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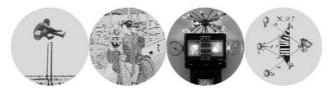Additional services and information for *Journal of Visual Culture* can be found at:

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Translating the Essay into Film and Installation

Nora M. Alter

Abstract

This article investigates whether or not it is possible to translate the philosophical essay into a two- and later three-dimensional audio-visual form known as the 'essay film'. This genre is increasingly gaining recognition as a distinct branch of international cinema. This text traces the essay film's origins back to early silent cinema and the abstract, experimental films of artists and then follows its development and the forking of paths into non-fiction 'art cinema' and non-fiction film, concluding with recent experiments that blur the distinction between art and film and which seek to transform the essay into a sculptural installation.

Keywords

Theodor Adorno • Walter Benjamin • essay • film • installation • Georg Lukács • philosophy • translation

A mode of audio-visual production, loosely called the 'essay film', has proliferated in recent years within the disciplines of film and fine art. Sometimes referred to as 'filmed philosophy', this filmic genre which originates in the 1920s has increasingly come to be recognized as a distinct branch of international cinema. In the broadest sense, the essay film is a hybrid that fuses the two long-established categories of film: fiction and documentary. But it also goes beyond this to cross the boundaries of traditional disciplines. Producers of audio-visual essays thus include not only feature filmmakers, documentarists and avant-garde filmmakers, but also artists who produce installations for gallery and museum display.

While essay films typically do not follow a clear narrative trajectory, they often self-reflexively offer their own film criticism. Like its ancestor, the written essay, the genre of the essay film poaches across disciplinary borders, often transgressing conceptual and formal norms. Positioned, as is the

literary essay, between genres that are more stable and firmly established – in the case of the written essay between literature and philosophy and in the case of the essay film between narrative fiction and documentary – audio-visual essays problematize binary categories of representation. Although 'essay films' have been sporadically produced for at least 80 years, this genre was only properly theorized in the final decade of the 20th century. Since then, the production of audio-visual essays has increased at such a rate that they have come to be commonly acknowledged as a third cinematic genre.

The reasons for the proliferation of the essay film are multiple, and include the broad accessibility of video cameras and digital editing systems. This technology has enabled individuals with little or no training in filmmaking to become practitioners of the craft. The more general shift away from literacy toward visual culture in the late 20th century has also spurred on production within this medium. Indeed, the essay film at the turn of the millennium has increasingly come to perform the critical function of the written film theory essay. In what follows I shall examine the genealogy of the audio-visual essay, as well as discuss the vicissitudes of this genre from a one-dimensional written linguistic text to be read, to a two-dimensional audio-visual film or video work to be screened publicly or viewed on a VCR, DVD or CD-ROM, and finally to a three-dimensional installation designed as a space through which the spectator actively navigates his or her way. My aim is not only to explore the particular stages of the essay film, but also to investigate the translation or mutation of this genre from medium to medium.

The Essay and Its Vicissitudes

'To essay' means 'to assay', 'to weigh', as well as 'to attempt', suggesting an open-ended, evaluative search. But this objective search is haunted and con-strained by the presence of individual subjectivity. This makes sense if we consider that the verb is also linked via the Latin *ex-agere* to *agens*, the word and problem of human agency. Current use of the word *essay* as a distinct genre can be traced to the 16th-century social critic and philosopher Michel de Montaigne, whose *Essais* (1580) were to exert a deep influence on the *philosophs* of the Enlightenment, and on a number of critics in this legacy, from the Marquis de Sade, Giacomo Leopardi and Ralph Waldo Emerson, to Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes.

By 'essay', Montaigne meant the testing of ideas, himself (slyly qualified as 'the most frivolous of topics') and society. It was a wide-ranging form of cognitive perambulation that reflected upon fundamental questions of life and human frailty, tensions and overlaps between 'fact' and 'fiction', and their consequences for social order and disorder. Since Montaigne, the essay has retained some of its distinguishing features. Its weapons are humor, irony, satire, paradox; its atmosphere is contradiction and the collision of opposites. Although the essay as a form transgresses national contexts, my investigation of the formulations and practices of this genre will be limited to the writings of Lukács, Adorno and Benjamin.

