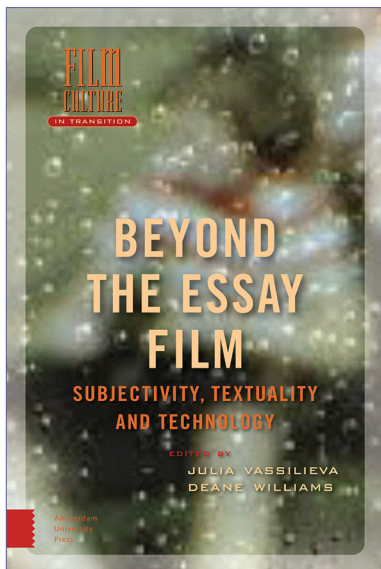


Fátima CHINITA

The Audiovisual Essay in the Post-Cinematic Age



Review of:

Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology, edited by Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams.

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 245 pages. ISBN: 978-94-6372-870-6 (hardback).

In the collection Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams edited, *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology*, they do not, as is customary among theorists in the field, offer a definition of essay film, probably because they realize that the versatility and un-normativity of the genre are its best features. To risk a definition would be highly damaging to the creative and mysterious credentials of the audiovisual essay in general. So they offer a common ground instead: those characteristics about which commentators seem to be in general agreement. These are a hybrid nature (“a liminal position between fiction, non-fiction, and experimental film”); a free and innovative form (“transgressive and heretical”); an assumed authorial stance, endowing the film both with subjectivity and a “reflexive standpoint”; and

Fátima CHINITA

Lisbon Polytechnic Institute
chinita.estc@gmail.com

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last, but not least, “a more involved and critical position” on the part of the viewer (all quotes are from “Introduction” 12).

The editors begin by drawing attention to the fact that “the essay film is in the spotlight. The last 25 years or so saw an explosion in audiovisual productions from across the globe that belong to this lineage” (1). From Jean-Luc Godard’s project *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (concluded in 1998) to the current audiovisual essay practice of academics such as Cristina Álvarez López/Adrian Martin and Catherine Grant, subjectivity is no longer forbidden in the non-fictional film—*beyond* straightforward documentary practices, I will add. So, while drawing from the past whenever necessary, the aim of the editors is to focus on the audiovisual essay in the 21st century. Indeed, all the book chapters as well as the introduction focus on the “audiovisual essay,” the offspring of the essay film. The word *Beyond*, which starts the collection’s title, points to several of the possible ramifications operative in this field nowadays. The articulation of “subjectivity” (authorial condition), “textuality” (form) and “technology” (the advent of the digital essay)—the three words that make up the subtitle of the book—enable the editors and the authors featured in the collection to question the essay film as cinema, but not without a cinephilic attitude (shared most notably by Cristina Álvarez López/Adrian Martin, Julia Vassilieva, and Catherine Grant in their contributions).

According to the editors, the introduction of digital video production and post-production equipment has caused new and different products to appear: expanded essays in the form of installations; the videographic essay as an academic analytical practice; lyrical essay films that use a plethora of different archival material and varied footage. It has also brought about different essayistic attitudes, connected to more political or eco-critical positions aligned with the current times (such as the Anthropocene) and an even more explicit subjectivity connected to “the genres dialogical structure” (“Introduction” 14).

The responsibility of addressing the expanded essay falls on Ross Gibson (chapter 5), who writes about the multi-channel essay film, but instead of doing it from the perspective of the author, he focuses on the spectators of said installations, placing the charge of essayism on them and their mental processes in relation to the art object. He observes that “each interpretation is a kind of essay, a trying-out extracted from an array of fields.” (117). According to Gibson, an installation enables the “essayistic participant” (116) to draw on more cognitive and emotional options stored via memory. Gibson argues that by having to sort through the simultaneous screens, the installation becomes “an essay about the apprehension in extremis, an essay that tries out the notion that the understanding of intense, dynamic, and complex experiences necessarily blends inspective, retrospective and prospective time frames all at once, as the viewer makes sense of the experience by selecting details from the perceived present moment and conjoining them with personally stored memories of past significance to conjure instantaneous projections about imminent prospects” (114).

In contradistinction to Gibson, for Raymond Bellour—in an article originally written in 2009 and published in 2012, here reproduced, (chapter 1)—the effort to reflect upon a film is nowadays hampered even further by DVD consumption and art installations. In Bellour’s opinion, multichannel works can never be perceived in the same way that a film would be apprehended, and more importantly: no two different spectators have the exact same experience (47). In this “other cinema” (47)—as Bellour calls the new artistic output in contemporary art—the text is more ‘unattainable’ than ever, as he had claimed in 1975, in that it cannot be memorized, experienced and explained (let alone immortalized) by the viewers and the critics alike. Paradoxically, as it turns out, when images are more accessible than ever, choices have to be made and exacting sifting is required. However, Bellour’s article is not about essay film, which begs the question: why insert it in this collection in the first place? Although the answer is not provided directly, it may very well have to do with the fact that Bellour represents thought about film before film could think for itself and convey itself as thought (i.e., discourse). In a manner of speaking, Bellour represents a cinematic pre-essay condition, in which the gap between the film form and the ‘message’ transmitted via the film’s materiality—rather than through an author’s explicit voice (as in documentary)—had not yet become an experience in its own right, hence its supposedly “unattainable” status.

