from the European border. Whereas *Far from Vietnam* dealt with a war far from home, the war raging in certain Balkan states was too uncomfortably close to the European centers of civilization both geographically and ethnically, since denizens of the six socialist republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia were considered historically to be Europeans. The catastrophic collapse of what had been a seemingly functional, albeit stressed, federal union had a profound effect on many artists and writers, bringing into sharp relief what Fredric Jameson has described as “the intellectual’s perpetual guilt about his preoccupation with art in the midst of universal suffering and starvation.”<sup>52</sup> The ensuing wars between the Serbians and the ethnic populations commanded international attention, especially as combat was not limited to military targets and battlefields but instead was waged in cities such as Dubrovnik, Sarajevo, and Zagreb, where civilians were brutally massacred in the shadow of museums, universities, libraries, theaters, hospitals, and other cultural sites. Throughout the Bosnian and Serbian countryside massacres occurred and corpses were disposed of in mass graves, and women and young girls were raped and forced into sexual slavery. No one was safe or immune, including the UN peace-keeping forces and the journalists reporting on the tragedy. The horror attracted diverse visitors, including partisans eager to exercise their skills on a “real” battlefield, volunteers to aid the displaced civilian population, medical assistants, peace negotiators, intellectuals, and cultural workers who sought to understand and witness firsthand the former republics’ descent into hell. Following World War II it was believed that such barbarism would never occur again in Europe, and yet less than half a century later history was repeating itself. That World War I began in the Balkans with the assassination of the archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo was a bitter irony that escaped few.

Following his Berlin-focused film *November Days*, Ophuls traveled from Paris to Sarajevo in the winter of 1993, filming along the way. The resulting four-hour essay film, *Veillées d’Armes (The Troubles We’ve Seen: A History of Wartime Journalism, 1994)*, focuses on war correspondents—journalists, reporters, cameramen, photographers, and the like—who were stationed in Bosnia, either as part of media outlets such as the BBC, France 2, the *New York Times* or as freelance workers. The film opens with a shot of a statue of Goethe and a quotation from *Faust*, followed by a

contemporary interview with an official who states, with great disillusion, that “it is always said if one had known what was going on in Germany during World War II it would never have happened. However, today one knows and it changes nothing.” The interview is cross-cut with black and white sequences from footage of film industry personages arriving at the Gare de l’Est in Paris in 1942, seemingly oblivious to the politics of the day. The Gare de l’Est, as it appeared in the forties changes into its state in the 1990s as Ophuls rushes to catch a train bound for Vienna. Once seated in the compartment he pauses to reflect that this train was once called the Orient Express but today it is a train like all others. The conductor checks his passport and ticket, with a vague indication of recognition of his passenger’s name, leading Ophuls to introduce himself as the son of his more famous father, Max Ophüls. A clip from the latter’s film *From Mayerling to Sarajevo* (1940) follows, which includes the reenactment of the assassination of the archduke. The film then cuts back to the present, with Ophuls filming himself in his couchette as he ponders how to begin his film, signaling a similar dilemma faced by his “friend” Woody Allen at the beginning of *Annie Hall* (1977), in which Allen addresses the camera to tell a joke about two elderly Jewish women at a resort in the Catskills who first complain about the food and then the portions. As Allen explains, “That’s essentially how I feel about life: full of misery, suffering, and unhappiness; its all over much too quickly.” Ophuls holds up Phillip Knightley’s book *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam. The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (1975), and reads the epigraph: “The first casualty when war comes is truth,” followed by the opening paragraph, which describes the charge of the Light Brigade.<sup>53</sup> A clip of Errol Flynn on horseback follows as he dashes across a plain in Michael Curtiz’s eponymous 1936 film. Thus begins a densely montaged journey consisting of films, songs, archival newsreels, and photographs, intermixed with contemporary interviews and recent footage from the war-ravaged Bosnia and Sarajevo as Ophuls tries to understand this war and the individuals who are responsible for transmitting its events to the public.

In this self-reflexive essay film, Ophuls subjects war correspondents to an interview process and scrutiny similar to that which they use on their subjects. His camera records how they edit, mix, and manipulate their footage to conform to broadcast expectations and the messages they wish

to convey. Such wartime “truth” is carefully manufactured to meet international standards. Ophuls meets with journalists such as Jon Duncanson, Nigel Bateson, and Eddy Stephens, who reveal their often perilous status. As Stephens explains, “we don’t take sides, but we are the target now.” Throughout the film anecdotes are provided detailing the injuries and deaths of members of the press, such as that of David Kaplan who died within his first ten minutes of reporting. What makes this war particularly horrific, Ophuls suggests, is that everyone is potentially a target, even reporters who have historically been granted immunity. Nevertheless he constantly questions their “objectivity” while exposing their bravado and exceptionalism, their position as witnesses and narrators of the spectacle of the day. This is done not only by showing subtle contradictions, such as that between the freezing and starving local population and the journalists who are stationed in Sarajevo’s Holiday Inn enjoying rich meals accompanied by vintage French wine, but also through the tactical use of film clips and songs. To reinforce the irony of being sequestered in an aptly named “Holiday Inn” and to summon the sentiment of a vacation in someone else’s misery, Ophuls included an old television commercial for the hotel chain as well as clips from Mark Sandrich’s feature film *Holiday Inn* (1942). War as entertainment is illustrated by a comic routine from the Marx Brother’s *Duck Soup* (1933), and the privileged status of journalists is reinforced by a sequence from Billy Wilder’s *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957) in which a postwar impoverished Marlene Dietrich sells information and her charms to an American GI who is well stocked with cigarettes, alcohol, and food.

Through montage, Ophuls collapses half a century and juxtaposes contemporary events with those from the forties, a regressive move that cannot be ignored. The ravaged metaphorical, psychological, and material landscape of Bosnia in the 1990s bears a far closer affinity to that of 1940s Europe than it does to the present day. Ophuls subtly highlights this fact by emphasizing the geographical proximity of Sarajevo to Vienna (just under 500 miles) as well as its unfathomable distance. At the end of Part One, Ophuls returns to Vienna where visitors contemplate masterpieces in the Kunsthistorisches Museum to the accompaniment of Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow*. Ophuls depicts himself cynically in a luxury hotel, smoking a cigar, wearing a hat and a silk bathrobe, and watching the television news while a shapely nude young woman lounges in bed. The frigid winter of

Sarajevo, where heat is hard to come by, seems worlds away. Along the same lines of contrast, Part Two opens almost the same distance from Sarajevo, in Venice during the Winter Carnival. Brightly costumed and adorned characters enjoy the festivities and engage in role-playing games. War, destruction, torture, rape, and massacres are seemingly distant realities.

Like *The Empty Center*, *The Troubles We've Seen* cuts back and forth dialogically between the 1990s and the 1940s. Myriad instances occur that trigger flashbacks to World War II as Ophuls makes direct comparisons between ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Aryan laws of purification. During his journey through Austria as he passes by Salzburg, for example, Ophuls's commentary, viewed over newsreel footage of Hitler, recalls the dictator's alpine retreat in Berchtesgaden, where he plotted his nefarious schemes. Elsewhere Ophuls affects links between the Auschwitz concentration camp and the massacres at Vukovar, Mostar, and Srebrenica. A leitmotif repeated in different variations throughout the film is a questioning of the accepted myth that if the murders in Auschwitz had been filmed they would have been stopped. Similar atrocities are recorded and broadcast globally today, and they are not stopped. Jean-Michel Frodon has observed that for Ophuls it is not enough to see; surveillance cameras see everything but show nothing. What is significant is the point of view, the mis-en-scène, that Ophuls suggests should not strive for objectivity.<sup>54</sup>

*The Troubles We've Seen* is a subjective film in which fictional and non-fictional sources are given equal weight. Ophuls adopts this hybrid form to confront the banality of images circulating in the mass media to which the public has become inured. His fictional inserts, whether film clips or songs, are often comedic, and they attract attention precisely because of their artificial nature. Their juxtaposition to corresponding nonfiction sequences demonstrates the interrelatedness of the two perspectives, which, when combined, can be highly effective.

#### FOR EVER MOZART (1996)

Jean-Luc Godard issued similar concerns about the role of the cultural producer in a contemporary landscape ravaged by war and destruction, resulting in two essay films set in the former Yugoslavia: *For Ever Mozart* (1996),

and *Nôtre Musique* (*Our Music*, 2004), both of which take up questions of individual and aesthetic responsibility in the context of global politics.<sup>55</sup> Cinema's inability to alter the course of world events is the overarching theme of Godard's late work. His resigned pessimistic retreat is also evident in essay films that include *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (1988–98), *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*, and *JLG/JLG* (1994). If *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* is a mournful eulogy for the culture of the former East veering on *ostalgie* (nostalgia for aspects of its prior existence), *For Ever Mozart* addresses the tragic fact of new bloody battles emerging on the European landscape. The characters in *For Ever Mozart* debate the role of responsibility in the face of the atrocities being committed in the Balkans at the moment of the film's production, thus questioning the very possibility of artistic creativity while witnessing the ethnic cleansing of a population. Punctuated with caricature-like rebels and political fighters, *For Ever Mozart* follows a group of characters: an elderly filmmaker, Vitali, directing a movie about war, and three young people—Camille, the director's daughter, her cousin Jerome, and the family's Arab maid Rosette—who, prompted by Philip Soller's recent article "Sarajevo et Marivaux" in *Le Monde*, are preparing to journey to the Bosnian capital with the hope of staging a performance of Alfred de Musset's *No Trifling with Love* (1834). Musset's play involves a complex love triangle between two aristocrats, Camille and Perdican, and their naïve maid Rosette. This trivial play, inspired by the boredom of the nobility, has tragic consequences for the working-class girl, resulting in her death. In his final speech, Perdican declares his sudden realization that "we are foolish children, and we have been playing at life and death." The selfishness, dilettantism, and blindness of the sapless aristocrats is portrayed in Godard's film by the ineffectual intellectuals Camille and Jerome, the latter assuming the character of Perdican. The actors stay in role throughout their journey in the direction of the Bosnian capital, first by automobile, then by train, and finally on foot. In the meantime, Jerome pursues a romantic liaison with Rosette. The trip proves fatal as the idealistic performers of the theater troupe are captured by what appears to be a Serbian militia unit along the way and held in an abandoned country house. There they are raped, tortured, and forced to dig their own wintry graves. Thus the rehearsal of culture (in the form of Musset's play) and the belief in its ability to intervene in the political crisis are shown to be futile, a false gesture of intervention and concern forever incomplete.

Godard is highly critical of the characters of Camille and Jerome who, like many contemporary French intellectuals (Philippe Sollers is named explicitly), irresponsibly propose the killing fields of the ex-Yugoslavia as a stage for cultural events. Like Ophuls, Godard warns against scenarios and enterprises exploitative of the misery of others. Indeed, to rehearse a trivial play of love in the middle of a firefight, to aestheticize what are essentially unspeakable atrocities, reflects the staple of a type of cinema that Godard rejects. Furthermore, when we recall that in French the word rehearsal is “*répétition*,” it becomes apparent that what is being repeated in 1996 is the inaction on the part of “civilized” and “cultured” Europeans earlier in the century as a bloodbath took place in their midst. While Godard emphasizes the still powerful effects of the past on the present, he no longer holds out hope that the past can remain only a memory. Rather, the past reemerges as the fateful repetition of the “ever-same” in the guise of the new, the return of the seemingly repressed even amid apparent enlightenment.

A second narrative thread running through *For Ever Mozart* follows the aged film director Vitali, whose daughter has set out for Sarajevo. He responds to the contemporary crisis by traveling to Serbia to make an elaborate movie about war titled *Fatal Bolero*. The script is based on the Spanish author Juan Goytisolo’s assertion that “the history of the 1990s in Europe is a repetition, with slight symphonic variations, of the cowardice and chaos of the 1930s.”<sup>56</sup> Vitali searches for the perfect cast for his film that is to be structured along the lines of a Boléro, a one-movement orchestral piece originally composed for ballet by Maurice Ravel. At the beginning of the film, he auditions actors who take the stage one after the other and speak the lines “war is simple.” The director rejects each one in turn with an emphatic “No.” His efforts to get the most out of his actors and to shoot impeccable scenes to achieve the magic of cinema are emphasized throughout the film. His unrelenting pursuit of extraordinary performances and striking images inevitably leads to conflicts among the actors, the director, and the crew. When this film within a film is finally shown to the public, it flops. Vitali’s refusal to present his complicated and nuanced ideas in a simple fashion, together with his film’s lack of gratuitous scenes of sex and violence, leads a number of people who hear the film’s plot recounted while waiting in line to see the premiere to decide they would rather watch *Terminator 4*. Godard



intercuts this exchange with a pornographic dialogue, suggesting that the only films that can succeed in the context of a new barbarism are those that cater to the base needs of an audience and render unnecessary the process of thinking. Thus there is little or no space for an ambitious avant-garde cinema to have a social or historic impact on the present. The instrumentalization of social reality in the world in which we live, Godard suggests, has become too great. As he has said repeatedly in films and interviews, “culture is the rule, art is the exception.” Rather than a galvanizing source of reflection and change, dominant cinema, like culture, is bound to fail under these conditions.

*For Ever Mozart* ends with the weary and broken film director climbing the steps of a concert hall, evocative of a mausoleum, where Mozart is being played. He sits down and listens to the rehearsal. We see the hands of the young man, dressed a bit pathetically to resemble Mozart, at the piano. The film’s last words “there are too many notes in Mozart, that’s what people believe” lead the spectator to understand the title *For Ever Mozart* as a bilingual pun sounding like both *faut rêver Mozart* (“Dream, Mozart, dream”) and the more significantly *faux rêver Mozart* (“False dreams [of] Mozart”), reflecting the false dream of high art at the end of the twentieth century and suggesting that it is as absurd to make a complex film with too many notes that prompts critical thought as is it to stage a Musset play or perform a Mozart sonata. Here it is worth remembering Godard’s slogan: “not to make political films but to make films politically.” With his *mise en abyme* of films within films and plays within films, Godard subverts the established rules and conventions of filmmaking, positing narrative ambiguity and refusing to exercise closure. Godard proposes an art capable of upholding the value of discontinuity against that of a culture of continuity. The fragments comprising his films are meant to both contradict and complement each other, both dialectically, capable of generating new perspectives and a greater quantity of information, and nondialectically, as a form of accretion—like Deleuze’s understanding of the rhizome as building and spreading. For both types of montage, however, what is important is the fragment that operates and exists on both image and soundtrack. This practice of focusing on the fragment is part of revolutionary language that Julia Kristeva describes as a signifying practice involving the combination, fitting together, and detaching of parts.<sup>57</sup>

The fragment is not only operative in written composition and film-making; writing on music, Adorno hypothesizes that “there is no more severe test to which music can be subjected than that of extracting tiny fragments and seeing if they have meaning, if they can be played as one.”<sup>58</sup> The fragment was central to Adorno’s concept not only of music but of the essay as a general mode of critique. As he wrote about the genre of the essay: “It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over.”<sup>59</sup> Whether lyrical or instrumental, music is always heard as a part, a hint, or a suggestion. Whereas conventional Hollywood filmmaking leads to closure and presents a whole that is essentially unambiguous, Godard seeks to make *For Ever Mozart* deliberately and systematically ambiguous and fragmentary. If conventional forms of expression convey conventional meanings and are part of a conventional view of the world as supported by conventional journalism, then Godard’s unconventional focus allows for a greater scope of interpretation.

Audiovisual montage in the form of film clips and music in the essay films of Ophüls and Godard not only complements the image track but also produces a parallel soundtrack, freeing the imagination from the constraints of the visible world. Sound, whether a recording of Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas” over images of a bleak wintery Sarajevo or notes of Mozart over scenes of torture, is presented as an alternative to visual spectacle. It unleashes thought, producing a world of fantasy in the viewer’s mind. Through its shards and fragments, sound provides the fiction to enliven and enhance the “reality” of the essay film, just as the lyrics might connect the essay film to the vernacular—a tactic begun by Brecht and continued by Humphrey Jennings.

Thinking the essay film through the realm of the acoustic provides access to layers of meaning that are undetectable by interpretive approaches that focus solely on the montage of text and images. Non-diegetic sound elements such as music are capable of conveying ideas and sensibilities that cannot be explicitly stated or shown. They are also capable of summoning different times and spaces, allowing us to hear and therefore to see and understand an elsewhere, a place different from the one depicted on the screen. Furthermore, sound elements, like film clips, often bridge different films and productions and enable meaning to be transferred from one to the next. Music is an element that often functions

in *excess* of representation in film; its great power is one of suggestion, to overlook that strength and that dimension often comes at the expense of missing a key component of the essay film.

### B-52 (2001)

The wars of the 1990s in Bosnia and Serbia appear to have initiated the new state of perpetual war in which we find ourselves today. Concurrent with dissolution of the former communist block, in 1991 the United States embarked on the first Gulf War, the repercussions of which has thrown the West into a permanent state of war. The near obsessive fixation on national and regional identities dominating theoretical and cultural discourse at the end of the twentieth century masked the systemic shifts inherent in globalization. In place of nation-states, a new world order that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have described productively as “Empire” emerged, driven by economic exchanges that supersede distinct conceptions of individual nations. As Hardt and Negri point out, “in contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *detrterritorialized* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating *networks of command*.”<sup>60</sup>

Hardt and Negri’s characterization of globalization resonates with Steyerl’s observation that the essay film “as form has adapted rather well to globalization. It offers specificity, but beyond local academic or artistic codes, it is more often than not transnational (rather lumpen cosmopolitan); it is unaffiliated, radically independent, but also mobile, and can be integrated into newer and newer chains of meaning and different contexts.”<sup>61</sup> In a similar vein, essay filmmaker Ursula Biemann explains her choice to work in the video essay genre because, “not unlike transnationalism, the essay practices dislocation, it sets across national boundaries and continents and ties together disparate places through a particular logic. . . . The essayist approach is not about documenting realities but about organizing complexities.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the concept

of globalization encompasses transnational corporations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), multinational actors, high-speed transfers of information, and the perpetual flow of capital from one site to another in the postindustrial economy. As Slavoj Žižek noted in the mid-1990s, “the time has come to resuscitate the Marxian insight that Capital is the ultimate power of ‘deterritorialization’ which undermines every fixed social identity.”<sup>63</sup>

The impact of such deterritorialization on cultural production remains unclear. One effect in the area of media is the increased circulation of sounds and images across the digital globe. What strategies for critique might today’s filmmakers and other cultural and intellectual workers employ to negotiate and yet not succumb to the postindustrial condition of globalization? Steyerl argues that the essay film still has the ability to perform a critique, to create a position of resistance out of the maelstrom of media that surrounds us. She writes:

On the one hand, the form of the essay is very close to capitalist techniques of globalization. But it also has the potential to create different “visual bonds.” Besides the capitalist media assembly lines, there are alternative audiovisual economies. They coexist with media mainstreams, and are usually dependent on them, but they could also be based on barter, theft or appropriation. They defy the measures of the market, and its way of counting and extracting value. Retracing the trajectories of concrete images and sounds might give us a more precise view of those different linkages within digital globalization.<sup>64</sup>

Steyerl seeks to make sense of the way an image can be mobilized and put into a circuit of meaning that generates its own meaning, which might be completely unanchored and separated from its original context. In her later work she performs an archeological history of media images, tracing their sources, following their travels, and outlining their paths. One question that surfaces is how to resist the inexorable flow of images that surrounds us in an environment in which screens and monitors have become all pervasive. One response is found in the work of Steyerl, Biemann, and others who address the phenomenon directly by entering into and replicating the formal structures they are critiquing.<sup>65</sup> Following a different tack, filmmakers such as Godard reassert the filmic medium as

a site of resistance to the virtual world of sounds and images. In a similar gesture that reaffirms the unique qualities of cinema, in *The Forgotten Space* (2012) Noël Burch and Allan Sekula investigate globalization from the perspective of the sea: its ports, harbors, shipping containers, freights, and supporting social and labor systems that enable capital and goods to circulate globally. The high-definition quality of their images, particularly those taken as vast panoramic long-shots, comment aesthetically on the enormous scale of capital and its seductive allure.

Hartmut Bitomsky's *B-52* (2001) addresses the dual theme of perpetual war and globalization directly. Bitomsky, a former collaborator of Farocki, is best known for his trilogy of essay films concerned with Germany: *Deutschlandbilder* (1983), *Reichsautobahn* (1986), and *Der VW Komplex* (1989).<sup>66</sup> His tactic is to take an industry such as the German autobahn or the automobile company Volkswagen and launch a meticulous historical and technological investigation of a system that evolves into a larger sociopolitical critique. *B-52* is a full length, 122-minute film, in which he explores one of the most vaunted weapons in American history—the B-52 bomber—used since the beginning of the Cold War as an instrument of strategic and tactical warfare. Bitomsky's critique of this military machine doubles as a parable for American culture specifically and globalization generally. The B-52 comes to stand for what Hardt and Negri call “networks of command.” These surveillance and military war machines circulate literally and metaphorically as economic bodies that have both a material presence as actual aircraft and an immaterial one related to surveillance, Cold War ideology, and alienated vision.

The opening sequence of Bitomsky's *B-52* bears a strong resemblance to the first shots of *Far from Vietnam* as it records pilots preparing to take off in their bombers. By creating a “visual bond” to *Far from Vietnam*, Bitomsky engages in an intertextual dialogue with a tradition of political essay filmmaking. He appeals to the earlier film not only because of the role the B-52 played in Vietnam but also due to the significance of that war for positioning the United States as a global superpower given *carte blanche* to carry out military operations throughout the world under the guise of protecting freedom.

After the opening sequence, Bitomsky provides a history of the development of the B-52 aircraft.<sup>67</sup> Designed in 1948, this bomber “represented the strength of the country” from the beginning and, as we learn in the

film, is expected to continue to be in service until the year 2037. The voice-over alternates between a female and a male voice. They speak in an irregular and punctuated style, narrating statistical information about details such as the different types of bombs carried by the B-52, its varying flight patterns, and the logistical makeup of its crew. What unfolds is an institutional history of the world's most powerful bomber and its role in the formation and development of U.S. Cold War ideology. Bitomsky's film focuses not only on the official history of the bomber but also on its secret histories, such as when one of these nuclear bomb-equipped airplanes crashed in North Carolina in the 1961, or another off the coast of Spain in 1966. Bitomsky also spends a considerable amount of time on the labor history of the B-52. Each airplane is basically a mega-project, a factory in its own right, proliferating franchises around the world. The military industrial complex is presented as both a means to advance America's might and the backbone of the U.S. economy, prompting Bitomsky's more general claim that "the true scene of the Cold War was its production plants." Significantly, the film ends at the Boeing manufacturing plant in Seattle where 777 aircraft are being built from parts made out of recycled scrap metal from B-52s.

Labor history does not end with production. Bitomsky's film is attentive to the maintenance of these flying superbombers as well as their after-life. He tracks the work it takes to disassemble these war machines—a process that begins in the Arizona desert and ends in a Chicago art gallery where art crafted from old planes is exhibited. Everything can be repurposed and recycled. As the labor that goes into all stages of producing, operating, and even dismantling the bomber is revealed systematically in *B-52*, so too is the work that goes into the production of the film. We see extended shots of the film crew, and even of Bitomsky, who appears first as a disembodied voice, then as a lone interviewer, and finally, at the end of the film, as the filmmaker surrounded by his crew. This is consistent with Bitomsky's claim that a film should "show the amount of work that is in reality as being equal or equivalent to everything else."<sup>68</sup> Labor should not be hidden but revealed. To that extent, Bitomsky seeks to redress observations such as Adorno's in *Minima Moralia* that under capitalism the representation of the proletariat disappears.<sup>69</sup> Bitomsky structured his film around an international concept of work and its interrelated *practice*. For him, essay films "shouldn't reveal reality but rather articulate

and structure reality,” which he sees as an entire “concept” and not just a reflection of “the world, environment or life.”<sup>70</sup>

Unlike Bitomsky’s previous work, which had a relatively low production value and was often cobbled together from existent footage, *B-52* took almost ten years to produce. The 35 mm images that fill the screen are aesthetically overwhelming. To that extent this essay film becomes an artwork in and of itself, throwing into question its level of critique. Recall that for Lukács the essay resembles art only as a gesture, and what separates it from art is its character as an open-ended critique or investigation without strong conclusions. Bitomsky’s film accomplishes sovereignty by using style as *umfunktionierung* or *détournement*, and *B-52* performs an immanent critique of the ideology that informs the military industrial complex. The operation of the film evokes Adorno’s call for a critical practice that shatters “culture’s claims by confronting texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each one intends even if it doesn’t want to intend it, and to move culture to become mindful of its own untruth, of the ideological illusion in which culture reveals its bondage to nature. Under the essay’s gaze, second nature recognizes itself as first nature.”<sup>71</sup> Seen from this perspective, the very excess of the high-production filmic style Bitomsky employs strategically in *B-52* underscores the film’s ideological nature and serves to reveal the highly deceptive visual and linguistic rhetorics of the permanent state of war in which we live.

Bitomsky’s *B-52* demonstrates the inherently transnational structures and networks of command that are impervious to national borders in our increasingly global era. In the context of the new world order and its global economy, he tries to develop a filmic practice that acknowledges and attends to the essentially decentered and deterritorialized condition of the global, post-Fordist empire. Just as *B-52* planes, like the spy satellites above them, circulate endlessly in airspace, fully equipped with cameras, so technologized vision is rapidly replacing natural vision and surveillance systems are proliferating at a rate that is nothing short of alarming. Bitomsky adopts a tactic of critique that is based to a certain degree on imitation of the very structures he is investigating. Such structures manage to enter into these global systems and subvert them from the inside. To that extent *B-52* functions as a subversive decoy within the industry.

In each of the instances outlined in this chapter, the essay film responds immediately and directly to current crises by adopting either a subjective position or one marked by ambiguity. The essay as a form is uniquely suited to represent such ambivalence. It allows for the multiple perspectives and voices available to collaborative and omnibus productions. As a fifth column to the fourth estate, it brings attention to the ineffective banality of news reporting and the inadequacy of the documentary genre *tout court*.



Mass media means  
that a medium can  
deliver masses of  
people.

Commercial television  
delivers 20 million  
people a minute.

FIGURE 5.1 Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman, *Television Delivers People*, 1973.



FIGURE 5.2 Martha Rosler, *Domination and the Everyday*, 1978.

# 5

## THE ARTIST ESSAY: EXPANDING THE FIELD AND THE TURN TO VIDEO

*Memory becomes sedentary and sooner or later finds a physical shape (art), and this memory emerges from future time. . . . Only when art is fragmented, discontinuous and incomplete can we know about that vacant eternity that excludes objects and determined meanings.*

—ROBERT SMITHSON, "THE SHAPE OF THE FUTURE AND MEMORY"

**H**ans Richter's pressing argument from 1940 calling for a new form of cinematic production in the nonfiction realm that would be neither documentary nor art was particularly relevant in the United States thirty years later. Despite the example of Richter's *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947), the divide between avant-garde art films and documentaries had become an ever-widening and deepening canyon in North America. Unlike in Europe, where the essay film was developed by filmmakers in the shadow of feature film and in the interstices of documentary and art film, in the United States the essay film initially emerged out of a very different impetus and tradition: namely, that of art. Moreover, it developed in the work of artists who were not coming out of filmmaking but instead had trained in traditional arts such as sculpture, painting, and poetry. Moved by ontological questioning of the nature of art and possible means to expand its domain in their respective fields, artists such as Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, Martha

Rosler, and others turned to film or videotape to further their critical investigations.

Although many North American artists were making audiovisual essays throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these artistic experiments have not previously been recognized as such. Unlike Europe, where the genre was accepted as a discrete practice by the 1960s, it was only in the 1990s that the essay film was acknowledged by U.S. filmmakers, critics, and historians. One of the first publications in this regard was Jonathan Rosenbaum's 1991 review of Orson Welles's *Filming Othello* (1978), which began with a provocative discussion of the essayistic qualities of certain of Welles's films.

Two propositions:

1. One of the most progressive forms of cinema is the film in which fiction and nonfiction merge, trade places, become interchangeable.
2. One of the most reactionary forms of cinema is the film in which fiction and nonfiction merge, trade places, become interchangeable.<sup>1</sup>

Rosenbaum's characterization of the essay film as potentially both progressive and reactionary is particularly important to remember today when the essay film has become a prevalent genre employed by a large number of filmmakers and artists regardless of their political commitments. Although my primary focus has been on individuals who embed their leftist political critique in their essay films, many essay films eschew politics in favor of formal plays and tricks.

Piggy-backing on Rosenbaum's review, in "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay Film" (1992), film critic Phillip Lopate sought "to define, describe, survey and celebrate a cinematic genre that barely exists."<sup>2</sup> Unlike Rosenbaum, whose review like Welles's film is essayistic, fragmentary, non-judgmental and does not provide rigid guidelines and directives, Lopate insisted on specific qualities and characteristics that an essay film must include: "it must have words"; "the text must represent a single voice"; it "must have a strong personal point of view"; and finally, it "should be as eloquent, well-written and interesting as possible."<sup>3</sup> Early European film essayists that Lopate identifies include Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, and Alain Resnais. He maintains that North American filmmakers did not take up the genre with any regularity until the 1980s. He does not

mention Richter's *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, let alone other North American essay films of the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> This blind spot, I argue, is due to the rigid criteria by which he defines the genre and to his failure to search for the "centaur" in the right places.

In North America, the essay film did not emerge out of the European avant-garde film world of Harun Farocki, Godard, or Pier Paolo Pasolini but from the realm of art. Even there, a shift in perspective analogous to that put into play by anamorphosis is needed to recognize the phenomenon. As Rosler has astutely observed about the reception of her video essays from the 1970s: "They were initially almost universally rejected. My intentions seemed not to be clear if you didn't know more than one of my works. The work had no place to rest because there was no shelf for it. . . . It may simply be that you needed a pair of pliers and there were no pliers in your toolbox. And you didn't know that pliers existed even though you had been using different-shaped ones all along."<sup>5</sup> In other words, at the time the art world lacked the conceptual and generic tools with which to recognize essay films.

This inability to detect the essay film in the postwar United States stems from the fact that nonfiction films made in that context during the 1960s and 1970s do not differ significantly in form and classification from those two genres that had frustrated Richter three decades earlier—namely, documentary and art films. Recall MoMA's division of its nonfiction screenings in 1939–1940 into documentary screenings on one hand and abstract or Surrealist films on the other. By the postwar period, the American documentary had solidified into a practice that consisted of strict rules and guidelines directed toward replicating reality as closely as possible and addressing a wide array of topical social and political issues, including poverty, education, health care, and civil rights. In such films narrative was directed toward the strict accounting for and recording of "truth," with little or no place for invention and creative interpretation.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, films made by North American artists in the 1950s and 1960s generally celebrate the materiality and purity of the celluloid medium, championing formal innovation over narrative invention. Such experimental and avant-garde films usually lack a narrative; if there is one, it is almost entirely subsumed in the formal qualities of the film.

Just as there had been an explosion of new venues for screening experimental films in France in the postwar period, similar venues in the United

States supported alternative cinematic practices. In 1946 Frank Stauffer created the Art in Cinema program at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; between 1947 and 1963, Cinema 16 in New York City provided regular screenings of avant-garde and experimental film; and in 1962 Jonas Mekas founded the Filmmakers Cooperative in New York. Throughout the 1960s, numerous film societies, microcinemas, museums, art galleries, and foundations emerged, as well as new festivals specializing in alternative cinema, such as the New York Underground Film Festival, Chicago Underground Film Festival, and Los Angeles Freewaves Experimental Media Arts Festival. These venues established a rich and vital context for viewing and discussing alternative films. Individual artists played a key role in these developments. Mekas, like Richter, came out of the European avant-garde film context and founded a new journal, *Film Culture*, in which he sought to expand the field of what was considered the domain of film proper. The two “microcultures” in which films were made at that time corresponds to the avant-garde art world coming out of the visual arts, consisting for the most part of formal experiments and what came to be termed “Art-House” cinema, which during the 1960s meant foreign films, both feature and non-feature. Although these categories may have overlapped occasionally, for the most part they remained distinct. As conceptual and video artist Dan Graham recalls, during the 1960s the art world and the avant-garde film scene had little crossover with a few exceptions such as Andy Warhol and Jack Smith.<sup>7</sup> Unlike France in the 1950s, no individuals in the North American film community were conscious of making essay films. Although scholars have recently received Mekas’s diary films such as *Walden* (1969), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), and *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1975) as essay films, they were not conceived of in that way when as they were made.<sup>8</sup> Rather than looking to contemporary European shorts as models for new production, Bruce Conner, Tony Conrad, Ken Jacobs, and other makers of art films in the United States sought to resume the European avant-garde project of the 1920s and 1930s, which entailed formal projections that eschewed narrative. They emulated Richter’s early formal experiments with abstraction, rhythm, movement, and visual rhyming and ignored his subsequent essay films.

The prevailing division between narrative and nonnarrative films was promulgated by film historians and critics who sought to establish film/video firmly as an acceptable medium for art, as important as painting,

drawing, and sculpture. Perhaps one of the most influential voices in defining and institutionalizing what came to be known as American avant-garde film was P. Adams Sitney, who introduced the phrase “structural film” in 1969.<sup>9</sup> Structuralist or Materialist film, as it was also known, emphasizes the formal (material) qualities of the medium at the expense of content or subject matter. With his comprehensive and sweeping study *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–1973*, initially published in 1974, Sitney defined American avant-garde film, determined who was to be included, and identified the types of film that represented the phenomenon. In the preface to his first edition Sitney stated:

The precise relationship of the avant-garde cinema to American commercial film is one of radical otherness. They operate in different realms with next to no significant influence on each other. . . . In reaction the young American film-makers turned to the European avant-garde tradition. But unlike the painters and poets who had made films in the twenties, they did not stop film-making.<sup>10</sup>

With this tome, Sitney established connections between U.S.-based filmmakers and their European predecessors by constructing a historical narrative in which avant-garde film migrates from the continent to North America.<sup>11</sup> He demonstrated the impact of Marcel Duchamp, Viking Eggeling, Francis Picabia, Fernand Léger, and others on the emerging American avant-garde but did not extend this influence beyond World War II. He did not consider the postwar European short or essay film to be significant to the development of the U.S. experimental film. Nevertheless, his account, including the updated second and third editions, is extremely useful in charting a history of the American art film. But because he focused almost entirely on nonnarrative work, Sitney narrowed the field of avant-garde film production considerably, excluding the essay film from consideration. His account of Richter exemplifies this approach. Although Sitney devoted several pages to the artist and his importance for the new generation of filmmakers, his study focuses on Richter’s early abstract films, such as *Rhythmus 21*, and barely mentions *Inflation* or *Dreams That Money Can Buy*. Sitney’s import in defining a field cannot be underestimated; for years his work helped establish the makeup of the avant-garde. Definitely out of consideration was the essay film.<sup>12</sup>

One reason Structuralist/Materialist, or pure film, became a dominant mode of production in the United States during the postwar period is in no small part due to the influence of the art critic Clement Greenberg, who argued for a purity of medium self-reflexivity in the visual arts. As Catherine Russell observes, “film as film, film referring only to film, engendered a minimalism that brought it into alignment with Greenbergian modernism; thus structural film became somewhat entrenched as a high point of experimentation in the cinema, bringing film into the realm of high modernism associated with the plastic arts.”<sup>13</sup> Overall, avant-garde film was identified with formal, self-reflexive exercises that contain no narrative or references to external social contexts or politics. They did not include films made by artists who departed from this formal dogma, with the result that such works were ignored and marginalized. It is precisely in the films these critics overlooked, which are characterized by their narrative agendas and focus on content, that the essay film emerges as an artistic practice.

In an incisive essay in 2003 on the emergence of the contemporary art film/video by artists, “Expanded Cinema and Narrative,” Jackie Hatfield notes that the “general tone within avant-garde debates has been that artists were against narrative continuity or were anti-narrative or ‘liberated’ from the ‘demands of narrative continuity.’” She challenges this account, concluding, “despite the modernist thrust of the writing with an emphasis on the lineage of purist and non-imagistic anti-narrative practice, what actually went on was totally different. Rather than this history weighed towards anti-narrative, the reality has been that . . . artists have played around with narrative rather than being predominantly against it.”<sup>14</sup> Hatfield stresses that this counterhistory has been buried in favor of one that highlights the emergence of film as a formal medium that, not coincidentally, mirrors the trends of abstract minimalism: nonfigurative or representational work in painting and sculpture then endorsed by Greenberg.

If North American filmmakers producing art films were committed to Structuralist/Materialist productions, an equally rigid set of rules against subjectivity, creative invention, and imagination was at play in the genre of American documentary film, wherein highly aestheticized, formal compositions were rejected in favor of “objective” and, as much as possible, “unmediated” truth. Several factors contributed to the regimentation of this genre, which came to be known as American Direct Cinema or

Observational Documentary.<sup>15</sup> Following World War II and the horrors exposed in its aftermath, documentary filmmakers took seriously the mission to reveal “truth.” Several, such as Robert Drew, had been war photographers and were significantly affected by that experience. In addition, the documentary approach developed a particularly strong foothold in North America in no small part because of John Grierson’s heavy hand in establishing and defining the genre after he left Britain to set up the National Film Board in Canada. Grierson had become increasingly critical of the essayistic experiments of Alberto Calvacanti, Humphrey Jennings, and others, arguing that documentary needed to be more direct, based in fact, and without artifice or aesthetic interventions that might distract from its message. Grierson and his followers underscored the importance of following the etymological roots of the term “documentary”: to teach and to warn. What came to be called American Direct Cinema dominated the documentary mode of production in the United States from the 1950s well into the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> One of the basic tenets of American Direct Cinema was its alleged unmediated representation of objective reality, which was aligned with the representation of truth. Personal subjectivity, “creative manipulations,” a surfeit of aesthetic framing and composition, or poetic and meditative contemplation had no place in the genre.

Between the rock of American Direct Cinema and the hard place of Structuralist film, the North American essay film emerged in the interstices between art and documentary, just as it had in Europe in the 1920s. Several factors contributed to this emergence. In addition to a general cultural atmosphere in the arts of the 1960s characterized by broad experimentation and questioning formal limits and borders, the art world was characterized by an awareness of broad shifts in media, including the emergence of video technology as a means of recording, transforming, exhibiting, and distributing cinematic material. Just as in the postwar period, when the 16 mm camera had radically altered film production, and the early 1960s when innovations in audio recording equipment affected documentary film, the advent of the video camera and recording machine profoundly influenced media production. In addition, developments in cybernetics and the still relatively inaccessible computer technology lay on the horizon of film production. Publications such as Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore’s *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967) explored how the use of different media affected content



or subject matter. Artists and filmmakers made careful and conscientious decisions about using film or video to produce their audiovisual works because each medium was attached to particular political, institutional, and aesthetic genealogies.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside experiments in new media, conceptual art was emerging in the vibrant New York art scene as the field of art expanded to include “dematerialization,” a development that had a profound impact on artists who became involved in filmmaking. With happenings, conceptual art, fluxus, and process art, the “art” often consisted of an event, an action, a performance, or some other nebulous coming together. Aware of the ephemerality and immateriality of these works, artists often engaged in the seemingly contradictory response of recording them through writing, photography, film, or video. Whereas the initial intent of these verbal and visual accounts was to provide archival evidence of the work, the distinction between documentation and the actual artwork became increasingly blurred as the photographic, written, video, or film record came to replace and eventually stand in for the artwork.<sup>18</sup> Equally important as the execution of the work was the idea that preceded it. As conceptual artist Sol Lewitt famously pronounced, “in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work.”<sup>19</sup> Conceptual artists shifted the identification of art away from the material object toward the surrounding support structures, including ideas, discourse, and myriad forms of documentation.<sup>20</sup> At the root of Conceptual art was a deep philosophical and theoretical probing of the ontology of art. Unlike Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism, whose investigations were limited to self-reflexive concerns, the sociopolitical interests of conceptual artists extended the field of art into broader areas of philosophy, economics, gender, race, sociology, cybernetics, and the like. As a result, many conceptual artists saw writing as a fundamental component of their aesthetic practice, an aspect that was relevant to the emergence of the essay film.<sup>21</sup>

Conceptual art was inherently transmedial; it could not be identified with any particular medium such as painting, sculpture, or drawing. Instead, it was manifested across a broad range of traditional art forms as well as in new technologies and media such as newspapers, magazines, film, and video. Although artists initially employed writing, photography, film, and video to document their conceptual works, the subsequent shift from serving as documentation to becoming the work led many artists to

self-consciously investigate the inherent properties of the chosen medium and its employment within a broader contemporary context. Properties of the medium thus often became the topic of the art. For example, the inherently time-based dimensions of video as a technology that simultaneously records sound and image is one of the focuses of Bruce Nauman's *Lip Sync* (1969), and Graham's *Past Future/Split Attention* (1972) relies on the delay mechanism inherent in recording to underscore the temporality of audiovisual devices.<sup>22</sup> In addition, feedback mechanisms in video installations allow the viewer to alternate positions between spectator and subject, thereby provoking investigations into psychoanalysis and phenomenology. The filmic camera (video or celluloid) thus emerged as a mechanism that enabled conceptual artists to cross easily from other media, such as painting, sculpture, performance, dance, poetry, or music, into film.

These works, created in explicit rejection of the consumerist culture of the gallery system, were initially marked precisely by their unsalability. Denying easy classification, conceptual art was conceived of as the opposite to traditional designations such as "painting" or "sculpture" or "drawing." As Smithson noted, "artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories."<sup>23</sup> These categories were, of course, upheld and maintained by museums and galleries, which employed conventional exhibition standards such as white walls and open floor spaces on which to hang and display artworks. In reaction, some artists made works that could not fit into the traditional exhibition space, such as performance pieces or, in the case of Smithson, earthworks. As with European avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, Smithson's film and video projects were initially developed outside the purview of the museum. If films were shown, it was in a separate museum space or alternative galleries. For an artist to produce work on film constituted an outlier gesture in and of itself, especially if the work produced an argument and had narrative content.

The film or video essay as it emerged out of Conceptualism is an unrecognized genre and, to a certain extent, when practiced in video, an unrecognized medium. Departing from the pure cinematic exercises of Structuralist film or the durational studies by artists such as Andy Warhol or Michael Snow, conceptual artists produced audiovisual essays that presented problems through films or videotapes that relied not only on an assemblage of images but also on verbal language as expressed through voice-overs or the inclusion of printed text. By contrast, formalist art film

of the 1950s and 1960s steered away from verbal language; if sound was employed at all, it was generally in the form of nonrepresentational music.<sup>24</sup>

### *SPIRAL JETTY (1970)*

Many conceptual artists supplemented their artistic practice with essayistic writing, operating much in the same way as the theory/practice model of Richter, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Marker, Godard, and others, with their art informing their writing and vice versa. Smithson was one such artist. His thirty-two minute, 16 mm color film, *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is composed of image sequences that Smithson took on location to document the surveying, construction, and completion of the 1,500-foot-long (460 meter) earthwork he constructed in the Great Salt Lake in Utah during the spring of 1970. On the level of what Roland Barthes might refer to as its “informational meaning,” the film is a documentary recording of the construction of the earthwork sculpture, but it exceeds that role and constitutes an artistic work in its own right, making the earthwork sculpture and its environs the stage set for the filmic product.