I am focusing on these German-language critics primarily because they were at the forefront of theorizing the importance of the essay in the 20th century. These theorizations, however, were carried out in a context that was anything but favorable. Before then the genre of the essay in the 19th and early 20th centuries was demeaned in Germany, largely due to its outsider status. That the French word *essai* was untranslatable into German at this time already indicates the foreignness of the concept. The writings of Lukács, Adorno and Benjamin changed all of this. Hence, for a writer to work in this genre implied embracing an otherness in relation to national identity. Furthermore, critics of the essay within German-language intellectual circles dismissed the genre as flippant, with claims that it possessed neither the sustained deep thought typically found in philosophy, nor the creative impulse that characterized literature (see Hohendahl, 1997: 217–31).

And here it is important to emphasize that many audio-visual essays produced in a number of national contexts and languages incorporate, either by direct citation or visual reference, the words, theories and methods of Adorno, Lukács and especially Benjamin. Thus, formulations of the 20th-century German essay transcend media, national, cultural and racial borders. They resurface in the work of diverse US-based artists such as Alan Sekula, Dan Eisenberg, Renée Green and Rea Tajiri. In these cases, the directors literally appropriate and trans-late, not only from one language to another but from literary to visual form, the texts of these cultural theoreticians into their films. Such appropriations take the form of intertitles set against a black screen – *Leerstellen*, or empty spaces – that break the image plane and give the reader pause to reflect; or as an oral text read out loud that issues forth as verbal commentary on the soundtrack.

Green, for instance, cites directly from Benjamin's 'Naples' in her *Some Chance Operations* (1999), and Eisenberg includes passages from Adorno's *Minima Moralia* in his *Cooperation of Parts* (1987). But this is not the only way that the directors in question translate thought. A case in point is Eisenberg's film *Persistence* (1997), which renders in images and music Theses V and IX from Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1969a[1939]). The translation from one form to another is unambiguous, though the mutations of the new form are also clear. For example, in *Persistence* the manner in which Eisenberg's camera lingers on a train sitting at a platform in 1990s Berlin while the voice-over describes a departure scene at a similar platform in the 1940s recalls the tenor of Benjamin's Thesis V:

> The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and never seen again . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably. (p. 255)

Similarly, the manner in which the opening shot of Eisenberg's film features an image of the golden angel Victoria that sits on top of the *Siegessaüle* in Berlin with debris blowing across the screen inevitably summons the specter of Benjamin's Thesis IX:

> A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face turned to the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage, and hurls it in front of his feet. (pp. 257–8)

Eisenberg's film thereby performs what might be referred to as a triple translation: whereas Benjamin's ekphrasis translates Klee's painting into philosophical prose, Eisenberg's mediation translates Benjamin's text into the medium of film.

In his 1910 'letter' to Leo Popper, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', Lukács (1978[1910]) seeks to legitimate the written essay for the German-speaking world. The essay, he suggests, is 'criticism as a form of art' (p. 2). He compares the essay to other forms of literature using the metaphor of 'ultra-violet rays' which are refracted throughout the literary prism (p. 7). The essay is characterized as both 'accidental' and 'necessary' (p. 9). Adorno echoed this claim years later in 'The Essay as Form' (1993[1954–8]), where he extols the characteristics of 'luck', 'play' and 'irrationality'. For both Lukács and Adorno, the essay is fragmentary, wandering, and does not seek to find absolute truths – as would, for instance, the documentary genre – but rather 'finds its unity in and through breaks and not by glossing them over' (p. 16).[1] Indeed, Adorno goes so far as to propose that it is precisely in its untruths that the reality of the essay lies. For Lukács (1978[1910]), the essay functions as a form of 'judgement'. But he is quick to add: 'the essential, the value-determining thing about [the essay], is not the verdict [at which it arrives] . . . but the process of judging' (p. 18). What is important to emphasize is that Lukács believes that the essay is at once a work of art (because of what he calls its autonomous, 'sovereign' status) and not a work of art (because of its status as critique) (p. 18).

By contrast, Adorno (1993[1954–8]) never endows the genre of the essay with the status of art. Although he grants that 'the essay has something like an aesthetic autonomy' that leads it to be 'accused of being simply derived from art', he is adamant that it be 'distinguished from art by its [linguistic] medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance' (p. 5). Thus for Adorno the essay is fundamentally a linguistic form that cannot be translated into another medium. Its status, he insists, is between science and art, and it should not be tipped more heavily in one direction over the other. In short, where Lukács sees the essay as both art and critique, Adorno maintains that this genre's relation to art is a purely formal one – namely, insofar as it constantly pursues new forms of presentation (p. 18).