The videographic essay is dealt with both by Cristina Álvarez López/Adrian Martin (chapter 2) and Catherine Grant (chapter 10), but from different theoretical angles and with distinct objectives. Interestingly, both also engage with the two-faced notion of the thinking about film and essay film as a genre that thinks. Álvarez López and Martin—who, incidentally, draw on Bellour’s theories about the film as text—aim to establish a duality between the videographic openness and its critical movement, on the one hand, and the resource of the freeze frame, by which the image can be “grasped” (62), on the other. The authors argue that an essay is a text that needs no words (56), a fully audiovisual enterprise that is beholden to moving image codes that convey forms, textures, elements and associations (most notably through editing, since this is where duration is best experienced) (69). The main point of this lengthy and quite dense article in what regards the study of the audiovisual essay is that “there are more ways to ‘read and think’ other than through word-based reading and writing” (56–57). In this perspective, an audiovisual essay is polysemic, ideologically loose (“in motion”, 62), hence its being “unattainable,” as Bellour contends (64). Yet, Álvarez López and Martin achieve in this chapter what Bellour does not manage to accomplish in his: to examine essays in an essayistic form. Catherine Grant, an academic and “a prolific video essayist” (213), admits that this creative tool for academic research, which enables one to perceive anew often well-known films, is also a cinephilic enterprise. The handling of the materials, the re-formation of the components, the sheer pleasure of discovery, the sense of communication and intimacy with the film are all consequences of an interactivity that, by her own admission, have transformed her into a “possessive” and “pensive” spectator, according to Laura Mulvey’s

definition (201). Making video essays is, for Grant, not only an extension of her academic practice, but also a valid form of film analysis and cinematic interrogation “precisely because of its potential for more ‘poetic’, creative, and performative critical approaches to moving image research” (200, emphasis in the original). Judging by these two positions, an essay film, for all its discursive importance, may also be an instrument of pleasure and lyricism.

Laura Rascaroli addresses the issue of the lyric essay head-on (chapter 3). Even though she concentrates specifically on the form, highlighting the essay’s eventual connection to poetry, and its “aestheticizing power” (91), she does not separate it from the development of an argument. This, she claims, is always present under the form of narration which includes “a narrative mode and style, point of view, focalization, ordering of events and temporality.” (77). She does, however, claim that visual and auditory spectatorial pleasure (i.e., formal pleasure) is a key ingredient of this type of hybrid film (91). Yet, for all the aesthetic satisfaction artists derive from it, the lyric essay film “is not in contradiction with the essay in its role of commentary on our world. It can be used to shape the nature of subjectivity and enunciation, audiovisual rhythm and temporality; it can work against a film’s linearity and/or logic, undermining its rationality and its skepticism, and mobilize affect (on a spectrum that goes from rage to mourning) to produce intelligence” (91). The lyric essay is able to borrow abstraction, fragmentation and symbolism from experimental cinema; mood and atmosphere from fictional films; as well as patterns, rhythms and associative links from Bill Nichols’ poetic mode of documentary. Still, it remains congruent with the two characteristics of the essay film in general, as mentioned by Rascaroli: (1) a dialectic stance capable of accommodating historical, political and philosophical positions, in which the critical is balanced with the personal; (2) subjectivity itself. Form is, therefore, the catalyst to the ingrained political view: the revelation of the disenfranchised (“the voiceless.”) (86).

In the current essay film landscape, however, this otherness need not be human. Both Katrin Pesch (chapter 6) and Belinda Smaill (chapter 7) address ecological forms of thinking about the world and producing a world that thinks. Pesch argues in favour of a “posthumanist essay” (137). In this author’s opinion, contrary to the literary essay which was grounded on the tradition of the Enlightenment and had a strong humanist basis, implying “an autonomous, self-determined human subject” (137), the post-humanist essay highlights the materiality of the world and its images and sounds. Pesch advocates a mix of human and non-human voices, which is tantamount to switching subjectivity for “agency.” According to her, “the film promises a dialogical embodied experience” (122), one in which “the material and the discursive are intertwined” (128). In true film essayistic mode, “authorship is partially transferred to the audience, which assumes the role of co-creator.” (125). Yet, the film is also highly enunciative, stressing combined modes of representation, under the guise of a dense mix of images of actual spaces and sounds of real-life actions that draw attention to the film’s construction. Deborah Stratman’s *The Illinois Parables* (2016)—a film about the geography of Illinois and some of its