Smithson was interested in exploring how cinematic parameters could be expanded. Writing on the state of cinema in 1971, he reacted to both the fictional and the art film in terms that echoed Richter’s pronouncements of half a century earlier. Smithson glibly dismissed narrative film, reasoning that “the thought of a film with a ‘story’ makes me listless. How many stories have I seen on the screen? All those ‘characters’ carrying out dumb tasks. Actors doing exciting things. It’s enough to put one into a permanent coma.” He was equally frustrated by art cinema, about which he concluded: “after the ‘structural film’ there is the sprawl of entropy. The monad of cinematic limits spills out into a state of stupefaction. We are faced with inventories of limbo.”<sup>25</sup> With *Spiral Jetty* he sought to produce a film version or rendition of the sculpture. In addition to the sculpture and the film, Smithson also published an essay, “The Spiral Jetty” (1972), in which he elaborated upon his theories on the relationships among entropy, history, and art.<sup>26</sup>

Smithson’s process of recording or translating the artwork into a written essay can be related to his general concept of “site” versus “nonsite.”

For him site refers to the location where the materials for an object or sculpture were originally situated, whereas the gallery into which he rearranged those materials constitutes the “nonsite,” and the form of his rearrangement reflects that displacement. Thus for Smithson site and nonsite represent presence and absence. He envisioned writing in analogous terms: “one must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing. . . . There is a friction between language and memory. A memory of reflections becomes an absence of absences.”<sup>27</sup> *Spiral Jetty* comprises three interrelated parts; it is a tightly interlocking triumvirate of sculpture, film, and written text.

The film is propelled into the essay genre because it exceeds the generic parameters of documentary and art film in both narrative and form. Breaking with the tradition of the silent art film, Smithson inserted a highly meditative and at times philosophical commentary in the form of a disembodied voice-over. The voice-over functions rhetorically to relate a highly subjective narrative at odds with both the tradition of expository documentary, with its allegedly objective, voice-of-god narration, and that of observational documentary, which eschews all external commentary. In “A Cinematic Atopia” (1971), Smithson offered a hypothetical encyclopedic entry for film, filed under the letter “A.” He explained: “Here is a list of the takes in alphabetical order: Abstract Expressionism, Agee James, Alexandrov Grigory, Allen Lewis, Anger Kenneth, Antonioni Michelangelo, Aristarco Guido, Arnheim Rudolf, Artaud Antonin, Astruc Alexandre. Only the letter A gives this index its order.”<sup>28</sup> The inclusion of Astruc in this list is striking because the French film director and critic was not widely known in the United States and his essays had not yet been translated into English. In this way Smithson acknowledged and signaled an awareness of Astruc’s theory of the camera-pen and, by extension, the essay film. In addition, seven of the nine individuals Smithson named are contemporary European film theorists and practitioners, establishing a link between him and a current European avant-garde film community (as opposed to Sitney, who drew connections to a prewar constituency).

*Spiral Jetty* lies between Smithson’s material sculpture and his written essay. It complements the former, extending it to another dimension and place, or what he refers to as a “nonsite.” The sculpture, located in the Great Salt Lake, is equivalent to the site, and the film and written essay

are the nonsites. The three forms are inextricably bound in dialectical tension. The film is carefully composed of alternating symmetrical image sequences that follow a tightly arranged A/B pattern. For example, at the beginning of the film a sequence of shots taken from the front of a vehicle advancing forward on a deserted stretch of road (A) is intercut with shots of the same stretch of road taken from the back of the vehicle moving in the opposite direction (B). A series of alternating A/B sequences follows, underscoring the rhythmic movement back and forth, to and fro, on the highway, similar to the ebb and flow of waves on the lake. This same principle of parallel editing is at play when Smithson intercut seven shots of quietly lapping water with images of dump trucks unloading rocks and dirt for the construction of the jetty.

*Spiral Jetty* opens with scientific footage taken of the sun's surface. Smithson's voice-over commentary announces the location of the Great Salt Lake as the first of the shots taken from the front of a truck headed down a road appear. In the background a metronome ticks at an accelerated pace, against which pieces of paper are seen floating down a granite gravel or shale hill. Smithson's voice intones: "The earth's history seems at times like a story recorded in a book, each page of which is torn into small pieces. Many of the pages and some of the pieces of each page are missing." This is followed by a cut to the road with the images recorded from the back of the truck as it moves in the opposite direction. The clicking metronome fills the soundtrack, evoking John Cage's metronome pieces of the early 1960s and György Ligeti's *Fluxus Poème Symphonique* (1962), two musical compositions comprised of multiple metronomes set in motion. A close-up of a surveyor's map of the prehistoric pluvial lake of Bonneville that covered much of what is present day Utah follows; the Great Salt Lake is a remnant of this earlier formation. The commentary informs the viewer that, according to myth, until 1870 there had been a whirlpool in the center of the lake caused by the existence of a subterranean passage connected to the Pacific Ocean. The spiral form of the sculpture refers to the whirlpool and is thus a metaphor for a spiraling passage that links different regions both geographically and temporally. Smithson consciously sought to extend this spiral motif throughout the film, including the penultimate sequence when he is viewed from a helicopter running the course of the completed sculpture/jetty. In the written text he recalls, "For my film (a film is a spiral made up of frames) I

would have myself filmed from a helicopter (from the Greek *helix*, *helikos* meaning spiral) directly overhead in order to get the scale in terms of erratic steps.”<sup>29</sup>

The spiral is a recurring motif of the European essay film, whether the spiraling structure of Eisenstein’s *¡Que viva Mexico!*, Duchamp’s spinning roto-reliefs in *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, or Marker’s explicit reference to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) and the impossible spiraling of history and memory in both *La jetée* (1962) and *Sans Soleil* (1983). Smithson was familiar with *La jetée*, and his title *Spiral Jetty* is an intertextual nod to Marker. *La jetée*, itself a reference to *Vertigo*, is a meditation on the impossible memory of a man who is a time traveler, haunted by the image of his own death. At one point, the protagonists visit a museum of natural history in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris; in *Spiral Jetty* Smithson evokes this scene in a lengthy sequence filmed through a red filter in a different museum of natural history, replete with the remains of dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures. The soundtrack fills with rhythmic music as Smithson recounts: “Nothing has ever changed since I have been here, but I dare not infer from this that nothing ever will change. Let us try and see where these considerations will lead.” Following this are quasi-mystical philosophical ramblings that question the meaning of existence. In this way Smithson supplements, amplifies, and extends one possible meaning of the title of his sculpture beyond its descriptive function to include intertextual references that open a dialogue with both past and imagined future texts, placing the work in a parallel discourse composed of myriad voices and narratives.

The second part of the film replicates the alternating A/B structure of the initial segment as shots of trucks and bulldozers moving rocks and earth are intercut with close-ups of water. The film casts the dump trucks, grader, and large bulldozer used to construct the sculpture as prehistoric dinosaurs, building the spiral to the aural accompaniment of their screaming engines and boulders crashing loudly into the shallow water. The sharp visual difference between the “natural” world of the lake with its gentle rippled surface and the active industrial construction of the jetty parallels the aural contrast between the barely audible sound of the lapping water and the amplified noise of the machinery. Toward the end of the film, the completed jetty is viewed in aerial footage taken from a helicopter that spirals and circles vertiginously around the large sculptural

work, jockeying to pin the reflection of the sun directly in its spiral core. The artist is tracked on film running along the length of the jetty, and several shots of the helicopter's shadow are caught in the reflection of the water as Smithson's voice-over intones:

Gazing intently at the gigantic sun we at last deciphered the riddle of its unfamiliar aspect, it was not a single planning star but millions upon millions of them, all clustering thickly together like bees in a swarm, their packed density made up a deceptive appearance of solid impenetrable flame, it was, in fact, a vast boreal nebula of innumerable suns. He leads us to the steps of the jail's main entrance, pivots and again locks his gaze into the sun, "spirals," he whispers, "spirals coming away, circles curling out of the sun." Sunstroke: this term is usually restricted to the condition resulting from exposure to intense sunlight, in mild cases it may consist only of headache and a sense of lassitude persisting for a few hours, in more severe cases there may be intense headache, aversion to light, vomiting and delirium . . . there may be loss of memory, an inability to concentrate.

This final commentary brings several different types of narrative together seamlessly. Smithson compounded different linguistic genres—scientific, fictional, and medical—to form a hybrid account, just as he melded different audiovisual genres and forms of representation throughout the film. For example, the observation of the sun refers to the film's opening shot of the sun's surface; a passage from science fiction writer John Taine's *The Time Stream* (description leaving the jail, "He leads us to the steps of the jail's main entrance") is followed by a medical report of heatstroke. One has to look and listen carefully, to "concentrate" (the film's final word), to unpack the closing sequence fully. To concentrate, to focus, to bring thoughts and texts together like all the different stars that make up the sun: that, Smithson, suggests, is the task at hand.

In *Spiral Jetty* the cinematic machine and the land sculpture converge into a single entity. The metamorphosis whereby the subject represented (sculpture) becomes the projecting object (film) is extraordinary. Sound plays a significant role in this convergence, as it did in the European essay film. As a key component distinguishing the film from the sculpture and written text, the film's audial components are constructed and montaged

as complexly as the image track. In *Spiral Jetty* sound operates on several different registers. First, there is the direct sound of diegetic noises that correspond to the images; for instance, the film opens with the gurgling and bursting of gas bubbles, followed by the noise of a truck engine as it drives down an unpaved road, the muted lapping sounds of the lake, and finally the chopping and whirring noises of the helicopter propellers. Second, there are nondiegetic noises, which include the sound of a metronome ticking as pieces of paper tumble down the slope of what the voice-over describes as “earth’s history,” as well as the electronic humming, vibrating, and echoing music that fills the acoustic space as the camera tracks the skeletons of dinosaurs. Finally, there is the disembodied voice-over by Smithson, who speaks to the spectator from beyond both the cinematic space and the geographic site of the Spiral Jetty. The voice haunts the film with quasi-philosophical and fantastical musings that serve to direct and produce meaning. But it is not just through language that meaning is constructed; this also occurs through the alternating amplification and muting of ambient sounds. In the sequence of the jetty’s construction, the noise of machinery is exaggerated in contrast to the almost silent shots of the lake. The soundtrack transforms the viewer’s experience of the earthwork dynamically, just as the sculpture, while visually and temporally fixed by the filmic process, is made dynamic through the addition of the acoustic layer. Both film and video are classified as time-based media in part because they involve movement. Although images and text may be still or frozen, the same is not the case for sound. In contrast to Smithson’s still photographs or written essay describing the project, *Spiral Jetty* is a nexus or nodal point, bringing together the physical site with its sights and sounds.

*Spiral Jetty* is a film about film and its relation to the sculpture. Its medium specificity (16 mm) cannot be ignored; by 1970 artists were increasingly employing video to record performances and create permanent works from ephemeral actions. The advent of video prompted filmmakers and artists to consider the different properties of the two media: celluloid and video. Cinema was appealing to Smithson, not only because of its formal aesthetic qualities but also because, unlike video, cinema had a history—although not as extensive as that of the dinosaurs or of the geological formations that fascinated him—that provided a basis for his intertextual references. To stress the celluloid medium in *Spiral Jetty*,



Smithson included a final shot of an editing studio with several 16 mm projectors, reels of film, and an editing table and strips of celluloid hanging in wait. The segment is entirely quiet, with no soundtrack, and the shot is almost static; its only movement is a slow zoom in for a close-up of a large photograph of the completed Spiral Jetty affixed to the wall behind the worktable. Smithson drew parallels between the discerning eye of the filmmaker and that of the paleontologist, as he explained in his essay on the work:

And the movie editor, bending over such a chaos of “takes” resembles a paleontologist sorting out glimpses of a world not yet together, a land that has yet to come to completion, a span of time unfinished, a spaceless limbo on some spiral reels. Film strips hung from the cutter’s rack, bits and pieces of Utah, out-takes overexposed and underexposed, masses of impenetrable material. . . . The movieola becomes a “time machine” that transforms trucks into dinosaurs. Fiore pulled lengths of film out of the movieola with the grace of a Neanderthal pulling intestines from a slaughtered mammoth.<sup>30</sup>

Smithson articulates what Marker suggested with his excursus on frozen mammoths in the tundra of Siberia and developed further in *La jetée*, namely, that cinema is a “time machine” that allows for movement into the past as well as the future. The visual image of the sculpture “Spiral Jetty” resonates with the spirals of the film reels in this final shot, which one imagines will wind and unwind as they are projected. Everything is still, and the silence of the soundtrack amplifies the stasis, whereas sound is motion and motion is film. Like the sculpture that has been covered with salt water and subsequently uncovered by the ebb and flow of natural processes, so too would the reels of film ultimately deteriorate.

Smithson primarily wanted to address the artistic potential of the filmic medium in this essay film on spirals, history, environments both natural and unnatural, and the winding, rewinding, and preservation of time. *Spiral Jetty* is an essay on art and its placement in the world; with its carefully crafted and montaged audio and visual texts, the film becomes an artwork. When installed in a gallery, the whirring projector sited in the exhibition space echoes and doubles the sound of the helicopter and the machine noises heard in the film. Memory and its public translation into

history correspond to the filmmaking process. The first words of the film link the composition of earth's history with an imperfect system of storytelling through fragments, an association that corresponds to the process of film editing. Strips of celluloid hanging by the editing table waiting to be sutured together in the closing shot resonate with the earlier sequence depicting torn, scattered pages of history that need to be pieced together in a coherent narrative. The concept of the fragment—both formally and thematically—as a component of the essay, or of philosophical thought generally, remains a determining characteristic in the essay film.

### A NEW MEDIUM

Artists interested in moving images had a choice to work in film or videotape, an option in which economics and scale of production played significant roles. Although Smithson opted for the material of celluloid for his essay film, the audiovisual essay emerged most significantly in the new medium of videotape. During the 1960s, videotape and its related electronic cousin, television, brought the defining technical characteristics and aesthetic quality of celluloid into sharp relief.<sup>31</sup> Although working in celluloid allowed for an expansiveness of the image and materiality of the medium, it was prohibitively expensive. In contrast to the complex process of making a film, which entails multiple stages, personnel, equipment, and resources, videotape production involves relatively simple technology. During the early years of the development of the medium, manufacturers such as Sony gave videotape cameras to artists to experiment with, and report back, thus minimizing their research and development costs. The self-contained videotape camera with its immediate playback allowed the user it to be the sole proprietor, with the video artist assuming a role similar to that of the solitary artist or writer, as she or he becomes the single authorial presence responsible for creating the work.<sup>32</sup>

Video art emerged as a cross between a sculptural and a painterly medium in works such as Wolf Vostell's *TV Dé-coll/age* (1959) and Nam June Paik's "Exposition of Music—Electronic Television" (1963); it consisted of television monitors installed in galleries displaying sounds and images. The technology's versatility, portability, and unique ability to

record sounds and images in real time led to the recording of performances, actions, happenings, and events of various sorts. Nevertheless, the medium was limited, handicapped by the shoddy black-and-white images it produced, its inability to record multiple soundtracks, and its lack of deep focus capabilities. The latter rendered videotape insufficient when it came to capturing panoramic scenes.<sup>33</sup>

In tandem with this emergence of the singular video artist, a parallel development occurred that emphasized video's collective, community-based potential. During the 1960s and early 1970s a number of politically committed video collectives, such as Videofreex, Newsreel (also known as Camera News, Inc.), and Ant Farm, were formed to counter the mainstream media and ensure the recounting of histories and telling of stories other than those recorded and sanctioned by the official news media. The extensive databases amassed by these collectives include interviews with former Black Panther leaders, documentation from the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, and investigative reporting on the Hells Angels and other alternative groups. The emergence of these collectives was largely in response to the perceived hegemony of broadcast television, especially the nightly news coverage and the burgeoning form of made-for-television documentaries, such as those produced by Robert Drew.

Drew was a main protagonist of the American Direct Cinema movement, which sought to capture reality directly and represent it truthfully. He started his career at *Life* magazine and masterminded its first attempts to produce social documentaries for television. Like Grierson at the GPO, Drew brought together a talented team of filmmakers, including Richard Leacock and D. A. Pennebaker, to work with him in the new television division of *Time*. During the 1950s camera equipment was still too bulky to produce unrehearsed, unstaged documentaries. Nevertheless, Drew imagined a future for television documentary that would consist of "a theatre without actors; it would be plays without playwrights; it would be reporting without summary and opinion; it would be the ability to look in on people's lives at crucial times from which you could deduce certain things, and see a kind of truth."<sup>34</sup> Drew sought to realize his vision with the first major television documentary *Primary* (1960), which covered the presidential campaigns of John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey and launched television as a powerful medium for producing and broadcasting documentaries. However, such film-based documentaries required

significant budgets and production teams and producers willing to back them up. Although the themes and subject matter they treated were relevant to contemporary social issues, the truths they revealed and the messages they conveyed were in line with the dominant belief system perpetuated by the homogenizing force of television.

It was against such productions that those associated with the emerging video collectives sought to react. As television sets came to proliferate in households in Europe and North America during the 1960s, television became a second medium, beyond cinema, to which essay filmmakers could respond. There was an increasing awareness that several truths existed, that not all truths were equal, and that many stories were never told. As an inexpensive alternative to film, video made it possible to present heretofore unheard, invisible and unrepresented histories. Thus, in its first two decades, video can be divided into two areas: the first as experimented with and practiced by individual artists and the second as a tool employed by collectives. Whereas the orientation and genealogy of the former was directed toward art, that of the latter was bent toward mass media, information, and documentation.

Significant changes in the development of video technology during the early 1970s drastically reduced the overall package price for equipment (including a camera, video tape recorder unit and color display console), making the medium more affordable. In 1970 the cost ranged from \$11,000 (Sony) to upward of \$50,000, but by 1973 the price had dropped to \$1,000. The implications of this relatively inexpensive recording technology were enormous. Added to this, video technology was not difficult to operate. It was free of complicated camera and sound equipment and did not require large crews or high developing costs. The medium's immediate availability of both sound and image made it a perfect tool for recording topical issues. Moreover, video was easy to disseminate because it did not demand high-resolution screening facilities with specific projectors and screens. Filmmaking cooperatives took advantage of practices already in place for screening documentary and educational films in nontheatrical venues such as libraries, town halls, and community centers, as well as in alternative smaller theatrical spaces. With video, screening opportunities exploded in both private and public venues, and the medium increasingly became part of everyday life. The most significant change in screening and distribution practices was the intimacy offered by VCRs: they could be hooked

up to any home television, thereby facilitating private home screenings of any material. Videotapes were treated like books: circulated, loaned, and rented by such disparate institutions as the high-brow Video Data Bank, the more eclectic Kim's Underground, and national chains such as Blockbusters. Videotapes were archived and stored by museums, libraries, and universities. Just as important as these official outlets was the informal and almost always illegal practice of copying and circulating bootleg copies among users. The vastly growing network of users and the variety of different and sometimes overlapping communities of viewers resulted in mass circulation of a previously unforeseen quantity and variety of media material, including classical films, documentaries, art films, and television broadcasts. The technology of video contributed to the democratization of audiences and consumers as it enabled control about what to see and when to be wrested from corporate entities (television programming and studio releases) and given over to the individual. The ease with which video could be copied and shared also meant that the medium initially stood outside the art market—a market that thrived on the limited edition and limited access. Finally, with video the now “possessive” spectator could watch, manipulate, and control viewing with features such as rewind, pause, fast-forward, freeze, or still frame of images.<sup>35</sup> Video was received as a democratic medium both by and for the general public.<sup>36</sup>

By 1975, advances in video technology enabled television broadcasts and images to be copied and reused easily, a development that had huge repercussions for political media production. The original intentions of footage from commercial television could be countered through strategies of cooption, Situationist *détournement*, or Brechtian *Umfunktionierung*. In addition, the ability to recycle material that others had recorded on film or video enabled video artists such as Dara Birnbaum to produce work on a bare bones budget.<sup>37</sup> Pirating previously manufactured images and sounds became a form of political image making that directly challenged auteurist practices of cinema. By the 1990s, video technology facilitated the flexible condensing of information, layering of texts and subtexts, and production of multiple images and sounds, resulting in the possibility of using simultaneous and sometimes contradictory images and soundtracks.

In addition to active intervention and manipulation on the part of the viewer, videotape can be exhibited as a single or multiple channel artwork. With the exception of experiments such as Abel Gance's multiscreen

*Napoleon* (1927) or Andy Warhol's split-screen *Chelsea Girls* (1966), most films were conceptualized as single screen projections. By contrast, video technology opened the possibility of several channels and screens through which images could be projected simultaneously. Gene Youngblood first explored the potential offered by works that mobilized multiple projections in *Expanded Cinema* (1970), a book that was to have a profound influence on numerous film and video artists. With the advent of multiple channels came a shift in how video was shown. The traditional screening space consisting of an audience seated before a single screen—a construct from the centuries-old tradition of the theatrical proscenium stage and then taken up by cinema—could now be radically reconfigured. During the 1960s numerous attempts were made in avant-garde theater and performance to break the “fourth wall” between audience and spectator. Allan Kaprow, the self-proclaimed inventor of the happening, saw the potential for using video not only to record performances but also to include multichannel projections as part of theatrical installations.<sup>38</sup> The development of multichannel video as an installation medium was significant because it split the viewer's perception. These installations also placed demands on the sites where they could be exhibited. As traditional screening facilities were no longer adequate, multichannel video works found a home in art galleries and museums that could exhibit several objects simultaneously and in correspondence with one another. Single-screen video could be shown in public places, outdoors and indoors, with greater facility than film, but video projections were even more flexible. They began to appear on the sides of buildings and other sites where they could reach a different public.<sup>39</sup> The ability of video to engage a mobile spectator, activate multiple screens, and develop new strategies for the audiovisual essay would become fully apparent in the late 1990s and continue to develop in the new millennium (see chapter 7).

#### TELEVISION DELIVERS PEOPLE (1973)

In 1973, two video essays were made, and each in its own way engaged in a critique of mass culture and the entertainment industry: Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman's *Television Delivers People* and Vito Acconci's

*Theme Song*. Serra and Acconci both came from a background in post-minimal art. Serra was trained at Yale University as a sculptor and had only made a couple of films prior to *Television Delivers People*; whereas Acconci, who studied in the creative writing program at the University of Iowa, was an early forerunner in the exploration of videotape, which he employed tactically as an artistic medium because of both its technological and its theoretical properties. Schoolman was in charge of video programming at The Kitchen in New York City and also founder of Fifi Corday Productions.

Unlike Serra's early films, such as *Hand Catching Lead* (1968), which relies entirely on visual means without resorting to words, Serra and Schoolman's *Television Delivers People* features no images. The videotape consists primarily of printed words on a blue screen. The words comprise a rhetorical assault on the mass medium of television, an intention the artists underscored in their manipulation of the soundtrack, which consists solely of canned background music, similar to what has become known as elevator music. The viewer is prompted to read the vertically scrolling text, which is organized in verse like a poem. It begins:

The Product of Tele-  
 Vision, Commercial  
 Television, is the  
 Audience.  
 Television delivers  
 People to an  
 Advertiser  
 There is no such thing  
 As mass media in the  
 United States except  
 for television.  
 Mass media mean  
 That a medium can  
 Deliver masses of  
 People.  
 Commerical [sic] television  
 Delivers 20 million  
 People a minute.

The videotape continues in this manner for approximately seven minutes. At times the letters are all capitals, such as for the phrases “CORPORATIONS ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE”; “CORPORATIONS ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE TO THE GOVERNMENT.” The speed of the flow of words is modulated slightly, resulting in an overall visual effect of a scrolling poem against the backdrop of a vibrant blue screen, all accompanied by peppy, inane, mind-numbing, repetitive music. The litany against television, such as that which follows, is meant to wake viewers from their stupor:

What television  
Teaches through  
Commercialism is  
Materialistic  
Consumption  
The NEW MEDIA STATE  
Is predicated on media control

The videotape ends by castigating viewers for paying money to allow themselves to be programmed and consumed, thereby becoming products of mass consumption.

You pay the money  
To allow someone else  
To make the choice  
You are consumed  
You are the product  
Of television  
Television delivers  
People.

Serra and Schoolman’s piece is striking for a number of reasons. It circumvents the use of representational or indexical signs by relying solely on written words and symbols that comprise part of a logographic system. In this eschewal of a photographic basis, *Television Delivers People* has affinities with animation; what makes it filmic is primarily the motion of the script.<sup>40</sup> The printed words are executed in a standard commercial font, and the uniform blue screen is flat, without variation or shadows.



In an analogous manner, the accompanying music is soulless; its endlessly looping rhythm derives from popular songs whose lyrics, high and low intensities, and tonal modulations have been removed, giving it an obsequious quality. Elevator music, later copyrighted as Muzak, was initially employed in the 1960s to provide ambient sound in public spaces geared toward consumption, such as shopping malls and grocery stores. On one hand, *Television Delivers People* is an artwork, a video poem set to music. On the other hand, it is a scathing critique, a rant against commercial television. In a moment of *détournement*, Serra and Schoolman used the medium of video to launch their critique of another video-based medium, television. With this video essay the artists wrested the medium of television away from its commercial uses and suggested its radically different potential.<sup>41</sup>

#### THEME SONG (1973)

Acconci was trained as a poet and has always maintained that words and their arrangements form the spine of his aesthetic practice. In 1970 he obtained a videotape camera and began making his first videos. In early works such as *Pryings* (1971), he used the camera primarily to record performance pieces—in this instance, his attempt to pry open the eyes of a female subject. Acconci quickly moved from using videotape as a means of documentation to probing its potential as an aesthetic medium in its own right. He focused on those characteristics that made the video recorder different from the cinematic apparatus, including the former's potential to transform the relationship between the viewer and the audiovisual images projected on the screen. *Remote Control* (1971) highlights the eponymous technology that allows viewers to manipulate and control images, an agency that is virtually impossible with film projection. In this piece, Acconci and his collaborator Kathy Dillon are filmed in two separate containers. Acconci dictates a series of commands to Dillon that she must follow. Neither can see the other directly but only through a monitor, so their interaction is mediated by the technology. Acconci focused on the mediated relationship between the body and the new media technology, which, as Marshall McLuhan argued in the 1960s, has the potential to create new

social relations.<sup>42</sup> Acconci exploited the potential for intimacy that the video camera allows owing to its ease of operation, its ability to record sound and images simultaneously, and its capacity for close-up filming.

Acconci exploited these traits self-reflexively in several works he produced in the early 1970s in which he investigated the artistic potential of the new medium and the manner in which it reconfigures the relationship between filmmaker and viewer. They are characterized by close-ups of the artist's face as he speaks directly to the camera and addresses the viewer with the linguistic shifter "you."<sup>43</sup> We are reminded of Bertolt Brecht's essay, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" (1932), in which he imagined the interactive possibilities of the then relatively new technology. The essay begins: "There was a moment when technology was advanced enough to produce the radio and society was *not yet* advanced enough to accept it. . . . Radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life . . . if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him."<sup>44</sup> Although radio never realized the potential Brecht projected for it, Acconci recognized that video presented the related possibility of operating as a more interactive apparatus between producers and consumers/receivers, and he began to create theoretical video essays that are hybrid amalgamations of features associated with art, narrative, and documentary film.

In *Theme Song*, Acconci problematizes the false sense of intimacy and connectivity that the mass media exploits. The video begins with Acconci addressing the camera and the imaginary viewer as he responds to the lyrics of The Doors' song "I Can't See Your Face in My Mind" with the words: "Of course I can't see your face, I have no idea what your face looks like. You could be anybody out there. But there's gotta be somebody watching me." In this sequence, Acconci is commenting on the mediated distance that exists between the sender and the receiver of a message as he engages directly in dialogue with an iconic pop star. This multilayered video essay addresses issues of fandom arising from the advent of mass media in the nineteenth century and those deriving from the more recent postwar phenomenon of the fascinating male rock star with an irrational power over a very large number of fans.

*Theme Song* is approximately twenty-seven minutes long and is structured around nine rock 'n' roll songs, all performed by white male singers.

Acconci's playlist includes two tracks by The Doors and one each by The Faces, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Quicksilver Messenger Service, The Velvet Underground, Leonard Cohen, and Kris Kristofferson. Acconci hums and sings along, accompanying the tracks in a pre-Karaoke style while he interjects commentary related to the lyrics. As in his earlier videos, he videotapes himself in close-up, lying on the floor in front of the camera. Throughout the piece, Acconci's face fills the screen, with his body receding into the background. He flirts with the camera/viewer, establishing a relationship analogous to that of a rock star to his audience.

*Theme Song* opens with the artist lighting a cigarette, taking a drag, humming a few bars, and turning on the music player. As Acconci sings along with Morrison, he forges an ongoing intimate address with an imaginary viewer, interweaving the lyrics of the various singers playing in the background with his own commentary and improvisations. He appeals to the viewer to engage with him and enter the space of the video. "I'll take care of you, if you come in, come in close to my body," he pleads as he rotates his hips provocatively. Accompanying The Doors' "People Are Strange," as Morrison croons "Faces look ugly when you're alone," Acconci echoes, "I'm all alone, everyone looks ugly. . . . Look how down I am, look how alone, I'm depressed," as he tries to cajole the viewer to join him in his intimate space.

Acconci's experimentation with the possibilities of video to enable a closer, more intimate connection between image and spectator is echoed in the comments of his then-friend Graham, who identifies video as "participatory," "tactile," "voyeuristic"; as a medium that presupposes a kind of real time, participatory, not another time.<sup>45</sup> It is precisely the intimate address and false sense of proximity that led critics such as Krauss to dismiss the medium as inherently and self-indulgently narcissistic, and to attack Acconci specifically for his productions. Discussing Acconci's video *Centers* (1971), Krauss concludes that in the artist's "image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as *the* condition of the entire genre." She asserts: "Unlike the other visual arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time—producing instant feedback. The body is therefore as it were centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which projects the performer's image with the immediacy

of a mirror.<sup>46</sup> Although Krauss's observations about the use of video have relevance, she fails to recognize the humor behind Acconci's work and the broader critique of popular youth culture with which it engages. Acconci's target is the phenomenon of stardom, and rock stardom in particular—the male rock singer who, while addressing millions, somehow establishes an intimate bond with his unknown fans, luring them into an erotic relationship based on the affect of fandom. He analyses the condition that Edgar Morin refers to as “fandemonium,” a behavior characterized by “affective participation” in a society dominated by spectacle.<sup>47</sup> But Acconci is not simply leveling a critique at the anonymous masses; he also seems to be pointing self-reflexively to the intertwined relationship between the art world and the world of rock music.

Acconci's title *Theme Song* points to the growing practice in the 1960s and 1970s of bundling popular music into cinema, with the result that soundtracks began to be produced as separate recordings on discrete labels. As Graham subsequently noted, “by the early 70s, the power of the studios as film producers had waned; rock music becoming their main source of income.”<sup>48</sup> Acconci created his own soundtrack, as it were. As in conventional cinematic practice, the source of music in his video is off screen; we see the artist's arm reach toward a cassette tape player that lies just out of sight, identified as such only by the recognizable sounds of opening and closing the device. The invisibility of the machine problematizes the traditional split of cinematic sound into diegetic and nondiegetic—the former part of the narrative filmic world and the latter independent of it. For the most part, film music is nondiegetic, employed tactically to create or enhance a mood, whether it be suspenseful, adventurous, or romantic. In *Theme Song*, however, Acconci collapsed this neat binary through both his selection of and interaction with song lyrics, recalling the work of Humphrey Jennings.

After accompanying Morrison's alienating lyrics to “Strange Days” with his own self-pitying characterization of loneliness, Acconci shuts off the cassette recorder and shifts the mood with the declaration, “I will be honest with you.” He then plays The Faces' peppy “That's All You Need” and admits: “ok, I am not lonely . . . I wouldn't try and kid you. I just need a body next to me—you need it as much as I do, don't try to hide it.” He exchanges intimate emotional address for corporeal exchange without the sentimental packaging. The next songs include Dylan's “I'll Be Your Baby

Tonight” and Van Morrison’s “Ballerina,” as Acconci moves through all the registers of emotions that inhabit pop music, from longing to self-pity, to demanding, to resignation, ending with Kristofferson wailing “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose, Nothin’ don’t mean nothin’ honey if it ain’t free.”

Acconci organized his playlist based on classical tropes of dramatic narrative composition. The first two songs by The Doors concern loneliness and longing and set the scene, and the next group of songs involves contact, intimacy, and possible achievement. The final two songs, Cohen’s “Bird on the Wire” and Kristofferson’s “Me & Bobby McGee,” constitute the denouement, the departure, and the ending. The songs function as ready-mades around which Acconci can structure his work. They are the literal sounding board against which he engages in dialogue, responding to the lyrics as well as controlling what is played. The artist positions himself as a fan who identifies with the songs, believing that their mass-produced emotion is deeply personal and meant only for her/him. At the same time he takes on the persona of the rock star, exploiting his status and his relationship to his fans, as he makes clear when he intones, “Show me that I matter.” This double subject position—as both fan and star—parallels video’s double nature as recorder and transmitter. Acconci’s video constitutes a theoretical argument about the relationships between spectator/viewer/mass audience and performer and can rightly be considered an essay.

*Theme Song* contemplates mass and pop culture and the culture industry’s manipulation of the consumer to forge a false sense of intimacy and proximity. Acconci demonstrates how the videotape medium, like pop music, encourages direct address to the viewer, or at least a seemingly less mediated connection than is possible in film. Unlike the cinematic apparatus, with its multiple components, accessories, and crew, the video artist operates alone, a process that falsely implies a reduction in distance between producer and receiver. In this way videotape, with its relative lack of resolution, approximates reality to a greater degree than the polished combination of image and sound of commercial film. That videotape records sound and image simultaneously and does not involve the postproduction processes that distance these elements from reality is a crucial attribute of the medium. In *Theme Song* Acconci uses sound to further this sense of a direct connection between producer and viewer. The grain of his sirenlike voice lures the viewer into the imaginary space

of the video production as he pleads with “you,” the spectator, to come in, to join him. He enhances this direct connection between sound and image, and in turn the reality effect of video, by including the recognizable sounds of inserting a cassette tape, striking a match, and taking a drag on a cigarette.

Acconci employs the videotape apparatus to self-reflexively comment on the medium. As Kodwo Eshun, a member of the British Otolith Group of video artists, maintains, “what distinguishes the video essay from other forms of video art is its ability to perform the states it seeks to articulate. Because the video-essay inhabits the same medium as its subject, it can enact its speculations in ways that a textual essay cannot.”<sup>49</sup> *Theme Song* conjoins image and sound, videotape and music, bringing the two together in the form of an essay. The technology of the medium enables Acconci to replay and retransmit popular songs in a newly combined playlist. By arranging the songs in a narrative arc, he draws out their common themes to produce a structural analysis of popular music. He exploits video as *medium* and *technique* in such a way that, reflecting the ideas of Walter Benjamin, it produces and critiques social relations.

By the 1980s, through the introduction of digital editing systems, video could include complicated multilayering of texts, images, archival material, and sound tracks.<sup>50</sup> In the early 1970s, however, video technology was less sophisticated than film and appeared as less mediated and more “real.” A decade after Acconci’s *Theme Song*, Dan Graham produced *Rock My Religion* (1982–1984), a multilayered, fifty-five minute video essay on the relationship between art, contemporary music, U.S. politics, religion, and youth culture. Whereas Acconci exploits the video medium to comment on the imaginary relationship between the artist/producer and the spectator/viewer, Graham expands on the theme of music to produce an alternative history of the United States, conjoining its founding tenet of religious freedom with popular music. *Rock My Religion* is an audiovisual compilation essay comprised of archival sources and more recent footage from contemporary music (rock ‘n’ roll and punk) that are interwoven. A voice-over and printed textual commentary link the two practices. Graham’s work operates on several levels as multiple tracks converge and separate to produce myriad competing visual and sonic narratives and histories.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to Acconci’s *Theme Song*, which enacts and performs a theory, Graham’s *Rock My Religion* approximates the video essays

of contemporary European practitioners of this genre who use the audio-visual format to construct histories.

## FEMINIST ESSAY FILMS AND VIDEOS

If rock 'n' roll was the avant-garde of the art world in the 1960s and 1970s, that world was white and gendered male. Feminism was one of the most significant social movements of the era. Feminist theory and practice had profound effects on filmmaking as well as the other arts. Prior to this moment, women as producers, rather than as subjects or objects of work created by men, had been relatively rare. Unlike the field of literature, which has included a number of women writers in the canon, the dearth of such recognition in the visual arts remains profound. Female artists and filmmakers still have to contend with enormous ideological barriers, biases, and prejudices. Owing in part to the ease with which video can be produced, displayed, and distributed, female artists increasingly began to turn to video during the 1970s. As Catrien Schreuder explains, “feminist artists saw video as an alternative for painting, which in the 1980s was attendant on a macho culture surrounded by star status, big money and heroic achievements. In their videos, feminist artists revealed the construct of female role patterns in the male visual culture.”<sup>52</sup> Schreuder’s description of the male dominance of painting could apply equally to feature film. Many women filmmakers who began to work in Super 8, 16 mm, and video broke away from their traditional fine arts training. This shift pertained both to their choice of medium—opting for audio-visual media instead of painting, sculpture, drawing, and printmaking—and to the subject matter and the means by which it could be translated into sounds and images.

In some instances, the move from the other arts to film was due to practical as well as ideological considerations. Dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer, one of the founding members of the Judson Dance Theater, shifted from dance to film in the 1970s as a result of her recognition of the limitations of her own aging body and her growing involvement in feminism. Her first film, *Lives of Performers* (1972), records experimental

dance and choreography. She began to practice essayistic filmmaking to address her cognizance of gender issues. In early films such as *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976), she employed a disjunctive soundtrack in which sounds and images (for example, of men and women) are mismatched to produce a feminist critique. In one of her more remarkable films, *Journeys From Berlin/1971* (1980), Rainer used the essay form to explore the gray areas of West German radical politics (RAF). The impetus behind her films is gender inequity and the use of the filmic medium to produce different ways of seeing and hearing a particular topic. Her essay films self-reflexively show how ideology is constructed, thereby seeking to dismantle it. Similar attempts to deconstruct patriarchal systems of representation and vision have been practiced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who supplemented her critical essays and writings with essay films such as *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977, codirected with Peter Wollen) that rely on the framework of psychoanalysis to address male-dominated power structures.

During the 1970s numerous female artists, including Joan Jonas, Dara Birnbaum, Carolee Schneeman, and Linda Benglis, began working in video. Veering away from the pure formalism of Structural/Materialist film, they introduced elements of narrative. The presence of narrative content, compounded by the secondary status of video and the gender of the artists, led to their initial exclusion from the canon of experimental film. As Hatfield argues, “while drama-based film had narrative expectation built into it, the artists’ avant-garde used illusionism and narrative against themselves, i.e., drama was narrative, experimental film was anti-narrative. The problem is, it was along similar lines of definition that the majority of women’s practice of the 70s and 80s was marginalized as being narrative and therefore not art (i.e., not coming from the abstract or formal film) and not part of the purism debate.”<sup>53</sup> The narratives that structure these video productions are related to a larger political practice that exceeds purely formal concerns. The work of these women ruptures the patriarchal order of the art world, just as their authors’ recourse to artistic and experimental forms of film constitutes a break from the male-dominated world of cinema and television documentary production. The artists linked video as a medium with the essay as a form that breaks the rules of the father’s house to produce powerful feminist critiques.



*A BUDDING GOURMET (1974)*

At roughly the same time that Acconci was experimenting with video's ability to simulate intimacy and immediacy, visual artist and photographer Martha Rosler began using the medium to achieve an opposite effect, one anchored in Brechtian principles of distanciation and alienation. Similar to Acconci, she set up a stationary camera to record herself in performance. However, unlike the extreme close-up of *Theme Song*, she asserted a distance from the subject in her videos, mimicking the effect of the television camera. As she explains, "in video . . . I see the opportunity to do work that falls into a natural dialectic with TV itself."<sup>54</sup> Rosler's first three video works, *A Budding Gourmet* (1974), *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), and *The East Is Red and the West Is Bending* (1977), adopted the structure of the cooking show to critique the stultifying power of television as a mass medium. In each component of this trilogy, the artist is framed in a three-quarter medium shot, sitting or standing behind a kitchen counter or table. The distance between the camera and the subject it produces recalls the standard framing of undramatic, nonfiction television programs of the 1960s and 1970s, such as news broadcasts or special interest shows. Rosler typically takes on the role of informant or "host" who will impart important information to the viewer. As she explained in a 1981 interview, "Most of the video I do addresses television forms."<sup>55</sup> In these three videos Rosler employed the rhetorical trope of parody as a means by which to produce satirical essays that expose television's use as a powerful tool that actively participates in creating and reinforcing hegemonic values.

Rosler came to video from a background as a photo-essayist, working within the tradition of socially committed photographers such as Lewis Hine and Paul Strand, as well as of the Film and Photo League, who had used their cameras to expose social injustices in the early twentieth century. The photo-essay and social documentary practices received renewed attention in the 1930s in the Film and Foto League, as well as in the Information Division of the Farm Security Administration, which sponsored photographers Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, and Walker Evans and filmmakers such as Pare Lorentz to document rural America.<sup>56</sup> Just as muckraking authors like Upton Sinclair sought to bring about political and social change through their realist expository novels that exposed the underbelly of society during the early twentieth century, so American

photojournalists and novelists like James Agee were motivated to address the social repercussions of the Great Depression. Like Evans and Lange, Margaret Bourke-White published high-quality photographs often accompanied by short texts. Glossy magazines such as *Life* featured photo spreads in which texts and images were placed in interrelated montages such that each informed the other. In the United States the photo-essay was often employed to depict scenes of crisis: poverty, health-care issues, qualities of rural life, and social injustices that emanated from the Great Depression and the casualties of war. Development of the photo-essay paralleled that of the documentary film; both forms were motivated by a similar social mission to inform and educate the public as part of the mass media's responsibilities to a democratic citizenship. Whereas the former reached a broad public through magazines and journals and was consumed in the home, the latter was projected in theaters, schools, town halls, and other public screening venues.