Thought, Adorno argues, 'does not progress in a single direction'. Instead, the moments of thought are 'interwoven as in a carpet'; their fruitfulness 'depends on the density of the texture. The thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience without unraveling it' (p. 13). Here it is important to note that many audio-visual

essays are so dense that they seem to be made with video technology in mind, which allows for unlimited rewindings and pauses. The form of experience that is thereby produced is not unlike the traditional reading of a difficult text in which it is not uncommon for the reader to pause and reread particularly complex passages. Finally, according to Adorno, the essay 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' (p. 20).

Benjamin was the essayist par excellence for Adorno, and although the latter's theorization of the essay has had a significant reception, formally it is to Benjamin that many audio-visual essayists turn. Yet, it would be an error to underestimate the importance of Lukács's conception of the essay for late 20th-century practitioners of its audio-visual form. For it was Lukács who theorized the translation of the written essay into a new aesthetic medium, and it was he who also reformulated Schlegel's famous dictum that the 'theory of the novel should be a novel' into the idea that the theory of the essay should be an essay or the theory of film a film.

The audio-visual essay is a multi-layered product – an image track, a sound track, as well as a component in the form of intertitles, chapter headings, and even writing directly on the celluloid – often accompanied by a voice-over. The textual track or layer sometimes directly contradicts the image track, creating within the total filmic text a jarring collision of opposites and complex levels of meaning that the audience must co-produce. This model of translation, which galvanizes the observer into the role of a full-fledged participant in the construction of meaning, supplies the audio-visual essay with metaphors of relationality and participation in a medium that in its mass manifestations has been traditionally associated with passivity.

Essay films also translate various classical rhetorical devices into audio-visual dimensions. For example, the rhetorical figure of 'chiasmus', the oscillatory 'crossing' of categories, has been adapted to the cinematographic medium in several films. Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (1988–98) and Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1958) are cases in point. Both of these films feature soundtracks that interrupt the visual track to loosen habitual connections and produce surprising new meanings. Similarly, the painterly and psychological technique of 'anamorphosis', whereby a 'change of perspective' in the extended or narrow sense alters manifest meaning, has been adapted as a methodological tool by film essayists. Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet: Given Name Nam* (1989), for example, is cleverly presented as a documentary only to reveal its complete artifice – and the artifice of the genre of documentary altogether – by the end of the film. What these works all have in common is that they challenge the manner in which history is usually assembled and narrated and enable other stories to unfold.

The tenuousness of the relationship between representation and history is also a concern of artists such as Hito Steyerl who use various techniques of layering images and sounds to create a filmic version of what Benjamin referred to as the 'dialectical image', or those such as Eisenberg who seek to

create works based on principles of collage that preserve a certain fragmentary condition. Generally speaking, audio-visual essays do not pretend to have one clear objective or subject matter. Rather like Adorno's (1993[1954–8]) essay that 'coordinates concepts with one another by means of their function as a parallelogram of forces in its objects', there does not exist an overarching concept to which all audio-visual essays can be subordinated (p. 16). Some are narrated from a highly subjective point of view, while others are more detached, and more dependent on the particular interpretation of the beholder. There are also audio-visual essays that deliberately reference written philosophical texts, including actual citations, whereas others translate the genre of the essay to generate entirely new meditations. If the essay in literature and philosophy corresponds to formal and social/political crises, its audio-visual counterpart emerges at the moment of similar aporias. What those might be is the point in question.

Form, Context and the Essay Film

The genealogy of the audio-visual essay begins in the 1920s when the genres of feature and documentary were settling into their formal categories. Essayistic tendencies are discernible in 1920s films such as Dziga Vertov's seminal *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), a portrait of Moscow's dynamism, Joris Ivens's *Rain* (1929), a poetic meditation on the relationship between nature and modernity, and Walter Ruttman's crucial *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927), which signaled the great potential of this new mode of filmmaking.