bygone communities and historical traces, posing the landscape and its geopolitical implications above all else—proves that an intentionality pervades the work. Likewise, Belinda Smail wishes to perceive “the human in ways that move beyond (human) subject-centred paradigms” (142). This leads her to posit an essay film “beyond anthropocentrism” (144), where humans are not the measure of all things but are rather on par with their planetary subject. Thus, the film’s ideas are conveyed in a lyrical manner that weaves together images, sounds and voice-over in a non-prescriptive, but rather exploratory, fashion. This is achieved by establishing a relationship between the self and the natural world in a “lyrical’ formulation of the essay” (149) “closer to poetry than prose.” (149). Yet, the films are not devoid of political overtones. Patricio Guzmán’s film *The Pearl Button / El botón de nácar* (2015), in fact, contains: “Meditations on geology [the overriding presence and importance of water], astronomy [the cosmos], and personal recollections [by the film director and native interviewees] that infuse the representation of national political history [the indigenous nations, colonialism, the Pinochet-era massacres].” (146). This is conveyed through the presentation of materiality across time—present and durational time, as well as the past as a condition for the present—instead of a more engaged subjective position on the director’s part.

Although the editors of the collection use “technology” as the last term in their subtitle, it transpires from my exposition so far that it was the introduction of digital video that engendered, or at least aided, the new forms and ideologies approached in this volume. As is usually the case with aesthetic revolutions, the causes tend to be technical in nature. Starting with the *actualités* devised by the Lumière Brothers at the end of the 19th century, made possible by the portability of their camera, the cinematograph, proceeding with the observational documentarist practices of Direct Cinema at the middle of the 20th century, and arriving at the digital video, in full throttle in the new millennium, the smaller and more autonomous the apparatus, the more creative and radical the artistic practice tends to be, both in documentaries—as indicated here—and in fiction films (not to mention experimental ones). Thus, the modalities of subjectivity are conditioned and determined by the technology employed. It was the most recent technological boost that pushed even further the essay film’s hybrid character, intermedial configurations and versatility. According to the book editors, the discontinuity of image and text—as approached theoretically and used by Eisenstein and Godard in different cinematic periods—calls attention to the mediated nature of the essay and, consequently, its questioning of truth and its “impurity.” It seems that now, more than ever, the essay film allows all combinations and opens itself to all types of reflections and authorial searches, increasingly technological in essence and growingly intermedial in practice.

The investigation of the “symbiotic relationship between subjectivity and textuality in the essay film” is exemplified by Deane Williams through the case study of Laurie Anderson, whom he considers to be a twofold essayist (chapter 4). First, she is an essayist in the manner

that she practices her highly interdisciplinary and hybrid art, “sashaying” (i.e., mixing) variegated materials and media¹ for four decades “across music, sculpture, drawing, video, performance, installation, spoken word, software design, and more, working backwards, forwards, and sideways” (199). Secondly, she is an essayist in the film *Heart of a Dog* (2015), an essay which is non-linear, temporally unorthodox, dialectical, self-reflexive, performative and autobiographical. Indeed, Anderson’s film ranges across disciplines, placed between the artist and her life, and combining storytelling and digital media (106). The film is marked by Anderson’s own voice digitally filtered, highlighting the performativity of the whole (“its irony and playfulness in its sing-song quality undermine the kind of authority that can be associated with the voice-over,” 99–100). The contents combine a wide range of topics and media (“mobile-phone footage, 8mm home movies, domestic-grade digital video, found footage, animation, digital graphics,” 100).

Julia Vassilieva (chapter 8) argues that this inherent self-reflexivity, also mentioned by Rascaroli in her chapter, is at the core of the audiovisual essay. This genre “announces itself unambiguously as a commentary, an investigation, or an analysis of a media text delivered from a distance. And yet, it is also always driven by another tendency, which can be described as a desire to ‘inhabit’ the media text under investigation” (169). The author traces a direct line from the Soviet montage of the 1920s to the current audiovisual essay. The highly ideological Soviet editing and audiovisual essayism are both instruments of analysis, criticism, reflection and aesthetic expression into the “possibilities of the medium itself” (165), as Dziga Vertov’s film *Man with a Movie Camera / Chelovek c-kino-apparatom* (1929) amply demonstrates. Therefore, Vassilieva claims, it is apt to say that all methods devised by these avant-garde theoreticians are in fact, thought processes. Vertov’s and Sergei Eisenstein’s films also mobilize rhythm as a structuring device, which, according to Vassilieva, is an aesthetic strategy of the audiovisual essay. Esfir Shub’s compilation films, on the other hand, “foreground montage’s subversive potential as a source of reinvention, rebellion, and freedom” (178), inasmuch as shots can be taken out of context and defy the so-called “ontological authenticity” of the medium (179). In the audiovisual essay, Vassilieva states, montage is “amped up and raised to a higher pitch of emphasis”—a practice she nominates “intensified discontinuity” (166). When, in the coda to her article, she posits that the heightened rearrangement of excerpts in the now mainly digital essay is reminiscent of Lev Manovich’s data-base logic of the new media, she is calling attention to montage in a twofold way. First, as a different type of manipulation afforded by technology; second, as a creative momentum (re)gained by the authors under the aegis of hapticity as well as intellectual resources.