Although photojournalism and photo-essays remained dominant forms for disseminating information about issues of civic concern during World War II and the decade that followed, the advent of television during the 1950s had a major impact on the status of the photo-essay as well as on the genre of documentary, albeit in different ways. When *Life* photo series such as "This Is the March of Time" and "This Is America" dropped in popularity and the magazine began to lose subscribers to the new medium of television, the corporation began to exploit the potential of television to broadcast documentaries. Yet, as Jonathan Kahana has shown, as the documentary genre became a mainstay of 1950s and 1960s television programming, its centralized and controlled structure gradually gave way to independent producers reacting against the system.<sup>57</sup> Artists as well as documentary filmmakers were among those who reacted to the inadequacies of journalism and its increasingly important disseminator, television. Rosler recalls:

Artists' use of the media necessarily occurred in relation to the parent technology: broadcast television and the structures of celebrity it locked into place. Many of these early users saw themselves as carrying out an act of profound social criticism, criticism specifically directed at the domination of groups and individuals epitomized by the world of television and perhaps all mainstream Western industrial and technological culture.<sup>58</sup>

*A Budding Gourmet* opens with a grainy black-and-white image of Rosler sitting behind a table as she announces, "I want to become a gourmet."<sup>59</sup> Costumed in a high-necked, buttoned blouse with puff sleeves, with her hair parted in the middle and tied back in a bun, she resembles a straight-laced character in a Victorian novel. In a cut to an intertitle, these same words are scrawled in longhand, apparently written by the character, as Rosler's voice-over continues: "The gourmet is a sensitive person; he knows good from bad quality." She explains that a fundamental difference between animals and humans is their relationship to food. There is a cut back to the opening image of her sitting at a kitchen table as she declares: "I'd like to be refined, not just one cut above the animal." Playing on the soundtrack, the third movement of Schubert's String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, "Death and the Maiden," begins and continues throughout the ensuing sixteen minutes of the video. A still image of a fine porcelain china dish fills the screen as the voice-over resumes: "If I worked in a factory, had a lot of children, was down on my luck, I suppose I'd have to worry about where the food is coming from." A series of photographs of fancy presentations of a variety of extravagant cakes and desserts, one served on a silver platter, ensues as the voice-over continues: "If I didn't have an education I might not realize that there are better things, higher things; that food could be an adventure." The images of staged delicacies contrast sharply with those interjected from the photo-essay "Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States," which includes an iconic image of a woman with three malnourished and poorly clothed children. Ignoring the images on the screen, the commentator relates in a chipper tone: "If you get taken to a lot of good restaurants you notice a difference in how food is prepared." This is followed by a series of advertisements from glossy magazines depicting elegant diners in opulent settings. Rosler mobilizes an array of texts, including classical music, and objects such as fine chinaware to construct a highly stylized narrative in which her commentary on food, taste, class, and politics is tightly interwoven.

In *A Budding Gourmet*, Rosler targets the popularization of the formerly elite topic of gourmet cooking for American audiences through television programs such as Julia Child's *The French Chef* to advance a more general political critique. Rosler adopts a televisual style that operates visually (framing and costuming herself in the kitchen), thematically (the seeming banality of the topic and its ensuing narrative), and

ideologically (the demonstration of how inherent values of class and white male superiority are encoded even in something as seemingly innocuous as a gourmet cooking show). Rosler explains that in her work she focuses on “detritus,” by which she means “not the big themes but marginal themes. Things that people recognize but haven’t thought about in a while. It enlivens things and ties them together in such a way that it becomes a collage of motifs. And the motifs are de-narrativized from within their own narrative and hijacked into another narrative. . . . You displace something from its narrative—it’s a Pop strategy.”<sup>60</sup> This “pop” strategy has deeper historic roots: namely, the classical Greek poetic form of parody as first identified by Aristotle. Parody developed throughout the centuries as an important satirical and often comic form through which to perform a double political critique—against the immediate subject at hand and the preexisting genre, which the author has chosen to engage, and from which to *détourne*. Such critique is therefore performed both formally and thematically.<sup>61</sup>

During the 1970s Rosler took on her parodic critique of the institution of network television and its trivial programs, such as cooking shows, which were designed for and marketed to an audience of middle-class women who had the leisure time to view them as well as to follow their directives. By relying extensively on the reproduction of glossy magazine images to fill the image track of *A Budding Gourmet*, Rosler points to the shift from the late-nineteenth-century reliance on print culture for the mass dissemination of ideology to that of the medium of television. As this video subtly demonstrates, even ostensibly innocuous television programs such as cooking shows serve to inculcate and preserve the dominant hegemonic order. In her cooking trilogy, Rosler exposed how such programs reinforce ideals of traditional gender roles that keep women in the kitchen, striving to make exotic meals for their husbands and guests. As the voice-over in *A Budding Gourmet* explains, “Len likes me to make a good appearance for company to give them a pleasant time and show them we know the finer things—books, paintings, music—and of course we try and keep the house and car looking nice.”

The video links gourmet cooking to other items of daily use that have been transformed into commodities, such as shelter and means of transportation, but the ideological network does not stop there because it is in the nature of hegemonic structures that they are manifest in every aspect

of society. In her essay “For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life,” Rosler asks: “How does one address these banally profound issues of everyday life, thereby revealing the public and political in the personal? . . . Television, for example, is in its most familiar form, one of the primary conduits of ideology, through its programs and commercials alike.”<sup>62</sup>

In *A Budding Gourmet*, Rosler extends her ironic stance by linking gourmet cooking to travel, through references to the “old world” (French cooking) and “gastronomie” (shots of tins of foie gras) and comments such as “the French really know how to do it!” referring to the means by which the cultured U.S. citizen strives to reach a level of acculturation. She cites “exotic locales”—in this instance, Brazil, from which food and domestic products are brought to the United States and transformed into delicacies for Western consumption. American imperialism reigns supreme, but the video also relates cultivation of taste and consumption of the higher things in life to proper breeding and the importance of raising a future generation to replicate such values. The narrator concludes by asserting that she and her husband Len “have given them [their children] the advantages of living in America. We can take the best of all times and all places and make them our own.” These final words are followed in rapid succession by photographs from around the world of exotic food preparation and a reproduction of a map titled “Geographic Distribution of Hunger in the United States,” then back to Rosler sitting at a kitchen table surrounded by shiny pots and pans. The insertion of alarming statistics on starvation and poverty, like that of the earlier WPA photographs, results in a stunning contrast to the banality of the housewife’s endless babble and the flow of advertising images. An important part of Rosler’s aesthetic strategy is to produce contradictions by bringing different texts into jarring juxtaposition. She explains, “A character who speaks in contradictions or who fails to manage the socially necessary sequence of behaviors can eloquently index the unresolvable social contradictions—starvation in the midst of plenty, gourmetism as a form of imperialism, rampant inflation and impoverishment alongside bounding corporate profits—that underlie ideological confusion, and make them stand out clearly.”<sup>63</sup>

*The East Is Red and the West Is Bending* is a parody in the form of an advertisement and instruction manual for a new piece of cookware: an electric wok produced by Bending. For this performance, Rosler costumed herself as a hippy, with loose long hair, dark sunglasses, and wearing an

“oriental” padded jacket and slippers. At times she places the wok upside down on her head like a sampan as she reads a lengthy description of Bending’s new product from the manual. As in *A Budding Gourmet*, the highly sardonic text of the voice-over commentary is part original composition and part appropriation. This weaving in and out of “real” text, from sources such as recipes, travel magazines, instructional manuals, or promotional materials, and the “artificial” text of her own words is akin to Acconci’s interactive dialogue with the song lyrics in *Theme Song*. In both instances, the audial track comprises a blend of documentary and fictional material. This tactic is reminiscent of the scene in Bertolt Brecht and Slatan Dudow’s *Kuhle Wampe* (1931) during which the husband reads from a newspaper article on Mata Hari while his wife balances the food budget. By ending *The East Is Red and the West Is Bending* with the triumphant declaration that “we have improved on the clever idea of the wok and moved it out of stagnation,” Rosler underscores the inherent imperialistic and solipsistic underpinnings of marketing an Eastern product to Western consumers. With these video productions, we could argue that Rosler has improved on the clever idea of television and moved it out of stagnation.<sup>64</sup> She takes over the form, inhabits it, and transforms it through parody from a medium of affirmation to one of subversion.<sup>65</sup> As Rosler recalls about the medium of video during this period, “a utopian critique was implicit in video’s early use, for the effort was not to enter the system but to transform every aspect of it and—legacy of the revolutionary avant-garde project—to redefine the system out of existence by merging art with social life and making audience and producer interchangeable.”<sup>66</sup>

#### DOMINATION AND THE EVERYDAY (1978)

Rosler changed tactics with her next video, *Domination and the Everyday* (1978). Rather than casting herself or seeking to imitate a familiar form of television broadcast, she produced a visually and audially disorienting work. The film begins with an annoying color test pattern that goes on a bit too long to the accompaniment of a soundtrack that is similarly agitating. This is followed by a black screen and finally by complex overlays of images and sounds. A printed text runs across the screen in a manner

reminiscent of *Television Delivers People*. The words decode the series of images viewed on the screen. The movement of the letters is the only motion on the image track, which is composed of a series of photographs. The image track is remarkably still in contrast to the soundtrack. On the latter, sounds and conversation of a mother and child going through a nightly routine preparing for bed can be heard, while a lecture on contemporary art by the Los Angeles art dealer Irving Blum plays on the radio in the background. This amalgamation results in a disjunction between the invisible but very audible domestic space, the advancing text, the reproduced photographs, and the art dealer's lecture.

As the video opens, Blum pontificates on Abstract Expressionism. The screen then shifts to black, and the voice of the mother is heard. At first it is incoherent, and then she asks, "What do you want?" The child's demanding voice responds, "Come here. . . . I want to show you something." This is followed by an intimate exchange between mother and son about orange juice and yogurt, and the black screen is replaced by a black-and-white photograph of four men wearing dark suits, with the center seated figure attired in military regalia. A typed text at the bottom of the screen reads: "THIS GUY [referring to the man seated in the middle] IS A CHILEAN GORILLA . . . YOU KNOW, A THUG . . . NOT A 'GUERILLA.'" A zoom in on the man enables the viewer to recognize him as former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, and the words inform: "HE AND HIS FRIENDS ARE PROPS FOR U.S. INTERESTS. FOR THE INTERESTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL BOURGEOISIE. THOUGH WE IN THE STATES CAN AFFORD THE LUXURY OF DESPISING HIM." The accompanying background noises are of the mother and child looking for a spoon with which to eat the yoghurt while the text/commentary continues: "BUT WHAT I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT HIM RIGHT NOW IS THAT HE REPRESENTS NAKED FORCE. THE DROPPING AWAY OF CIVILITY THAT OFTEN MASKS REACTIONARY ECONOMIC SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IDEAS. HE REPRESENTS THE RAW FACT OF DOMINATION, REPRESSION, TORTURE." Blum drones on about the virtues of contemporary art, the child rejects a snack, and the typed text reads "STARVATION AND DEATH."

In *Domination and the Everyday* several different voices compete to be heard: (1) the child's voice that is in the process of acquiring language and searches for words to put meaning together; (2) the mother's voice

that nurtures and teaches; and (3) the authoritative voice of the art dealer. In one exchange, Rosler demonstrates how domination is constructed, not only through intimate exchanges between child and parent but also by societal norms. The little boy tells his mother that he has learned that he is a “guy” and she is a “missus.” She confuses him by replying that she is not a “missus.” Later, when he asks for a Dorito, she asks him how he knows about the product because they don’t have them at home. The child replies, “on television,” to which Rosler responds, “I don’t watch TV.” She then commences to read a bedtime story from *The Little Engine That Could*, the children’s book encoding moral values of standing up to adversity, the importance of perseverance, and the merit of seeing things through. Contrasting the child’s naïve and uninformed questioning voice and the mother’s patient but guiding tone is the extreme pomposity of the voice of Blum, who asserts his authority as he self-aggrandizes his role and power in the art world with a pretentiousness that is enhanced by his British accent. Blum delivers a formal lecture with a smugness that derives from his professional interest in the art market. As he drones on, Rosler modulates the sound so that the spectator can catch more of its meaning and flow. When Blum intones, “I put together a group of New York artists,” the photo of the “thugs” reappears on the screen, suggesting that art dealers and thugs shares similarities. Toward the end of the video we hear Blum pontificate, “It is not the hand of the artist that is important but the mind.” The mother asks her son, “What do you think the man on the radio is talking about?” The child responds, “I don’t know; do you know?” as he seeks an explanation from her voice of authority. At first she claims she doesn’t know because she wasn’t listening, but as the child’s persists she relents, “He’s talking about making pictures,” to which the child triumphantly claims, “So you *were* listening!” From this exchange we infer that we pretend not to listen and not to hear because we are dominated and oppressed, because our oppression and domination are not as blatant as those that occur in Chile. They derive not from “naked force” but from “civility.”

Finally, a fourth voice is heard—one that is distinct and clear. This is the voice of the typewritten text, the one that decodes and exposes ideological constructs, such as how human domination exists not only in extreme manifestations of brute force and violence but also more subtly and equally nefariously in the conventions of polite and civilized society.



It is this fourth voice that warns the spectator not only to be attentive to everyday life and resist but also to accept responsibility for what she or he sees and hears. At the outset of the video, the text crawls across the bottom of the screen like a teleprompter. However, during the second appearance of the photograph of the “thugs” it moves to the middle of the screen to inform the viewer that “THIS MAN TOLD THE CHILEAN PEOPLE THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF TELEVISION ‘REMEMBER YOU CAN BE REPLACED.’” As another still image appears—that of a television set, presumably from an advertisement—the text reads “WE WON’T STOP TO ASK WHO WATCHES TELEVISION IN CHILE,” and the image is replaced by a shot of a government official snared from television. A photograph of a woman crossing a suburban street with two children appears as the text continues: “THE PEOPLE IT WAS MEANT FOR ARE NOT AMONG THE THOUSANDS KILLED IMPRISONED OR MADE TO DISAPPEAR. GOT THE MESSAGE? ALL PEOPLE ALL INDIVIDUALS ARE EXPENDABLE WHEN THE ISSUE IS TO PRESERVE THE DOMINATION OF ONE ECONOMIC CLASS OVER ALL OTHERS. . . . HERE IN THE US WE FORGET.” This silent voice resonates with meaning, surpassing the audible voice of Blum through the force of its message. The text is the voice of the artist, which refuses to be muted. By using the technology of video, Rosler maintains that “artists were responding not only to the positioning of the mass audience but also to the particular silencing or muting of *artists* as producers of living culture in the face of the vast mass-media industries: the culture industry versus the consciousness industry.”<sup>67</sup> Through the juxtaposition of images and written texts, *Domination and the Everyday* harkens back to the photo-essay. Yet Rosler’s video also operates as a critique of that genre through its overlay of multiple voices, a device that exposes the contradictions between fact and ideology inherent to any concept of “truth.”

The concept of the “everyday” in the title is presented both acoustically and through images. Interspersed with the photo of the “thugs” are images from fashion magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and films. Rosler also inserted personal photographs. Several of these portray intimate family scenes, such as one of a young boy whom we infer to be the source of the voice on the soundtrack, and an image of a stovetop with a Le Creuset enamel pot that evokes the artist’s earlier cooking trilogy. Other photos depict everyday scenes in the streets. In one example, a “quaint” sign

advertising “Bank of America” includes the slogan “It’s a small World,” indicating that the branch location is Disneyland. To further her ironic intent, Rosler follows this image with a graph showing unemployment rates and the Dow Jones closing figures. In one image/text sequence, a photo of Rosler and the boy is contrasted with an idealized image of a mother and son from a fashion magazine, while the crawling text reads: “THE WORLD INTERPRETED FOR US AS A READYMADE, A SERIES OF ITEMS.” This is followed by a series of stills of Marilyn Monroe from the film *How to Marry a Millionaire*. The text reads: “WE DO NOT YET UNDERSTAND AS THE WORKERS AND PEASANTS OF CHILE WELL UNDERSTOOD THE FACT THAT DOMINANCE [is] A DOMINATION OF CLASS AGAINST CLASS.” In other words, even intimate social relations such as love, whether between parent and child or a romantic couple, are overdetermined and structured by commodity culture. Writing around the same time that she made *Domination and the Everyday*, Rosler explained: “All the myths of everyday life stitched together form a seamless envelope of ideology, the false account of the workings of the world. The interests served by ideology are not human interests properly defined; rather, ideology serves society by shoring up its particular form of social organization. Ideology in class society serves the interests of the class it dominates.”<sup>68</sup> The videotape concludes with a black screen, followed by a color test pattern, as the voices of the mother, the child, and the radio—the acoustic everyday life environment—continue in real time.

*Domination and the Everyday* is thirty minutes in length. Halfway through the tape the written text repeats, as do some of the images, but the soundtrack continues to progress forward, uninterrupted and in real time. Repetition is an important rhetorical device for Rosler; it encourages the viewer to ponder the connotative meaning of a text rather than merely to absorb the register of denotation, be it written or verbal, and to evaluate what she or he is hearing/reading. Two years later Rosler used this tactic of repetition in *Secrets from the Street* (1980), albeit with a significant reversal—the voice-over commentary repeats while the moving images change.<sup>69</sup> Rosler produced these works before the proliferation of the display practice of showing videotapes as loops. The videotapes thus reference a model of viewership based on a single, discrete screening wherein the viewer is left to contemplate the meaning of the work. As

noted previously, Rosler's work is heavily influenced by Brecht, who advocated for a pedagogical model of aesthetic practice in which the spectator is encouraged to question what she or he sees and hears, note the contradictions, and in the process gain greater insight. As Rosler explains, "my Brechtian model is to have the viewer think, if not now then in the subsequent moments. The work is supposed to follow you out the door. It is supposed to be unresolved. You have to solve the riddle in your own mind, and that is the space for listening or contemplation or internal analysis."<sup>70</sup>

In her video practice Rosler confronts mass media directly, especially the medium of television as an institution that endows a small elite with the power to control and manipulate a large public to produce a certain type of citizenship. Unlike print media, which allow reading and rereading as well as the facile decoding of messages, television's inexorable flow of images and sounds were, until the proliferation of the VCR, incapable of being paused or repeated. Thus the average spectator was subject to a steady stream of material without the ability to reflect and analyze. By mobilizing repetition, Rosler sought to restore critical agency to the viewer who may then reach his or her own conclusions. However, her tactic of transforming television's means into a didactic artwork has often resulted in a confusion and a mixed reception on the part of critics. Recall Rosler's words that no one knew how to receive the work because "you needed a pair of pliers and there were no pliers in your toolbox. And you didn't know that pliers existed even though you had been using differently shaped ones all along."<sup>71</sup> Through a combination of parody and tactics of distanciation that inhibit audience identification, Rosler uses the medium of videotape to produce a negative critique of the institution of television. If, according to Rosler, one of the key codes of television is "naturalism," then she seeks to break that code and opt instead for distanciation.<sup>72</sup> These artworks follow a television format; they could be transmitted and broadcast through that medium, and thereby reach a mass audience. In this sense they constitute a different sort of news story as part of a counter public sphere. Their close resemblance to the medium they critique, together with their overt political message, has resulted in a confusion that video artist Ursula Biemann observes is part of a broader problem of reception that plagued early video essays, namely, their dual roots in the genres of documentary and art: "For a number of reasons, the essay situates itself somewhere between documentary video and video

art. . . . For a documentary, [such efforts] are seen as too experimental, self-reflexive and subjective, and for an art video they stand out for being socially involved and explicitly political.<sup>73</sup> By combining image and text in her video productions, Rosler shifted photo-essays to their audiovisual equivalent: the video essay. Positioned between art and documentary, these works take on the form of an essay. Unlike the art film, they feature a narrative, but unlike documentary, the essay film/video does not provide an argument with clear answers. As Rosler herself explains: "I don't answer questions, I make contradictory remarks, and that is a way of presenting a puzzle for the viewer to solve. If I say puzzle, it sounds as though there was an answer known in advance, but that is not really what I mean. I mean I am opening questions rather than providing answers."<sup>74</sup>

The North American film and video essay emerged primarily from the visual arts and not from filmmaking. To that extent it connects better to the legacy of Hans Richter than to that of the British nonfiction tradition of the GPO or the French postwar *cinéma d'essai*. These film and video essays go against the grain of European art films; they eschew pure cinema and the formal plays Richter initiated in his *Rhythmus* in favor of introducing narrative and arguments as he did in *Dreams That Money Can Buy*. The North American artists who took up filmmaking reacted not only to the medium's specificity and materialist celebration of celluloid associated with the Greenbergian formalism of the art film but also to the dominant documentary genre of American Direct Cinema. Unlike the European essayists of the 1920s to 1950s who were responding primarily to feature film, these artists contended directly with the advent of television as a powerful disseminator of moving images. Along with television came videotape, an inexpensive and potentially democratic technology that many artists found suitable for the production of essays.



FIGURE 6.1 Isaac Julian and Mark Nash, *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask*, 1996.



FIGURE 6.2 John Akomfrah, *The Stuart Hall Project*, 2013.

# 6

## NEW MIGRATIONS: THIRD CINEMA AND THE ESSAY FILM

*Those things never happen in histr'y, an' even if they did, histr'y ain't got the eyes to see everything.*

—GEORGE LAMMING, IN *THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN* [1953]

*Once memory enters into our consciousness, it is hard to circumvent, harder to stop, and impossible to run from. It burns and glows from inside, causing anguish, new dreams and newer hopes. Memory does something else beside telling us how we got here from there: it reminds us of the causes of difference between popular memory and official versions of history.*

—TESHOME H. GABRIEL, "THIRD CINEMA AS GUARDIAN OF POPULAR MEMORY: TOWARDS A THIRD AESTHETICS"

**T**he trajectory of the essay film went from the GPO films of the 1930s to Italy, and across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, Mexico, and South America, where it was combined with the theories of Bertolt Brecht and Sergei Eisenstein. It then returned to Britain, via Africa, where it resurfaced in black diaspora cinema and was further mixed with the essayistic practices of Chris Marker and Jean Luc Godard.<sup>1</sup> In this migration, as the essay film crossed literal borders, its hybrid form was further mixed with myriad and diverse practices, transgressing disciplinary borders to evolve into a cinematic form of diaspora.<sup>2</sup>

Two films shared the International Critics' Prize at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival: Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) and Margot Benacerraf's *Araya* (1959), a "poetic documentary" that depicts the lives of laborers who extract salt from the sea off the Araya peninsula in Venezuela. Whereas *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* has entered into the annals of film history, *Araya* was all but forgotten until it was restored and re-released in 2009. The reasons for this oversight are multiple and no doubt include that Benacerraf, although temporarily based in Paris during the 1950s for her studies at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC), is from Venezuela, which at the time was far removed from the cultural and film centers of Europe and North America.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as a nonfiction film, *Araya* does not conform to strict expectations of the documentary genre because it includes re-creations of the salt-mining process, fictionalized narratives, and highly aestheticized audio and visual compositions. As Benacerraf recalls, "I decided that I wanted to tell this story, but not as a documentary in the contemporaneous sense of the word. I wanted to employ a more poetic mode, a narrative shaped by scripted rather than spontaneous action, a fictionalized documentary if you will, the flip side of the Italian neorealist style which had enjoyed such prominence during that decade."<sup>4</sup> Critics compared *Araya* to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, John Grierson's early GPO productions, and Eisenstein's *¡Que viva Mexico!*.<sup>5</sup>

#### ARAYA (1959)

At the time of its release, *Araya* drew a lot of attention for both its subject matter and its aesthetic style. The film earned praise from French film critics such as Georges Sadoul and filmmakers Luis Buñuel and Resnais. After Cannes, it was screened on the international festival circuit, including Moscow, Venice, and Locarno,<sup>6</sup> so it is all the more perplexing that this film and its director fell into relative obscurity. In addition to the gender and genre issues, *Araya* did not conform to cinema expectations in Venezuela. Although filmed there and concerned with a local subject, it was a French coproduction and initially screened with a French language voice-over, which was required for it to be entered in Cannes. Further

hindering the film from being embraced by Venezuelans was Benacerraf's diasporic identity, stemming from her Moroccan Sephardic family and her cosmopolitan education in New York and Paris.<sup>7</sup> Yet it is the formal qualities of *Araya* that led to its problematic status; it was considered too poetic and fictional to be classified as a documentary in Venezuela. This delayed the film's release in Venezuela until 1977. As art critic Marta Traba noted in her review of the newly released film, "the startling thing about *Araya* is that it articulates two generally incompatible elements, reality and estheticism, allowing each perspective to 'irrigate' the other."<sup>8</sup>

*Araya* was filmed on the eponymous peninsula that had been the center of Venezuelan salt mining for over 450 years. Shot in black and white with sharply contrasting images of white pyramids of salt towering against a cloudless sky and sparkling sea, the film departs from standard documentary convention by its narrative structure, which is based on a twenty-four-hour cycle that follows the lives of three "fictional" families who work the salt mines. The camera tracks the daily grind of the laborers, with the black and white film stock rendering details in high relief. Shots of the back-breaking work are interspersed with images of crashing waves, flocking sea gulls, windswept beaches, and occasional diversions such as a fisherman bringing in a fresh catch of fish that is distributed and sold or the fictional character of a young girl collecting shells along the tide line to decorate graves in the local cemetery. The film ends with dynamite explosions, accompanied by trucks and new equipment being brought to the salt flats to modernize the process.

Benacerraf brings two temporal states—past and present—into contact in *Araya* by recording aspects of the daily lives of salt workers who are about to become obsolete. To this extent, she is working in the tradition of European essay filmmakers who were self-consciously aware of film as a tool to record the rapid transformations undergone in the process of modernity. The voice-over, with its poetic descriptions referencing salt as the "white gold of the sea" or its repeated phrases such as "gestures of the salt," "gestures for centuries repeated," is in tune with the commentaries of *Statues Also Die*, *All the Memory of the World*, or *Ô Saisons, Ô Châteaux*. Indeed, this recourse to a "European" kind of filmmaking that blurred filmic boundaries led later Venezuelan critics to dismiss *Araya*.<sup>9</sup> For her part, Benacerraf proclaims: "*Araya* is a great metaphor, a poem. When you film a conventional documentary, you don't intervene in reality until



the editing stage or through the voice-over commentary that you eventually add. My procedure was basically the reverse: I worked like a writer or a poet, allegorically, intervening from the start in the reality I wished to record.”<sup>10</sup> Similar to the migratory path that Hans Richter cut in *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, a course that connected the European continent with North America, *Araya* opened a new route for the essay film to Latin America, where it would become an important genre.

Although *Araya* was ignored by most Latin American filmmakers, it did not go entirely unnoticed. Indeed, Brazilian director Glauber Rocha, who was studying film in Rome in the late 1950s and saw *Araya* at its premiere in Cannes, was persuaded by it, as evidenced by his subsequent film *Barravento* (“The turning wind,” 1961). In addition to *Araya*’s stunning images and Benacerraf’s interest in documenting a soon-to-be obsolete way of life initiated during Spanish colonial rule, Rocha was impressed by the pared down means of production employed to make the film, which included only the filmmaker, co-screen writer Pierre Seghers, cinematographer Giuseppe Nisoli, and musical composer Guy Bernard. For Rocha, *Araya* stood as a model for filmmaking that did not rely on extensive crews, postproduction teams, or actors but instead was more artisanal in nature, adhering to a paucity in production that went beyond economic funding structures. For this reason and Benacerraf’s refusal to conform to genre expectations of the day, *Araya* is an important forerunner to Third Cinema—a cinematic movement that contrasted with both “first cinema,” represented by Hollywood-style feature productions, and the so-called second cinema of European art film productions.

### THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES (1968)

As a historical and political phenomenon, Third Cinema emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of Latin America but rapidly spread to Africa, Europe, and the United States as a model of cinematic practice dedicated to fighting oppression. Mike Wayne notes in his examination of political film that “Third Cinema can work with different forms of documentary and across the range of fictional genres. It challenges the way cinema is conventionally made (for example, it has pioneered collective

and democratic production methods) . . . and the way it is consumed. . . . Although it has precursors, particularly in the Soviet cinema of the 1920s, Third Cinema emerged in the decade after and was influenced by the 1959 Cuban Revolution.”<sup>11</sup> Paul Willemen describes it as “a cinema made by intellectuals who, for political and artistic reasons, at one and the same time assume their responsibilities as socialist intellectuals and seek to achieve through their work the production of social intelligibility.”<sup>12</sup> Third Cinema represents a dimension of the essay film whose roots cannot be traced exclusively either to the European avant-garde art practices of Richter or to the postwar French *cinéma d'essai*. Rather, it grew out of the incomplete formulations of Eisenstein and Brecht as encountered in the postcolonial context. This type of cinematic essay is part of a broader tradition marked by a politics of postcolonial liberation from ideological structures of domination and oppression.

The roots of Third Cinema can be traced to Glauber Rocha's manifesto of 1965, “The Aesthetics of Violence,” delivered as part of a film conference presentation in Genoa, Italy, and subsequently published as an essay, “The Aesthetics of Hunger.” Prior to the formal articulation of his principles, Rocha, one of the founders of *Cinema Novo*, had made several films, including *Barravento* and *Black God, White Devil* (1964), that called into question the dominant mode of feature and documentary cinematic production both formally and thematically. In their stead Rocha proposed a cinematic practice based in a “culture of hunger,” where “it should be learned that an esthetic of violence, before being primitive, is revolutionary. It is the initial moment when the colonizer becomes aware of the colonized.”<sup>13</sup>

Responding to Rocha's manifesto and the Cinema Novo movement in general, two Argentine filmmakers, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, members of a film collective known as the the Ciné Liberación Group, made the epic revolutionary film *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968). With a running time of over six hours, the film is a direct call for revolution against oppressive regimes throughout the world. It is neither a documentary nor a feature; it can be more aptly described as an extended agitprop production. *The Hour of the Furnaces* is a compilation work based on newsreel footage, archival photographs, and citations from anti-colonialist theorists and revolutionary leaders such as Frantz Fanon, Ché Guevara, Aimé Césaire, and José Martí. The soundtrack includes classical

and contemporary pop music. *The Hour of the Furnaces* conveys the abstract ideological conditions produced by centuries of colonization.<sup>14</sup> The Ciné Liberación Group produced the film clandestinely during the military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía in Argentina. From the outset, the collective's members sought to wrest the cinematic spectator from a position of passive consumption to one of active participation in interpretation. This tactic operates at several levels. The film addresses viewers directly with an appeal: "This is not just a film showing, nor is it a show; rather it is above all a MEETING—an act of anti-imperialist unity; . . . there is no room for spectators or for accomplices of the enemy; here there is room only for the authors and protagonists of the process which the film attempts to bear witness to and to deepen. The film is a pretext for dialogue." Solanas and Getino were inspired by the Brazilian theater theoretician Augusto Boal, who had been influenced by the theories of Brecht.<sup>15</sup> During the 1950s Boal developed his "Theater of the Oppressed," predicated on the premise that for learning and revolutionary transformation to occur, the fourth wall between the space of the audience and the performance on stage needed to be broken down to facilitate open dialogue and interaction among spectators and actors. During screenings of *The Hour of the Furnaces* throughout Latin America and Europe, interruptions, breaks, and pauses took place at regular intervals so that aspects of the film could be debated and discussed.<sup>16</sup> The context of the screening and the deliberation that it encouraged was part of the "film act," a phenomenon that expands film beyond the celluloid projected on a screen to include the entire cinematic experience. As Solanas and Getino explained, "the film act means an open-ended film; it is essentially a way of learning."<sup>17</sup>

The year after *The Hour of the Furnaces* was released, Solanas and Getino coined a new term, Third Cinema, to articulate their theories on the importance of film for the revolution. For them the modes of written manifesto and film were interrelated. As Getino maintained in the mid-1980s: "It thus remains difficult even today to separate the concept of Third Cinema from [that of] film, a demonstration of the interdependence of theory and practice."<sup>18</sup> In "Towards a Third Cinema" (1969), Solanas and Getino outlined a new mode of production that would stand outside of and critique the "system." They understood the system to be derived from a Hollywood model, or first cinema, with iterations not only in films

coming out of the West but also in those from the Soviet Bloc. The filmic practices in both instances are based on oppression and domination. In contrast, they maintained that Third Cinema is based on emancipation and “will remain in existence until emancipation is a reality: a *culture of subversion* which will carry with it an art, a science, and a *cinema of subversion*.” Advocating cinema as a cultural form for the masses that should bring together politics and art, Solanas and Getino noted that concepts such as “beauty” and “aesthetics” have traditionally been kept separate from revolutionary language and “anti-imperialist manifestos.”<sup>19</sup> To reconcile art and politics, they believed that Third Cinema needed to either develop new forms of expression or bring those that existed at the margins, such as “Pamphlet films, didactic films, report films, essay films, witness-bearing films,” to the center.<sup>20</sup> This is one of two instances in the article in which Solanas and Getino used the phrase “essay film.” The second is during their discussion of the importance of steering films away from plots driven by individual protagonists in favor of those that deal with the collective: “The man of the *third cinema*, be it *guerilla cinema* or a *film act*, with the infinite categories that they contain (film letter, film poem, film essay, film pamphlet, film report, etc.) above all counters the film industry of a cinema of characters with one of the themes, that of individuals with that of masses, that of the author with that of the operative group.”<sup>21</sup> Significant to their invocation of the film essay is the move away from filmmaking based on individual subjectivity, which Solanas and Getino connected to bourgeois ideology, in favor of one centered on structures, people, and groups. They mobilized the essay film as a type of filmmaking that reflects the attribute of the essay as the form of “political critique par excellence” (Adorno) that does not have to be based on an individual subject position for identification.

Solanas and Getino maintained that the foundation for Third Cinema is documentary, whether in essays, pamphlets, reports, or poems. As they elaborated: “With all the vastness that the concept has today, from educational film to the reconstruction of fact or a historical event, [the documentary mode] is perhaps the main basis of revolutionary filmmaking. Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation, is something more than a film image or a purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the System finds indigestible.”<sup>22</sup> Documentary material—directed not simply to the consumption of facts

or to the repetition and conventional framing of facts but also involving the transformation of these documents is thus a “basis for revolution.”<sup>23</sup> The connotations of eating and digestion associated with their term “indigestible” are not coincidental but point to an important trope in Latin American culture generally, namely, that of antropófagia, or cannibalism: an aesthetic tactic formulated by Oswald de Andrade in his 1928 *Manifesto Antropófago* (“Cannibal manifesto”). The tract inverted the colonial trope of the cannibal and advocated for the creation of a unique Brazilian cultural identity through the consumption and critical reevaluation of both national and foreign influences. Andrade’s manifesto was stimulated both by the myth of Tupinambá and other indigenous ethnic groups said to cannibalize their defeated foes to incorporate their powers and by the belief that all national identities are arrived at through processes of critical absorption of an array of different cultural perspectives. Andrade deployed the cannibalist metaphor to construct an anticolonialist project in which he proposed the selective assimilation of cultural products and technologies from abroad. The metropolitan cultures of Europe were to be neither uncritically emulated nor intolerantly disdained but openly devoured to develop an autonomous cultural project in Brazil.<sup>24</sup>

In the artistic and musical manifestations of the 1960s Brazilian movement known as *Tropicália*, European and North American cultural elements are merged with indigenous or local expressions. Such hybrid mixing, known as syncretism, grew increasingly widespread in Latin America and Caribbean culture and was also manifest in Africa where it became a defining aspect of Third Cinema. As the cultural forms of the colonizer are combined with those of the colonized in a process of Creolization or *métissage*, a new language and culture ensues. At the end of the nineteenth century, W. E. B. DuBois had theorized “double consciousness” as the phenomenon in which a subject sees him- or herself as part of two cultures and is never fully integrated into either. Solanas and Getino referred to this as a bilingual culture, “not due to the use of two languages but because of the conjuncture of two cultural patterns of thinking. One is national, that of the people, and the other is estranging, that of the classes subordinated to outside forces.”<sup>25</sup> Whereas this form of bilingual culture maintained the separate identities of the two cultures, Solanas and Getino wound its elements together to produce a new hybrid cultural practice.

This aesthetic practice of syncretism finds its way into the cinema of the diaspora and the essay film.

In its initial stages, the theorists of Third Cinema sought to provide a radical alternative to Western film. Solanas and Getino acknowledged the important steps begun by “second cinema” or European Art Cinema, “the so-called ‘author’s cinema,’ ‘expression cinema,’ *nouvelle vague*,’ *cinema novo*’ [that] signified a step forward inasmuch as it demanded that the filmmaker be free to express himself in non-standard language and inasmuch as it was an attempt at cultural decolonization.”<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless they understood that second cinema was still trapped within the dominant Western system of first cinema, the style, mode of production, and distribution of which had been set by Hollywood. Solanas and Getino recognized the efforts of both Godard and Marker, filmmakers who challenged the system from within to seek alternatives. In particular, Solanas and Getino singled out Marker’s formation of SLON and his efforts to train workers in the technology of 8 mm equipment. Skilled in the use of a film camera, the worker can then film “*his way of looking at the world, just as if he were writing it.*”<sup>27</sup> Solanas and Getino struggled to discover a new filmic form rooted in documents and facts. Similar to the frustration with the documentary genre expressed by Richter and others, they deemed insufficient a documentary film practice limited to objective representation and devoid of critical commentary. This may be why they turned to the essay form. As Getino wrote retrospectively, Third Cinema entailed, among other things, “opening up to new genres and styles which could not be classified as documentary films.”<sup>28</sup> By the time of the Cuban revolution, documentary was considered a hopelessly confining category, especially as it had been shaped by television.<sup>29</sup> For Solanas and Getino a “revolutionary cinema is not fundamentally one which illustrates, documents, or passively establishes a situation: *rather, it attempts to intervene in the situation; . . . it provides discovery through transformation.*”<sup>30</sup> Dominant postwar documentary cinema had a clear beginning, middle, and end and traded in objectivity. Experimentation and risk were beyond its purview. Revolutionary filmmaking involves finding new forms and structures, developing a new cinematic language and grammar, and taking on previously unexplored themes. From this perspective, the documentary genre is limiting because it conformed to the Western ideal of objective truth put forth by dominant media.<sup>31</sup> For Solanas and Getino, “our time is one

of hypothesis rather than thesis, a time of works in progress—unfinished, unordered, violent works made with the camera in one hand and a rock in the other.”<sup>32</sup> The idea of film as a constant process of becoming, a series of rough cuts as it were, is anathema to Western production of the second half of the twentieth century. Third Cinema bears a close resemblance to the open-ended, fragmentary structure of *Kuhle Wampe* or Eisenstein’s proposal to film *Kapital* from “thousands of tiny details,” in which “the form of *fait divers* or collections of short film-essays is fully appropriate for replacement of ‘whole works.’”<sup>33</sup>

In *Por un cine imperfecto* (“Toward an imperfect cinema”), published the same year as “Towards a Third Cinema” and clearly in dialogue with it, Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa also made an argument for a cinema that shows “the process of a problem.” He compares this type of cinema to “showing the very development of the news item, without commentary; it is like showing the multifaceted evolution of a piece of information without evaluating it. The subjective element is the selection of the problem; . . . the objective element is showing the process.”<sup>34</sup> Espinosa’s stress on an open-ended filmic structure that reveals an entire method of construction resonates with Lukács’s concept of the essay as a form not about judgment but about the “process of judging.” Robert Musil, describing the manner of structuring his unfinished novel *The Man Without Qualities*, maintained in a related fashion: “It was more or less in the way an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it—for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down into a concept.”<sup>35</sup>

Fifteen years after publishing “Towards a Third Cinema,” Solanas once again underscored the concept of an open text as it applies not just to individual films but to the entire category of Third Cinema, explaining: “Third Cinema is an open category, unfinished, incomplete. It is a research category. . . . It is not practiced in the solitude of one’s home or laboratory because it conducts research into communication.”<sup>36</sup> The idea of an open text or work comes from the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco, who first coined the phrase “Open work” (*Opera aperta*) in 1962 when he proposed that the texts that most effectively engage a public contain multiple structures of meaning and do not progress teleologically. Eco’s writings were widely disseminated during the 1960s, and there were numerous important Italian connections to the formation of Third Cinema during that

period. Rocha first delivered “The Aesthetics of Hunger” at a conference in Genoa in 1965, and many Latin American film directors, including Fernando Birri and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, received their training at the Centro Sperimentale in Rome. As Willemsen has observed, while in Italy the directors studied two primary types of filmmaking: Italian neo-Realism and Griersonian documentary.<sup>37</sup> Both are highly essayistic. Jacques Rivette, in his review of Roberto Rossellini’s *Voyage to Italy*, concludes that Rossellini, through the episodic form, fragmentary style, and lack of clear storyline in his work, “at last offers the cinema, hitherto condemned to narrative, the possibility of the essay. . . . For over fifty years now the essay has been the very language of modern art; it is freedom, concern, exploration, spontaneity.”<sup>38</sup> Third Cinema accordingly contains within its roots the cinematic essay that evolved out of the postwar fictions of Italian neo-Realism and the nonfiction of Grierson’s GPO productions.

#### “THE VIEWER’S DIALECTIC” (1982)

The combination of documentary and fiction in Third Cinema breaks with traditional film and its generic conventions to gain traction. As Espinosa notes, “imperfect cinema can make use of documentary or the fictional mode, or both. It can use whatever genre or both genres.”<sup>39</sup> Pursuing a similar train of thought, Cuban director Alea penned an essay related to Third Cinema titled “The Viewer’s Dialectic” (1982), in which he proposed that from its inception cinema followed two paths: “‘true’ documentation of certain aspects of reality and, on the other hand, the pursuit of magic fascination. . . . Film has always moved between those two poles: documentary and fiction.”<sup>40</sup> Singling out cinematic practices that have disturbed this principle, including Italian neo-Realism and the projects of Godard, Alea maintained that the most provocative and productive dimension of revolutionary cinema was the mixing of fact and fiction. Indeed, his celebrated film *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) is characterized by a fragmentary and episodic structure as well as newsreel footage and other archival material intermixed within the fictional narrative. The importance of newsreels as key building blocks rests in their dual status as both recordings of specific moments in time and indications



of the constant flux of history in which interpretations of meanings are determined by the contemporary context. The newsreels in Alea's film perform a double dialogical function as chronotypes. As he explained: "because of the emphasis on information, the newsreel's validity is short-lived. Nevertheless, and at second glance, these newsreels constitute a body of material that is a testimony to an epoch, the importance of which is not always predictable. That is, these newsreels can acquire increased historical value and constitute the raw materials for analytic re-elaboration at a later date."<sup>41</sup>

Like the postwar French essay filmmakers, Alea viewed the film short as a potentially rich form that allows for experimentation and novelty. Drawing on Eisenstein and Brecht, for the spectator to become truly engaged with the material, Alea stressed that there had to be a combination of reason and emotion that will "provoke, as Pascal said, authentic 'shudderings and shakings of reason.' . . . it is emotion tied to *discovery* of something, to the rational comprehension of some aspect of reality."<sup>42</sup> Seeking to synthesize Eisenstein's sensitivity toward the power of emotions with Brecht's rationality, Alea summed up his understanding of their positions: "If, on the one hand, Eisenstein goes from 'image to feeling and from feeling to idea,' Brecht goes one step more and lets us know that although feeling can stimulate reason, reason in turn purifies our feelings."<sup>43</sup> To achieve a synthesis of the two positions, Alea posited that film combines fact and fiction, presented both objectively and subjectively. Alea referred to the subjective aspect as "artistic show," a quality that he maintained should be placed alongside documentary reality as a tactic to produce both identification and awareness of the social issues.<sup>44</sup> Artistic show is manifested as a rupture in the everyday documentary fabric of the film: the fictional insertion of individual subjectivity that is intended to produce aesthetic delight, shock, and awe. Drawing on both qualities, he posited a cinema composed of everyday reality upon which artistic show—the socially productive filmic qualities of "spectacle" or "attraction"—and fantasy are grafted. The right balance between artistic show and documentary reality has to be struck, and care must be taken that the "show" does not overwhelm or occlude the reality of the situation that the film depicts. As Alea explained, "a show which is socially productive will be that which negates daily reality (the false crystallized values of daily or ordinary consciousness) and at the same time establishes

the premises of its own negation.” He cautioned against the use of show to offer “a simple means of escape or consolation for a burdened spectator” that is limited to the duration of the film, after which she or he returns to previous states of consciousness; rather the viewer “should be stimulated and armed for practical action.”<sup>45</sup> Finally, in “The Viewer’s Dialectic” Alea argued that Eisenstein’s project to film *Capital* should be taken up anew, thereby asserting the connection between a committed political practice and the essay film as a form to convey it. As he explained, “Eisenstein’s final goal was to arrive at reason, at intellectual comprehension. And it’s not so surprising then that he expressed an interest in filming *Capital*. The fact that he did not do so surely means that he had not yet found the appropriate artistic means to do it.”<sup>46</sup> Alea accordingly proposed a hybrid form of cinema based on the essayistic form of intellectual montage—a combination of fiction and reality—to educate the spectator and produce a change in subjectivity.

Third Cinema, both in theory and practice, paved the way for an alternative that would be fully realized in the work of black British film and video collectives. An important theorist and historian of Third Cinema in this regard was the Ethiopian-born American scholar Teshome H. Gabriel. Gabriel’s 1979 doctoral dissertation, “Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation,” was the first comprehensive history of Third Cinema to introduce the concept to the English-speaking world. Published in book form in 1982, it circulated widely in North America, Great Britain, and parts of Africa.<sup>47</sup> In his study, Gabriel did more than chronicle the formation of Third Cinema as it developed in Latin America; he extended its principles and theories to include diverse practices of emergent cinema around the globe. As he stated in his Preface: “Third Cinema cineasts advocate a political cinema whose ideology is not only implied but adheres to the dialectic of traumatic changes that are engulfing the people of Africa, Asia and Latin America.” Because of Third Cinema’s inherent militant appeal, Gabriel distinguished between it and international films that have a political subject matter: “Third Cinema filmmakers equate film with a weapon and view the act of filming as more than a political act.”<sup>48</sup>

Gabriel further reflected on Third Cinema in “Third Cinema as a Guardian of Popular Memory” (1989). There he stressed the significance of popular memory as an invaluable counternarrative to official history.

Similar to Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Gabriel views history as a phenomenon based primarily on the written accounts of the powerful. Dominant historical accounts, he argues, "claim a 'centre' which continuously marginalises others, . . . [their] ideology inhibits people from constructing their own history or histories."<sup>49</sup> By contrast, "for popular memory, there are no longer any 'centres' or 'margins,' since the very designations imply that something has been conveniently left out. . . . Popular memory . . . is a 'look back to the future,' necessarily dissident and partisan, wedded to constant change." Gabriel asserted that Third Cinema emerged from popular memory, whereas "cinemas of the system" represent official history.<sup>50</sup> Official history is expressed formally in the documentary genre, whereas popular memory, which is not necessarily rooted in fact, may include fictional moments and interludes. Because popular memory often confronts or is in dialogue with official history, the result is often a hybrid essay that freely mixes fact and fiction, objective records and subjective interpretations.

#### *PERFUMED NIGHTMARE (1977)*

A striking example of a hybrid essay film of this sort is Philippine director Kidlat Tahimik's *Perfumed Nightmare* (1977). In this sardonic critique of the Philippines' status as a doubly colonized country, first by the Spanish and more recently by the United States, Tahimik casts himself in the role of Kidlat Tahimik, a "native informant" from a rural village who delivers a narrative of his life to an imaginary "Western" spectator. Kidlat is a jeepney driver who shuttles people and commercial goods (including precious cargo such as ice) on and off his island via a bridge. Through his allegedly "naïve" eyes, the film tracks the impact of colonialization on the Philippines. Reflections on how brutal the Spanish were when they imposed Catholicism are followed by the story of the murder of Kidlat's father by U.S. armed forces who accused him of trespassing on American military property. The cultural legacies of the foreign occupations invade all aspects of life in the village, from the persistence of public demonstrations of archaic Catholic self-flagellation rituals to seasonal beauty pageants. Accompanying the sounds of birds, music, and church bells we hear

the radio broadcast “Voice of America,” one of the most important propaganda tools during the Cold War. A cutting humor permeates the film. A case in point is when Kidlat, the founder and president of the Wernher von Braun club, writes to Voice of America to ask what Neil Armstrong’s first words were when he walked on the moon.<sup>51</sup> When Kidlat receives the response, his previously fluent and eloquent voice haltingly reads and mispronounces the well-known phrase: “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” The compound “mankind” is broken up into two words, and “kind” is pronounced with a short “i” vowel as in “kindergarten.” This pronunciation, which returns to the Germanic root meaning “child,” subtly shifts the meaning and undercuts the accomplishment. Through his performance as the childlike native Kidlat, Tahimik deftly detours the ideology of colonization, in which space is the final frontier, and infantilizes the colonizer. This sequence is but one of the many symbolic tropes in *Perfumed Nightmare* that bring together and combine two different systems, in this case languages. The strategy recalls Max Bense’s characterization of an essayist as “a combiner, a tireless creator of configurations around a specific object. Everything that is even somewhat in the vicinity of this object, defining the subject of the essay, giving it the possibility of existence, enters into the combination and causes a new configuration.”<sup>52</sup>

In *Perfumed Nightmare* Tahimik draws attention to the way in which culture, language, thought, history, and memory are brought together to produce new syncretic forms. The colorful, brightly painted jeepney is a standard issue U.S. military jeep, designed in 1941 for military purposes and transformed for civilian use. In an unusual documentary sequence, Tahimik records the process of transformation that occurs at a machine shop in Manila where the original vehicles are stripped down and repurposed, each with an extraordinary colorful array of individual designs, in such a way that the finished product bears little resemblance to the original function of the vehicle as a means for troop transportation. As Kidlat explains, the jeepneys are “vehicles of war, which we made into vehicles of life.” The process that the jeepney undergoes is part of a more general anthropophagism in which products from the West are ingested and regurgitated as newly invigorated forms. This process of transformation goes two ways. For example, in another less colorful example, Kidlat’s American friend “GI Joe” offers him a stick of U.S.-manufactured chewing

gum made from raw materials drawn from the gum tree native to the Philippines. The gum is extracted, exported to the United States, processed with sugar, and repackaged in shiny wrappers for consumption in places like the Philippines. Cultural transfers such as these are seemingly innocuous, but they do not occur without the violence of colonial expansion. Sometimes that violence is explicitly stated, but often it is implicit, as when the soundtrack repeats a radio recording of Henry Kissinger stating that the United States is assisting African nations in achieving their goals. Kidlat suggests that “for 12 million dollars the Philippines became U.S. property,” but today’s means of acquiring control over countries is achieved through economic aid.

The title *Perfumed Nightmare* underscores the conjunction of mismatched concepts. Tahimik interweaves fiction and reality, bringing the two together as a personal essay film on the postcolonial condition. In Tahimik’s world order, it is impossible to untangle the threads of culture from its present day hybrid. Tahimik focuses on metonymical objects to reflect on a double-consciousness based on forms of Creolization, syncretism, or hybridity, which operates not only on the level of cultural traditions and histories but also across time and space.

#### SANKOFA AND BAFIC

Gabriel expanded the concept of Third Cinema beyond its Latin American borders to include Africa and the United States. As a professor of film studies in the Department of Theater, Film, and Television at UCLA, he brought together and mentored African American and African filmmakers who became known as the “L.A. Rebellion.” This group was important in confronting the hegemony of Hollywood-style filmmaking. They produced a rich and varied corpus of films that challenged racism from both thematic and formal perspectives. The L.A. Rebellion filmmakers include Camille Billops, Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, and Bill Woodberry. Their films are not only marked by a militant politics but also constitute a new form of aesthetic expression.<sup>53</sup> Films such as Gerima’s *Bush Mama* (1979), Dash’s *Daughters of Dust* (1991), and Billops and James Hatch’s *The KKK Boutique Ain’t Just Rednecks* (1995) all bear strong essayistic traits.

In addition to his contribution to the development of alternative filmmaking in the United States, Gabriel’s introduction of Third Cinema had

a profound impact in Great Britain.<sup>54</sup> The 1980s in Britain was a seminal decade for the formation of several collectives of artists, filmmakers, and other cultural groups comprised primarily of individuals from Britain's former colonies. These collectives were formed in response to new funding models for self-constituted organizations.<sup>55</sup> The growing social unrest, political upheaval, and increasing demonization of the black British subject in Margaret Thatcher's Britain led to new structures of resistance and community activism that challenged the political, intellectual, and cultural foundations of the former Empire. "Black" was used as an all-inclusive label that applied to all nonwhite British subjects, whether Caribbean, Asian, or African, regardless of background. During the next decade there was increased attention to and awareness of the multiple subject positions encompassed by the term "British" on the part of these nonwhite subjects. Artists such as Sonia Boyce, Chris Ofili, Donald Rodney, and groups like BLK Art Group achieved international acclaim.<sup>56</sup> In the public sphere, a broad array of intellectuals including Homi K. Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Stuart Hall radically transformed traditional fields of literature, philosophy, sociology, and the fine arts by calling attention to diversity, difference, and the construction of the other. British cultural studies became the global forerunner of a new type of politics composed, in Hall's words, of "unspeakable stories of subjectivity."<sup>57</sup>

Two filmmaking collectives stand out in particular in this context. Founded in 1982 and 1983, respectively, the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC) and Sankofa were the result of concentrated government initiatives to provide independent filmmakers, workshops, and collectives with the financial, technological, and practical training to produce new work.<sup>58</sup> Most important, however, as Edward George of BAFC explained at the time, the workshops "provided an exposition of the importance of politicising the technological aspects of film and video making, so that it could no longer be an isolated technicist question simply of hands-on experience, but one of connecting that experience of technology to wider questions of race and gender."<sup>59</sup> To be eligible for funding, a group or workshop had to consist of at least three members. Aside from practical matters, the collective nature of these groups corresponded politically to new initiatives in community building. As Kobena Mercer recalls, "Collaborative writing was not only a strategic means of interruption, or 'breaking the silence' as we used to say, but [it also] underlined the *communifying*, or community-building, process of coming out of the margins into public

speech by way of the empowering transition from ‘I’ to ‘we.’”<sup>60</sup> The establishment of Channel 4 as a resource to commission and broadcast new works and the existence of increased government funding for the British Film Institute both contributed to a vibrant creative environment, fostering alternative and experimental filmmaking.

With their first works, BAFC and Sankofa were immediately heralded as initiating a new form of avant-garde practice closely linked to Third Cinema, in which aesthetics and racial politics are intricately interwoven. The nonfiction filmic landscape within which these two collectives emerged during the 1980s was structurally similar to the cultural context in which North American essay filmmakers worked in the 1970s. The field of British nonfiction filmmaking, like that in the United States, was split for the most part between artists who eschewed narrative in favor of a formalist practice and documentary filmmakers who primarily pursued an objective “observational” mode.<sup>61</sup> The members of Sankofa, including Martina Attille, Maureen Blackwood, Nadine Marsh-Edwards, Robert Cruz and Julien, had attended art colleges, whereas John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, and Trevor Mathison of BAFC were trained in the social sciences. Documentary film was part of social sciences and mass communications, and the “observational cinema” documentary movement known as “Mass Observation,” begun by Humphrey Jennings in the 1930s, continued into the 1960s.<sup>62</sup>

The first films of both Sankofa and BAFC were based on “real” events that deeply affected black communities. Sankofa’s *Who killed Colin Roach?* (1983), directed by Julien, focuses on the death of a twenty-one-year-old black man shot while in police custody at the Stoke Newington police station in 1983. This investigative short served both to represent the powerful protests prompted by Roach’s death and to publicize critical information and background on his arrest and imprisonment. As such it served as a counternarrative to that circulating in the official media of the time. Although the form suggests a documentary style, the film reflects a definite departure from the observational mode, particularly with regard to Julien’s carefully choreographed soundtrack and his startling inclusion of a resounding dub score. Indeed, a typical trait of black British culture at the time was its employment of music as a signifying practice to counter white hegemonic culture.<sup>63</sup> Three years later, in *Handsworth Songs* (1986), BAFC confronted media representations of a series of demonstrations, riots, and clashes with police that occurred in

1985 in Handsworth (outside Birmingham). The film consists primarily of recycled footage from public media sources, which BAFC broke apart, repeated, looped, and placed in new constellations in combination with an experimental soundtrack to expose the complicity of the dominant media in producing the black male youth as a major threat to civil order.<sup>64</sup> In her assessment of Sankofa and BAFC, Coco Fusco stresses the importance of mass and popular media for the two groups. She explains that they “draw on the experiences of a cultural environment in which musical performance can function as a laboratory for experimenting with ready-made technologically (re)produced materials. They also produce films in an environment where television is the archetypical viewing experience.” Television functions as more than just an antagonist; it provides a model for a new type of viewer accustomed to “fast-paced editing and non-narrative structures found in advertising and music video.”<sup>65</sup>

Neither Sankofa, with *Who Killed Colin Roach?*, nor BAFC, with *Handsworth Songs*, settled on a pure documentary form for their critique; instead, both experimented with the insertion of poetic and aesthetic devices, including the sonic, to question the status of the documentary genre. As BAFC explained in a statement at the time:

Our task was to find a structure and a form which would allow us the space to deconstruct the hegemonic voice of British TV newsreels. That was absolutely crucial if we were to succeed in articulating those spatial and temporal states of belonging and displacement differently. In order to poeticize that which was captured through the lenses of the BBC and other newsreel units—by poeticizing every image we were able to succeed in recasting the binary myth and history, of imagination and experiential states of occasional violence.<sup>66</sup>

For his part, Julien recalls a sense of discontent with the options available in nonfiction film, especially the dominant documentary mode. In an interview of 1989 with Fusco, Julien explained, “I was tired of the realist debate, the populism versus modernism debate, which was focused on fairly conventional documentaries.”<sup>67</sup> Julien was equally frustrated with what he referred to as “neo-formalist” art film, which exemplifying a radical aesthetic but eschewed a radical politics.<sup>68</sup> To that extent the individuals associated with both Sankofa and BAFC sought a new filmic



form between documentary and fiction that did not play by the rules of white Britain but would result in a new genre capable of dissolving the “binary between aesthetics and politics.”<sup>69</sup> As Julien underscored when speaking about his next film, *Territories* (1984), “I saw *Territories* as a film essay around civil disorder and semiological questions for Black people.”<sup>70</sup> Recalling that prior to making *Territories* he had encountered the work of Marker, Julien remarked that *Sans Soleil* in particular had a pronounced effect because of the way in which it included “experimental” and “poetic” moments within the documentary form. As he explained: “*Sans Soleil* provided a model for how to bridge the two distinct filmmaking traditions of experimental film and political essayist documentary.”<sup>71</sup> Julien’s use of “film essay” to characterize his work in the 1980s, when the phrase was not circulating widely in English language contexts, points in several directions, including toward Third Cinema.

Like Julien, Akomfrah cites the important impact of Marker, in addition to other filmmakers such as Godard and Andrei Tarkovsky, photographers such as Alexander Rodchenko, and African American intellectuals and liberation leaders including W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael. Similar to the films of Julien and Sankofa, the work of Akomfrah and BAFC signals the importance of film and cultural traditions other than those of western Europe and the United States, including the productions of Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène and Indian Mani Kaul. Rather than turning to any single source of inspiration or model, the members of BAFC sought to draw from multiple sources and diverse voices. An awareness of a plurality of practices and exchanges informed their productions from the outset. Auguiste, speaking on behalf of BAFC, notes: “We should first and foremost recognize that there is a syncretic process occurring in the area of film culture, and it should be given its due celebration.”<sup>72</sup> This syncretism not only includes bringing multiple film forms and histories together but also combining “the literary traditions of the diaspora” with “Teshome Gabriel’s theoretical work on Third Cinema.”<sup>73</sup> This reference to Third Cinema points to its relevance in the mid-1980s to black British filmmaking.

The year 1986, in which both *Handsworth Songs* and Sankofa’s *The Passion of Remembrance* were released, constituted an important milestone for the essay film. The two films were cited as examples of a new black political avant-garde movement. In particular, the cinematic style and

grammar of the two films as well as the way their experimental forms combined with their radical political stances were often discussed. This was also the year that Akomfrah organized the Cultural Identities conference at the Commonwealth Institute. The event brought together a number of politically engaged filmmakers to discuss the intersecting issues of racial, ethnic, sexual, and cultural identity.<sup>74</sup> These same themes had a bearing on that year's Edinburgh International Film Festival, devoted to the question of Third Cinema and its relevance to all filmmakers working "outside the white Euro-American sphere." The festival program cited Third Cinema as important both theoretically and practically "because of its ability to unblock the dead-ends of 70s cultural theories, but also and primarily because it opens out onto new practices of cinema: a cinema no longer captivated by mirrors of dominance/independence or commerce/art, but grounded in an understanding of the dialectical relationship between social existence and cultural practice."<sup>75</sup> At Edinburgh, the works of BAFC and Sankofa were screened as examples of Third Cinema produced in Europe.

The close connection between Third Cinema and the cinematic practice of BAFC and Sankofa led some members of the collectives to downplay its influence. As Auguste explained, "in our attempt to develop an alternative visual grammar it is imperative that we acknowledge influences other than that of Third Cinema." Yet he conceded that a "tentative relationship does exist between Third Cinema in the Third World and that which is in the process of becoming in Britain's black communities."<sup>76</sup> Third Cinema in its classical dimension did not account for the plurality of the British diasporic condition and therefore the practice had to be expanded. It was thought to be rooted in national paradigms that did not address the heterogeneity of the diasporic communities of cosmopolitan centers such as London, New York, and Paris. Nonetheless, there is a clear link between Third Cinema and the maturation of the essay film as a radical political form taken up by black British filmmakers. Third Cinema provides a crucial model for bridging aesthetics and politics, while concomitantly challenging conventional genre distinctions, leading both collectives to adopt the essay film as their preferred mode of practice. Thus the trajectory of the essay film travels from Italy to Latin America and back to Britain, and the genre is constantly transformed along the way.

An important theorist from the 1920s whose writings and theories circulated in British cultural studies during the 1980s was the Russian

Structuralist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose thought provided the lens through which several critics, including Willemsen and Mercer, came to understand not only Third Cinema but also the black British film of the diaspora. Bakhtin's concept of the "dialogic imagination," in particular, offered a significant perspective on how different cultures, languages, peoples, classes, and genders combine under certain conditions in literature and creative acts as well as in social spaces such as carnivals, fairgrounds, and markets. In these imaginary and material sites, radically different groups are brought together, each with its particular language and culture. Bakhtin referred to these encounters and the subsequent emergence of multiple languages that exist side by side as "heteroglossia." The concept challenges attempts to standardize language and, by extension, history—a regularization that is deeply linked to nation-building and imperialism. For Bakhtin, dialogism results when these different languages, cultures, and classes are brought together both figuratively and literally, each carrying with it a specific historical and social context. This results in unsettling juxtapositions and confrontations of different subjectivities that would remain discretely contained within their homogenous communities.<sup>77</sup> Exploring the tensions between concepts of "outside" and "inside," and of how the two are in constant tension with each other, Bakhtin posited that it is in the border zones of in-between spaces that the most interesting cultural production takes place.<sup>78</sup> His notion of dialogism is applicable both to the intersection of white and black cultures and to the coexistence of multiple dimensions in each. Mercer identifies "the critical difference between a *monologic* tendency in black film which tends to homogenize and totalize black experience in Britain, and a *dialogic* tendency which is responsive to the diverse and complex qualities of our black Britishness and British blackness—our differentiated specificity as a diaspora people."<sup>79</sup>

#### TERRITORIES (1984)

Julien's *Territories* (1984) is exemplary for the way in which it translates Bakhtin's theories into film. In the production, Julien used the Notting Hill carnival as a site through which to explore not only the clashes between white state authority (represented by policemen) and local residents but also those between peoples that make up the black British population.

*Territories* is a twenty-five-minute audiovisual collage comprised of both original sources and found material. It consists of multiple recurrences and doublings that repeat image sequences and voice-over commentaries. The film opens with block letters of the title “Territories” that appear fluid against the black screen. As the camera moves in, the black screen frames each letter, which in turn becomes a window onto a moving image. The letters open onto a scene of urban decay with deteriorating architectural structures, broken windows, abandoned shopping carts, and desolate characters. A man’s murmuring voice is followed by a woman declaring “a new context, a new context.” The woman then begins to recite from a text about the multiple contradictions that exist in a city, including those of “class, labor, race, sex relations.” She reflects on the territories of desire, surveillance, sexual expression, and resistance that “cohabit the city.” The male voice repeats some of her phrases: a refrain that at once underscores the meaning of the words and poeticizes her academic language. Recalling the photography of the Russian avant-garde, the camera tracks the exteriors of derelict buildings from oblique angles. The spoken word “carnival” punctuates the visual articulation of territories of resistance. The commentary then announces the film’s thesis, which is repeated multiple times: “behind each conflict there is a history, a herstory. We are struggling to tell a story, a herstory, a history, of cultural forms specific to black people.” Julien employs a fragmentary narrative structure to combat not only the homogenous representation of blacks that predominates in popular media but also the forms that such representation takes in news documentary in particular. As he explained in an interview with Jim Pine, “up to now there have only been linear narrative films and realist documentaries. . . . We have to try and break away from that, and try to create space for other kinds of intervention—because black people are not all the same, there are many black communities.”<sup>80</sup> Julien stresses heterogeneity by highlighting racial, ethnic, and sexual difference through a combination of interviews and found footage. The Notting Hill carnival is presented as an “archipelago of colonial society” that features the performance of different cultural identities and the enactment of multiple forms of fantasy. As the voice-over commentary observes, in news broadcasts, documentaries, and feature stories such as these “carnival [is] contained as aesthetic spectacle.” By contrast, in *Territories* Julien seeks to dismantle both the spectacle and the concept of neatly packaged history. He deconstructs “black” as a designator for all nonwhite denizens as a colonial term

that needs to be broken apart to shatter the hegemony of the vestiges of colonial power. As the commentary informs the viewer, “territory is the holding of one class’s privilege in a declining system.”

*Territories* includes extensive sequences taken from BBC documentaries about the history of carnival, the emergence of the phenomenon in London, and its historic roots in Trinidad and Tobago. Speaking over a BBC newscaster’s distinctly upper-crust British accent, male and female voices counter the official narrative with their own: “How far should we go to begin our story and history of carnival tonight: 1976, 1966, 1959, or should we turn to its origins in the Caribbean, in Africa. . . . We are struggling to begin a story, a history, a herstory, of cultural forms specific to black peoples, of its creation and re-creation in the diaspora.” The commentary challenges a “white BBC” understanding of carnival that characterizes its music as “noise” and its dancing as “sexual misconduct and debauchery.” In contrast to the standard packaging of the made-for-television documentary footage directed to a white public, Julien’s images are stylized aesthetically and replete with disorienting techniques, including odd camera angles, slow motion, superimpositions, and close-ups. Musical instruments such as steel drums and cymbals as well as speakers and sound systems fill the screen. The multiplicity and simultaneity of languages is underscored by the variety of different types of “black” music, including calypso, reggae, rap, and dub, that circulate on the soundtrack. Music serves as a powerful signifier on multiple levels. As Julien elaborates, “Reggae is part of the mythology of 1977 and there is no doubting its past, and continuing importance, but reggae really relates back to the caribbean [*sic*] whereas soul takes one into the wider black diaspora.”<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, rap music is entirely different because it offers a blatant form of political resistance and a challenge to the system. Mediating Paul Gilroy, Mercer links the overall form of *Territories* with its “discontinuous gaps between sound and image” to a “deconstructive aesthetic of dub-versioning.”<sup>82</sup>

In *Territories* disc jockey musicians manipulate turntables, scratch records, and drop needles, thereby transforming the recordings. The active engagement with prerecorded music is a powerful metaphor that reflects the double meaning of “record” as indexical trace and storage mechanism. The disc jockey as musician changes the record, reorganizing and rearranging it to produce vibrant new recordings. Disregarding

London's noise ordinances, the amplified sounds are mobilized as a powerful cultural weapon. In this sense, Julien's *Territories* recalls Humphrey Jennings's *The True Story of Lili Marlene* of forty years earlier in which a song metonymically opens up a different history. In the second half of *Territories*, Joan Baez sings "The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti," with resounding lyrics such as "Against us is the law" and "Against us is racial hatred," accompanying footage of white police surveilling the streets and neighborhoods of London in preparation for anticipated confrontations. The line "against us is the power of the police" is repeated over images of police brutality. Baez's song functions on multiple levels. The Mexican American singer fought for U.S. civil rights and international peace throughout the 1960s and beyond. The "Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti" recounts the false conviction and wrongful execution by the U.S. justice system of two Italian anarchists in the 1930s. The lyrics are direct citations from letters Vanzetti wrote to his father. Thus a double act of appropriation is at play: Baez transforms the letters to a song, and Julien transports them to a film. These transmedial shifts point to the afterlives, the reverberations of original source materials—their dub effect.

In *Territories* Julien extends this use of quotation as a political tactic. By including further textual extracts from Edward Braithwaite, Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, and Michelle Smith, all read by different voices, he eschews the voice of a single authorial master (the norm in documentaries) to present instead a text composed of multiple voices and perspectives. This heteroglossia challenges the homogenous stream of information made available by mass media. A similar challenge is manifested in a recurring image of a burning British flag over which is superimposed a young, bare-chested, male interracial couple dancing round and round. The beauty of their bodies, rhythms, and movements overwhelms and obscures the symbolic icon of the "Union Jack" that Gilroy makes a point to emphasize "includes no Black."<sup>83</sup>

As Auguiste proclaimed, it was primarily the "literary traditions of the diaspora" that the black British collectives of the 1980s translated into cinematic practice. They looked not only to the contemporary writings of Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Gilroy, but also to earlier writers who theorized the colonial condition such as Fanon and Aimé Césaire, as well as to African Americans such as Langston Hughes and Malcolm X.<sup>84</sup> Willemen explains: "They started from a recognition of the many-layeredness

of their own cultural-historical formations, with each layer being shaped by complex connections between intra- as well as inter-national forces and traditions, . . . a way of inhabiting one's culture which is neither myopically nationalist nor evasively cosmopolitan."<sup>85</sup>

*FRANTZ FANON: BLACK SKIN WHITE MASK (1995)*

Frantz Fanon was one of the historical touchstones whose importance was recognized by North American, Latin American, Caribbean, African, and European filmmakers. Fanon's plea in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) to question perpetually—"O my body, make of me always a man who questions!"—resounds through the myriad cultural texts generated by his legacy, including Julien's essay film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask* (1995). Julien's essay film launches an investigation into the complicated cross-currents and conflicted thought patterns that comprise Fanon's life, writings, and theories of decolonialization and liberation. The film also touches on the continued relevance of discussions of race, masculinity, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and audiovisual representation.<sup>86</sup> As Julien explains, "it is not a question of simply finding a way to represent Fanon in the film but to use film to engage with Fanon's ideas and perhaps in some way transform them. . . . We would even go further and say that the act of visualization can be seen as a form of theoretical production."<sup>87</sup> What is at stake for Julien is the translation of philosophical thought from one medium (text) to another (film), and from one time period (1950s) and cultural context to a different one (1990s). The task is to animate Fanon's written essays and propel them into contemporary media culture.

To break with the documentary tradition, Julien employed a highly stylized formal approach indebted to Brecht that underscores and spotlights contradictions. The film consists of footage from French newsreels, colonial documents, photographs, archival records from public and private sources, and interviews with a wide range of individuals, including contemporary theorists Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Françoise Vergès, Caribbean francophone writers Maryse Condé, Raphaël Confiant, and Daniel Boukman, French intellectuals Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, former FLN leader Mohammed Harbi, and members of Fanon's

immediate family. Julien intercut these documentary sources with fictional footage from Gillo Pontecorvo's feature film *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) in which contemporary actors ventriloquize speeches from those long dead. He also staged stylized tableaux of Fanon, with actor Colin Salmon cast as the historical figure. *Frantz Fanon* is replete with self-reflexive techniques such as superimpositions, slow-motion camera shots, fade-ins and -outs, and fractured images that draw attention to cinema's constructed core. Salmon's dashing figure glides through the film. He is often posed as a cutout over archival footage, looking directly into the camera to confront the viewer. In a way that recalls Brecht's techniques of alienation, Salmon delivers his lines in a distanced mode. In Julien's film, Fanon is less a developed character than an "open sign" onto which the viewer can project meaning.<sup>88</sup>

While the film imparts a historically accurate account of Fanon's life and works grounded in documentary archival sources, Julien animated the material with highly aestheticized flights of fantasy, ranging from imaginary re-creations of scenes that may or may not have occurred to beautifully composed tableaux and images. *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask* is a film about Fanon, but it is also an essay about the translation from one medium (writing) to another (film). When Vergès addresses the camera in three-quarter profile to explain the experience of the white man who looks into the mirror and sees a black man—that is, Fanon's theory of the gaze—the figure of the filmmaker appears in the background. By casting himself as the anonymous black man of Fanon's text, Julien stresses his role as a filmmaker who makes and projects images that circulate in a white-dominated film world. This cameo is forecast in the epigraph by Fanon that begins the production: "I cannot go into a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me."

One of the conundrums facing Julien was how to represent Fanon filmically since at the base of much of Fanon's thought is the marker of race as a visual sign. As Hall explains, Fanon's term "*epidermalization*" was "literally the inscription of race on the skin. This armature of 'race' provides the black subject with that which elsewhere Fanon calls an alternative 'corporeal schema.' But, as he always insists, this schema is cultural and discursive, not genetic or physiological."<sup>89</sup> The task confronting the filmmaker is how to portray a black man whose philosophy is rooted in an awareness of his body as a racial metaphor that is "battered down by



tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships.”<sup>90</sup> Film is generally organized around scopic desire and the gaze, concepts Fanon introduced decades before their articulation in structuralist and psychoanalytic film circles. One of the explanations Hall offers for the renewed interest in Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* “is the association it establishes between racism and what has come to be called the scopic drive—the eroticisation of the pleasure in looking and the primary place given in Fanon’s text to the ‘look’ from the place of the ‘Other.’ It is the exercise of power through the dialectic of the ‘look’—race in the field of vision . . . which *fixes* the Negro from the outside.”<sup>91</sup> To make a film on this topic following the in-depth reflections on visual pleasure of the previous two decades posed a significant challenge. Julien explains that as an essay film *Frantz Fanon* explores “the idea of visualizing theory . . . around the black subject, . . . the body. In *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon’s return to the body is of course an essential return. He returns to the place where the scopic imperatives mark the body in a particular way, which is part of a racist regime from which we cannot escape. . . . I think it’s the place of artists—and their concern with visibility—to also return us to the site of the body.”<sup>92</sup> Instead of avoiding the representation of Fanon, Julien draws attention to the ambivalence of any such representation, not only by selecting an attractive actor, Salmon, but also by including erotic sequences of Salmon’s naked body. When Fanon’s theories about interracial desire are discussed, Julien has a nude Salmon caress a white woman, thereby highlighting the desiring and desired black male body.

*Frantz Fanon* is punctuated by a repetition of images and sequences that do not relate directly to Fanon’s life or writings but provide moments for contemplation or meditation. Among these are shots of Fanon in various poses staged in a windy desert, his figure highlighted by the light that reflects off the sand that surrounds him. The desert interludes also function as section breaks that effect the transition from one narrative block to another. The first of these is of a solitary Fanon waving the Algerian flag. After a brief introduction, Fanon’s voice-over explains his motivation for writing *Black Skin White Masks*. The film then cuts from archival footage back to the desert, followed by a close-up of Salmon’s face as he turns to gaze defiantly into the camera. Salmon’s voice-over states: “There are so many idiots in this world and having said it, I have the burden of proving it.” Reinforcing the stylized aesthetic quality of the desert sequence,

Salmon does not speak directly, although the voice we hear is his. This alienation technique is both connected and not connected to the narrative, serving as an ornamental structural device where language hovers over the image like a disembodied phantom. Another use of this tactic occurs during a key moment in Fanon's political consciousness after he leaves Martinique and moves to Paris, and encounters racial prejudice based purely on the color of his skin. Once again the disembodied voice-over recalls, "All around me the white man, all around me a white song, all around me a whiteness that burns," as the gleaming sands of the desert fill the screen and a soprano voice sings in the background. This multiplicity of voices and perspectives is further complicated by the multivocality present in Fanon's writing, which uses different sources and modes of address—not only personal recollections but also medical records, theories, observations, and proclamations. The result is an amalgam of styles that Julien deftly conveys by having Salmon adopt a variety of ways to deliver his lines in a manner that mimics Fanon's direct address to the reader. This lack of stylistic conformity or continuity in favor of breaks and differences is characteristic of the essayistic form as a dialogue of fragments that coexist in a variety of patterns—analogue to the pieces of Fanon's psyche that are put together after his psychological breakdown in France.

*Frantz Fanon* is punctuated by images of flora and fauna such as an extreme close-up of a tropical red flower indigenous to the Caribbean that fills the screen when "desire" is discussed, or a close-up of an enormous ivory brain coral with an intricate mazelike surface of crevasses that appears when Joby Fanon explains that his brother Frantz intended the original title of *Black Skin White Masks* to be "An Essay on the Dis-alienation of the Black Man," and that the study was as much about the dis-alienation of whites as of blacks. The brainlike pattern of the white coral reinforces visually the extremely complicated and convoluted inner workings of race and identity that Fanon explored in his research. In both close-up shots, "nature" is opposed to "culture," a juxtaposition that serves as a visual metaphor for the depth of Fanon's thought while metonymically recalling his Caribbean origins. Similarly, a bougainvillea-filled courtyard where Fanon dances with de Beauvoir interrupts the narrative flow of Fanon's life. Such beautiful images and interludes recall Alea's appeal for artistic show in cinema and produce an effect of wonder for the viewer.

There are three primary interlocutors in the film: Bhabha, Hall, and Vergès. Vergès provides the voice of the historian who understands Fanon's subjectivity as a product of Martinique and the sociohistorical context of the French department in which he was raised. Hall broadens the discussion to communicate theories of colonization, decolonization, race, the sexualized nature of the gaze, Fanon's eventual recourse to violence, and the cultural implications of Fanon's essay on the veil. Both Vergès and Hall are interviewed in traditional documentary fashion, with the exception of a sequence in which Vergès discusses Fanon's decision to "become Algerian." In this section, Vergès appears before the camera in a clichéd North African costume, complete with an "exotic" headdress and large bangle earrings. In contrast to Vergès and Hall, who speak as isolated interview subjects, Bhabha is filmed on busy streets. He moves through these spaces, suggesting that his identity is more tenuous, and his image is shot in slightly blurred black and white film stock. He blends into the crowd. Moreover, whereas Vergès and Hall speak in their own words, Bhabha's pronouncements take the form of voice-overs, separate from his image, disembodied, and clearly scripted.<sup>93</sup> His rhetoric is replete with poetic flourishes, including ponderous phrases such as "desire is the movement of memory." Toward the beginning, for example, we see a black and white sequence of books tumbling down a staircase and being placed in a briefcase. The voice-over announces: "In the bottom of an abandoned suitcase lay a book bag filled helter-skelter with the icons of an earlier time, book covers like *Flags of Convenience*, launching revolutions, announcing political prophets, installing cultural fetishes, Castro, Marx, Mao, Regis Debray, Simone de Beauvoir, Fanon." In a later sequence Bhabha walks down a contemporary London street as he explains the motivation that underpins the production of a film about Fanon in the 1990s: "we turn to Fanon in this fin-de-siècle to understand something of the landscape of the present." What this "something" involves is a myriad of loosely interconnected phenomena and conditions of contemporary existence, including the rise of religious fundamentalism, the justification of torture, new waves of migration, intolerance, and the ever-widening economic gap between the haves and have-nots. Julien uses Fanon as a figure to address these issues. He not only draws a connection between the politics of liberation of the 1950s and those of the present day but also links early theories of race, identity, subjectivity, and visualization to

current debates in cultural and media studies. The final shot in the film is of a veiled woman who turns to reveal that an image from one of Marc Garanger's photographs taken during the Algerian war of unveiled Berber women is superimposed on her veil. The legacy of colonialism and the violence of liberation continue to mark the contemporary period.

This dialogic approach to a historical figure through the lens of the present recurs throughout the film. Julien spends a considerable amount of time focusing on the issue of torture. Several staged scenes depict Fanon in his role as a psychiatrist in Algeria interviewing torturers, victims, and witnesses. The implication is that torture leaves an indelible mark on the psyche on all these subject positions. A young French woman who hears her father kill her childhood friends goes mad; a young man whose mother has been shot point blank by French soldiers repeats this act of violence on an "innocent" French woman who reminds him of his mother; a torturer describes nightmares of his victims visiting him. During these testimonial "interviews" Julien interrupts the visual recording with shots of Garanger's photographs and horrific scenes of torture featured in *The Battle of Algiers*. Juxtaposed to these cinematic insertions is a cut to Hall, who stresses that "decolonization was always more violent than recorded at the time." Julien implies that Pontecorvo's fictional film comes closer to the truth than did historical documents of the era. The use of color footage for these staged interviews brings the subjects' testimonies to life, making their screams reverberate into the future.

Hall's voice is the most important in structuring the narrative and bringing together the multiple threads that constitute Fanon's thought. Hall explains the colonizer/colonized relationship, translates Fanon's theories of the scopic nature of racism and its relation to the dual process of desiring, analyzes Fanon's turn away from language in favor of violence, and clarifies the complexity of Fanon's interpretation of the veil. Hall is cast as the present-day interlocutor channeling Fanon's thought. He makes sense of the resurgent interest in Fanon, and especially the latter's *Black Skin White Masks*, "with its psychoanalytically-inspired exploration of the unconscious mechanisms of racism and colonialism, its attention to the role of projective fantasy, its opening up of the dislocated subjective complexity of the deceptively obvious 'fact of blackness' and its attention to the dialectic of identity, otherness and desire."<sup>94</sup> For Hall and others, the way Fanon's book brings together the discourses of Marxism, psychoanalysis,

and racism, and its relevance for understanding the diasporic subject, is crucial. Hall praises the work of contemporary artists who have looked to Fanon in their effort to “subvert the structures of ‘othering’ in language and representation, image, sound and discourse . . . in order to constitute new subjectivities, new positions of enunciation and identification.”<sup>95</sup> If Fanon occupies a privileged place in early postcolonial studies, then Hall’s work in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is no less significant. Hall is recognized as one of the most important theorists and historians of postcolonial studies. A public intellectual who regularly broadcast on both radio and television, his was a voice of resistance and understanding. He brought attention to the “unspeakable stories of subjectivity” that constitute the modern subject. His illness and death in 2014 prompted Akomfrah’s three-screen installation *Unfinished Conversation* (2012) and the film *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013). Hall also played a key role in Julien’s *Kapital* (2013), where he participates in a discussion with the filmmaker and the geographer David Harvey.

Close to the end of *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask*, Bhabha’s voice-over narration begins over a fictional sequence shot in color of Fanon taking leave of de Beauvoir: “In the dust and detritus of old nations, in the bricks and mortar of new ones, Fanon emerges amongst us not merely to return us to the savagery of the colonial past.” The visual imagery shifts to Fanon, who is seen in profile walking across the desert, followed by black and white footage of Bhabha in profile walking down an urban street and viewed through the bars of an iron fence. His commentary continues: “through the historical metaphors of violence and proximity of black and white juxtaposed bodies, we face a deeper truth about the living arrangements of our times, our nations, our cities, our people.” The image shifts as the camera moves alongside Bhabha and the diverse faces of passersby appear in close-up. His voice continues: “the closed border, the disputed frontier, the problem of the zone and the barricade turn the eye of history, turn to the migrant’s half-way house, to the unhomey refugee, to those denied the epiphany of emancipation. The maids who are paid two pounds a month, the workless less than human, freedom’s frail strangers.” The sequence concludes with Bhabha’s voice intoning “turn history turn” as it cuts back to the depopulated desert. Julien thus closes the geographic gap between Algeria and London and the temporal gap between the 1960s and the end of the twentieth century. *Frantz Fanon:*

*Black Skin White Mask* uncannily projects a bleak future and a crisis of migration that confronts the Western world in the twenty-first century. If Fanon was unable to imagine the horrors that followed decolonization in Algeria, Julien, through *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask*, forecasts and warns of the impending disaster to come.

### THE DIASPORIC SUBJECT

The theme of migration and its economic discontents continues to preoccupy Julien. He has expanded his cinematographic practice physically, materially, and conceptually in the twenty-first century, from cinema and television productions to gallery installations, from single channel works to projections on multiple screens, and from chronologically ordered stories to fragmentary narratives. Julien explains his shift to gallery installations as follows: “In an increasingly troubled time of emergencies, war and disinformation, moving images in a gallery context could represent an alternative view—one in which artistic images can play a critical role in shaping our understanding of the world, rather than merely being used as a tool for propaganda or for the art market.”<sup>96</sup> Two of his recent installations, *WESTERN UNION: Small boats* (2007) and *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), confront the crisis of migration in western Europe and the nightmares encountered by those who undergo the process. Julien launched the fantastical journey of *Ten Thousand Waves*, dispersed over nine double-sided screens suspended from the ceiling, from a 2004 news item detailing the death of twenty-three undocumented Chinese workers who, unaware of the dramatic tides, drowned in Morecambe Bay in northwest Britain.<sup>97</sup> The simultaneous projection of multiple images and narrative fragments activates the viewer. As Julien explains, it “is not simply a question of the number of screens—but about breaking away from the normative habits we have in exhibiting and also in looking at moving images.” The movement of the spectator’s body through the installation determines the narrative constructed. Julien carefully designed the placement of the screens so that “the viewer will form new, empathetic identifications . . . experiencing these images and experiences from an unexpected point-of-view: from an ‘other’ position.”<sup>98</sup>

The twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are marked by large-scale human migration. The cultural effects of these displacements are profound. Nigerian art curator Okwui Enwezor argues that “these migrations . . . transformed the cultural maps of many nations, making the idea of border crossing a key motif of dwelling, a zone from which new cultural practices were formed and sustained.”<sup>99</sup> Migration on this scale is the product of conditions of emergency. The impact of that crisis on the essay film is enormous, taking social, economic, political, national, racial, and cinematic forms. Auguiste explains that “vis-à-vis cinema, Black Audio Film Collective believes that independent producers in this sector occupy a social space that is structured and governed by determinance of a state of emergency.” He cites an early essay in which Bhabha declares that “in every state of emergency there is emergence.”<sup>100</sup> Crisis and emergency can be particularly productive in artistic practice. Enwezor observes: “In the modern era artistic and intellectual collectives tend to emerge during moments of crisis. This crisis can be social, cultural, political or economic; however, its effects seem always to generate environments of disillusion and disaffection, leading to a counter challenge by artists.”<sup>101</sup> The essay film, with its porous boundaries, generic deterritorialization, and anti-disciplinary form, is particularly well suited to diasporic subjectivity, which is characterized by movement, the crossing of borders, the erasure of inside/outside positionality, and temporal geographical displacements.