This edited collection features a posthumous article by Thomas Elsaesser in which the late Professor Emeritus writes about his own experience of making a personal documentary

1 “I like that ‘sashaying’ sounds a little like ‘essaying’.” (98).

about his grandfather, a renowned German architect (chapter 11). He entered into this project by chance, as the result of a commission from a TV broadcast station, and the task, he claims, set him on a course toward many discoveries, some of them personal, some artistic. Besides tracing the genealogy of Elsaesser's only essay film, this contribution to the volume is important because of the author's own questioning of the essay genre. Did he or did he not make an essay film, that is the question he asks himself. The doubt is reasonably introduced by the author when he remarks that this is a film made from home movies shot by his father and appropriated by him. Modesty, no doubt, leads him to wonder: "Even if I didn't make an essay film did I manage to make an authored film after all?" (236). Elsaesser claims from the start that he wanted to let the images "speak" for themselves, which meant foregoing any off-screen commentary. Yet, his subjectivity should prevail, as is customary in the essay film, through an involvement with the spectator and the use of reflexivity and self-reference. The former implies a certain purpose in the use of pre-existent film materials; the latter departs from any and all realism and objectivity, typical of the documentary stance. So, two subjectivities coalesce here: Elsaesser's father's, who first shot the material as home movies which reveal as much family life as they conceal it; and Elsaesser himself, who used the second-hand images with the intention of reviving his grandfather's memory (hence, enunciating a clear discourse). As a result, Elsaesser's film, *The Sun Island / Die Sonneninsel* is indeed an essay film, one that allows the genre's connotation with a more poetic and less apparently ideological stance.

Elsaesser's film has all this, but it is also *beyond* it. He manages to highlight what is physically missing from the images, but is somehow inscribed there, between the frames: his grandmother's adultery with another architect, contemporary of her husband; Elsaesser's own mother's love for a German Aryan who left, forcing her into a possibly loveless marriage. The film viewer should accordingly adopt a hermeneutic posture and interpret "the absences as having their own presence" (229). Apparently neutral and even banal, *The Sun Island*, contrary to the footage that brings it to life, is neither destined for family consumption nor is it celebratory. All in all, Elsaesser proves that the essay is in the approach, regardless of the ideas themselves; an essay exists whenever the truth claim is denied or obfuscated.

All the above-mentioned articles in *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology* form a cohesive whole that points to possible ramifications of the essay film that are already under way. The exception is Richard Misek's article (chapter 9), which examines the subject of voice-over narration in essay films, and how misleading they sometimes can be for film audiences. As interesting as this chapter is, it does not pertain to any new practice or direction in essay films, as the others do. Contrary to other recent approaches to the essay film, this collection focuses primarily on the form and the self-reflexive and material essence of the genre, instead of on its themes and socio-political elements. Thus, it stands out as a much needed contribution in the English language, one that fills a gap in the existing

literature on the subject. This approach, like any other with a cinephilic propensity, has the merit of joining a long line of reflexion on what cinema is. However, the word “beyond” is ambiguous and possibly dangerous in this context, although admittedly captivating. On the one hand, it points to the fact that cinema (and essay film as well) is in a permanent state of flux, changing and renewing itself. On the other hand, it also denotes a certain removal from the essay film, which should be its point of origin and subject matter. *Beyond* the essay film are we still in essay film land, or has the map grown larger than the territory? Is the future of essay film no longer essay film but essayism? Only time will tell, but this collection offers an important contribution to that debate.

Author’s short bio:

Fátima Chinita is an Associate Professor at the Theater and Film School of the Lisbon Polytechnic Institute, in Portugal. She holds a PhD. in Artistic Studies with a thesis on cinematic authorial discourse, and has conducted her mixed post-doctoral research in LabCom.CA—Communication and Arts research center, in Portugal, and IMS—Intermediality and Multimodality research center at the Linnaeus University, in Sweden, under the supervision of Lars Elleström. She lectures on film production, film history, cinematic narrative, intermediality and inter-arts studies; and publishes on film narrative, intermediality, authorship and essay film.