Issues of diaspora and migration are central to the work of BAFC and Akomfrah. Like the films of Sankofa and Julien, those of BAFC begin with local problems confronting diasporic communities in Britain. *Handsworth Songs*, for example, addresses the growing tensions and riots between the police, the state, and residents. One of the mainstays of BAFC was to cobble together an informal history from existing fragments and shards to construct a counterarchive to the official memorials of the British Empire. An issue confronting historians of the diaspora is that there are no memorials, no architectural structures, no buildings commemorating displaced peoples, and few images, writings, archives, or recordings of their experiences. Culture is crystallized into form by the victors; the marginalized have to struggle for representation. According to Akomfrah, “the absence of the ruin meant that you had to construct some [memorials], even if all you were constructing were half-finished monuments—you had to build something.”<sup>102</sup> Recall that for Gabriel popular memory and by extension

Third Cinema are used “not only to rescue memories, but rather, and more significantly, to give history a push and popular memory a future.”<sup>103</sup> History in all of its manifestations is central to the diasporic subject. The relationship between history and memory, the creation of counternarratives, the reclamation of a disappeared past, and the establishment of an archive in the absence of records are themes confronting the diasporic filmmaker.

With so few factual records, a creative leap into fantasy and to the act of reconstruction are necessary steps for those who wish to produce new narratives.<sup>104</sup> The fabrication of histories from spectral traces, from the “ghosts of songs,” becomes one way of countering the relative absence of records or archives that locate the diasporic subject’s arrival as “other” in a new country. The effort the displaced person must make to fit into the new culture largely mimics the universal process of finding one’s voice and sense of self. For the migrant, however, that pursuit is often urgent and desperate. Identity is impossible without some concept of memory, the latter serving as an essential prerequisite to being. Although memory also acts as a powerful counterbalance to the turbulence of dislocation, there are few tangible memorials to center the diasporic subject. The act of migration eliminates them. Even the minutest fragments of archives acquire a special poignancy in this situation. They function as distant mnemonic signs, establishing possible prior relationships between the migrant and others of the same cultural context. As reservoirs of memory, archives are one of the few sites that attest to the diasporic subject’s existence.

The work of Akomfrah and BAFC is structured around archival material that serves both as a point of departure and a site for the accumulation of material in the future. The archive is composed not only of visual documents but also of aural records. As the name of the collective suggests, sounds are as important as images. From the beginning BAFC was intent on continuing the often-ignored avant-garde explorations of sound that Dziga Vertov began in the 1920s, a track of investigation explored more fully in the Surrealistic sound experiments of GPO filmmakers Cavalcanti and Jennings. Akomfrah recalls that “the avant-garde saw our emphasis on the audio as a thought crime, a heresy. It was all about the image for them. They frowned on the sonic, treating it as an impure intrusion into a hallowed field. It was a weird hangover from high modernism, especially if



you watched a Dziga Vertov film you'll [*sic*] see the early avant-garde was as interested in sound as in images."<sup>105</sup> Experiments in audio composition and design—in music, dialogue, and sound—resound on every track of the films of BAFC and Akomfrah. Their work composes an epic song from a vast audio archive; a song that complements the visual counterparts of the films. "Song" suggests the epic genre of early modern literature, such as *The Song of Roland* or *The Song of the Niebelungens*—anonymously and collectively produced tales whose early transmission was oral. The same sounds, whether in the form of dialogues, noises, or music, echo from one work to another and are linked intertextually across time and space.

A statement repeated several times in *Handsworth Songs*, "There are no stories in the riots, only ghosts of other stories," reverberates in an unspoken way throughout Akomfrah and BAFC's oeuvre. Akomfrah's project, which he calls "spectropoetics," is to bring attention to the ghosts, to animate them and give voice to their songs, their "unspeakable stories of subjectivity." To restore a history and to create an archive where there often is none is the challenge. A young girl asks in Akomfrah's *All That Is Solid* (2015), "where do voices go after we hear them?" An intertitle provides the response: "unless it leaves a deposit on an archiveable support, sound remains merely an event . . . and it disappears without a trace, without being able to be repeated, cited, convoked."<sup>106</sup> The status of the diasporic subject is as ephemeral as sound. Unless it is recorded, its history will disappear. Akomfrah's task is to tell those stories of beings, human and animal, who do not have the means to record—stories that will be made up of fact and fiction, and that are nonlinear, episodic, fragmentary, non-rational. In a word, stories that are essayistic.

The twin topics of colonization and its aftermath have found their way into Akomfrah's work, beginning with his early projects with BAFC in the 1980s. In *Expeditions* (1983), a slide/tape projection divided into two parts—"Signs of Empire" and "Images of Nationality"—he juxtaposed archival images produced by British colonizers from another era with contemporary memorials and representations. As Akomfrah explained at the time, "before there was colonial history, after there's postcolonial history. And we wanted to problematize that very obvious splitting of memory into past and present."<sup>107</sup> Walter Benjamin's reflections on the production of history inform the narrative.<sup>108</sup> Word fragments that disrupt the presentation of images are superinscribed on the images in bold

type. The legacy of empire finds itself in contemporary Britain in its diasporic communities, which despite their unique histories and conditions (Caribbean, African, Asian) have been deindividuated and simply labeled “black.” Akomfrah and BAFC confront this homogenization of the non-white British subject directly in *Handsworth Songs*. The film’s inclusion of interviews with various different constituencies underscores the heterogeneity of the migrant populations. The audible differences in accent, language, intonation, and cadence speak volumes about the diversity of these populations, as do the sequences of local musical performances. Difference is rendered audially and visually.

One important signature of BAFC is the integration of writing and theory in its cinematic practice. Citations from Virginia Woolf find their place alongside those from Stuart Hall; Jacques Derrida’s meditations are placed in dialogue with pronouncements by African anticolonialist leader Amílcar Cabral; and novelists such as George Lamming anchor recent work such as *Auto Da Fé* (2016). The literary philosophical tradition and the use of classical tropes and poetic figures of speech such as allegory, metonymy, metaphor, and synecdoche are at the base of BAFC’s and Akomfrah’s practice. Auguiste proclaimed that “intersections of literary concerns and cinema” were as important as Third Cinema to BAFC. Cinema is an audiovisual translation of writing; the films of BAFC are essays that mobilize images and sounds to expose an issue, but the collective’s project extends beyond a documentary exposition; at play is the commitment to reclaim, discover, and rewrite histories that would otherwise be lost.<sup>109</sup> This focus recalls Marker’s character Hayao Yamaneko, a computer hack in *Sans Soleil* who manipulates and changes archival images with the help of a prototype digital synthesizer. Yamaneko starts with documentary footage of past events, which he then transforms because, as the voice-over explains, “if the images of the present don’t change, then change the images of the past.”

In a related manner, Akomfrah and BAFC also seek to transform cultural practice radically by rewriting old histories and imagining new ones. Akomfrah likens this process to alchemy because, as he explains, “in alchemy there is this notion of the *negredo* or the moment of blackening, when something turns the base material to something valuable—it’s a moment of transmutation and transfiguration, and that’s where magic has value in alchemy, it’s about the process of transformation, not

transformation but transmutation, and both categories are absolutely central in what we are trying to do.”<sup>110</sup> The central theme of Akomfrah’s essay film, *Peripeteia* (2012), the title of which evokes a sudden reversal of fortune or fate, was inspired by the filmmaker’s discovery of two sketches of African slaves by the German artist Albrecht Dürer that metonymically serve to represent the phenomenon of slavery. Metonymy moves or extends a sign from one referent to another. In the case of Dürer’s drawings, the metonymic relations are from part to whole; the sketches of individual slaves are extended to reference all slaves in Europe during the early 1500s. The first sketch, from 1508, is untitled and depicts the bare head of a slightly bearded black man. Akomfrah’s intertitle notes that “everything else about this man is now lost to the winds of history.” The second, from 1521, features the face of a black woman wearing a European head cowl. All that is left is her name: “Katharina.” Within the brief span of a decade, more has changed than just the slave’s gender; importantly, the second figure is given a Christian name and European clothing. In the film Akomfrah cast two actors to represent Dürer’s figures, who represent the proliferation of slavery in Europe. Both are depicted alone and appear to be highly introspective as they negotiate the harsh northern landscape. Although the film has no dialogue, the soundtrack is anything but silent. Its whistling “winds of history,” rushing water, crackling fire, assorted birdcalls, and perpetually howling wolves drive the visual imagery. Just like water, which permeates Akomfrah’s recent works, sound moves in waves; it is constantly in flux and depends on movement to exist. The recording of sound is like the recording of history; each “bite” provides a tenuous indexical link to a fragment of a “once was.”

A counter set of still images records the capture of the slaves. Over the panting breath of the young actress who pauses, the image track cuts momentarily to a black and white archival photograph from the Royal Museum of Central Africa of two young women seated before a thatch hut in West Africa. Anxiety fills the air as the women, facing imminent imprisonment, glance at the photographer. Another archival image captures seven African men of varying ages adorned with elaborate scarification marks on their chests; still another portrays a man resting his head on the lap of a woman whose back leans against the wall of a mud dwelling. One particularly arresting image depicts a seated woman bound to a stake who looks defiantly at the photographer. An arrow pierces through

her thigh. The insertion of still images from a time period at least 300 years after those of Dürer breaks the narrative flow of sounds and images temporally. As Raymond Bellour has argued more generally about the use of photographs in film, the “presence of a photo on screen gives rise to a very particular trouble. Without ceasing to advance its own rhythm, the film seems to freeze, to suspend itself, inspiring in the spectator a recoil for the image that goes hand in hand with a growing fascination. . . . Creating another distance, another time, the photo permits me to reflect on the cinema.”<sup>111</sup> *Peripetia* combines archival stills with soundtracks and clips of original material Akomfrah shot to evoke dream images that are memory fragments of a hypothetical past that is purely imaginary. In this manner Akomfrah connects different worlds, momentarily joining them in a fragile synthesis. He steers the metonymical components in a metaphorical direction to create new realities. Through other juxtapositions, including various details of interracial scenes from the Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1504), Akomfrah induces narratives of love, trauma, and the violence enacted on individuals forcefully displaced from their respective communities and subjected to a radically different existence in a far-off land. To that extent Akomfrah creates fictions that follow the Aristotelian dictum of the “probable impossible.”

The same reimagining of a different history is operative in *Tropikos* (2016), staged in the mid-1500s during the beginning of British imperial exploration and conquest. The location shifts between Plymouth Sound in southwest England, from which many slave expeditions were launched, and their destinations: the coasts of Guinea (1554) and Sierra Leone (1567) and Fouta Djallon in the highlands of Guinea (1577). The flow of images is punctuated by sequences of a boat laden with goods slowly making its way down a river in Africa, intercut with shots of the River Tamar in England. Baskets of New World staples such as corn and potatoes are arranged alongside a display of tropical fruit, totem carvings, precious stones, and two black figures, a man and a woman. They too have evidently been brought back to be trafficked. The face of one figure is dusted in white chalk, suggestive of the folk belief that at death one’s skin turns white. In this metaphorical world, rivers serve as channels between life and death. Akomfrah mobilizes *Tropikos*, a Greek term for both revolution and the tropics, to connote the moment of a new global reordering.

At the root of *tropikos* is trope, a figure of speech that uses words, phrases, or images in nonliteral ways for aesthetic purposes. Trope came into common usage in the English language at about the time these imperial explorations were launched in the sixteenth century.

Characters in period costume display the opulence of Elizabethan England. Well-tended fields and open meadows along the riverbanks are verdant. Multiple shades of green suffuse the film and act as a natural screen through which the figures move. Their colorful garb is testament to the way exotic treasures of all kinds were incorporated into European culture. Gold thread, pearls, and other sparkling gems from afar are woven into the fabric of imported velvets and silk. In contrast to the costumes, the gray stone edifices that provide architectural support for the empire are anachronistic. Some are in total ruin, others in various states of disrepair. A cast-iron railing in the arch of a doorway bears the date 1862, a twentieth-century concrete jetty marks the ebb and flow of tides, modern buildings line the shorefront, and a nautical sign on the river reads "Speed limit 10 knots." Near the end of the film the camera focuses on a black figure in Elizabethan costume as he looks out across Plymouth Sound. His gaze spans over 400 years as the contemporary world is brought together metaphorically with a past built on plundered goods and slavery. A twentieth-century battleship cruises across the channel.

Sixteenth-century Plymouth is thus presented as a conduit to modern Britain. It is a contact zone between the local and the global, the old and the new. Just as corn, potatoes, and other previously unknown staples would soon become part of the European diet, so too would the people brought there by slavery and commerce be forced to take root in their new environments in order to survive. *Tropikos* and *Peripetia* touch on the moment when the historical conditions of modernity produced its first subjects. Akomfrah uses the metaphor of "crossroads" to understand the "liminal spaces between different worlds, contact zones."<sup>112</sup> He considers the awareness that the diasporic subject is always moving between two cultures, involved in a double-consciousness, crucial for comprehending how the diaspora functions.<sup>113</sup> As he explains in retrospect: because "there were no traditions of Afro diasporic cinema except in the most recent sense, what we made will be formed out of residues, elements of the old, i.e., non-Afro diasporic sensibilities and approaches. And that was important not simply because that was how all new forms came into being. But

this is also how diasporas are formed. They are crossroads formations.”<sup>114</sup> At the very core of diasporic aesthetics is a mixing of forms, of cultures, and of traditions—all of which find their correspondence in the structure of the essay film.

### *UNFINISHED CONVERSATION (2012) AND THE STUART HALL PROJECT (2012)*

Just as in the 1990s Julien paid tribute to Frantz Fanon, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Hall was the focal point for Akomfrah. Hall expounded on diaspora, multiculturalism, and the condition of migration. An Oxford-educated activist and scholar, he problematized racial categories and demonstrated not only how they were socially constructed but also how fundamentally unstable they are. “Blackness,” Hall wrote, “has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoke[n], not simply found.”<sup>115</sup> Of primary concern to Hall in his understanding of identity is what he referred to as “arbitrary closure,” by which he meant the acceptance of a fixed subject position that does not allow for future development and change. As we have seen with *Frantz Fanon*, to make a film about a historical figure, to re-present and reenact that figure’s personage, thoughts, and life is difficult enough. Even more challenging is how to make a portrait of a live person without locking or fixing the character in a death mask.<sup>116</sup>

Akomfrah takes on the challenge and produces two interrelated projects: *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), a horizontal triptych installation, and *The Stuart Hall Project* (2012), a single-channel film. Although both audiovisual essays are archive-based and inform each other, relying on some of the same footage, their arrangement and scopes differ, largely due to the formal differences between an art installation and a film. *The Unfinished Conversation* focuses on Hall’s life until 1968, whereas *The Stuart Hall Project* extends to 2000. The film follows a clear, linear, and chronological narrative, albeit replete with offshoots and digressions, in contrast to the different arrangements that emerge in the installation, which recall the operation of a kaleidoscope. As Akomfrah explains, the genre of the

art installation relieves some of the rationalizing pressures that structure film or television work, and the triptych format allows him “to propose a way around and against causal logic. The associations between channels are sometimes enigmatic, and for me this uncertainty is closer to the truth of things than anything else I could have done.”<sup>117</sup> This three-screen installation practice also enabled a structure in which associations and patterns move in multiple directions. The movement cuts horizontally across the three screens, vertically as a processional succession of images, and diachronically within each screen through the process of slow zoom or pan.

*The Unfinished Conversation* opens with an epigraph on the middle screen: “Identities are formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of a history.” A sun rises into a dark blue sky streaked with pink on the other two screens. The words on the middle screen continue, “identity is an endless ever unfinished conversation.” At this point industrial machines and gusts of wind punctuate the film installation’s soundtrack. As the three screens turn to feature archival black and white images from 1950s London, a woman’s voice reads lines from Virginia Woolf’s experimental novel *The Waves* (1931). Citations from Woolf’s text are woven in and out of the soundtrack at regular intervals. The passages stand out in Akomfrah’s film in much the same way as they do in Woolf’s novel. They are nondiegetic meditations commenting at once on the shifting quality of light as the sun rises, on how perception changes substances from solid to liquid, and above all on the inexorable motion of the waves. Additional intertextual elements in *The Unfinished Conversation* include passages that describe the industrial nightmare of coke town from Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854) and perspectives on growing up from Mervyn Peakes’s *Gormenghast Series* of the 1940s. Akomfrah explains this tactic of citing literary texts to comment obliquely on the filmic text in the following way: “That Hall didn’t choose those passages himself is neither here nor there. I think of such juxtapositions as collisions between unspeakable moments of subjectivity. They can imply a world of uncanny correlations, sparking retrospective realizations of affinities that were never conscious but which may nonetheless have had a seminal effect on someone’s life.”<sup>118</sup>

The inclusion of literary passages set off by the distinctive grain of their reader’s voice provides *The Unfinished Conversation* with an additional

layer of meaning, one in excess of Akomfrah's focus on Hall. The spoken words animate the text, breathe life into it, and set it in dialogue with other voices. The effect is not of a two-dimensional textual or image-based palimpsest but rather of a three-dimensional space. The passages open alternative paths for the spectator to follow. Each of the literary works centers on the "coming of age" of an alienated individual whose subjectivity clashes in an environment where she or he is perpetually out of place. As such, the citations add an additional poetic layer that amplifies the visual track. Moreover, Akomfrah's use of the citations in turn highlights key aspects of the literary texts. For example, in *The Waves* the death of Percival, who is thrown off his horse during a tour of duty in the colonies, at once shatters the other character's illusion of youth while also signaling the collapse of the British Empire. In *The Unfinished Conversation*, repeated images of a dark horse running fill the screens as a new era begins. The literary text thus obliquely informs the image track.

The installation's triple-screen format facilitates these juxtapositions as it breaks apart the linearity of a single-screen projection. The triptych is aural as well as visual, contributing to the effect of a carefully choreographed piece where images and sounds participate in an elaborate dance. The density of rapidly changing information makes it impossible to focus on any isolated element. Akomfrah wanted *The Unfinished Conversation* "to make viewers feel as if they're caught in a maelstrom of visual culture, of sensory overload, because in metonymic terms, the violence of that experience seems to be the violence of subjectivity itself."<sup>19</sup> The effect is compounded by the installation, which is designed so that the viewer stands dwarfed before the three large screens, her or his attention momentarily caught by the images and sounds that fill the exhibition space. By contrast, *The Stuart Hall Project* is more constrained; the form does not anticipate a spectator who may begin watching at any moment but rather one who will follow the film linearly from beginning to end. In addition, the film contains no literary insertions, and the commentary is composed entirely from recordings of Hall's voice.

Amid the installation's swirling "maelstrom" or thick forest of information are pauses and interruptions, moments signaled for reflection or meditation. These occur as red monochrome screens that appear at critical junctures in the work, marking transitions, such as when "1968" is placed in the center between two red screens. The conceptual break is



occasionally not so clear; instead of red, an orange screen appears occasionally, such as when Hall recalls how he set up courses in film studies in collaboration with the British Film Institute. The repetition of sets of images and sounds throughout the installation serves to anchor the project and allow for recognition and familiarity on the part of the viewer. A photograph of Hall as a young man reappears in different contexts, ranging from an initial close-up of his face that fills the entire screen to subsequent repetitions at regular intervals that vary in both size and position in relation to other images. The effect is similar to standing at the center of a swirling storm—recognizable patterns emerge slowly from the chaos. Sets of images such as these appear in different contexts. Images do not carry inherent meanings, and the shots do not collide with one another. Signification depends on the montage of the contexts over the entire film.

Such groupings of images and sounds resurface throughout Akomfrah's work. One recurrent clip is that of a record player. It operates metaphorically as a record of a person's life, the way it is played out and the music that is made, and metonymically as it connects to the jazz of Miles Davis, perhaps the single, most important musician for Hall. Davis's compositions play in the background of *The Unfinished Conversation*, but they are foregrounded in *The Stuart Hall Project* and function as a primary structuring device. Akomfrah indicates each year of Hall's life not only by a significant political event but also by a composition from the same time by Davis. For example, in the section on the early 1950s, when Hall arrives in England, Akomfrah cites the Korean War and the release of Davis's *Miles Ahead* (1954); he marks the late 1950s by the opening of the intellectual coffee bar "The Partisan," the founding of the journal *New Left Review*, the explosion of violence in Cyprus, the racially motivated murder in 1959 of Antiguan immigrant Kelso Cochrane in Notting Hill, and the release of Davis's *Summertime* (1958). Just as Hall goes through changes and matures, so too Davis's music evolves and develops in endless variations. The turntable is a trope for the turnings of life, the revolutions of various scales and import that occur and are experienced by human beings. "Turning" also recalls the etymology of "conversation," which means to turn about with something—the "unfinished conversation" is an endless turning on Hall's ideas and thoughts, and the sociocultural histories in which they are immersed.

In both works, Akomfrah included footage of Hall from the BBC broadcast “The Jewish Community.” There Hall discusses the middle-class status of the Jewish minority in Britain in the 1960s, reminding the audience that most of them arrived as “penniless immigrants” in the nineteenth century. Hall stressed their integration into British society and their positive contributions. In *The Unfinished Conversation* this same sequence plays out over the three screens. At the beginning, black and white footage of crowded urban life appears on all three screens. For example, a train station appears on the two side screens, while the middle screen depicts Hall during his broadcast framed against a backdrop of Hebrew letters. Hall’s voice is then replaced by a child’s voice reciting the first stanza of William Blake’s *The Tyger*: “Tyger! Tyger! burning bright in the forests of the night, what immortal hand or eye could frame thy dreadful symmetry.” As the images shift on the right and left screens, vivid colors of the Caribbean replace the black and white footage of British cityscapes. On the middle screen a red intertitle announces “the ambiguity of identity.” The intertitle is immediately replaced by a close-up photograph of a young Hall in his late teens or early twenties. Hall’s voice cuts in: “I’ve had this tension my whole life between what I thought I was—a young bright Jamaican—and this refusal of my family to live in that world at all.” Images of children in Jamaica going to school appear as their voices overlap with the earlier child’s voice that continues the Blake recitation: “when thy heart began to beat, what dread hand? & what dread feet? What the hammer, what the chain,” and then fades as Hall’s adult voice recalls: “I am the blackest member of my family . . . and in Jamaica the question of what shade you were, . . . was the most important question, because you could read off class and education and status from that.” Images from everyday colonial life on the island appear, juxtaposed with photographs of Hall and sequences of a young boy of about seven, a stand-in for Hall. Accompanying footage of a middle-aged Hall who travels to Jamaica to visit his childhood residence is a passage about young Titus, the protagonist of Peake’s Gormenghast trilogy. The sequence concludes by returning to Hall’s lecture on the roots of the British Jewish community. The intertitle marking the beginning of the next sequence reads “in the colony.” Hall’s subtle suggestion that the influx of poor, postwar immigrants from the former colonies is comparable to the turn-of-the-century immigration of

Jews from the East is reinforced by the montage of images and sounds that bring together two seemingly different worlds.

Hall's interest in the Jewish community extends beyond a general analogy and speaks to something more personal. By including another live interview with Hall from the 2000s, where Hall identifies as "part English, part African, part Portuguese Jew, even some say a little East Indian," Akomfrah underscores Hall's subject formation. One of the enigmas of subjectivity that Hall theorized is the coexistence of multiple identities, with different histories and subject positions that change as they are brought into contact with other elements of society and with the contemporary environment. A central preoccupation of Akomfrah's is the complex flight lines that traverse modernity, crossing continents and oceans. In his recent two-screen installation *Auto Da Fé* (2016), he filmed eight sequences in Barbados to investigate the transmutations brought about by relocation and migrations that have affected the island over the past 350 years. Accompanied by the sound of an impending storm, *Auto Da Fé* begins with two shots of the sea. On the left screen a child's waterlogged red teddy bear floats on calm waters, and on the right a shot of a distant jetty is quickly replaced by images of a dilapidated cemetery, the oldest Jewish burial site in the New World. The first subtitle reads "The Microspheres of Transience." Akomfrah's investigation, prompted by Hall's claim to be part Portuguese Jew, brings to light a little known mid-seventeenth-century event when the Inquisition expelled Sephardic Jews from Catholic Brazil, and they were dispersed throughout the Caribbean. The circuits of migration, like the oceans in which they run, are vast: from Europe to South America, to the Caribbean, to the United States and, as Hall's biography attests, back to Europe. "If the notion of the Western is now inherently unstable," Akomfrah has argued, "then so are its 'pure opposites.' They are no less 'unsullied' and 'uncontaminated' by this instability." Probing the way pure terms are constituted historically is crucial to his project. From this perspective categories are relational; concepts such as European or Caribbean, black or white, Jewish or Protestant, are only comprehensible by determining what their binary opposite constitutes. Akomfrah's films fly in the face of both Western and non-Western perspectives. They transcend dualistic understandings that posit a clear and principled split between the local and the global and construct independent accounts of each. As Hall asserted, "Instead of asking what are people's roots, we

ought to think about what are their *routes*, the different points by which they have come to be now. . . . These routes hold us in place, but what they don't do is hold us in the same place."<sup>120</sup> In the new millennium, people's "roots" are no longer paramount and have been replaced by the "routes" of migration that have led them to where they now are.

The final sequence of the triptych features scenes of civilian protest, equal rights demonstrations, police brutality, violence, and destruction from war. Three disconnected images appear: on the left is a black and white clip of an anonymous Asian woman receiving medical attention for her amputated right leg while a child cries in the background; in the center, also in black and white, is an iconic photograph of Coretta Scott King and her five-year-old daughter Bernice at Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral; and bright color footage of a polar bear emerging out of the water and lumbering onto an ice floe blazes on the right screen. What connects these three disparate image sets is the soundtrack. Woolf's words close the project: "The sun struck straight upon the house, making the white walls glare between the dark windows. . . . The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall. . . . The waves fell; withdrew and fell again, like the thud of a great beast stamping."<sup>121</sup> With the sound of a gunshot that accompanies this passage, Akomfrah anticipates his later pronouncement in *Vertigo Sea* (2015) that the "ways of killing man and beast are the same." Indeed, the same footage of the polar bear returns in *Vertigo Sea*, which reflects on humankind's inherent violence and self-destructive nature.

## IMAGE AND SOUND FRAGMENTS

Mobilizing and refunctioning image sequences and acoustic bites to link worlds and frames of reference is characteristic of Akomfrah's working method. The practice repeats in project after project. For instance, the image of a young woman riding on a train in *Handsworth Songs* finds its way into *Mnemosyne* and *All That Is Solid*; the actors Boris Ranevsky and Pauline Boty from Ken Russell's *Monitor* (1964) appear in *All That Is Solid* and in *Vertigo Sea*; and a man wrapped in a rough gray blanket to ward off

the elements in *Peripeteia* reenters in *Tropikos* (2016). Added to this, we see the same foundered boats in the lonely bay on the Isle of Sky in three memorial films that commemorate deceased family, friends, and public figures: *The Call of the Mist (redux)* (2012); *The Genome Project* (2008), and *At the Graveside of Tarkovsky* (2012). These images and sounds traverse time and space like the haunting whale songs writer Heathcote Williams inserted into his audio poem *Whale Nation* (1988) that Akomfrah samples in *Vertigo Sea*. They come from the vast media archive that Akomfrah has assembled over the years and that he continues to mine, finding appropriate segments to place into new constellations and configurations. These image and sound fragments are his building blocks, a morphology that he montages together in endless variations and repetitions. He is like the character of the data thief featured in his *Last Angel of History* (1996), who takes and samples material from different sources. Some of these blocks are footage Akomfrah has filmed or sounds he and his team have recorded for the purpose of making a film. Others are taken from archives and initially had no cinematic intention. By recycling these clips and weaving them into his own work, Akomfrah transforms the materials. As he explains, “a lot of it has to do with acquiring material that has a ‘non-cinematic’ use—be they artifacts, photographs, writings, accounts that are not the traditional forms of cinema. . . . It’s about taking things that have inherently ‘non-cinematic’ value and forcing them into that space in which they begin to acquire the resonance of the cinematic, for example, forcing a line-up of photographs to say ‘We are part of the procession of the real; we too are partaking in this creating narrative in which subjectivities can be understood—we too are legitimate to cinema.’”<sup>122</sup> All of these materials are constantly at hand, recalling the kaleidoscopic nature of the essay that Bense evoked in which each turn rearranges the components and elements and produces new audiovisual essays.

For Akomfrah and Julien, the open, experimental genre of the essay film that eludes dominant structures is the chosen form for political critique. Both begin their investigations, whether for television, cinema, or multichannel installations, with fragments of “reality” such as acoustic reports of the emergency responder appealing for assistance in the Morecambe Bay catastrophe or the news broadcaster relating news of the shipping disaster in *Vertigo Sea*. They both deem coherent totalities or single narratives inadequate to represent or comprehend the horrors humans

experience as a result of social, political, economic, environmental, and biological disasters. For Akomfrah and Julien, essay films trouble the status quo of cinematic or art production at the same time that they address issues and events that are at once topical and historical.

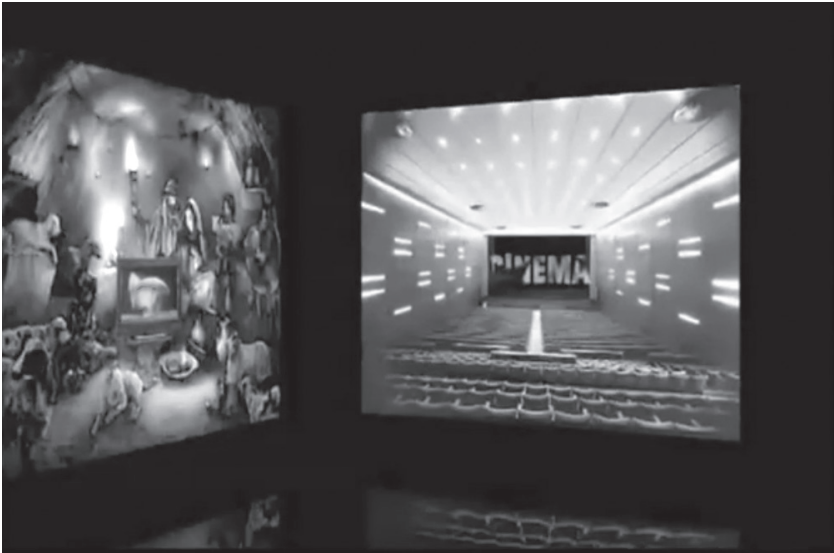


FIGURE 7.1 Chris Marker, *Kino*, 2012.

# 7

## BEYOND THE CINEMATIC SCREEN: INSTALLATIONS AND THE INTERNET

*For nothing is concluded.*

—WALTER BENJAMIN, "NAPLES"

**T**he year 1989 heralded the fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of second world communism, and a radical reconfiguration of the world order leading to the perpetual outbreak of new wars. It also constituted a watershed moment technologically, marking the emergence of a new technological imaginary following upon the unexpected and unregulated global expansion of the new communication and information technologies of the Internet. This shift from analog to digital media ushered in a visual regime of signification in which the truth claims of documentary film came under increasing scrutiny by essay filmmakers and theoreticians. In light of the radical changes in how image production is conceptualized and configured in the digital universe, it is not surprising that many audiovisual essays produced during the 1990s reflect upon such topics as the self-conscious presentation of history, memory, technological reproduction, and vision. Directly related to these epistemic shifts was the emergence of new sites for the essay film: the exhibition gallery and the Internet. Although the essay film in its traditional single-channel form continued to be produced for theatrical projection, as witnessed by its virtual explosion during this period, the expansion from single-channel



moving image projections to multidimensional installations and virtual interactive projects in the post-1989 essay film contributed to significant transformations in the form of the genre and the possibilities for its exhibition and distribution. With the political events of 1989, claims were made for an “end of history” (Francis Fukuyama), just as the approach of the centenary of the birth of cinema (1995) was heralded as the end of the medium; nevertheless both history and film production continue, as does the essay film, although its forms are changing along with venues in which to experience it. Indeed, the essay film is arguably more accessible and prevalent than ever before.

Three audiovisual essayists in particular—Harun Farocki, Renée Green, and Chris Marker—adapted and translated the essay film into new formats in response to the exhibition and distribution possibilities offered in the post-1989 landscape. Each represents a different generation: Marker emerged in postwar France working in celluloid; Farocki was part of a post-1968 German avant-garde that worked primarily in television in the 1970s and 1980s; and Green is a contemporary U.S. installation artist who has produced work for art exhibitions from the outset of her career. Their post-1989 audiovisual essays correspond to three significant metamorphoses of the genre in the contemporary moment. Green, the youngest, is acutely aware of her position as a global artist whose practice represents the “post-medium condition” of installation art. Her projects are site specific, and film is just one component among many that she employs in each work. Although Farocki continued to work with film and video, he shifted from single-channel projections conceptualized for television or art house screenings to multichannel installations intended for art exhibitions. In the final years of his lengthy career, Marker explored new possibilities for materializing essayistic thought that were enabled by digital technology. He also experimented with the Internet as a site for production, exhibition, and dissemination of his work.

In addition to the era’s changing global landscape, its reconfiguration of political boundaries and alignments owing to the constant eruption of wars and genocidal violence, one development in particular had a significant effect on the essay film as it was conjoined with the shift to digital production: the formation of the European Union in 1993. The economic significance of this political formation, especially as it affected the production and export of national products, including culture, cannot be

underestimated. Renegotiation of the GATT trade agreement removed many of the protective policies that underwrote the national subsidization of culture and art. Various nationalist policies that had supported individual artists were dismantled in favor of funding tactics directed toward global projects. National and regional television support dried up, leaving many filmmakers disconnected from the media that had supported their work, and the new regulatory practices enabled only those cultural and aesthetic practices involving multiple nations to receive support. This shift led in part to the increasing multinational quality of many feature and independent film productions. It also had a profound bearing on European filmmakers, who had previously relied on the support of national television networks to produce and broadcast their work. Concomitant with the decrease in resources available for independent filmmakers, after decades of marginalization, film and video projects were finally being accepted by museums as more or less equivalent to painting, sculpture, photography, and the like. Accommodating the new source of funding made available throughout the art world was a disciplinary shift and a blurring of fields associated with the production, exhibition, and distribution of moving images as filmmakers became artists and artists became filmmakers. Productions that might previously have been viewed on television were found in museums, and lengthy nonfiction films were screened at art festivals. The collapse in public funding for experimental filmmaking and its distribution coincided not only with the shift from analog to digital image technology but also with the development of new projection equipment that facilitated the integration of large-screen film and video projects into art spaces. This phenomenon made important new transnational funding sources available for the fabrication, exhibition, and distribution of moving-image works.

The prevalence of film in exhibition spaces seemed to explode, which led in turn to new funding sources for production, exhibition, and distribution. Instead of negotiating with a television network such as West Deutscher Rundfunk (WDR) or Channel Four (France), filmmakers began to look to galleries, museums, and exhibition venues such as the Venice Biennale or Documenta in Kassel for production support. The malleable form of the essay film is particularly suited to migration from single-channel projections intended for theatrical release or television broadcasts to the myriad multiplatform and channel possibilities opened

up by the art exhibition space. Repositioning the essay film framed as art affected three distinct but overlapping aspects of its production and dissemination: techniques associated with montage; a reconception of the exhibition space and its relationship to the work; and an increased internationalism.

Montage in film had traditionally followed the linear model of the medium. Although cross-cutting implies multiple diegetic spaces that indicate differences in time and space, the overall medium in which montage was executed took place in a continuum. One sequence of images succeeds the next no matter what type of montage might be employed. Multiple screens affect not only the way visual montage is constructed but also the manner in which the soundtrack is manipulated to direct the viewer's attention from one screen to another through audial cues. In addition, films and videos were no longer screened only in single-channel theaters, separate from the rest of the museum; instead, moving images were projected in galleries alongside other works, and they were staged and produced for such projection. The abstract nature of these exhibition spaces encouraged multiple channels and screens, which generated new ways of thinking about spaces in which a mobile spectator could navigate relatively unrestricted, both temporally and spatially. New exhibition techniques such as "looping" and timing devices further altered the spectator's perception: multiple screens and projections could be experienced simultaneously; there might be conversations among spectators; and the rooms were often brightly lit. This type of viewing experience stands in sharp contrast to the ritual of sitting immersed quietly in a dark theater focused on a single set of images for a prescribed period of time. The possibility of using multiple screens had significant implications for rethinking montage. The practice of synchronized and looping projections challenged the concept of linear film and called into question any notion of beginning or ending. This looping of images is one aspect of installation film that corresponds to the meandering, nonteleological structure of the essay.

In the post-1989 era, the global nature of the essay film, which had always been an integral aspect of the genre, was further enhanced. This global dimension was facilitated not only by further advances in image-making technology, such as ever-smaller, lighter, and more portable cameras, including those on cell phones, but also by the unlimited supply of images available through the Internet, which makes archival footage

from an unlimited array of sources available and easy to download and incorporate in a film. The advent of the World Wide Web promised, as its nomenclature suggests, a new virtual international site without borders.<sup>1</sup> Marker was among the first essay filmmakers to explore the potential opened up by the Internet.

In concert with these developments, a new global structure emerged in the art world: the proliferation of international biennial-type exhibitions and art fairs that began in the 1990s. A fixed number of prestigious venues, such as the Venice Biennale, Sao Paulo Bienal, Whitney Biennale, Documenta (every five years), and Münster (every ten years), had existed for some time, but many new outlets for exhibiting art films arose in the 1990s. The Gwanju Biennale originated in Korea in 1995, followed by Manifesta (in various sites in Europe) in 1996, the Berlin Biennale in 1998, the Melbourne Biennale in 1999, and the Jerusalem Biennale in 2013. Approximately 200 such exhibitions take place worldwide today. With an invitation to participate in a biennial exhibition, artists and filmmakers travel to the associated city, and site-specific work is often produced in response to the host country or institution. As artists move around globally, they become part of a vast international circuit and are increasingly willing to take on political topics in their work. T. J. Demos observes: “Owing to these circumstances of the conjunction of representation, power, and technology, socially and politically active artists have taken up the ambition of intervening in the world, and have done so by reengaging and reinventing the documentary mode.”<sup>2</sup> What Demos refers to as “the documentary mode” is none other than the essay film, which has gained in popularity and practice over the past two decades, especially as manifested in the art world. Some essay filmmakers resist and problematize the phenomenon whereby moving images circulate in an unregulated flow at a pace determined by global capitalism and are accessible on demand through mobile devices anywhere and at any time. Prominent examples include Jean-Luc Godard’s *Film socialisme* (2010), which represents the anomie of twenty-first-century capitalism through the depiction of cruise ship passengers trapped in their individual, alienated worlds as they journey around the Mediterranean on the *Costa Concordia* ocean liner, and *Adieu au Langage* (2014), a 3-D narrative film that reflects on the end of communication and the birth of discourse. Both essay films were intended for theatrical release.

One result of the art gallery's accommodation of the essay film is that it became a commercial product, usually for sale in a limited edition. In contrast to the relatively open source media of television broadcasts or Internet postings, intended for mass audiences, essay films made as artworks are targeted for a specific market; their accessibility is carefully controlled, and viewership is designated to a limited public. Accessibility is connected to ownership, and the essay film as a work of art becomes highly exclusive. For this reason, essay filmmakers such as Ulrike Ottinger and Hartmut Bitomsky have refused the lure of the gallery and continue to make films exclusively for theatrical release. Others, such as Farocki or Hito Steyerl, cut it both ways, making single-channel projection films intended for theatrical release and multichannel versions meant for art exhibitions. Still others, such as Godard, use the museum platform to launch their vituperative condemnations of the commodification of all art and culture.<sup>3</sup>

#### SCHNITTSTELLE (1995)

Farocki began making films for the art world in the late 1990s. The collapse of public funding as a support system for independent filmmakers had a significant effect on his practice, which he had sustained by working with state-sponsored television. Farocki's early productions attest to the important role television played in terms of funding and distribution in West Germany. Commissions from broadcasting firms such as West Deutscher Rundfunk (WDR) allowed him to produce an enormous amount of work and fund essay films such as *Zwischen zwei Kriegen* (*Between Two Wars*, 1978), *Wie man sieht* (*As You See*, 1986), and *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1989). In the 1990s Farocki, like many other filmmakers at the margins of the industry, turned to galleries, museums, and large art-exhibition foundations for production support. The art world provided new platforms for non-fiction experimental film generally and for the essay film in particular. The designation "essay film" constituted an ideal nomenclature for critical films that combined aesthetic values appropriate to their new venues in art spaces with fragmentary and fictional narratives with documentary

facts. The manner in which these films were installed had the potential to add a new dimension to such critiques.

Farocki's shift corresponded to his transition from single- to multi-channel work and to his increasing experimentation with film loops, double or multiple screens, and spatial montages that employ the spectator's navigation of the rooms in which multiple image-screens are installed. Farocki first tackled this new type of exhibition venue and mode of production in his two-screen installation *Schnittstelle* (*Interface*, 1995). By employing two separate screens in one viewing space, Farocki sought to create what he referred to as a "soft montage." This comprised a "general relatedness" of images "rather than a strict opposition equation" produced by a linear montage of sharp cuts.<sup>4</sup> Two images are held in place simultaneously within the same spatial field, yielding new configurations. Soft montage allows for increased flexibility and openness of the text in which associations are suggested but not formally mandated. This form of montage is essentially a filmic parallel to Theodor W. Adorno's essayistic schema in which "discrete elements set off against one another come together to form a readable context . . . [as] the elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay's gaze."<sup>5</sup>

With *Schnittstelle* Farocki began a film practice in which discrete units occupy the same visual space; two parallel sets of images run simultaneously on separate tracks. The segments are to be viewed together, both in succession, as each unwinds, and simultaneously. The viewer regards two sets of moving images at once, each with its own internal logic and external relations to the other set of images. This interplay of moving images establishes temporal as well as spatial relationships. Each successive shot is as important as the one that it follows, and the concurrent image is no more significant than the adjacent one. As Farocki explained: "Imagine three double bonds jumping back and forth between the six carbon atoms of a benzene ring; I envisage the same ambiguity in the relationship of an element in an image track to the one succeeding or accompanying it."<sup>6</sup> This practice of placing images in force fields is key to understanding why Farocki made most of his multiscreen projects in single-channel versions, each as carefully crafted and thought out as the

ensemble. Occasionally he transposed double projections diagonally and overlapped them slightly within a single frame. In Farocki's work, images do not take the place of but supplement, reevaluate, critique, and balance those that precede them as well as those that run alongside them. As he explained, this conceptual reorientation is intimately aligned to the transition from analog to digital editing:

Touching the reel was pleasantly reassuring—like when you open a book and know immediately where you are in the book. . . . There was always the idea that future projection would turn the caterpillar into a butterfly—you don't get that with electronic images. There, you are dealing with two images! On the right is the edited image; on the left, the next image to be added on. The right image makes a demand, but is also being criticised by the left one, sometimes even condemned. This made me experiment with double projection works. . . . One image doesn't take the place of the previous one, but supplements it, re-evaluates it, balances it.<sup>7</sup>

With *Schnittstelle* the essay film takes on a new dual form akin to a conversation, with the two screens in dialogue with each other.

### *EYE/MACHINE* (2000–2003)

Following *Schnittstelle*, Farocki made several films that exist in both single-channel and multichannel formats. These include *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), designed initially as a single-channel transmission and transformed into a twelve-channel work a decade later; *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts* (2000); and *Vergleich über ein Drittes* (*Comparison via a Third*, 2009). The interplay between different formats and the respective effects they have on the spectator is evident in a comparison of his tripartite, double-channel video installation *Eye/Machine* (2000), *Eye/Machine II* (2001), and *Eye/Machine III* (2003) and its single-channel version, *War at a Distance* (2003), which is intended for theatrical screenings. The *Eye/Machine* series and *War at a Distance* are comprised entirely of “operative images,” sourced from scientific, medical, or military contexts that are meant to present rather than to represent material things and events.

The role of the human eye is eliminated with operative images since they are produced entirely through various technological devices. This use of operative imagery was a means for Farocki to investigate how image production not originally created for aesthetic reasons can be refunctioned into a work of art. By reorganizing these images into patterns and constellations and adding a commentary, he constructed arguments and posed philosophical questions, resulting in the audiovisual essay. Farocki attempted to make the voice-over as neutral as possible, providing only a minimum of information and eschewing fictional narrative. This combination of operative images with a seemingly objective commentary that effaces the subjective intrusion of the filmmaker situates his essay films at the opposite end of the spectrum from personal or self-reflexive works in the genre.

The shift from presentation to *representation* is enacted in the relationship between the viewer and the images as they are organized within each discrete channel, among the screens, and with the commentary. The effect on the spectator walking in and around an installation space differs significantly from sitting passively in a darkened theater, witnessing a film with a clear beginning and end. The issue is further complicated by the relative positions of the screens: whether they are lined up on the floor, as was the case with *Workers Leaving the Factory*, or placed at eye-level for someone standing or sitting.<sup>8</sup> Thus, for *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, which is based on images obtained from surveillance tapes from the California State Prison at Corcoran, the ideal installation would have the spectator seated on an industrial chair looking up at television monitors to approximate the position of a guard in a booth watching surveillance monitors.

Both *War at a Distance* and *Eye/Machine* open with operative images taken by “suicide cameras” during the U.S. bombing of Iraq in the first Gulf War. Most of the videos run in complete silence and are accompanied by a written text isolated in its own frame. In *War at a Distance* the words appear on a black screen at regular intervals between image sequences; in the dual monitor installation of *Eye/Machine*, words appear on one monitor, and the images are on the opposite screen. As the commentary bluntly states, “the war was soon forgotten.” Images from the Gulf War are followed by those of an array of intelligence weapons, including bomb detectors, mobile surveillance machines, and medical cameras. *Eye/Machine* underscores the dialectic of these “camera eyes,” which are



used in a benevolent manner to perform minimally invasive surgery in medicine and malevolently to wage deadly “surgical strikes” in war. By displaying alternating image sequences of both procedures, Farocki proposes that with global cameras there is “no real need to invade foreign space in order to collect data” and suggests that in the future war’s human targets will likely be obsolete. The viewer is never quite sure what she or he is seeing and feels remote and detached. Reinforcing this alienation is the commentary, which declares, “without connecting to everyday experiences the images fail to grip.” Indeed, these images have all been generated by computer programs, and human agency has been effectively eliminated. In one instance, a shot of a computer on one screen is juxtaposed to the “secondhand” images it has been used to produce. The text notes that industrial labor has replaced not only manual but also visual work because these machines are utterly devoid of social context. The result, Farocki suggests, is a proliferation of images “of the world to be processed” as technological vision supplants natural vision.

Farocki’s format differs markedly from single-channel theatrical projection to multichannel exhibition. *Eye/Machine* is intended as a double projection with the two videotapes running in a continuous loop on a single large screen. In *Eye/Machine II* and *III*, Farocki used two separate screens, thereby increasing the distance between the images. Both of these installation strategies transform the content of the videotapes in several ways. First, the continuous loop recalls the constant replay of media images on television as well as the continuous recording of visual matter by satellite surveillance cameras. Second, the silence of the installations places the spectator in a position of surveilling information in a detached and alienated manner similar to the way the machine or drone captured the images. Third, the effect of simultaneously watching two discrete image tracks dramatically alters the way the viewer processes the information.

Double-screen soft montage results in a mediated dialogic space between the two images in which unexpected associations emerge. By creating a space between the two tracks, Farocki interrupted the mechanized image-making systems and restored the gap between natural vision and mechanized vision. In contrast to a single-channel videotape, which imposes a monocular, technologized vision on the spectator, the two-channel installation opens a space for thought, interpretation, and reflection, the goal of which is to activate the spectator. The associations

constructed by the viewer from myriad possible narratives that the viewer plays an active role in putting together. Farocki's use of montage, whether linear or spatial, recalls Adorno's observation that a film form that "neither lapses into arts-and-crafts, nor slips into a mere documentary . . . is that of *montage*, which does not interfere with things but rather arranges them in a *constellation* akin to that of writing."<sup>9</sup> The essayistic quality of Farocki's installation represents a significant stage in the development of the film genre. Farocki has gone beyond the two-dimensional audiovisual form of the essay intended for theatrical viewing, translating it into a three-dimensional installation.

In the decade that followed, Farocki continued his investigation into the increasingly technologized and mediated practice of warfare with his four-part installation *Serious Games I-IV* (2009–2010), which consists of the following: *I: Watson Is Down*; *II: Three Dead*; *III: Immersion*; and *IV: A Sun with No Shadow*. *Serious Games* examines the widespread use of computer games to prepare, train, and engage in war. Countless scenarios are invented as future combatants fight myriad wars using video-recording gear. Following his experiments in exhibition format, such as *Workers Leaving the Factory* and *Deep Play*, which were installed like sculptures and occupied an entire gallery, Farocki positioned the four parts of *Serious Games* in the middle of the exhibition space so they could be viewed from both sides. The installation encouraged the spectator to ambulate around the projections, observing them from multiple vantage points. Other spectators were also free to move around, so views of the piece were occasionally obstructed. This experience differs radically from what one would normally encounter in a cinema, and the shift from stationary to mobile spectator further affects the montage. In soft montage, Farocki argued that the space between two fixed elements or images produces thought or meaning, whereas in *Serious Games* the montage occurs in the spaces between the bodies of the viewers and the screens. By mobilizing the spectator to engage his or her body in relation to others, Farocki was drawing attention to the "liveness" of the public, a "reality" that is posited in contrast to the flow of the computer-generated images in which the viewers are immersed. The "documentary real" emerges in the gallery, where the public's active engagement with the installation contrasts with the remote manner in which virtual weapons are used to wage war.

*THE SILVER AND THE CROSS* (2010)

With the shift from cinema or television to gallery as a venue for essay films, the specific qualities of the exhibition space take on an added relevance.<sup>10</sup> The context in which essay films are screened shapes and profoundly affects their meaning. The architectural space in which the work is exhibited might be large and empty or small and cramped. Exhibition spaces are not usually designed with sound in mind, creating additional challenges for the installation of audiovisual works. Further, there is the important issue of what is installed alongside the work, which might include other works by the artist or by others. In both instances, the exhibition curator, sometimes working in tandem with the artist, establishes a narrative and puts it into play. Finally, there is the broader history implied by the space itself, which at times erupts unwillingly and uncannily. This was the case with Farocki's *The Silver and the Cross* (2010), which was made for the group exhibition *The Potosi Principle: How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land*, curated by Alice Creischer, Andreas Sieckmann, and Max Jorge Hinderer at the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid (2010). The curators and artists were determined to underscore the "dark and brutal" side of Spain's glorious "golden age" in this royal museum.

*The Potosi Principle* featured twenty-two colonial paintings to which contemporary artists were invited to respond. For his part, Farocki addressed Gaspar Miguel de Berrio's *Descripción del Cerro Rico e Imperial Villa de Potosí* (1758), a panoramic painting depicting the wealth, citizens, and laborers of the city of Potosi, Bolivia. Farocki, like the other artists selected to participate, made a work that addressed the topic of the exhibition, the vexed history of one of the world's richest silver mines. The artists and curators involved in the project traveled to Bolivia to conduct extensive research. Taken together the curatorial project and installation constitute one large essay composed of multiple shards and fragments. Farocki divided his single-channel film into two sets of images, each of which contains sequences either from present-day Potosi or from details of de Berrio's painting. During the sixteenth century Potosi was one of the wealthiest and largest cities in the world, with a population exceeding that of London. It was not only the capital of silver production but also a conduit for the global transportation of enslaved laborers from Africa, and later China. During the initial years of the mining operation,

the Spanish exploited the indigenous population, which perished by the thousands due to mercury poisoning. The same happened to the Africans and later Asians, who suffered from the strenuous work conditions at high altitudes and the ongoing mercury poisoning. The number of deaths were not recorded, nor does any evidence remain of the genocide. Farocki examined every square inch of the painting meticulously, performing an elaborate iconographical analysis to expose that which is not shown. As the deadpan voice-over explains, the canvas depicts Potosi during its economic height as a lively and vibrant city, full of commerce, religious icons, and ceremonial processions. It features the complex system of waterworks developed to produce sufficient energy to pulverize the rocks from the mines, resulting in the piles of crushed ore mixed with mercury that are neatly arranged next to the processing mills. Yet nowhere in the painting can the probing camera find any sign of the Spanish exploitation of the indigenous population. Not even the entrances of the mines are represented. Farocki's film underscores that the key historic details that generated the city's wealth and existence are invisible. This conspicuous absence speaks of the massive violence, described by the voice-over as "large-scale genocide" wrought upon both the indigenous population and the foreign slave laborers. Whereas de Berrio's painting reflects an effort to capture a history that was already 250 years old, Farocki produced an audiovisual history 500 years later that brings the "losers of history" back to consciousness. The double-screen projection, with its images from both the past and the present, sets up a dialogue, a commentary, a conversation. Cynthia Beatt, who provides the narrative voice-over, also delivered the text in Farocki's signature essay film, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* of twenty years earlier, forging a theoretical sound bridge with that film and reminding the viewer of the recto/verso of in/visibility. Beatt's voice is factual, neutral, and without emotion as she delivers the counterhistory of Potosi. As we contemplate the absence of the slave laborers, the commentary observes that "it is important to bear in mind that the philosophers of the European Enlightenment also made no mention of slavery or of the slave trade." Although it is similar in methodology to Resnais's *Van Gogh*, in which a history is produced entirely out of images from the artist's oeuvre, Farocki's addition of a second screen on which to juxtapose a different set of images composed of contemporary shots, voids, texts, or details from Berrio's painting further complexifies

the genre. The political critique of *The Silver and the Cross* emerges in the interplay of imagery on the two screens and the regular insertion of black screens to provide the viewer with time to pause, think, and contemplate the message delivered by the commentary.

By using the same voice from twenty years earlier, Farocki suggested a continuum between the two works. In his earlier film, he examined the im/perceptible that lies at or just beyond the margins of the field of vision or cognition. In a manner that resonates strongly with Benjamin's notion of the "optical unconscious," the eye of the camera records evidence that eludes the human eye. As Farocki demonstrated in both films, we often see and do not see at the same time, or we do not see what we are not looking for. As Allan Sekula argued in "Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labor and Capital," to see documents differently the reader has to ask different questions. According to Sekula, the questions posed when mining an archive determine the meaning of its contents.<sup>11</sup> A similar process is operative in Farocki's work. Through his meticulous analyses he demonstrates that many images function as puzzles, not unlike the image of a duck that may be that of a rabbit depending on one's perspective. As Adorno wrote in *Aesthetic Theory*: "Every artwork is a picture puzzle [*Vexierbild*], a puzzle to be solved, but this puzzle is constituted in such a fashion that it remains a vexation. . . . Artworks are like picture puzzles in that what they hide . . . is visible and is, by being visible, hidden."<sup>12</sup> Part of Farocki's project is to show both sides of the puzzle. If, following Adorno, the picture puzzle functions as a metaphor for the operation of ideology—that is, it privileges certain perspectives over others—then in *The Silver and the Cross* it is the ideology of the image-maker as well as that of the viewer that determines the way forms of war such as colonialism are documented and seen. Adorno used the trope of the picture puzzle in his penetrating social critique *Minima Moralia* to address the transformation in the perception of labor under advanced capitalism. The philosopher lamented that workers in the new societies constructed around an economy of consumption are no longer able to perceive themselves as individuals. His treatise on the "Picture Puzzle" ends with the "grimly comic riddle" pondered by contemporary sociologists: "Where is the proletariat?"<sup>13</sup> With *The Silver and the Cross*, Farocki reinserted into the historical record the many enslaved laborers who lost their lives mining silver so that the Spanish Empire could flourish.

*PARTIALLY BURIED* (1996)

In 1966 Robert Smithson argued that “memory becomes sedentary and sooner or later finds a physical shape (art), and this memory emerges from future time. . . . Only when art is fragmented, discontinuous and incomplete can we know about that vacant eternity that excludes *objects* and determined meanings.”<sup>14</sup> These beliefs resonate strongly in the work of Green, who two decades following Smithson’s early death engaged his art in an intertextual dialogue with her mixed media essay *Partially Buried* (1996). This is the first of a trilogy of interwoven works Green made in the late 1990s that includes *Übertragen/Transfer* (1996) and *Partially Buried Continued* (1997). Green made all three works both as discrete essay films and as segments of larger gallery installations.<sup>15</sup> Initially shot on Super 8 and then digitally transferred to film, it comprises a multi-layered audiovisual track that consists of voice-over, soundtrack, image track, and text in the form of intertitles and printed words that run left to right across the visuals. Historical records, found footage, and archival sounds are interwoven with personal reminiscences and musings. Unlike visual artists of the 1970s such as Smithson, Vito Acconci, and Martha Rosler, who stumbled onto the essay film as an appropriate genre with which to express their ideas, Green began with the goal of translating the literary-philosophical form of the essay into an audiovisual practice. She explicitly refers to Adorno’s theorization of the essay and to Walter Benjamin’s dialogic practice of essay writing.

In addition to her firm grounding in the German philosophical tradition of the essay, Green turns to more recent models of essay films by filmmakers such as Farocki, Godard, Alexander Kluge, Marker, Jean-Marie Straub, and Danièle Huillet, and to artists such as Smithson, Rosler, and Dan Graham. In *Partially Buried* she takes up the dual roots of the essay film by combining filmic and artistic practice, bringing together two relatively distinct spheres to produce new work. The tendency to blur the distinction between art and film in these productions is further complicated by a temporal and geographical swathe that moves dialogically from the 1990s back to the 1970s and ranges from North America to Europe in its subject matter.

Following Gene Youngblood’s notion on expanded cinema and his belief that the traditional cinematic apparatus could be expanded productively

into other media and arenas, Green's single-channel projections are but one component of her multifarious installations. This expanded "essay" component of Green's work accounts for many of its specific aspects. One characteristic of both the literary essay and its audiovisual counterpart is that both involve a significant amount of perambulation. Similar to the trope of the flâneur, an essay follows no specific or predetermined path, indulging in digressions, transgressions, and detours, with sheer chance as its only guiding principle. Adorno observed that in the essay "thought does not progress in a single direction; instead moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture. . . . The essay erects no scaffolding and no structure."<sup>16</sup> The essay follows a natural rhythm rather than a prescribed meter. Smithson made similar observations in "A Cinematic Atopia": "The simple rectangle of the movie screen contains the flux, no matter how many different orders one presents. But no sooner have we fixed the order in our mind than it dissolves into limbo. Tangled jungles, blind paths, secret passages, lost cities invade perception."<sup>17</sup> Green's work is concerned with a similar tension. It explores the ways in which memory can be triggered through a variety of mnemonic stimuli offered by letters of the alphabet or disjointed geometrical figures, moving lights, or unrelated citations, seeking a way to arrange the heterogeneous materials. The element of chance needs to be preserved to maintain the ephemeral character of the subject matter so that the end product is neither a "death mask" nor a documentary.

Green's audiovisual essays find their conceptual correlative in her exhibitions. When she installed "Between and Including" in the Vienna Secession exhibition hall (1999), she transformed the entire exhibition space into a maze of interconnected chambers with no preset path or trajectory for the viewer to follow. The films *Partially Buried*, *Übertragen/Transfer*, and *Partially Buried Continued* were projected in separate niches and accompanied by the appropriate documentation and supporting materials. The structure of her exhibition expanded the essay into a three-dimensional spatial device; its winding passages actualized the genre's inconclusive and nonlinear form. At the center of the maze, Green constructed a "Velvet light trap" theater where she projected a fourth film, *Some Chance Operations* (1999), which explored the career of one of Italy's most prolific early filmmakers, Elvira Notari, who has been largely erased from the annals of film history. Green based her design for the "Velvet light trap" on models

for an “invisible cinema” created by the Austrian experimental filmmaker, Peter Kubelka, who postulated that the presence of chairs in an enclosed velvet space would exaggerate the aural component of the cinematic experience. Green’s evocation of Kubelka in the Vienna Secession exhibition hall serves to remind viewers of the history of that building, completed in 1897 to house the works of artists who had broken with academic tradition, just as it recalls Kubelka’s own status as a rebellious artist who was radically rethinking artistic practice in postwar Austria.

Unlike theatrical screenings of essay films, exhibition installations enable artists to expand on the particular conditions of particular sites to establish new meanings and connections. At an exhibition at the Kunstverein Felsenvilla in Baden, Austria (1998), Green screened both *Partially Buried* and *Partially Buried Continued* one after another through a single projector, and Smithson’s film *Spiral Jetty* was projected alongside. The effect was to swerve the meaning of *Partially Buried* and *Partially Buried Continued* closer to the legacy of Smithson than to historical events such as the murder of students at Kent State University. Placing one film next to another functions in a manner similar to the “Kuleshov effect,” in which the signification of an image derives from and changes according to what comes immediately before or after it, or in this case next to it.

In tandem with her installations, Green’s exhibitions often include public screenings of films that she curates. The film programs vary according to the site. For example, to accompany the exhibition “Flow” (1996) at the Fri-Art Centre d’Art Contemporain-Kunsthalle in Fribourg, Switzerland, she curated a series with films that were either sponsored by the Swiss government or had something to do with the nation, such as Beno Maggi’s *The Sixth Continent* (1992). For “Between and Including” she curated a program that included Elvira Notari’s *E’Piccerella* (1921), Robert Frank’s *Last Supper* (1992), Su Friedrich’s *Sink or Swim* (1990), Hollis Frampton’s *Nostalgia* (1991), and John Cassavetes’ *Shadows* (1957). Similarly, for a film series she organized at the Antoni Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona in conjunction with her “Shadows and Signals” exhibition of 2000, Green paired Frampton’s *Nostalgia* and *Zorn’s Lemma* (1970); Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1969) and *The Bus* (1964); Yvonne Rainer’s *Journey’s from Berlin/1971* (1980) and *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976); and Sara Gomez’s *De cierta manera* (1975–1977) and Lorenzo Llobet Gracia’s *Vida en sombras* (1947–1948). In each of these exhibitions, Green situated



her work in a carefully curated context that connects her practice to particular histories. This process is akin to what occurs when the traditional media of painting, drawing, and sculpture are exhibited with different works as part of a larger curatorial concept. For all three exhibitions, Green selected films that avoid easy classification and have strong essayistic tendencies. In this way, she inserts her work as part of this genealogy. By establishing a network and creating a history of a hybrid type of film production through which to understand her audiovisual essays, Green engages with a concept of expanded cinema that extends beyond a single discrete production to connect to a vast institutional history of film. Her attentiveness to the overall exhibition adds a new component to the essay that expands beyond the specific cinematic screen projecting her works to a field that extends beyond the walls of the gallery.

In *Partially Buried* Green develops several interlocking themes: history and memory, identity and death, and art and politics, and explores the figure of Smithson. Green takes up Smithson's charge to produce an artwork that is imbued with the past but avoids being what Benjamin called "the death mask of its conception."<sup>18</sup> The fragmentary and wandering path of the essay, which by definition remains open-ended without forming conclusions, is well suited for this task. By the same token, to make a documentary about Smithson would risk freezing his identity and creating a death mask. Smithson's artistic legacy is the ghostly presence that inhabits the film. The seminal role that it plays in Green's work can be traced both to his sculpture *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) and to his writings on site and nonsite. The title of Green's film omits "woodshed," leaving the signifier open: *what* is partially buried—is it a person, a memory, an object? She raises the question again in the title of the first project's companion piece, *Partially Buried Continued*. Here Smithson's ghost is joined by the specter of the late Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a Korean American writer, artist, and filmmaker whose work primarily concerned the intersections of time, memory, and language and the inadequacies of traditional structures of representation. Green indirectly relates the death of these artists to other deaths: in the case of Smithson to the four students murdered by the National Guard at Kent State University, the site of his installation *Partially Buried Woodshed*; in the case of Cha, to the student protesters slaughtered by government soldiers in Kwangju, Korea, on May 18, 1980.

Specters often exceed particular individuals. *Partially Buried* is obliquely about the death of an era and the eclipse of memory. Death triggers a new production; it is the catalyst around which subsequent events adhere. Film and video have the ability to bring back the dead, to reanimate them not only through representation but also by imbuing them with a new context and meaning. These recording technologies function as a double medium, able to at once communicate with present and past by recording and replaying sounds and images. Inserting figures from the past into a new system of signification without turning the film into a memorial or eulogy is difficult. As Green notes in *Partially Buried Continued*, citing loosely from architect Adolph Loos, “the tomb and the monument are places of memory.” Instead of fixed and static forms, often carved in stone, Green’s essay films are kinetic, labile, and open productions in which memory can be stored and reactivated. They are always in process, open to be continuously transformed into new shapes with new meanings.

Typewritten words scroll across the screen in *Partially Buried*: “Deaths and lives are what myths are made of, and their residue is what we can read about or watch in a movie.” Residue is what remains, the trace of something in memory or history. Green uses the essay form to explore the complicated operation by which what is fleeting and exists only as a trace can be represented in an audiovisual medium; how something that is barely perceptible or absent can be made visible, audible, present, without losing the ghostlike quality of ephemerality. The question is how to unbury a memory without carrying out a grim exhumation. It is important to preserve the ambiguity and tenuousness of a memory because to complete it would be to fix its meaning in an act of memorialization. At the beginning of *Partially Buried Continued*, Green makes a statement that she attributes to Theodor Reik via Walter Benjamin via Beatriz Colomina: “The function of remembrance [Gedächtnis] is protection of impressions, memory [Erinnerung] aims at their destruction. Remembrance is essentially conservative; memory destructive.” That Reik, Benjamin, and Colomina cited the original quote at different times, in different ways, and in radically different contexts, speaks to the mobility of thoughts and ideas. The act of quotation is a dynamic gesture. Through it, Green engages in an intertextual dialogue as she refunctions the meaning of the original text into something new. This process of constant transformation prevents atrophy or calcification of thought and memory.

*Partially Buried* opens with the credits rolling upward vertically against a black screen. This is followed by footage taken from the front seat on the passenger side of a car whose driver, caught in profile, is Green. By foregrounding herself as an artist, Green performs a form of what Catherine Russell characterizes as auto-ethnography in which everything that follows will be mediated self-consciously through the subjective “I/Eye.”<sup>19</sup> The inclusion of the self as an autobiographical character through which to structure the narrative is a key characteristic of the essay film as posited by Renov, Corrigan, and Rascaroli. But Green transforms this tradition, with the self appearing in both the first and third person: not only as an “I/eye” witness but also as a “she/other/viewer.” Green reflects on her current self in the third person as one of several characters: “They [she and Smithson] occupied the same time and location briefly. Is that important? Not necessarily, but she ponders the conjecture.” In *Partially Buried* we see Green cast herself as a ten-year-old child, her hair plaited in braids, wearing a backpack, jacket and pants, wandering in the woods, and looking for traces of Smithson’s sculpture. She has returned physically but not temporally to a childhood site, Kent State. As it is only in her imagination that going back in time can occur, she presents her view through a present-day lens. Green drives through Shaker Heights, an upper-middle-class suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. This is followed by a series of images from the site of the 1964 World’s Fair in Queens, an elephant (linked symbolically to memory) and a carousel. These images are interspersed with running words in purple that traverse a black screen from right to left: “How does one return? To a country, to a place of birth? To a location that reeks of remembered sensations? But what are these sensations? Is it possible to trace how they are triggered and why they are accompanied with as much dread as anticipation?” Green evokes the genre of the “artist on the road,” road films, literary treks such as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, and parts of her own book *Camino/Road* (1994).<sup>20</sup> In accordance with the genre of the road film, the viewer anticipates that a quest for knowledge will occur. A running text foregrounds the artist’s presence in the third person: “This return . . . induced the artist to examine her relationship to the genealogy of American artists as well as to attempt to imagine the currents that affected her before she was consciously aware of their capacity to shape.” Two forces come into play to shape meaning: the culture of an era that nurtures us, which operates more or less indirectly and unconsciously,

and the more focused, conscious influence of a particular artist, embodying the “genealogy of American artists,” in this instance, Smithson.

The film brings together two events from 1970: Smithson’s artistic project produced during the winter months, which involved burying a woodshed with dirt until its main beam cracked, leaving it partially buried but in the process of total destruction, and the May 4, 1970, National Guard shooting of a group of university students who were peacefully protesting the Vietnam War and the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. Green recalls waiting for her mother to return home from the university on that particular day, translating the public event into the viewpoint of an anxious child. For most of the American public, however, Kent State remains linked primarily to the memory of the student killings and as a marker of the end of an era of peaceful protest.

The film commentary asks how best to evoke an era: through music, art, public events, literature, film, style? The subtext is the relevance of the seventies for the nineties—why the era was “in vogue” twenty years later and how it was marketed for consumption. What Green evokes is not an era that has been carefully packaged for a future generation but a culture that has been marked both by the artistic experimentation of the 1960s, as represented by artists such as Smithson, and by the political activism of the student population. In her first and last films of the sequence, Green used a photograph of Robert Smithson and Robert Morris climbing over a chain link fence as a symbol of artistic border crossing. In *Partially Buried Continued* she includes flashes of work by politically committed artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler, as well as references to a symposium in 1970 titled “The Artist and Politics.”

Green’s interest in Smithson’s *Partially Buried Woodshed* exceeds both personal coincidence and the artist’s politics. It is related to Smithson’s preoccupation with the effect of entropy on a work of art, and to how the significance of an artwork can be transformed by an external event. Like his *Spiral Jetty* construction in the Great Salt Lake of Utah, the woodshed at Kent State was meant to be absorbed into nature and disappear. But the meaning of the piece shifted dramatically following the National Guard shootings and became an emblem of “Kent State”—a name or label that refers not merely to a place or a university but to a crime scene, a crisis, a symbol of state-condoned violence, and, for many, the loss of innocence. Shortly after the killings someone painted “May 4, 1970” across

the unburied part of the woodshed. This anonymous graffiti explicitly connected Smithson's artwork to the slayings. *Partially Buried Woodshed* became an informal monument to the dead. The memorialization process froze Smithson's sculpture both spatially and temporally, at least until it finally gave out in the early 1980s. Through this collapse *Partially Buried Woodshed* was again transformed and reanimated. Green's project evokes the metamorphosis that *Partially Buried Woodshed* underwent; her essay film puts forward the ephemeral traces, fragments, and residue of what remains.

Green is aware that memory cannot be captured in a discrete time capsule, recovered from the temporal earth in which it is buried. By using quotations from previous authors, organizing film programs in the cities where her films are installed, and installing vitrines to exhibit related books, pamphlets, and photographs, Green highlights the associated cultural matter that clings to the past. She avoids the museum practice of extracting, cleaning, preserving, and displaying art in a vacuum. In this way she follows Smithson, who proclaimed: "Dialectics could be viewed as the relationship between the shell and the ocean. Art critics and artists have for a long time considered the shell without the context of the ocean."<sup>21</sup> It is the "context of the ocean" (culture) that is vital to an understanding of Green's audiovisual essays (shells). Whenever possible she emphasizes the context of cultural production—the sound of an era, its music, its books, its images, its style. In the first exhibition of *Partially Buried*, Green included a case with fragments from the foundation of Smithson's woodshed. The dialectic relation was figured not only spatially between the object/event and that which surrounded it but also temporally between the time of its production and the time of its unearthing and display. In "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), Benjamin directed the material historian to grasp "the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one."<sup>22</sup> As Green explains, "my idea of history is as an activity reflecting lived lives which relates to something that is very present. It is not something different."<sup>23</sup> The past is determined by the present, which undermines the "truth bearing" role of the investigator or archeologist, because it is ever warped by the artist's subjectivity, which threatens to overshadow and color any objective search. The past and present are intertwined, and the visual equivalent of this occurs cinematographically when sequences of archival celluloid footage are digitally

reshot, remastered, and remixed. Green uses this bracketing technique in a manner consistent with her use of quotations; in both instances the framing effect underscores the mediated nature of history, which is filtered through the perspective of the storyteller. A recurrent shift or displacement makes it impossible to provide a direct window onto the past. Green pursues her investigation of the fine line between observations and stories, problematizing how observations become stories and how memories are shaped into narratives and then transmitted to others. As an intertitle comments: “*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. . . . It starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties on to the next. . . . In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop.”

Any retelling is a fictional construct of one’s imagination embedded in false memories and impressions. Because it is fictional, must it be any less real? Green’s essay films address the construction of fictional characters, including her own appearance on the screen. In that sense, her films highlight their own construction. Green’s essay films, like those of Godard, Marker, Minh-ha, Welles, and others, are self-consciously reflexive and draw attention to their own artifice. To cite Adorno, “the untruth in which the essay knowingly entangles itself is the element in which its truth resides.”<sup>24</sup> In such works, fiction is read as fact and fact as fiction.

An image that surfaces several times in this trilogy of audiovisual essays features jellyfish in a large aquarium. The medusas saunter across the screen, bobbing in a seemingly random way, literally going with the flow. The first time they appear in *Partially Buried* a child’s voice asks in German “Haben die Augen?” (“Do they have eyes?”). In *Partially Buried Continued* and *Some Chance Operations*, the jellyfish float across the screen without an accompanying soundtrack. The clips of jellyfish encode much of what is vital in Green’s work: random movements, floating signifiers, and the idea of transculturation suggested by the German voice. The recurrence of the jellyfish image also links Green’s various projects to Smithson, the era of the seventies, politically active artists, and avant-garde filmmakers—all building blocks or foundations of Green’s artistic practice. These clusters of discrete images function as monadic markers, discrete but interconnected. Like the repetition of an arrangement of

notes in music, they connect the films through a continuous structure of accretion: a rhizomatic structure akin to Godard's "and" that is never finished but presented with each film and installation as one more variation. Green challenges the finitude of the discrete form of the essay by producing artworks that are at once complete and incomplete. Although designed to be watched separately, in an installation context they can be transformed, reactivated, and reanimated to engage with the present. As Fredric Jameson has proposed, art installations function "not as a work or a style . . . but rather as a strategy (or a recipe)—a strategy for producing an event, a recipe for events."<sup>25</sup> Like the end of *Partially Buried*, their message is always "Partially Over . . . Stay Tuned."

### NEW TECHNIQUES

Whereas Farocki was fascinated by the virtual world and its relations to image production and technologies of knowledge, he examined this theme from the outside, resorting to filmic projections to perform his critique. It was only for his very last project, *Labour in a Single Shot* (2001–2014), that Farocki utilized the potential of the Internet as a site for exhibition. By contrast, Marker was quick to experiment with digital technology as a means of making images, then as a new format for essays, and finally as a site for exhibition and distribution. With his oft repeated phrase "I traded film for video, video for computer," Marker oversimplified his excursions in digital media and the Internet, two realms that frequently overlap but are distinct, particularly as they relate to the categories of film production, display, dissemination, and use. Just as he saw video as a powerful political technology based on its accessibility, relatively low cost, and suitability for mass distribution, so he was aware of the democratic potential of digital media, which could open virtually unlimited resources of information and knowledge, make material accessible, and connect individuals around the globe.

Marker's belief in the Internet emerged out of his commitment to a cinema of engagement. An early model of using cinema as a mode of engaged social practice was Aleksander Medvedkine's ciné-train, which traveled the Soviet Union during the 1920s to fulfill his aim of using film

as an instructional tool to help citizens understand and resolve conflicts. The goal was to demystify filmmaking and put the means of production in the hands of the public—to help them make the leap from passive to active spectatorship. In the late sixties, Marker was inspired by this example to form a collective in which the workers made their own films. Initially funded by Marker's production company SLON (Société pour le Lancement d'Oeuvres Nouvelles, "Company for the Launching of New Work"), the Medvedkine Group made twelve films. For the idea of a train lab, Marker substituted new, lightweight cameras and the video Porta-Pak. Marker's explorations of the full potential of the Internet as a radicalizing political form had its roots in television as a distribution system. His *Le Joli Mai* (*The Lovely Month of May*, 1963) included observations of everyday life in Paris. In a short sequence that takes place in the bleak, tiny studio apartment of a worker, the voice-over comments: "for many Parisians, television is the only widow open on the world, and this window is all the more needed when the room is small."<sup>26</sup> Fifty years later the window of television has been replaced by the Internet, through which one can not only observe passively as a spectator but also enter and participate as a user. For Marker, the shift from analog to digital production and the new virtual world provided both novel techniques for the essay and a new platform for its exhibition and distribution with the capacity to transform the passive subjectivity of the reader/viewer into an interactive agent.<sup>27</sup>

Marker's early experimentation with new forms of media and exhibition is linked to his interest in history and its representation or transformation into media images. Moreover, his shift to digital techniques corresponds to his foray into museums. Marker's first video installation *Quand le siècle a pris forme* (*When the Century Took Shape*, 1978) made for that year's exhibition "Paris-Berlin 1900–1930" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, presented footage and images from World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the failed Spartacus Revolution in Germany of 1919, together with the onset of the Great Depression and other relevant historic events. Experimenting with the new montage opportunities provided by a three-dimensional exhibition space, Marker set up two towers of television monitors on which he played looped footage that included sequences from World War I fighter airplanes and tanks and other advances in military technology that profoundly changed twentieth-century warfare. Working with



a prototype Apple computer, he processed the images synthetically with a crude digital synthesizer that rendered the black and white sequences in color. Playing with the temporal rhythm of the sequences, he broke down the distinct photolike quality of the images into pixels. The process distorted and defamiliarized the images, provoking the viewer to pause and reflect on their nature and question why Marker subjected them to such metamorphosis. The answer lay in the ongoing significance of these early events in the first quarter of the century—war, revolution, economic depression—and Marker’s acute awareness that their relevance was fading from public memory. The “war to end all wars” did no such thing; instead it introduced new weaponry and rules of the game that allowed for even greater mass destruction and annihilation. Marker transformed images from the past to highlight the effects of new technology on the filmic medium and the intertwined relationship of history and cinema. To surviving black and white archival footage he added color and distortions to indicate a “pastness,” uncannily bringing contemporary relevance to a remote history.

Four years later, in *San Soleil* (*Sunless*, 1982), Marker depicted computer hacker Hayao Yamaneko similarly, modifying images with a computer synthesizer to create his “Zone.” In the film, Yamaneko manipulates images from a variety of sources, both historic and imaginary. He starts with documentary footage of past events, which he then transforms because, as the voice-over explains, “if the images of the present don’t change, then change the images of the past.” The synthesized images, the commentary continues, are “less deceptive than those you see on television. At least they proclaim themselves to be what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality.” If the essay film blends fact and fiction, then the digital process of transformation that Marker applied to archival footage is fundamentally essayistic.

The recourse to new technology and the shift from analog to digital techniques enabled Marker to represent an event in which he did not share a time and a space, one that he did not witness directly but could only imagine. It is important to recall that Marker was not a historic filmmaker in the traditional sense; for the most part, he directed his work to address contemporary events. He was keenly aware of the difficulty involved in presenting nonfictional historic material to which

one has not had direct access and exists only as a mediated memory. His engagement with the contemporary finds its outlet in museum installations as well as in the medium of television. It is therefore not surprising that Marker brought the two platforms together in his next project, *Zapping Zone: Proposals for an Imaginary Television* (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1991). *Zapping Zone* consisted of an assembly of twenty video and computer monitors of varying sizes, photographs, and several sound stations. The monitors played animation clips, documentaries, and short video essays, many of which Marker released as separate works. The video essays include portraits of contemporaries such as *Matta* (1985), *Christo* (1985), and *Tarkovsky* (1986); animal pieces such as *Chat écoutant musique* (*Cat Listening to Music*, 1990); and focus videos relating to recent political events, including *Détour Ceausescu* (1990), about the television coverage and execution of the former Romanian dictator and his wife, and *Berlin '90* (1990), which covers the first free elections in Berlin after the fall of the wall. *Zapping Zone*, with its multiple monitors placed in different positions—some on the floor, others mounted on metal platforms—together with the jumble of cables and antennae, created an overwhelming effect on the spectator, a literal information overload. The logic informing the installation is more cybernetic than cinematic, as indicated by an earlier title for the project: “logiciel/catacombes” (“software/catacombs”). With *Zapping Zone*, Marker gave three-dimensional form to and materialized different *denkbilder* (“thought images”) of his essayistic mode of practice. The format of the installation allowed for the coexistence of multiple registries of information and ideas.

The complex installation is indicative of a change in Marker's thinking that was initiated by digital systems. Unlike the linearity of his earlier work in television and film, the new piece is based on constellations that allow multiple times and spaces to coexist. Advances in digital technology permitted Marker to propel the essay film into a new register, one that is not bound by the older linear forms of representation available through writing or film. Thus, in his portrait of Andrei Tarkovsky, *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich* (1999), the commentary asks the viewer to imagine the Russian filmmaker's oeuvre, not chronologically but similar to the way one would navigate a vast house with interconnected chambers and passages through which images, motifs, and ideas flow freely.

*IMMEMORY* (1996–1997)

During the 1990s, parallel to his ongoing film work, Marker produced a CD-ROM, *Immemory One*, in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou, based on the structure of his installation *Zapping Zone*.<sup>28</sup> *Immemory One* was exhibited in museums, encouraging viewer interactivity, and available for individual purchase under the title *Immemory*. The dual exhibition format appealed to two different types of viewers: those who go to museums and may see a work in a public setting, usually only once, and those who experience the work at home and can fully explore, analyze, and dissect it at will. Marker designed *Immemory* as a personal archive or history. It opens with a menu featuring a variety of subject headings that open up to Marker's personal musings, photographs, citations, music, and film sequences. A series of routes can be followed on the themes of War, Film, Photography, Poetry, Museums, Voyages, and X-Plugs (the surrealistic collages Marker made out of well-known fine arts masterpieces). There are numerous overlaps and repetitions within these sites; multiple possibilities open up under each heading. For example, the photography heading offers several choices: China, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Bosnia, World War II. Click on Cuba and a series of images of Cuba in the thirties unfolds at a speed determined by the user. Musical and film extracts also can be accessed. Marker's CD-ROM introduces the character of an orange cartoon cat, Guillaume-en-Egypte, who alternately serves as guide, muse, and commentator. The same feline reappears in Marker's Second Life platform, *L'Ouvroir: Pictures at an Exhibition* (2008). In *Immemory*, Guillaume-en-Egypte takes over the traditional role of newsreel commentator. At one point in the section on Cuba, he informs the viewer that twenty-seven years have passed since the newsreel on the monitor showing Fidel Castro giving a speech. Many images in *Immemory* are paired with written texts that do not correspond. Some of the texts are from literary sources; others are telegrams and postcards addressed to Marker. They harken back to his earlier photo-essay books, such as *Coréenes* (1959) and *Le dépays* (1982), in which he argues that "the text is no more a commentary for the image than images are illustrations of the text. They are two different series of sequences that inevitably cross each other and interact now and then. But it would be pointless and tiring to have one confront the other."<sup>29</sup> The same principle is operative in

*Immemory*, which is packed with images and texts that coexist without necessarily being related. To navigate through the entire CD-ROM takes hours, and a different voyage can be undertaken each time. The narrative changes with each use, depending on the route the viewer opts to take.

*Immemory* is interactive to a certain degree. The “player” has a variety of options and makes decisions along the way about what to visit, the order of the visit, and what to ignore. As with most exhibitions, however, there are a fixed set of sites to be visited and objects to be viewed.<sup>30</sup> Like a deck of cards, the order of sites is reshuffled after the play is over and nothing remains of the prior game save for the sites themselves and the viewer’s personal memory of the experience. What is most important is that access to the past is no longer imparted according to a preordained linear arrangement, such as that found in traditional books or films. Rather, historical clusters appear simultaneously, irrespective of their temporal or geographic location. Heavily indebted to Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, the DVD produces a madeleine with each click of the mouse, propelling the user into a long series of meditations.<sup>31</sup> Marker’s digitalized audiovisual montage yields a wide range of possibilities and results in a work that the spectator codirects, edits, and scripts. The work remains open and perpetually incomplete. In typical essayistic fashion, the spectator’s role is that of continuing the work, perpetually constructing new narrative trajectories and creative possibilities.

Conceptually, *Immemory* is a cruder version of Marker’s 2008 Second Life platform, *L’Ouvroir*, where visitors become immersed in a similar virtual world. *L’Ouvroir*—the title suggesting a workroom, atelier, sewing room, or chantier—is an imaginary museum filled with Marker’s X-Plug collages, animated photo montages constructed from historic masterpieces of Western art in combination with twentieth-century historical photographs. Guillaume-en-Egypte pads nimbly about on his back two legs, leading the user but also standing in for the viewer as he pauses in front of the X-Plugs. The animated avatar guides the spectator silently. In addition to functioning as an amusing companion, Guillaume signals Marker’s former work as an animator and the unique position of animation in film outside the system of indexical reality. Animation in film is pure fiction without a photographic negative, much as digital media can be said to be closer to painting than to photography. The digital X-Plugs and the figure of Guillaume function as virtual projections and invented

memories. The presence of Guillaume-en-Egypte recalls that of the mammoth in *Letter from Siberia*, who, although often underground, surfaces unexpectedly in myriad uncanny sites, both real and virtual. The digitally constructed and virtually maintained site of *L'Ouvroir* is an island floating somewhere in the vast ocean of the World Wide Web. Unlike *Immemory*, where the CD-ROM/DVD has a physical presence, *L'Ouvroir* has no material base and defies the commercial art world and market. At the time Marker was involved in this work, the Internet was relatively unregulated by the forces of capital, and there was freedom to post and create alternative sites and communities. Just as video initially existed outside the mainstream of art production and the market, so too the Internet initially represented a field that had the possibility to evade easy commodification.

Marker's last work made in the weeks before his death, *Kino* (2012), is a short (just under two-minute) "film" that he posted on "Kosinski's channel." Kosinski was Marker's YouTube alias, and he made new work for the Internet in an attempt to foster active engagement with an international public. Kosinski's channel allows viewers to pose questions to which Marker would respond, enabling him to engage in a dialogue. Connected with his ambitions for *L'Ouvroir*, Marker posted a dozen shorts similar to *Kino* in response to contemporary events. Some are commentaries on political scandals. In *Imagine* (2011), for example, Marker montaged an image of the Sofitel hotel in New York, with one of female hotel cleaning staff and a "Do Not Disturb" sign to reference the Dominique Strauss-Kahn scandal. He made another, *i Dead* (2011), on the occasion of Apple CEO Steve Job's death. *The Morning After*, posted in November 2008, expresses Marker's optimism following Barack Obama's election as president of the United States, and *Overnight* (2011) contrasts photos of sites in London before and after the uprisings that summer. In each instance, Marker edited the short to a carefully arranged soundtrack.

With *Kino* Marker said *adieu* to film, the art form that had been so integral to his life. The short opens with a black screen on which the words "since its birth" appear. This is followed by a digitally composed image (like one of his X-Plugs), a crude painting of a scene in a manger that resembles Plato's cave. The figures of Mary and Joseph look down on their new infant: a computer monitor on which Thomas Edison's hand-tinted 1895 short *Annabelle Serpentine Dance* plays. The screen then flips to one side, like a book page being turned, and is replaced by another image of a

movie theater with empty seats and the word “CINEMA” projected on the screen. This image is again turned like a book, and a black screen continues the sentence begun at the opening: “look’d for,” followed by “the perfect viewer.” Marker then spotlights great film directors from the advent of cinema in the silent era, to the classical period, and the contemporary: Georges Méliès, D. W. Griffith, Orson Welles, and Jean-Luc Godard, all of whom have “look’d for the perfect viewer.” These “giants” appear as photographs in the foreground against a backdrop on which a famous sequence from one of their films plays. Each of these figures is notable for advancing the cinematic medium in significant ways: using montage and editing to create illusions; establishing cross-cutting and parallel editing to complicate narrative structure; or perfecting deep-focus, jump-cut, and the use of multiple screens. In each case, the directors named were concerned with producing cinema that engendered new ways of seeing, new modes of spectatorship. Marker’s inclusion of Godard is significant as a nod to his old rival and contemporary—an ultimate acknowledgment of the latter’s genius and his resistance to allowing his films to become mass entertainment.<sup>32</sup> The commentary continues: “Finally, more than a century later, they found him,” accompanied by a cut to a digitally manipulated image of Osama bin Laden with a remote in his hand watching reruns of “Tom and Jerry” cartoons, and ending with the final words “That’s all Bin!”

How are we to understand Marker’s final image of Osama bin Laden watching vintage Tom and Jerry cartoons? Marker’s use of animated shorts is as calculated as his earlier selection of great directors. The Tom and Jerry cartoons, begun in the 1940s, actualize the “cat and mouse game.” This English language idiom, dating from the seventeenth century, refers to a contrived action involving constant pursuit, near capture, and repeated escape. The cat is unable to definitively triumph over the mouse, who is able to avoid capture despite not being able to defeat the cat. On one level, the cat and mouse game to which Marker refers is the global political situation whereby the powerful are in endless pursuit of their enemies. In this episode, the mouse—Bin Laden—has been caught, but like the hydra whose decapitation results in multiple new heads new enemies emerge as a result. The faces of the players may change, but the game of pursuit continues. On another level, the cat and mouse game doubles back self-reflexively to the media makers’ endless chase after the ideal viewer or spectator—the latter occupying a continuously shifting

and elusive position. Finally, the insertion of Tom and Jerry gestures to Marker's appreciation of animation and his invention of characters such as Guillaume-en-Egypte, the sage feline who shows us where to look, what is relevant, and in some instances how to act politically.

Cats have long held a special place in Marker's bestiary as the domesticated animal that never aligns itself with power. But what about Jerry, the mouse? Here one might recall Marker's first posting on Kosinski's channel, *Leila Attacks* (2007), in which he proudly described his role: "I'm not exactly the self-complimentary type, yet when considering the work I did there, I can call it perfect. Linearity of action, frugality of editing, sobriety of dialogs, all that enhanced by the performance of an exceptional leading lady." In this short, Marker filmed a large mouse (Leila/Jerry) who first intimidates and then chases a cat (Tom). Leila has clearly gained the upper hand in the centuries-old game. *Leila Attacks* and *Kino* constitute Marker's first and final postings, bookending the series. With *Kino* he points to the limits and constraints of what he deemed the obsolescent form of cinema, particularly as it relates to the spectator. The final shot of an isolated Osama bin Laden in front of a TV screen with a remote in his hand underscores a disconnected and passive viewer at odds with the potentially actively engaged participant of the virtual world. Through Kosinski's channel and other electronic interventions such as his Poptronics design for the Occupy Movement, Marker, the self-proclaimed "ace of montage," attempted to continue a discussion with his viewers, as he did by keeping an active blog. These essayistic shorts, available to this day on YouTube, operate in the spirit of the essay film as conceptualized by French filmmakers in the 1950s while extending the form to another medium, that of the digital. The medium has changed, but the impetus is the same, and, with new exhibition and distribution platforms available, spectatorship has multiplied infinitely.

#### THE EVER-CHANGING GENRE

In its almost century-long development, the essay film has evolved from the silent film to its contemporary configuration as a multichannel and multiplatform format. Advances in technology, such as sound or digital

editing, have complicated the makeup of the genre, adding new layers to every level. The essay's inherent flexibility and transgressiveness enhance its "translatability." Benjamin argued that translation was above all a mode of expression, a new formal arrangement. In "The Author as Producer" he wrote: "we have to rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres, in view of the technical factors affecting our present situation."<sup>33</sup> The shift from the written page to the audiovisual form is accompanied by a similar freedom of movement. Contemporary filmmakers/artists have adapted the essay as a mode of critique and translated it into a variety of media. As with the highly theoretical and self-reflexive cinema that constituted the earliest essay films, these new productions continue the critical function that the written essay was initially developed to perform. This critique takes place on multiple platforms, including exhibitions and the Internet, which galvanize the observer into the role of full-fledged participant in the construction of meaning, supplying the audiovisual essay with metaphors of relationality and participation in a medium that in its mass manifestations has been associated with passivity. Posting material is as easy as downloading it. Physical sites are no longer necessary. Audiovisual essays can be posted on YouTube, Facebook, and a growing number of social media platforms. New mobile technologies enable immediate accessibility wherever one might be. What, one might ask, does this mean for the genre of the essay film? To which the only answer can be that it will continue to change with the times.





## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

1. I use the term “essay film” to refer to a moving image or audiovisual essay, a production made in celluloid, 16 mm, 35 mm, Super 8, video or digital formats that plays on single or multiple screens. My notion of genre is comparatist and understands the category as subject to change. It keeps diachronic considerations in mind.
2. Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 159.
3. Hito Steyerl, “The Essay as Conformism? Some Notes on Global Image Economies,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 276.
4. In her attempt to define the essay film, Laura Rascaroli suggests “that we think of the essay as a mode.” Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 39. David Montero views it “not so much a genre as a form and an attitude.” David Montero, *Thinking Images: The Essay Film as a Dialogic Form in European Cinema* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 4. Jean-Pierre Gorin settles on “form” as the preferred term. Jean-Pierre Gorin, “Proposal for a Tussle,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 269–75. Timothy Corrigan prefers “essayistic thinking” when discussing the essay film, as he explains: “Essayistic thinking thus becomes a conceptual, figural, phenomenological, and representational remaking of a self as it encounters, tests, and experiences some version of the real as a public ‘elsewhere.’” Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35.
5. Alexandre Astruc, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra Stylo,” in *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999), 158–62.

6. Edward S. Small, *Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).
7. Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" [1910], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 21–40. Max Bense, "On the Essay and Its Prose" [1947], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, trans. Margit Grieb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 49–59. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form" [1954–1958], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, trans. Margit Grieb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 60–82.
8. Theodor W. Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977).
9. From 1991 to 1993 three important volumes appeared: *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992); *Augenblick* 10 (1991), Special issue: "Versuch über den Essayfilm"; and *Cinema* 39 (1993), Special issue: "Non-Fiction: Über Dokumentarfilme." These groundbreaking volumes were soon followed by *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Zurich: Voldemere, 2003); *Der Weg der Termiten: Beispiele eines Essayistischen Kinos, 1909–2004*, ed. Astrif Ofner (Vienna: Schueren Verlags, 2007); and *Der Essay Film: Ästhetik und Aktualität*, ed. Sven Kramer and Thomas Tode (Konstanz: UVK Verlag Konstanz University Press, 2011). There have been fewer French publications devoted to the essay film prior to the 2000s. See *L'Essai et le Cinema*, ed. Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Murielle Gagnebin (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2004); *Jeux Sérieux: Cinéma et art contemporains transforment l'essai*, eds. Bertrand Bacqué et al. (Geneva: HEAD, 2015). English language publications include the works by Corrigan, Montero, Rascaroli, and *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia*, ed. Elizabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades (New York: Wallflower, 2016).
10. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "The Scholar, the Intellectual, and the Essay: Weber, Lukács, Adorno, and Postwar Germany," *German Quarterly* 70, 3 (1997): 219, 220, 230.  
 Timothy Corrigan argues that the essay filmmaker engages in the public sphere, and what is produced is a "dialogue of ideas." He writes, "The essay and the essay film do not create new forms of experimentation, realism, or narrative; they rethink existing ones as a dialogue of ideas." Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 51.
11. The corresponding type of essay film finds its roots in the writings of Montaigne who stressed: "It is many years now that I have had only myself as object of my thoughts, that I have been examining and studying only myself; and if I study anything else, it is in order promptly to apply it to myself, or rather within myself . . . for I am constantly describing myself." Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948), 273. Raymond Bellour has noted that the confusion between the self-portrait and the essay exists both in the essay film and the literary form of the essay. See "The Cinema and the Essay as a Way of Thinking" [2011], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 227–39.
12. Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions" [2003], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 162. See Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

13. Laura Rascaroli extends her theory of individuality to the intended recipient of the essay film. She proposes, “each spectator, as an individual and not as a member of an anonymous, collective audience, is called upon to engage in a dialogic relationship with the enunciator. . . . The spectatorial position is in the singular.” Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 35.
14. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, Vol. 1, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Vintage, 1996), 273. Twentieth-century essayist Aldous Huxley proposed that essays should be composed of three poles: “the personal and the autobiographical; . . . the objective, the factual, the concrete particular; and . . . the abstract-universal.” He lamented, however, that “most essayists are at home and at their best in the neighborhood of only one of the essay’s three poles, or at the most only in the neighborhood of two of them.” Aldous Huxley, “Preface to *The Collected Essays of Aldous Huxley*” [1960], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 83.
15. Arthur, “Essay Questions,” 171.
16. Peter Uwe Hohendahl elaborates: “The essay is an ironic form, i.e., a mode of coded speaking in which language and meaning are not identical, in which the concrete object under discussion and the overall thematic concern of the essay remain, and consciously so, in a relationship characterized by tension.” Hohendahl, “The Scholar, the Intellectual, and the Essay,” 220.
17. Gorin concludes: “The film essay not as an illustration of the endless shimmer of the soul . . . but as experience of the capacity of the *Id* of cinema to show itself through the practice and manipulation of filmmakers compelled to map however tentatively new territories.” Gorin, “Proposal for a Tussle,” 273–74.
18. See Volker Patenberg, “La déviation comme norme,” in *Jeux sérieux: Cinéma et art contemporains transforment l’essai*, ed. Bertrand Bacqué et al. (Geneva: Musée d’art moderne et contemporain, 2015), 75–92; Steyerl, “The Essay as Conformism,” 276–85, and Thomas Elsaesser, “The Essay Film: From Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form?” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 240–58.
19. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” 63.
20. Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 273.
21. Bense, “On the Essay and Its Prose,” 53.
22. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” 76.
23. Gorin, “Proposal for a Tussle,” 274.
24. Isaac Julien, “From Ten Thousand Waves to Lina Bo Bardi, via Kapital,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 336.
25. Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard*, trans. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972) 171.
26. Laura Mulvey, “Riddles as Essay Film,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 316.
27. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” [1934], in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 224.

28. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (1921), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 70, 71.
29. *Ibid.*, 76.
30. *Ibid.*, 78.
31. Bense, "On the Essay and Its Prose," 52.
32. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 70.
33. Bhabha as cited by Reece Auguiste and the Black Audio Film Collective, "Black Independents and Third Cinema: The British Context," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI, 1989), 214.
34. Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," 22.
35. Bense, "On the Essay and Its Prose," 59.
36. "Were one to compare the forms of literature with sunlight refracted in a prism, the writings of the essayists would be the ultra-violet rays." Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," 27.
37. André Bazin, "Envoyer trois faisceaux intellectuels et recevoir l'écho," in "Chris Marker, *Lettre de Sibérie*" [1957], in *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1983), 179–81 (my translation).
38. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 71.
39. *Ibid.*, 61. Musil also observed that the essay includes numerous "spontaneous and accidental factors." Robert Musil, "On the Essay," in *Precision and Soul*, ed. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 48.
40. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 74. According to Adorno: "The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character." *Ibid.*, 67.
41. Bense, "On the Essay and Its Prose," 52.
42. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 62.
43. The German essay film emerged out of the Romantic tradition in which it was proposed that theory and practice should not be separated, but that the work of art should perform the theory of the work in and of itself.
44. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, 159.
45. As Eisenstein maintained, "for OCTOBER remains essentially a model for a two-level solution: de-anecdotalization is, in fact, a 'fragment of tomorrow,' that is, the premise of the work to follow: C[APITAL]."
46. Sergei Eisenstein, "Notes for a Film of 'Capital,'" trans. Maciej Sliwowski, Jay Leyda, and Annette Michelson, *October 2* (1976): 4, 5, 9.
47. "The first, preliminary structural draft of CAPITAL would mean taking a banal development of a perfectly unrelated event. Say, 'A day in a man's life,' or something perhaps even more banal." *Ibid.*, 15, 18, 22.
48. Hans Richter, "The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film" [1940], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, trans. Maria P. Alter (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 89–92.
49. *Ibid.*, 90.

50. Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde," 159.
51. Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). For similar positions see Philip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur" [1992], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 109–33; Arthur, "Essay Questions"; and Corrigan, *The Essay Film*.
52. For a pithy overview of the development of film studies, see Dudley Andrew, "The 'Three Ages' of Cinema Studies and the Age to Come," *PMLA* 115, 3 (2000): 341–51.
53. Recent documentary scholarship has complicated this history. See, for example, the work of Brian Winston, Charles Musser, Michael Renov, Tom Gunning, Oliver Gaycken, Barry Keith Grant, Jeannette Sloniowski, and others.
54. Charles Musser, "Problems in Historiography: The Documentary Tradition Before *Nanook of the North*," in *The Documentary Film Book*, ed. Brian Winston (London: BFI, 2013), 121–28. Musser proceeds to debunk this myth and establish a documentary tradition that goes back at least to the seventeenth century. According to Musser, during World War I the war documentary was already a popular genre, thus preceding Grierson's 1926 formulation.
55. One of the first correctives to this exclusive historiography was the coedited British volume, *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, which includes a section titled "The Essayists," with discussions on Anderson, Malle, Marker, Ophuls, Resnais, and Welles. See *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, ed. Kevin MacDonald and Mark Cousins (London: Faber, 1996).
56. According to Arthur: "Essays typically pile up a series of stylistically diverse fragments—'discursivity' in the original meaning—whose individual codes seem familiar, yet when bunched together subvert documentary's privileged transparent aura of control." Arthur, "Essay Questions," 164.
57. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
58. Bill Nichols, "Documentary Modes of Representation," *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 56. Nichols has recently, on the last pages of his most recent study, expanded his theoretical formulations and made the following appeal: "Let's make ample room for the essay." Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 228.
59. The phrase "art film" or "artist film" refers to films made by visual artists working within the field of the arts. Art film should not be confused with "art cinema," which refers to a type of global independent film production that emerged in the 1960s and continues today. As Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover explain, "The term 'art cinema' itself has both a historical importance and a contemporary currency. Used in critical histories of postwar European and U.S. cinema to carve out a space of aesthetic and commercial distinction that is neither mainstream nor avant-garde, the term remains an everyday concept for film industries, critics, and audiences." Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, "Introduction: The Impurity of Art Cinema," in *Global Art Cinema*, ed. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

60. Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes" [1975], in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 99–100.
61. *Ibid.*, 97.
62. *Ibid.*, 93.
63. Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*" [1972], *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies*, 83.
64. This interplay of fact and fiction is also one of the key features of the essay film for Gorin, who not coincidentally collaborated with Godard on a number of projects in the late 1960s. Gorin described the essay film as a form that "can navigate from documentary to fiction and back, creating other polarities in the process between which it can operate." Gorin, "Proposal for a Tussle," 9. Similarly, Alexander Kluge firmly believed that the mixing of forms in nonfiction film is "the only method which permits radical changes in perspective." Alexander Kluge, "On Film and the Public Sphere," *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981–1982): 215.
65. Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," 102.
66. Wollen, "Godard and Counter Cinema," 91.
67. Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," 104.
68. See Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999) and T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013). Among other notable publications see especially Hal Foster, *A Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, eds. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008); and *Auf den Spuren des Realen: Kunst und Dokumentarismus*, ed. Karin Gludovatz (Vienna: MUMOK, 2004).
69. In his survey of films that combine documentary and art, Scott Macdonald does not account for the essay film but instead resorts to well-worn categories such as City Films, Personal Cinema, Recycled Films, and the like. See Scott MacDonald, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
70. Jean-Luc Godard concludes his commentary on *Here and Elsewhere* (1975) by stating: "Probably we don't know how to see or to listen or the sounds are too loud and drowns out reality. To learn to see in order to hear elsewhere. To learn to hear oneself speaking, in order to see what others are doing."
71. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 74.

## 1. BEGINNINGS

1. Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 30.
2. Leyda writes: "With his *Inflation*, made in 1928 to introduce a forgotten commercial film, he began a series of 'film essays,' partly dependent on the same stock-shot libraries that Ruttman employed. Kracauer describes Richter's film essays as 'sagacious pictorial comments on socially interesting topics.'" *Ibid.*

3. Hans Richter, *The Struggle for Film: Towards a Socially Responsible Cinema*, ed. Jürgen Römhild, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 24.
4. Hans Richter, "Film von Morgen" [1929], in *Hans Richter Film ist Rhythmus*, ed. Ulrich Gregor, special issue of *Kinemathek* 95 (July 2003): 56.
5. Richter worked closely with Richard Huelsenbeck, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Viking Eggeling, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, and Sophie Taeuber. He figured prominently in the historical avant-garde and participated in the Congress for International Progressive Artists in 1922, as well as in the Constructivist International in the same year. In 1926 he founded the Gesellschaft für Neuen Film with Karl Freund and Guido Bagier with the intention of promoting experimental film; and in 1929 he published his first book: *Filmgegner von heute—Filmfreunde von morgen* ("Film enemies today and film friends tomorrow").
6. Hans Richter, "Der Gegenstand in Bewegung" [1928], in *Hans Richter Film ist Rhythmus*, 43.
7. Hans Richter, *Richter on Film*, a filmed interview with Cecile Starr, conducted in Southbury Connecticut, 1972.
8. Richter, *The Struggle for Film*, 47.
9. Jacques Feyder, "Visual Transpositions" [1925], in *French Film Theory and Criticism. Volume 1: 1907–1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 364–67.
10. Hans Richter, "The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film" [1940], trans. Maria P. Alter, in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 91.
11. Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 34.
12. John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary" [1932], reprinted in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, ed. Ian Aitken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 83.
13. John Grierson, in an untitled lecture on documentary films delivered between 1927 and 1933, reprinted in *ibid.*, 76–77. For his part, Grierson advanced his agenda to "arrange," "rearrange," and "creatively shape" the documentary tradition. His calculated creation of the myth of origin not only secured a historical past but also proleptically cast a future for nonfiction film as "documentary" that extended over half a century.
14. Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter, *Universelle Sprache* (Fort in der Lausitz: Eigenverlag, 1920), no pagination.
15. Accompanying the film *Opus I*, for example, was a musical score composed by Max Butting.
16. Max Bense, "On the Essay and Its Prose" [1947], trans. Margit Grieb, in Alter and Corrigan, *Essays on the Essay Film*, 50.
17. Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* [1969] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 50, 100.
18. Tom Gunning, "Before Documentary: Early Nonfiction Films and the 'View' Aesthetic," in *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film*, ed. Daan Hertogs and Nico de Klerk (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997), 22.
19. Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," 82–83.



20. Ricciotto Canudo, "The Birth of a Sixth Art" [1911], in Abel, *French Film Theory*, 62.
21. In 1923, Canudo adjusted his theory to posit film as a seventh art to account for dance as another art. See Ricciotto Canudo, "Reflections on the Seventh Art" [1923], in Abel, *French Film Theory*, 291–302.
22. Walter Ruttmann, "Kunst und Kino," in *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Jeanpaul Goergen (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1990), 73. The exact date of this short text is not known.
23. Ruttmann, "Malerei mit Zeit," in Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann*, 74.
24. The distinctions among these various groups, especially Dadaists and Surrealists, are in no way clean and clear, and there are many overlaps.
25. René Clair, "Pure Cinema and Commercial Cinema" [1925], in Abel, *French Film Theory*, 371.
26. See Scott MacDonald, "Introduction," in *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3–4.
27. "Whether they look to aesthetics or politics for their context, the films of the avant-garde challenge the major codes of dramatic realism which determine meaning and response in the commercial fiction film." A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 1.
28. See, for example, the work of Ian Christie, *The Last Machine: Early Cinema and the Birth of the Modern World* (London: BFI, 1995); Dalia Judowitz, *Drawing on Art: Duchamp and Company* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Rudolf Kuenzli, *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); and Michael O'Pray, *Avant-Garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003).
29. MacDonald, *Avant-Garde Film*, 1.
30. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), liii.
31. *Ibid.*, 98.
32. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," trans. Ben Brewster, *Screen* 16, 2 (1975): 19.
33. Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," 88–89.
34. Richter, *Struggle for Film*, 46–47. Richter here directly references Bertolt Brecht's well-known statement that "A photograph of Krupps or the AEG yields hardly anything about those industries." Bertolt Brecht, "Der Dreigroschprozeß" [1931], reprinted in *Bertolt Brecht—Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe [GBA]* (Berlin, Weimar, and Frankfurt: Aufbau Verlag and Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992), vol. 21, 496.
35. As quoted by A. L. Rees in his foreword to Richter, *The Struggle for Film*, 9.
36. Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," 81.
37. Richter, "The Film Essay," 91.
38. Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," 88, 87.
39. *Ibid.*, 86.
40. As Grierson writes, "They were too scrappy and had not mastered the art of cutting sufficiently well to create the sense of 'march' necessary to the genre. The symphony of Berlin City was both larger in its movements and larger in its vision." *Ibid.*, 86.
41. *Ibid.*, 87.

42. Grierson: "The little daily doings, however finely symphonised, are not enough. One must pile up beyond doing or process to creation itself, before one hits the higher reaches of art. In this distinction, creation indicates not the making of things but the making of virtues." *Ibid.*, 87.
43. For example Lopate forcefully argues that the primary defining characteristic of an essay film is that it "must have words." He continues, "I have never seen a silent-era movie that I could consider an essay-film." Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur" [1992], in Alter and Corrigan, *Essays on the Essay Film*, 111.
44. For a close reading of Ruttmann's editing style in *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, see Matthew Bernstein, "Visual Style and Spatial Articulations in *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (1927)," *Journal of Film and Video* 36 (Fall 1984): 5–12. Bernstein employs Christian Metz's theory of the "bracket syntagma" to explain Ruttmann's complex editing technique.
45. Karl Freund, as cited in Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann*, 27.
46. The traditional symphonic form has four movements; however, there are exceptions, such as Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, Op. 68, "Pastoral."
47. Despite Grierson's insistence that *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* be situated firmly with other "symphony" films, it is also part of the subgenre of "City Films." That international category includes films from the 1920s such as Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta* (U.S., 1920), Calvacanti's *Paris, rien que les heures* (France, 1926), Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (Soviet Union, 1929), Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (France, 1930), Mizoguchi's *Tokai Kogyogaku* (Japan, 1929), and Rudolf Rex Lustig's *Sao Paulo: A Sinfonia da Metropole* (Brazil, 1929). These films were, for the most part, produced before the advent of synchronized sound and image recording and were conceived with a separate musical score, performed by a live orchestra or played as a distinct sound recording, that accompanied the film projection.
48. Ruttmann explains, "For the first time we have attempted to make a film in which the lead role is not played by an actor . . . a child . . . or an animal, instead it is the city of Berlin." Ruttmann, in a *B.Z.* article, September 20, 1927, as reprinted in Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann*, 79.
49. Bela Balázs, *Early Film Theory: The Visible Man and the Spirit of Film*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), 128. I am grateful to Luka Arsenjuk for drawing my attention to this quote.
50. Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Albert Renger-Patzsch: Joy Before the Object* (New York: Aperture, 1993), 48.
51. See André Gaudreault, "Showing and Telling: Image and Word in Early Cinema," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI, 1990), 274–81; and Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *ibid.*, 56–62.
52. Robert Musil, "On the Essay" [1914], in *Precision and Soul*, ed. and trans. Burton Pike and David S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 48–49.
53. *Ibid.*, 49.
54. Dziga Vertov, "We: Variant of a Manifesto," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 8.

55. Annette Michelson, "The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval," in *Montage and Modern Life, 1919–1942* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 73.
56. Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," 31.
57. John Grierson, in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 127.
58. Vertov, "We: Variant of a Manifesto," 16.
59. *Ibid.*, 115.

## 2. SPEAKING ESSAYS OR INTERRUPTIONS

1. Alberto Cavalcanti, "Sound in Films," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 101.
2. René Clair continues: "I have observed people leaving the cinema after seeing a talking film. They might have been leaving a music hall, for they showed no sign of the delightful numbness which used to overcome us after a passage through the silent land of pure images. They talked and laughed, and hummed the tunes they had just heard. *They had not lost their sense of reality.*" René Clair, "Art of Sound," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 95.
3. On Arnheim and sound film see Nora M. Alter, "Screening Out Sound: Arnheim and Cinema's Silence," *Reconsidering Rudolph Arnheim*, ed. Scott Higgins (New York: Routledge, 2011) 69–88.
4. Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov, "A Statement," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 84.
5. Vsevolod Pudovkin, "Asynchronism as a Principle of Sound Film," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 89.
6. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 70.
7. Cavalcanti, "Sound in Films," 109.
8. Interestingly, it is in Luis Buñuel's employment of music, namely, Brahms's Fourth Symphony, that a more complicated commentary emerges. As Catherine Russell notes, "The function of Brahms's Fourth Symphony is to provide a radical juxtaposition of a classical, highly developed culture with the primitivism of the Hurdanos. Its transcendent, triumphant, major-key hyperbole is completely incongruous with the ethnographic imagery. Together with the commentary, this soundtrack may be one of the most successful instantiations of the famous 1928 Soviet manifesto on sound in which the contrapuntal use of sound is advocated for avant-garde cinema." Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 30–31.
9. E.J., [review of *Kuhle Wampe*] *Film-Kurier*, August 13, 1931, 153–54.

10. As historian Masha Salazkina notes: "Parallels between the situations in postrevolutionary Mexico and the Soviet Union were crucial for Eisenstein. He saw Mexico as a complex society, as a place in which primitive and modern societies coexist." For a detailed analysis of *¡Que Viva Mexico!*, see Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 75.
11. Grigori Alexandrov, a member of the original filmmaking team, edited Eisenstein's footage, meticulously following his original notes and directions to create as faithfully as possible the film that Eisenstein had begun. Eisenstein originally planned for a fourth sequence, "Soldadera," but never filmed its footage.
12. For instance, Martha Wolter, who plays the main character of Gerda, was a professional seamstress.
13. Anon., *Die literarische Welt*, April 22, 1932, 190.
14. Bertolt Brecht: "Above all I believe that the effect of an actor's performance on the spectator is not independent of the spectator's effect on the actor. In the theatre, the public regulates the representation. The cinema in this respect has enormous weaknesses which seem theoretically insurmountable." Walsh citing from Brecht's journals, March 27, 1942, in Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema*, ed. Keith M. Griffiths (London: BFI, 1981), 60.
15. Bertolt Brecht did not formally articulate the concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* until after 1935, but its presence as a theoretical formal strategy can be found in his work of the early 1930s.
16. Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" [1936], in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 94.
17. Bertolt Brecht: "Copying the methods of these realists [Balzac and Tolstoy], we should cease to be realists ourselves." Bertolt Brecht, "The Popular and the Realistic" [1938], in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 110.
18. *Ibid.*, 109, 111.
19. Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," 93.
20. Brecht, as cited by Roswitha Mueller in *Bertolt Brecht and the Theory of Media* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 53.
21. As Stephen Heath observes, "for Brecht, the photograph is the sublimation of reality into passive ideality. . . . A materialist practice of film must then in turn be inevitably involved in combat against the sublimation of film in the luminous reality-truth of the photograph." Stephen Heath, "From Brecht to Film: Theses, Problems," *Screen* 16, 4 (Winter 1975/6), 36.
22. Salazkina, *In Excess*, 47.
23. The interplay between still images and an animating text or commentary resurfaces in Marker's 1965 imaginary essay film *Soy Mexico* ("I am Mexico") in which he enters into a dialogue with Eisenstein's unrealized project.
24. Anon., *Die Rote Fahne*, April 3, 1932, 188.
25. For a detailed discussion of Brecht's "separation of elements," see Christian Metz and Colin MacCabe, "The Politics of Separation," *Screen* 16, 4 (Winter 1975/76): 46–61.

26. Anon., *Licht Bild Bühne*, October 15, 1931, 158.
27. Mueller, citing Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht*, 92.
28. Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 334.
29. Eisler as cited in Bruce Murray, *Film and the German Left in the Weimar Republic: From Caligari to Kuhle Wampe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 223.
30. Eisler as cited in Wolfgang Gersch, *Film bei Brecht: Bertolt Brecht's praktische und theoretische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Film*. (Munich: Carl Hanser), 133.
31. Bertolt Brecht, "On the Use of Music in Epic Theatre" [1935], in *Brecht on Theatre*, 85–86.
32. Indeed, as Brecht argued, "So-called 'cheap' music, particularly that of the cabaret and the operetta, has for some time been a sort of gestic music. Serious music, however still clings to lyricism, and cultivates expression for its own sake." *Ibid*, 87.
33. Anon., *Licht Bild Bühne*, October 15, 1931, 158.
34. Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harvest, 1949), 22.
35. Gersch, *Film bei Brecht*, 167.
36. See Sergei Eisenstein *¡Que viva Mexico!* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 27.
37. "Er hat sich aus dem Fenster gestürzt" or "sie haben ihn aus dem Fenster gestürzt."
38. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), 38.
39. For an exploration of the role of reenactments in cinema see, Joram ten Brink, "Re-Enactment, The History of Violence and Documentary Film," in *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (London: Wallflower Press, 2012), 177.
40. John Grierson, "Introduction to a New Art" [1934], reproduced in the booklet accompanying *Addressing the Nation: The GPO Film Unit Collection*, Vol. 1 (London: BFI, 2008), 23.
41. Elizabeth Sussex, "Cavalcanti in England," in *The Documentary Movement: An Anthology*, ed. Ian Aitken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 188.
42. As Cavalcanti recalled in 1972: "When sound was introduced all the film directors of the silent cinema were thrown out of the studios. I was one of these. . . . The producers thought that films should be made by stage directors. The results were pitiful and we were called back to the studios very quickly. . . . I made French and Portuguese versions of American films at Paramount Studios in Paris. . . . After Paramount I made a series of French comedies, which were awful. . . . I was sick and tired." Alberto Cavalcanti, "Interview: Alberto Cavalcanti," in *We Live in Two Worlds: The GPO Film Unit Collection*, Vol. 2, ed. John Grierson, Alberto Cavalcanti, Basil Wright, Harry Watt, Len Lye, and Norman McLaren (London: BFI, 2009), 20.
43. Ian Aitken, *Alberto Cavalcanti: Realism, Surrealism and National Cinema* (Trowbridge, UK: Flick, 2000), 32, 36.
44. *Song of Ceylon* was awarded best film at the International Film Festival in Brussels in 1935.
45. As cited by Jon Hoare, "Song of Ceylon," in booklet accompanying *Addressing the Nation: The GPO Film Unit Collection*, Vol. 1 (London: BFI, 2008), 44.
46. Grierson, "Introduction to a New Art," 29.

47. As Jamie Sexton observes, “The complex editing of sound is here indicative of the urge to use the aural track in a creative and expressive manner, not merely to represent speech but to construct new meanings in conjunction with the images.” Jamie Sexton, “Sound and Music at the GPO Film Unit,” in booklet accompanying *Addressing the Nation*, 15–16.
48. Grierson’s 1929 film *Drifters*, about a North Sea herring fishery, was a highly poetic, montage-based film that, according to Ian Aitkin, “drew heavily on the filmmaking styles of Sergei Eisenstein and Robert Flaherty and Grierson’s understanding of avant-garde aesthetics.” Ian Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, ed. Ian Aitken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 10.
49. John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary,” in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, ed. Ian Aitken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 83.
50. John Grierson, “The Documentary Idea” [1942], in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, ed. Ian Aitken (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 108.
51. Cavalcanti, “Interview,” in *We Live in Two Worlds*, 27.
52. After the war, Cavalcanti made several feature films in Britain; however, he was soon frustrated and in 1950 returned to Brazil to set up the Vera Cruz Film Company. His Brazilian films include *Caicora* and *O Canto do Mar*. Again frustrated, he left for East Germany where he codirected *Die Windrose* (1957) with Joris Ivens. He then traveled to Israel and made *Thus Spoke Theodor Herzl* and subsequently returned to East Germany to work with Brecht on *Herr Puntilla und sein Knecht Matti*. See Aitken, *Alberto Cavalcanti*.
53. For a history of the compilation film, see Jay Leyda, *Film Begets Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964).
54. Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 59.
55. I would like to thank Bernard Eisenschitz for drawing my attention to this film.
56. What is missing from Jennings’s film is the by now better-known 1944 version sung by Marlene Dietrich and produced by the OSS (Office of Strategic Services).

### 3. THE ESSAY FILM AS ARCHIVE AND REPOSITORY OF MEMORIES, 1947–1961

1. Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 63.
2. Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 158–62.
3. Phillip Lopate, “In Search of the Centaur” [1992], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 112, 113.
4. Paul Arthur, “Essay Questions,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 162.
5. See Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 58.
6. Alexandre Astruc, “The Future of Cinema” [1948], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, trans. Sofia Rabaté (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 93–101. Originally titled “L’avenir du cinéma.”

7. In New York, Hans Richter became director of City College's Institute of Film Technique, a post he held until he retired in 1957.
8. As recently as 2003, Jonas Mekas paid tribute to Richter with his nine-minute *A Visit to Hans Richter*.
9. Hans Richter, *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, ed. Cleve Gray (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 48.
10. Hafid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 153.
11. Siegfried Kracauer, "Kunst und Film Zu Hans Richter: Träume für Geld" [1948], in *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, 126.
12. Richter, *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, 54.
13. "The fact is that there are at least two film forms besides the fictional film that, less spectacular than Hollywood, are more cinematographic in the proper sense of the word, the documentary form and the experimental or art film." Hans Richter, "The Film as an Original Art Form," in *Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Praeger, 1970), 17.
14. Michel-Rolph Trouillet, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.
15. Richter, "The Film as an Original Art Form," 16.
16. As Azade Seyhan observes, "Writers of diasporas often employ linguistic forms of loss or dislocation, such as fragments or elliptical recollections of ancestral languages, cross-lingual idioms, and mixed codes to create new definitions of community and community memory in exile." Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 17.
17. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 6.
18. Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 104.
19. Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde, La Caméra Stylo" [1948], in *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999), 159-60.
20. Astruc, "The Future of Cinema," 100.
21. Astruc, "Birth of a New Avant-Garde," 159.
22. *Ibid.*, 161.
23. Astruc, "The Future of Cinema," 95.
24. *Ibid.*, 96.
25. *Ibid.*, 101.
26. Jean-Luc Godard, *Cahiers du cinéma* #92, as cited in Alain Fleischer, *L'art de Alain Resnais* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1998), 60.
27. Marker observes, "It is not because [in them] the camera moves that Resnais' films about painters are, first of all, cinema. It is because finally the painting is given back the time belonging to it. It is that the duration of its action is no longer governed by the time of the screen, which is a journey." Cited in François Porcile, *Défense du court métrage français* (Paris: Les éditions du cerf, 1965), 145.

28. Alain Resnais, interview with François Truffaut, *Aris*, February 22, 1956.
29. Resnais recalls, "It was a matter of knowing if painted trees, painted characters, painted houses could play, in a cinematographic narrative the role of real objects, and if, in that case, it was possible to substitute for the spectator, and almost without his knowledge, the inner world of the painter for the world such as photography reveals it to us." (*Ciné-Club*, no. 3, décembre 1948), cited in Porcile, *Défense du court métrage français*, 144.
30. Adam Lowenstein, "Films Without a Face: Shock Horror in the Cinema of Georges Franju," *Cinema Journal* 37, 4 (Summer 1998): 37–58.
31. Georges Franju, *Eyes Without a Face* [1997] (DVD, The Criterion Collection, 2004).
32. For a passionate and angry, but otherwise detailed, reading of *Blood of the Beasts*, see Jeannette Sloniowski, "'It was an Atrocious Film,'" in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, eds. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 171–87.
33. Porcile, *Défense du court métrage français*, 19.
34. For a collection recent of essays on the short film, see *Le court métrage documentaire français de 1945 à 1968*, ed. Dominique Bluher and Philippe Pilard (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009). In particular, chapters by Bluher and Christa Blüm-linger link the essay film to the short documentary film.
35. Two years later Resnais's *Night and Fog* met a similar fate when it was withdrawn from Cannes, despite the unanimous approval of the eighteen-member selection jury, because the West German government found it to be offensive. The Germans invoked Article 5 of the Cannes Festival by-laws, which stated that if a film was found to offend or damage one of the participating countries, it should be withdrawn. In the case of *Night and Fog*, this action provoked a huge scandal.
36. Chris Marker, "Les Statues Meurent Aussi," *Commentaires* 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1961), 9.
37. Marker concludes, "they probably aimed more at form than content and, more precisely, at certain rules of the game, certain non-respected codes, [more] than form." *Ibid.*
38. Marker, "Les Statues Meurent Aussi."
39. Sergei Eisenstein, *Que Viva Mexico!* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 28.
40. Chris Marker, "Soy Mexico," *Commentaires* 2 (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 66.
41. *Ibid.*, 65.
42. *Les Maîtres fous* was banned in Ghana, the United Kingdom, and in Niger, the country of origin of the Haukas.
43. For an analysis of the impact of Surrealism on Rouch's ethnographic films, see Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).
44. *Les maîtres fous* is said to have had an influence on Jean Genet's *The Blacks, A Clown Show* (1958).
45. Rouch will continue to investigate this phenomenon in later films such as *Moi, un noir* (1958) in which Nigerian workers take on the pseudonym's of famous actors such as Eddie Constatine and Edward G. Robinson.
46. As Catherine Russell explains, "For Rouch, the incorporation of 'fiction' into ethnography is a metaphor for subjectivity, desire, fantasy, and imagination that might be fused with the



- empirical, indexical documentary image. Beyond mere truth, *cinéma vérité* could potentially produce a new reality, a science fiction blending objective science and subjective art." Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 219. Rouch's hybrid blend of fact and fiction in his ethnographies has led to his profound influence on the contemporary essay filmmaking of directors such as Manthia Diawara, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Nelson Pereira dos Santos.
47. Anatole Dauman founded and headed Argos films. Under his directorship, Argos produced films by Marker, Resnais, Varda, William Klein, Franjus, Andrei Tarkovski, Elia Kazan, Volker Schlöndorff, Wim Wenders, and others. For an assemblage of primary material, see *Souvenir: Ecran: Anatole Dauman Argos Films*, ed. Jacques Gerber (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989).
  48. Paul Arthur, "The Resurgence of History and the Avant-Garde Essay Film" [1989], *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 66.
  49. Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 64.
  50. Marker worked with Cayrol on the commentary, especially during periods when Cayrol broke down and had trouble continuing.
  51. For an analysis and history of Paul Celan's detailed and at times torturous process of translating Cayrol's text into German, see Eric Kligerman, *Sites of the Uncanny: Paul Celan, Specularity and the Visual Arts* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007).
  52. *Night and Fog* has generated a number of studies that address the difficulty of representing the unrepresentable, including Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Documenting the Ineffable: Terror and Memory in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*," in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 204-22; Peter Haidu, "The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and Narratives of Desubjectification," in *Probing the Limits of Representations: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* ed. Paul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 277-99; and William Rothman, *Documentary Film Classics* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). For a comprehensive account, see Sylvie Lindeperg, "*Night and Fog*," *A Film in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
  53. Jean Cayrol, *Lettres françaises*, 15 février 1956; reproduced in *Souvenir-Ecran*, 101.
  54. On bare life in the context of the concentration camps, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998).
  55. Vsevolod Pudovkin, "Asynchronism as a Principle of Sound Film" [1929], in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 89.
  56. Cayrol, *Lettre françaises*, 1956.
  57. For an analysis of *Le Chant du Styrene* and its narrative in alexandrine verse composed by Raymond Queneau, see Edward Dimendberg, "'These are not exercises in style': *Le Chant du Styrene*," *October* 112 (Spring 2005): 63-88.
  58. For a detailed account of Marker, see my earlier *Chris Marker* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), much of what follows has been condensed from that study.

59. Jean-Louis Pays interview with Chris Marker, *Miroir de cinéma*, May 1962.
60. Marker, *Commentaires* 1, 29.
61. André Bazin, “Sur les routes de l’URSS et *Dimanche à Pékin*,” *France Observateur* 372 (1957): 19.
62. Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, trans. E. J. Trechmann (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), xvi.
63. Marker filmed *Letter from Siberia* in August 1957, four years after the death of Stalin, when he traveled to Siberia with his friends André Pierrard, Armand Gatti, and Sacha Vierny.
64. André Bazin, “Chris Marker, ‘Lettre de Sibérie’” [1958], in *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1983), 179–81.
65. *Ibid.*, 180 [emphasis added].
66. Marker, *Commentaires*, 43.
67. This employment of animation anticipates Marker’s later use of synthesized digital “nonimages” in *Sans Soleil* (“Sunless,” 1982) as well as the animated figure of Guillaume-en-Égypte, who serves as guide and spectator in Marker’s later virtual explorations.
68. This sequence appears exactly twenty minutes into *Letter from Siberia*, just after the first reel.
69. For a detailed analysis of the new consumer culture in the postwar period, see Kristen Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
70. Bazin, “Chris Marker,” 181.
71. On Agnès Varda as an essayist, see Christa Blümlinger, “Marker, Varda—l’art des correspondances,” in *Le court métrage documentaire français de 1945 à 1968*, ed. Dominique Bluher and Philippe Pilard (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 165–81.
72. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman, “An Introductory Essay,” in *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Joeres and Mittman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 19.
73. For an overview of Varda’s career, see Alison Smith, *Agnès Varda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). For a study connecting Varda’s film work with her more recent art installations, see Delphine Benezet, *The Cinema of Agnès Varda: Resistance and Eclecticism* (London: Wallflower, 2014).
74. Varda explains that she was interested in “reconciling two aspects of reality: the mediated and the constructed aspect and the documentary ‘reportage’ style, real life, things caught at the moment.” Early Varda interview.
75. For a close analysis of *L’Opéra-Mouffe*, see Éric Thouvenel “*L’Opéra-Mouffe: le ventre de Paris, ou la ciné-maïeutique d’Agnès Varda*,” in *Le courts métrage documentaire français de 1945 à 1968*, ed. Dominique Bluher and Philippe Pilard (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 183–93.
76. In an interview on the importance of poetry in her films, Varda explains: “It’s all about these transitions from one impression to the other. This also stems from Surrealism. . . . The second important lesson I learned from the Surrealists, is to always keep faith and chance in mind.” Interview conducted for on Cine-films.com, February 1, 2010.

## 4. THE ESSAY FILM AS THE FOURTH ESTATE

1. For a detailed and comprehensive history of New German Cinema, see Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989). For a history of Italian postwar cinema, see Millicent Marcus, *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
2. The first retreat took place in the Black Forest, followed by those in Titisee (1949), Schluchsee (1950), Bacharach am Rhein (1951), Lindau am Bodensee (1952), and Bad Ems (1953).
3. See Chris Marker, "Adieu au cinéma Allemand?" *Positif* 12 (November/December 1954): 66–71.
4. Eric Rentschler, "Remembering Not to Forget: A Retrospective Reading of Kluge's *Brutality in Stone*," special issue on Alexander Kluge, *New German Critique* 49 (Winter 1990): 23, 35 [emphasis in original].
5. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* (Munich: Piper, 1967). On the topic of West German feature films and recent German history, see Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), and Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
6. For a full text of this and subsequent manifestoes, see Eric Rentschler, ed. *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices* (New York: Homes and Meier, 1988), 2 ff.
7. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Volker Schlöndorff, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Margarethe von Trotta, and Wim Wenders all made shorter experimental essay films that functioned as working sketches and drafts, addressing problems of aesthetic and cultural representation.
8. Jean-Paul Sartre introduced the term "littérature engagée" in his introduction to the journal *Les Temps Modernes* (1945), in which he called upon intellectuals to take a position and produce work that engaged with society.
9. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Paese Sera* (April 14, 1963), as cited in Thomas Tode, "Zu essayistischen Motiven des Films *La rabbia* von Pier Paolo Pasolini," in *Non-Fiction*, eds. Alfred Messerli and Janis Osolin (Basel: Stroemfeld Verlag, 1993), 55.
10. Max Bense, "On the Essay and Its Prose" [1947], trans. Margit Grieb, in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 57.
11. See Nora M. Alter, *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
12. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon, 1968), 234.
13. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon, 1960).
14. Harun Farocki, "Risking His Life: Images of Holger Meins" [1988], in *Harun Farocki: Nachdruck/Imprint Texte/Writings*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhauser (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2001), 272.

15. On the use of found footage or “secondhand images” in film, including in the work of Farocki, see Christa Blümlinger, *Kino aus zweiter Hand* (Berlin: Vorwerk, 2009).
16. Denkbilder is a concept mobilized by Adorno; see Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
17. Harun Farocki, “Notwendige Abwechslung und Vielfalt,” *Filmkritik* 224 (1975): 368–69.
18. Georges Didi-Huberman, “How to Open Your Eyes,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun (Cologne: König, 2009), 42.
19. For an analysis of this film, see Diedrich Diederichsen, “Napalm Death,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun (Cologne: König, 2009), 55.
20. Gilles Deleuze, “Three Questions About *Six fois deux*” [1976], in *Jean-Luc Godard: Son Image, 1974–1991*, ed. Raymond Bellour and Mary Lea Bandy (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 40, 41.
21. For an in depth analysis of *One plus One*, see Nora M. Alter, “Composing in Fragments: Music in the Essay Films of Resnais and Godard,” *SubStance* 128, 41, 2 (2012): 24–39.
22. As Daniel Morgan concludes in his study of Godard’s history films, “By describing Godard’s work as constituting multiple series, I mean to invoke the way he has repeatedly said that all his films are essays, in the etymological sense of trying, experimenting: *essai*.” Daniel Morgan, *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 20.
23. For “soft montage,” see Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, *Speaking About Godard* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), chap. 6.
24. As cited in Stefan Aust, *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex: Erweiterte und aktualisierte Ausgabe* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1997), 49.
25. A 1971 poll by the Allensbacher Institute for Public Opinion revealed that 25 percent of all West Germans under the age of thirty felt sympathy for the RAF.
26. For a detailed analysis of *Germany in Autumn*, see Nora M. Alter, “Framing Terrorism: Beyond the Borders,” in *Projecting History: German Nonfiction Cinema, 1967–2000*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 43–76.
27. Theodor Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 74; Georg Lukács, “On the Nature and Form of the Essay,” in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 40.
28. “‘Deutschland im Herbst’ oder ‘Modell Deutschland?’” interview with Alf Brustellin, Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, Volker Schlöndorff, Bern Sinkell], *Filmfaust* 7 (March 1978), 3.
29. Alf Brustellin, *ibid.*, 9.
30. Bern Sinkel, *ibid.*, 10.
31. Alexander Kluge, as cited in Miriam Hansen, “Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere,” *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981–1982), 49.

32. Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
33. Alexander Kluge, as quoted in Franz Scholer, "Man Muss zärtlich sein," *Die Welt* (Bonn), September 14, 1968.
34. Theodor Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" [1966], trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981–1982), 203.
35. Alexander Kluge, "On Film and The Public Sphere" [1979], trans. Thomas Y. Levin and Miriam B. Hansen, *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981–1982), 218–19.
36. *Ibid.*, 220. Kluge illustrates his principle of montage, not by referring to an anonymous sailor but by identifying him as Odysseus, thereby provoking in the reader a certain set of associations produced by his or her subjective relationship to the fictional character. Some may recall his navigating between Scylla and Charbydis, others his being bound to the mast to hear the song of the Sirens or Penelope awaiting his return by unraveling her tapestry, and others his intentions for the Trojan horse.
37. Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema," 48.
38. Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.
39. Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema," 53.
40. Alexander Kluge, "The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time," *New German Critique* 49 (1990), 13.
41. "The Hamburg Declaration" [1979], in *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York: Homes and Meier, 1988), 4.
42. For essay films focused on German reunification, see Dan Eisenberg's *Cooperation of Parts* (1987) and *Persistence* (1997), and Amy Spiegel's *DDR/DDR* (2008).
43. For a close analysis of *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*, see my "Theses on Godard's *Allemagne 90 Neuf Zéro*," *Iris* 29 (2000), 117–32.
44. See my "Marcel Ophüls' *November Days*: German Reunification as Musical Comedy," *Film Quarterly* 51 (1998): 32–43.
45. Marcel Ophüls, as cited in Kevin Jackson, "Just Singin' Round the Wall," *Independent* (London), November 9, 1990.
46. Vsevolod Pudovkin, "Asynchronism as a Principle of Sound Film," in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 91.
47. Hito Steyerl, "The Empty Center," in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Zurich: Voldemeer, 2003), 53. This understanding of the essayistic as an archeological endeavor is present in Steyerl's later essay films such as *November* (2004) and *Lovely Andrea* (2007).
48. *Ibid.*, 47.
49. Hito Steyerl, "Die Farbe der Wahrheit. Dokumentarismus und Dokumentalität," in *Auf die Spuren des Realen: Kunst und Dokumentarismus*, ed. Karin Gludovatz (Wien: MUMOK, 2004), 92. Translation my own.

50. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meanings," in *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29, 30.
51. This is by no means to underplay the enormous toll taken on individuals from the former East Germany, many of whom had no chance to assimilate to Western ways. Nor is it meant to ignore the resurgence in Germany of right-wing extremist groups with their xenophobic, anti-Semitic, and antifoignner acts of violence.
52. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2013), 190.
53. Phillip Knightley, *The First Causality: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975). Knightley is citing isolationist Senator Hiram Johnson, to whom this statement from 1917 is attributed.
54. Jean-Michel Frodon, "Juste un Regard," essay accompanying DVD ARTE Video 2006, 5.
55. Godard and Mieville also produced a two-minute short, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo* (1993).
56. Juan Goytisolo, *Landscapes of War: From Sarajevo to Chechnya*, trans. Peter Bush (San Francisco: City Lights, 2000). This book compiles Goytisolo's journalism for Madrid's *El País* from 1993 to 1996.
57. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 100–104.
58. Theodor Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle" [1961], *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), 279.
59. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 74.
60. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii [emphasis in original].
61. Hito Steyerl, "The Essay as Conformism? Some Notes on Global Image Economies," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 277.
62. Ursula Biemann, "Performing Borders: Transnational Video," *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Zurich: Voldemeer, 2003), 83.
63. Slavoj Žižek, "Enjoy Your Nation as Yourself!," *Austrian Contribution to the Forty-fifth Biennale of Venice 1993* (Vienna: REMAprint, 1993), 327.
64. Steyerl, "The Essay as Conformism," 278.
65. In her essay installation *Factory of the Sun* (2015), Steyerl re-creates a motion capture studio in which a multilayered first person shooter game plays out that is obliquely related to the forces of capital and domination. Steyerl blurs the distinction between reality and fantasy by positioning the spectators, seated in beach chairs, as passive consumers of distraction, including distractions that hasten their own destruction.
66. For Bitomsky's theories of documentary, see Hartmut Bitomsky, *Geliehene Landschaften. Zu Praxis und Theorie des Dokumentarfilms*, ed. Marius Babius, (Cologne: König, 2012). For a brief overview of Bitomsky's work, including several of his own writings and screenplays, see Jutta Pirschtat, ed., *Die Wirklichkeit der Bilder: Der Filmemacher Hartmut Bitomsky* (Essen: Filmwerkstatt, 1992); Ilka Schaarschmidt, ed., *Hartmut Bitomsky Kinowahrheit* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2003). For a gloss on *Reichsautobahn*, see Ed

- Dimendberg, "The Will to Motorization: Cinema, Highways, and Modernity," *October* 75 (1995): 91–137.
67. Bitomsky does not always follow such a rigorous path. Indeed in his film about film, *Das Kino und der Wind und die Photographie* ("Film, the wind and photography," 1991), he suggests that "the investigation is not systematic, it is more a type of poaching, a gay science, where the most important features are placed side by side with marginal ones" [translation my own]. Bitomsky, "Das Kino und der Wind und die Photographie," in *Die Wirklichkeit der Bilder: Der Filmemacher Hartmut Bitomsky*, ed. Jutta Prischat (Munich: Taschenbuch), 116.
  68. *Ibid.*, 113.
  69. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections of a Damaged Life* [1951] (London: Verso, 2006), 193–94.
  70. Bitomsky, "Das Kino und der Wind und die Photographie," 111–12.
  71. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 78.

## 5. THE ARTIST ESSAY: EXPANDING THE FIELD AND THE TURN TO VIDEO

1. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Orson Welles's Essay Films and Documentary Fictions: A Two-Part Speculation," in *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 173–74.
2. Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur" [1992], in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 109. Eurocentric in his conception of the essay film, Lopate locates its origins in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, its full realization in the films of Chris Marker, and its contemporary practice in the work of Jean-Luc Godard. The few U.S.-based practitioners Lopate includes in his account are Orson Welles, Yvonne Rainer, and Ross McElwee.
3. *Ibid.*, 111–13.
4. The North American essay films of the 1980s that Lopate identifies are Ralph Arlyck's *An Acquired Taste* (1981), Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* (1984), Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986), and Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989).
5. Paul Chan and Martha Rosler, *Paul Chan/Martha Rosler (Between Artists)* (Montreal, Canada: A.R.T. Press, 2006), 45–46. It should be noted that Rosler did not use the term "essay" to characterize her work until the 2000s.
6. Bill Nichols sums up the qualities associated with the documentary: "Rather than constructing a temporal framework, or rhythm, from the process of editing, as in *Night Mail* or *Listen to Britain*, observational films rely on editing to enhance the impression of lived or real time. In [Direct Cinema's] purest form, voice-over commentary, music external to the observed scene, intertitles, reenactments, and even interviews are completely eschewed." Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 38.

7. In response to Eric De Bruyn's question: "You did not perceive a link between the 'avant-garde' film scene in New York and the contemporary art world?"  
 Dan Graham responds: "No, there were only Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, which was probably not avant-garde filmmaking." "Graham interviewed by Eric de Bruyn" [1996], in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 99.
8. See Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 132–34. Devoting considerable space to Mekas as an essayist, Michael Renov asserts, "It is my contention that *Lost, Lost, Lost* shares with Montaigne's *Essays* an unyielding attentiveness both to the measure of sight and to the measure of things." Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), esp. 73–89, here 73.
9. P. Adams Sitney, "Structural Film," *Film Culture* 47 (Summer 1969): 1–10.
10. P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), xii.
11. Exceptions to Sitney's focus on contemporary American artists include the Austrian Peter Kubelka, one of the pioneers of the "flicker" film; in this instance, however, Sitney focused on the filmmaker's work in New York during the 1960s and not on his earlier films made in Austria.
12. Following upon Sitney arguments, British experimental filmmaker Peter Gidal, also emphasized the formal qualities of art film, thereby buttressing Sitney's canon while dismissing the relevance of narrative interventions in avant-garde film. "Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film," in *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1976), 1–21.
13. Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 161. In this excellent study, Russell expands the field of ethnographic filmmaking to include previously dismissed experimental or art films.
14. Jackie Hatfield, "Expanded Cinema and Narrative: Some Reasons for a Review of the Avant-Garde Debates Around Narrativity," *Millennium Film Journal* 39/40 (2003): 59.
15. Observational Documentary emerges out of Humphrey Jennings's Mass-Observation project, which turned the camera on the everyday lives of ordinary people. For an insightful history of American Direct Cinema, see Dave Saunders, *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties* (London: Wallflower, 2007).
16. As late as 1989, Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* was prevented from being considered in the documentary category for the Academy Awards because it violated certain rules of the genre. Documentary film was extremely doctrinaire, and if nonfiction filmmakers didn't adhere strictly to the established protocols, they had a difficult time finding sponsorship, exhibition, and distribution venues for their work.
17. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film* (New York: Dutton, 1970) was the first study to take video seriously and to fully explore the potential of the medium.



18. See Alexander Alberro, ed., *Recording Conceptual Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
19. Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 12.
20. For a history of early conceptual art and the dematerialization of the art object, see Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).
21. Conceptual artists who supplement their artistic practice with essayistic writing include Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula, and Robert Smithson.
22. Graham describes the work as follows: "In 1972 I did a piece called *Past Future/Split Attention*, a video. It's two people, one person is speaking about the other person's future, predicting his immediate future or far future, and the other person is speaking about the first person's just-past or remembered past. They speak at the same time and they are influencing each other. It all really takes place in the just-past. It's about the paradox of present time. Because neither stays in the present time as they speak or behave, it's impossible for there to be present time. The only thing resembling present time is a slight projection into the future, or into the just-past." "Graham interviewed by Ludger Gerdes," in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 76.
23. Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement" [1972], in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 280.
24. There were exceptions, such as Kenneth Anger's remarkable *Puce Moment* (1949), *Scorpio Rising* (1963), and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965), all three of which rely heavily on a lyrical soundtrack to produce meaning and structure.
25. Robert Smithson, "A Cinematic Atopia" (1971), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 138, 139.
26. Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" (1972), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 143–53.
27. Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan" (1968), in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 100.
28. Smithson, "A Cinematic Atopia," 140.
29. Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty," 148.
30. *Ibid.*, 150.
31. For some critics, such as Rosalind Krauss, the medium of video was synonymous with that of television. Krauss writes that the apparatus of video "both at its present and future levels of technology—comprises the television medium." Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" [1976], in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John Hanhardt (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 180.
32. This ability to produce video single-handedly contributed in part to Rosalind Krauss's labeling of video as an inherently "narcissistic medium." *Ibid.*, 180.
33. As Dan Graham observed, "The great thing about the films was that I could do them outside the studio. They became landscape pieces. It's an advantage you couldn't get with video at the time." Graham, "Interviewed by Eric de Bruyn," 105.

34. Drew as cited in Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 9.
35. See Laura Mulvey, "The Possessive Spectator," *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 161–80.
36. For an insightful history of video communities, see Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).
37. Dara Birnbaum was one of the earliest video artists to work with appropriated images; her four-channel video *PM Magazine* (1982) is composed entirely of found footage.
38. See Allan Kaprow, "Video Art: Old Wine, New Bottle," *Artforum* 12, 10 (1974): 46–49.
39. One of the first permanent public video projects was Dara Birnbaum's *Rio Videowall* (1989), which consists of twenty-five linked video monitors installed in a shopping mall in Atlanta, Georgia. Since 2001, the Creative Time project known as "The 59th Minute" in New York's Times Square dedicates the last minute out of every hour to showing video art. For a history of video art in public spaces, see Catrien Schreuder, *Pixels and Places: Video Art in Public Space* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2010).
40. For a theory of film based on *motion* instead of the index, see Tom Gunning, "Moving Away from the Index. Cinema and the Impression of Reality," in *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, ed. Gertrud Koch et al. (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum, 2012), 42–60. Gunning bases his argument on the premise that what makes something appear real is not just its resemblance to reality but its movement.
41. Following *Television Delivers People*, Serra made *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1974), which critiques and parodies both the television game show and the artist's video. The penalty for losing on the show is being locked up in a basement, which Serra reputedly equates to the average length of an artist's boring videotape. Jonathan Jones, "Caught on Tape," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2003. For more on *Prisoner's Dilemma* see Pamela M. Lee, *New Games: Postmodernism After Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 185–86.
42. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [1964] (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).
43. At this level, video could be seen as a precursor of the now popular "selfie."
44. Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" [1932], in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1986), 53.
45. "Graham Interviewed by Eric de Bruyn," in *Two-Way Mirror Power*, 106.
46. Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," 179–80, 181.
47. See Edgar Morin, *The Stars: An Account of the Star System in Motion Pictures* (1957), trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
48. Dan Graham, "The artist as Producer" [1978/1988], *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 4. Artist Judith Barry recalls that in the 1970s, before the advent of MTV, artists began working with rock and punk groups making videos of their songs that were shown in music clubs.
49. Kodwo Eshun, *Dan Graham: Rock My Religion* (London: Afterall, 2012), 8.

50. In 1981 the advent of digital editing systems for video further affected the medium, allowing for multiple layers and further complexity.
51. For a thorough analysis of *Rock My Religion* as a video essay, see Eshun, *Dan Graham*.
52. Schreuder, *Pixels and Places*, 58.
53. Hatfield, "Expanded Cinema and Narrative," 61.
54. Martha Rosler, "For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life" [1979], in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 7.
55. Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," *October* 17 (1981): 77.
56. In his remarkable documentary *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), Pare Lorentz exposed the deleterious effects of overfarming, resulting in the destruction of the soil's fertility and its contribution to the creation of the dustbowl.
57. Jonathan Kahana asserts: "While documentary became a fixture in American commercial television of the 1950s and 1960s, methods were being invented for representing and interpreting the ordinary plight of new classes of Americans, some of whom had not previously featured in left-liberal documentary. Where the documentary forms of the New Deal and Second World War emphasized hierarchy, planning, and abstraction, new forms of documentary began to spring up—funded and distributed, to an increasing degree, outside of the highly centralized infrastructures of the state and the mainstream communications of the industry—that looked and sounded uncontrolled and local." Kahana, *Intelligence Work*, 37–38.
58. Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment" [1986], *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 54.
59. Rosler adopted the text of *A Budding Gourmet* from her eponymous postcard novel that involves sending weekly postcards to a set list of recipients.
60. Chan and Rosler, *Paul Chan/Martha Rosler*, 34. For an understanding of the importance of pop in her work, see Martha Rosler, "The Figure of the Artist, the Figure of the Woman," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 90–112.
61. Essay films in this form include Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet: Given Name Nam* (1989) and Mark Lewis's *Cane Toads* (1988), both of which parody the classical ethnographic anthropological documentary film.
62. Rosler, "For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 6.
63. *Ibid.*, 7.
64. Beginning in the 1980s, Rosler was involved with the alternative activist public television broadcast collective Paper Tiger. She made several works for the collective, including the highly performative *Born to Be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby S/M or \$M* (1988).
65. As Jan Verwoert explains, "Working in the medium of video makes it possible to reconstruct, criticize or correct the logic of image production in a performative mode, *from inside out*." Jan Verwoert, "Double Viewing: The Significance of the 'Pictorial Turn' to the Critical Use of Visual Media in Video Art," in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biermann (Zurich: Voldemeer, 2003), 24.
66. Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," 54.

67. Ibid.
68. Rosler, "For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 3.
69. *Secrets from the Street* is a videotape transfer from Super-8 film footage taken from a car driving through San Diego. The camera films storefronts, signs, billboards, graffiti, and other scenes from the street. Rosler's disembodied voice-over chants, "The secret is, the secret is. . . ." These three words form the base of the twelve-minute loop.
70. Chan and Rosler, *Paul Chan/Martha Rosler*, 15.
71. Ibid., 46.
72. Rosler explains, "I have avoided naturalism . . . that locks narrative into an almost inevitably uncritical relation to culture. Rather, I aim for the distancing effect that breaks the emotional identification with character and situation that naturalism implies." Rosler, "For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 8.
73. Ursula Biemann, "The Video Essay in the Digital Age," in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Zurich: Voldemeer, 2003), 8.
74. Rosler in Chan and Rosler, *Paul Chan/Martha Rosler*, 53.

## 6. NEW MIGRATIONS: THIRD CINEMA AND THE ESSAY FILM

1. Manthia Diawara traces this type of cultural migration whereby a phenomenon journeys to different contexts and geographies and is changed by those encounters before returning to its origins as something new to the music of James Brown and Miles Davis. See Manthia Diawara, *In Search of Africa* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
2. Paul Willemen underscores that the importance of European theoreticians in the conceptualization of Third Cinema should be understood as a "symptom of the productive cultural hybridization inherent in the position from which the Latin American cineastes speak, rather than functioning as a designation of origins." Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections," ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, *The Third Cinema Question* (London: BFI, 1989), 22.
3. Shortly after releasing *Araya*, Margot Benacerraf returned to Venezuela where she was active in promoting national arts and culture.
4. Karen Schwartzman, "An Interview with Margot Benacerraf: Reveron, Araya, and the Institutionalization of Cinema in Venezuela," *Journal of Film and Video* 44 (1992): 51-75.
5. The similarity to Eisenstein's film is not surprising; while studying film at the IDHEC, Benacerraf took a course with Edouard Tissé, the cinematographer for *¡Que viva Mexico!*, who used footage from Eisenstein's film as teaching material.
6. *Araya* was released for distribution in France in 1967 when Benacerraf had relocated to Caracas to work in cultural affairs. For a number of reasons, however, it was not shown in Venezuela until 1977.
7. Prior to going to Paris, Benacerraf studied theater with Erwin Piscator at the New School in New York City. On the uneasy and belated reception of *Araya*, see Julianne Burton-Carvajal, "Araya Across Time and Space: Competing Canons of National (Venezuelan)

- and International Film Histories,” in *Visible Nations: Latin American Cinema and Video*, ed. Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 51–81.
8. Marta Traba, cited in Burton-Carvajal, “*Araya* Across Time and Space,” 78.
  9. See Burton-Carvajal, “*Araya* Across Time and Space,” 56. At the time she was filming *Araya*, Benacerraf was in close contact with André Bazin, Roberto Rossellini, and Luis Buñuel.
  10. Schwartzman, “An Interview with Margot Benacerraf.”
  11. See Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 5.
  12. Willemsen, “The Third Cinema Question,” 27.
  13. Glauber Rocha, “An Esthetic of Hunger” [1965], in *New Latin American Cinema: Volume One*, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 60.
  14. *The Hour of the Furnaces* is divided into two parts, each composed of three sections. Each section is further subdivided into chapters with a total of fourteen chapters comprising the entire film. The chapters are titled: Introduction; (1) The History; (2) The Country; (3) Daily Violence; (4) The Port City; (5) The Oligarchy; (6) The System; (7) Political Violence; (8) Neoracism; (9) Dependence; (10) Cultural Violence; (11) Models; (12) Ideological Welfare; and (13) The Choice.
  15. In addition to reading Brecht, Boal had studied Paulo Friere’s practice of critical pedagogy, which he theorized as “Pedagogy of the Oppressed.” See Paul Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [1968] (New York: Bloomsbury, 1998).
  16. In 1974 *The Hour of the Furnaces* was screened in London, where it received the BFI’s “Best Foreign Film” award.
  17. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World” [1969], in *New Latin American Cinema: Volume One*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 55.
  18. Octavio Getino, “Some Notes on the Concept of a ‘Third Cinema’” [1986], in *New Latin American Cinema: Volume One*, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 101.
  19. Solanas and Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema,” 35.
  20. *Ibid.*, 47.
  21. *Ibid.*, 56 (emphasis in original).
  22. *Ibid.*, 46.
  23. As Michael Chanan notes, the documentary genre in all of its manifestations “held a central position” in Latin American Cinema, including its incorporation into fictional films. Chanan identifies nine types of documentary practices, including *cine ensayo*. See Michael Chanan, “Rediscovering Documentary,” in *New Latin American Cinema: Volume One*, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 206.
  24. For a critical analysis of anthropophagy, see *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. Francis Baker et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
  25. Solanas and Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema,” 37.
  26. *Ibid.*, 42.

27. *Ibid.*, 45 (emphasis in original).
28. Getino, "Some Notes on the Concept of a Third Cinema," 106.
29. As Chanan relates, ". . . within the bounds of a conventional sense of realism that had become pretty well established by the end of the 1930s. Ideologically consolidated in the postwar period, this is the basis of the aesthetic which was then inherited by television, a style many filmmakers felt excessively confining." Michael Chanan, "Rediscovering Documentary," 203.
30. Solanas and Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema," 47.
31. As Solanas and Getino stressed repeatedly: "a revolutionary cinema is inconceivable without the constant and methodical exercise of practice, search and experimentation. . . . The possibility of discovering and inventing film forms and structures that serve a more profound vision of our reality resides in the ability to place oneself in the outside limits of the familiar, to make one's way amid constant dangers." *Ibid.*, 48.
32. *Ibid.*, 49.
33. Sergei Eisenstein, "Notes for a Film of 'Capital,'" trans. Jay Leyda, *October* 2 (1976): 9.
34. Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema" [Cuba, 1969], *New Latin American Cinema: Volume One*, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 81.
35. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, Vol 1, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Vintage, 1996), 270.
36. Solanas, as cited in Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question," 9.
37. Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question," 5. Additionally, it should be noted that Alberto Cavalcanti was teaching at the Centro Sperimentale at the time.
38. Jacques Rivette, "Letter on Rossellini" [1955], *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood and the New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier, trans. Tom Milne (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 199.
39. Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," 81.
40. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, "The Viewer's Dialectic" [Havana, 1982]. There are several versions of this text, including one that consists of two-parts published in *Jump Cut* 29 (February 1984): 18–21, and *Jump Cut* 30 (March 1985): 48–53, and a shortened version in *New Latin American Cinema: Volume One*, ed. Michael Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 108–31. Both are translated by Julia Lesage. However, the texts are significantly different in certain parts. In *Jump Cut* Alea discusses at length the importance of Eisenstein and Brecht for his understanding of engagement with the spectator; in the *New Latin American Cinema* version these figures have been glossed over. I cite from both sources, indicating each as such. Alea, *New Latin American Cinema*, 111.
41. Alea, *New Latin American Cinema*, 117.
42. Alea, *New Latin American Cinema*, 120 (emphasis in original).
43. Alea, *Jump Cut*, part 2.
44. Alea, *New Latin American Cinema*, 123.
45. *Ibid.*, 124–25.
46. Alea, *Jump Cut*, part 2.
47. Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* [1979] (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1982), xi.

48. Ibid.
49. Gabriel, "Third Cinema as a Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 53.
50. Ibid., 53–54, 55.
51. Wernher von Braun, a celebrated Nazi scientist, invented the V2 rocket that devastated parts of Britain, including London. He was subsequently brought to the United States to work for the U.S. military and aeronautical space division, where he is credited with having designed the Saturn V rocket that launched the Apollo 11 trip to the moon.
52. Max Bense, "On the Essay and Its Prose," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan, trans. Margit Grieb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 57. As Bense elaborates, "all great essayists have been combiners and possessed extraordinary imagination."
53. For an analysis of the aesthetic component of L.A. Rebellion films, see Franklin Cason, "The Souls of Black Film: Art and Politics" (doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, 2010). For an institutional history of the formation of black filmmaking at UCLA, see Zeinabu Irene Davis's documentary *Spirits of Rebellion: Black Film at UCLA* (2015).
54. According to Michael T. Martin, "One cannot understand black diasporic cinemas without understanding them as part of Third World Cinema." Michael T. Martin, "Framing the 'Black' in Black Diasporic Cinemas," ed. Michael T. Martin, *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 1.
55. As Coco Fusco summarized the period, "The independents and the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) directed many of their efforts toward the establishment of Channel 4 as a commissioning resource and television outlet for British films. Its charter affirms the channel's commitment to multicultural programming. Those interest groups' lobbying, together with the support from Channel 4 and the BFI, also led to the Workshop declaration of 1981, giving nonprofit media-production units with at least four salaried members the right to be franchised and eligible for production and operating monies as nonprofit companies." Coco Fusco, "A Black Avant-Garde?" in *Young British and Black: The Work of Sankofa and the Black Audio Film Collective*, ed. Coco Fusco (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1988), 10.
56. For a comprehensive overview of British cultural landscape in the eighties and nineties see Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), and *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980s* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016). For a detailed account of the art scene in London, see Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History from 1950 to the Present* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).
57. Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," in *Identity—The Real Me: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha et al. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), 44.
58. Reece Auguiste of the BAFC succinctly sums up the mission of these collectives: "Historically, the workshops have always been structured and determined by three interconnecting factors: 1) political, 2) financial, and 3) cultural. Those three interconnecting

- categories have always determined, and will continue to do so, what is possible or not possible in an already, severely racialised terrain." Reece Auguiste and the Black Audio Film Collective, "Black Independents and Third Cinema: The British Context," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen (London: BFI, 1989), 213.
59. Edward George, "New Directions in Training" [1985], in *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective 1982–1998*, ed. Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 149.
  60. Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 10.
  61. In his assessment of the independent filmmaking scene at the time, Colin McCabe recalls: "The dominant aesthetic was post-68 and anti-representational. Narrative and Spectacle were to be eschewed in favour of analysis and political correctness. The majority of the films made during this period were as dire as such an aesthetic suggests." Colin McCabe, "Introduction," in *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel*, ed. Isaac Julien and Colin McCabe (London: BFI, 1991), 8.
  62. Humphrey Jennings's "Mass Observation" project was taken up again in 1981 at the University of Sussex, with which both John Akomfrah and Stuart Hall were affiliated.
  63. On the nature of black British culture, see Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
  64. For an analysis of *Handsworth Songs*, see Kodwo Eshun, "The Disenchantments of Reflexivity in *Handsworth Songs*," in *Der Essayfilm: Ästhetik und Aktualität*, ed. Sven Kramer and Thomas Tode (Konstanz: UVK, 2011), 241–56.
  65. Coco Fusco, "Black Filmmaking in Britain's Workshop Section," in *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 314.
  66. BAFC unpublished statement cited in Fusco, "A Black Avant-Garde?," 19.
  67. Isaac Julien, "An Interview with Martina Antille and Isaac Julien of Sankofa Film/Video Collective," in *Young British and Black: A Monograph on the Work of Sankofa Film/Video Collective and Black Audio Film Collective*, ed. Coco Fusco (Buffalo, N.Y.: Contemporary Arts Center, 1988), 24.
  68. "It wasn't just neo-formalism. That, I think, has always been my problem with abstract film: that, in formal terms, it might be radical and interesting but it was never radical enough in terms of content." Isaac Julien, "From Ten Thousand Waves to Lina Bo Bardi, via Kapital," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 336.
  69. *Ibid.*, 335.
  70. Julien, "An Interview with Martina Antille and Isaac Julien of Sankofa Film/Video Collective," 25.
  71. Julien, "From Ten Thousand Waves to Lina Bo Bardi, via Kapital," 335.
  72. Auguiste and the Black Audio Collective, "Black Independents and Third Cinema," 215.
  73. Reece Auguiste and the Black Audio Film Collective, "Black Cinema, Poetics and New World Aesthetics" [1988], in *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective, 1982–1998*, ed. Kodwo Eshun (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 152.



74. A transcript of some of the lectures and conversations at the Commonwealth Institute conference was published in *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists' Film and Video*, eds. Nina Danino and Michael Mazière (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), chap. 4.
75. From the 1986 program notes of the Edinburgh International Film Festival organized by June Giavanni, Jim Pines, and Paul Willemen, in Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question," 2.
76. Auguiste and the Black Audio Film Collective, "Black Independents and Third Cinema," 215.
77. In his study on the essay film, David Montero uses Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to understand contemporary European essay filmmakers such as Harun Farocki and Chris Marker. David Montero, *Thinking Images: The Essay Film as a Dialogic Form in European Cinema* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), 16. Montero limits his approach to West European filmmakers and does not make the connection between Third Cinema and contemporary filmmaking of the diaspora.
78. Willemen quotes extensively from Bakhtin to counter attacks that the black British filmmakers should not be making films about Britain or other cultures to which they do not belong. Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question," 26.
79. Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 62.
80. Jim Pines, "Territories; An interview with Isaac Julien," *Framework* 26–27 (1985): 5.
81. Isaac Julien, "Introduction," *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel* (London: BFI, 1991), 2.
82. Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 60.
83. See Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*.
84. See Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston* and *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin White Mask*; John Akomfrah, *Seven Songs of Malcolm X* (1995).
85. Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question," 4.
86. Frantz Fanon's text (*Black Skin White Masks*) is in the plural, whereas the title of Julien's film is singular. There are two versions of the film. A fifty-minute version made for BBC television and distributed primarily in the United States by California Newsreel and a seventy-eight-minute cinema version circulated in festivals, considered to be both the director's and the producer's cut. Unless otherwise noted, I refer to the cinematic version.
87. Isaac Julien and Mark Nash, "Fanon as Film," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 11/12 (Fall/Winter 2000): 15.
88. *Ibid.*, 16.
89. Stuart Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon: Why Fanon? Why Now? Why *Black Skin, White Masks*?" in *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press), 16.
90. Fanon, as cited by Hall. *Ibid.*, 18.
91. *Ibid.*, 17.
92. Julien, "Filmmakers' Dialogue," in *The Fact of Blackness: Franz Fanon and Visual Representation*, ed. Alan Read (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), 169.
93. Bhabha wrote his text for the film in collaboration with Julien and Nash. Email from Julien to author, March 2, 2016.

94. Hall, "The After-life of Frantz Fanon," 15.
95. *Ibid.*, 19.
96. Julien, "From Ten Thousand Waves to Lina Bo Bardi, via Kapital," 336.
97. On *10,000 Waves* as an essay installation, see Laura Mulvey, "Ten Thousand Waves," in *Isaac Julien: Riot* (New York: MOMA, 2013), 202–10.
98. Julien, "From Ten Thousand Waves to Lina Bo Bardi, via Kapital," 336.
99. Okwui Enwezor, "Coalition Building: Black Audio Film Collective and Transnational Post-Colonialism," in *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective, 1982–1998* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 109.
100. Auguste and the Black Audio Film Collective, "Black Independents and Third Cinema," 213–14.
101. Enwezor, "Coalition Building," 122. For an insightful study of contemporary artistic practices and migration, see T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during the Global Crisis* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013).
102. John Akomfrah, "De-Westernizing as a Double Move," in *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, ed. Saër Maty Bâ and Will Higbee (New York: Routledge, 2012), 268.
103. Gabriel, "Third Cinema as a Guardian of Popular Memory," 64.
104. In the film *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashigo* (1991), Japanese American essay filmmaker Rea Tajiri ponders the difficulty of how to make a documentary about a subject—in this case Japanese-American internment camps—when the evidence has been destroyed and few records exist.
105. Akomfrah quoted in Sukhdev Sandu, "John Akomfrah: Migration and Memory," *Guardian*, January 30, 2012. Akomfrah has worked with the same sound designer, Trevor Mathison, for the past three decades.
106. Akomfrah dedicated *All That's Solid* to the memory of Philip Donnellan (1924–1999), an important British documentary filmmaker deeply invested in recording and preserving songs, ballads, and folk tunes, among other projects.
107. "An Interview with Black Audio Film Collective: John Akomfrah, Reece Auguste, Lina Gopaul and Avril Johnson," in *Young British and Black: A Monograph on the Work of Sankofa Film/Video Collective and Black Audio Film Collective*, ed. Coco Fusco (Buffalo, N.Y.: Contemporary Arts Center, 1988), 47.
108. Walter Benjamin's importance for BAFC and Akomfrah is evidenced by their film *The Last Angel of History* (1996), which evokes his well-known Thesis IX. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Thesis: IX. In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, 257–58. New York: Schocken, 1969.
109. "Thus BAFC began their critical project not from the point of view of a moving image culture, but as a writing project, with the archive of empire representing a site for rewriting the narratives of empire." Okwui Enwezor, "Coalition Building," 118.
110. Akomfrah, "De-Westernizing as a Double Move," 268.
111. Raymond Bellour, "The Pensive Spectator," *Wide Angle* 9, 1 (1987): 6–7.
112. Akomfrah, "De-Westernizing as a Double Move," 268.
113. As T. J. Demos notes, the terms "double-consciousness" (W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Gilroy), "double frame" (Bhabha), and "double perspective" (Edward Said) all refer to "the

- bicultural knowledge produced by living in a foreign environment, generating in its positive expression a sensitivity toward a difference (that of cultures, places, and communities), and a newfound appreciation of the cultural character of one's origins when looking back from the migrant's awry vantage." T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 3.
114. Akomfrah "De-Westernizing as a Double Move," 268.
  115. Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," 45.
  116. For examples of portraits in the genre of the essay film, see Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (1992) or Godard's self-portrait *JLG/JLG: Autoportrait in December* (1994).
  117. John Akomfrah, "1000 Words," *Artforum* (October 2013): 260.
  118. *Ibid.*
  119. *Ibid.*
  120. Stuart Hall, "A Conversation with Stuart Hall," *The Journal of the International Institute* 7, 1 (1999).
  121. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, Harvest, 1978), 150.
  122. Akomfrah, "De-Westernizing as a Double Move," 268.

## 7. BEYOND THE CINEMATIC SCREEN: INSTALLATIONS AND THE INTERNET

1. The promise and the reality of the World Wide Web are two very different matters. Political restrictions may limit accessibility to certain sites and servers, and economic restrictions impede access for those who cannot afford increasingly costly high-speed access.
2. T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during the Global Crisis* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), xvii.
3. In his exhibition *Voyage(s) en utopie: À la recherche d'un théorème perdu* (Centre Georges Pompidou, 2006), Jean-Luc Godard launched a full-scale attack against the museum as an institution and broker of art and culture. For an insightful analysis of Godard's project, see Daniel Fairfax, "Montage(s) of a Disaster: *Voyage(s) en utopie* by Jean-Luc Godard," *Cinema Journal* 54, 2 (2015): 24–48. Shortly before his death, Chris Marker withdrew from a retrospective of his work planned at the Centre Georges Pompidou because the institution insisted on advertising the upcoming show with large banners bearing his name.
4. Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki, *Speaking About Godard* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 142.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, ed. Nora Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 71.
6. Harun Farocki, "Cross Influence and Soft Montage," in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun (Cologne: König, 2010), 70.
7. Harun Farocki, "Nine Minutes in the Yard: A Conversation with Harun Farocki," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 302.

8. For an analysis of the different types of exhibition strategies Farocki used in *I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts*, see Christa Blümlinger, "The Art of the Possible," in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Zurich: Voldemere, 2003), 106–7.
9. Theodor W. Adorno "Transparencies on Film" [1966], *New German Critique*, 24/25 (1981–1982): 203.
10. For an interesting discussion detailing the shift in projection spaces from theaters to galleries, see Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
11. Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labor and Capital" [1983], ed. Liz Well, *The Photography Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003) 443–52.
12. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* [1969], ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 121.
13. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* [1951], trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1987, 194).
14. Robert Smithson, "The Shape of the Future and Memory" [1966], in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 211.
15. *Partially Buried* was initially shown in the context of an installation at the Pat Hearn Gallery in New York. The installation included black and white media photographs, yearbook photos, books, and other information about the tragedy at Kent State University in Ohio in 1970.
16. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 70–71.
17. Smithson, "A Cinematic Atopia" [1971], in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 141.
18. Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 81.
19. See Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).
20. Renée Green, *Camino/Road* (New York: Free Agent Media, 1994).
21. Robert Smithson, "Art and Dialectics," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 219.
22. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Thesis: XVIII A, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 263.
23. Renée Green, "Interview with Pauline Bouday," *Les Cahiers de la Classe des Beaux-Arts* 113 (1997): 71.
24. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 19.
25. Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review* 92 (2015): 111.
26. Chris Marker was intrigued by the potential of television; during the 1950s he tried his hand at broadcast television with his projected series *Clé des songes* ("Key of dreams"). He returned to television throughout the 1970s with his *On parle de . . .* broadcasts, and in 1989 he made a thirteen-part series for the Société Nationale de Programmes France-régions on FR3, *L'Héritage de la chouette* ("Legacy of the owl").

27. Some scholars assert that the written essay has achieved its apex as an interactive form through the Internet. See Patrick Madden, *Sublime Physick* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016) and website [quotidiana.org/sublimephysick/](http://quotidiana.org/sublimephysick/).
28. An updated DVD version was released a decade later; both versions are now technologically obsolete.
29. Chris Marker, *Le dépayés* (Paris: Editions Herrscher, 1982).
30. Aware of his authorial control, in one version of *Immemory*, installed at the Antoni Tàpies Foundation, Barcelona, Chris Marker worked with the foundation's artistic director Laurence Rassel to create *Roseware* (1998), a version that would allow users to add new information and create new links.
31. For two insightful treatments of *Immemory*, see Laurent Roth and Raymond Bellour, *Qu'est-ce qu'une Madeleine?: A propos du CD-ROM Immemory de Chris Marker* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997).
32. Marker has addressed Godard in several films, including *The Last Bolshevik* (1992).
33. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" [1934], in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 224.

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