Although essayistic traces emerge with increasing frequency in films of the 1920s, the essay film as a genre was not formally articulated until 1940 when avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter wrote the manifesto-like text, 'Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms' (The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film) (1992[1940]). One of the key players in German Dada, Richter worked closely with other figures in this international avant-garde movement, including Richard Huelsenbeck, Kurt Schwitters, Viking Eggeling, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp and Sophie Taeuber. By 1921, he had made his first abstract film, *Rhythmus 21*, a black and white study of Suprematist squares and rectangles that change in size and depth through a series of rhythmic evolutions. Richter continued to make abstract films for several years. The overriding structure of these productions was determined more by the motion or movement of the filmed objects than by any physical or referential materiality.

But by the late 1920s, Richter had shifted from purely abstract works to more socio-critical representational shorts, such as *Vormittagspuk* (1927) and *Inflation* (1928), that characteristically performed a mode of social critique. Many of these films were censored, and Richter faced an increasingly hostile environment, which culminated in his decision to emigrate to the United States in 1941. The first film that he made in the US, *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947), won the Special Award at the Venice Biennale of 1948 for 'the

best original contribution to the progress of cinematography'. Richter followed *Dreams That Money Can Buy* with *8X8: Chess Sonata* (1957) and the two-part *Dadascope* completed in 1963. The documentary genre became particularly significant for him during this period.

In his essay, 'The Film as an Original Art Form' (1970[1955]), he cites documentary as one of two genres – the other being experimental or art film – capable of challenging the dominance of narrative cinema (p. 17). Yet, for Richter both the documentary and experimental genres of cinema are limited. As with 'the history of society', he writes, 'the history of cinema is split into two divergent lines.' And just as one can no longer locate progressive social politics within the context of communism, 'the progressive cinema can no longer be identified simply with the artistic cinema' (Richter, 1986: 29).

In 'Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms' (1992[1940]), Richter theorizes, even if only in rudimentary form, a new genre of film that would enable the filmmaker to make 'problems, thoughts, even ideas' perceptible – a type of filmmaking that would 'render visible what is not visible' (p. 197). Richter dubbed the result 'essay', since it 'deals with difficult themes in generally comprehensible form'. Unlike the genre of documentary film, which presents facts and information, the essay film is an in-between genre that, insofar as it is not grounded in *reality* but can be contradictory, irrational, playful and fantastic, is thus well suited to develop complex thought. The essay film, Richter continues, no longer binds the filmmaker to the rules and parameters of the traditional documentary practice: rather the imagination with all its artistic potentiality is now permitted to reign freely.[2] The resonances of Walter Benjamin's theorization of 'pure language' on Richter's notion of essay is no doubt coincidental. But the parallel is striking nonetheless. For Benjamin (1969b[1923]),

> In all language and linguistic creations, there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated . . . It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work. (pp. 79–80)

Such a liberation would, when transposed to Richter's film essay, free abstract concepts by giving them visual form. It is the task of Richter's essay film to discern instances of invisibility, rendering them stylistically, philosophically and historically perceptible through the means of audio-visual technology.

Richter's conceptualization of the genre of the essay film is crucial for the emergence of the audio-visual essay in the context of art. His post as Director of New York's City College Institute of Film Technique, as well as the committed material support of Peggy Guggenheim, placed him in an excellent position from which to train a younger generation of artists in avant-garde filmmaking. His films and theoretical writings became

enormously important for a number of other aspiring filmmakers and artists such as Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, Stan Brackhage, Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol, all of whom developed modes of filmmaking indebted to him in significant ways. Thus the avant-garde project that Richter commenced in Zurich during World War I and resumed in New York City in the aftermath of the Second World War culminated in the development of the essay film as a full-fledged art genre.

In contrast, the type of audio-visual essay that developed in postwar Europe was more strictly theorized in relation to the genre of documentary. The European 'essay film' was most prominently articulated by the French filmmaker and theorist Alexandre Astruc, who in the late 1940s began to write about what he described as 'filmed philosophy'. More specifically, Astruc (1968[1948]) introduced the notion of a *camera-stylo* (camera-stylus) that would 'become a means of writing, just as flexible and subtle as written language, . . . [rendering] more or less literal "inscriptions" on images as "essays"' (p. 17). These inscriptions, however, in translating by means of the camera the ephemerality of the world, were able to liberate the pure language imprisoned in the linguistic construction into the format of film. Astruc's concepts were taken up not only by French filmmakers, but also almost simultaneously by filmmakers in Germany. Indeed, despite the proliferation of American cultural products and Hollywood films in Europe during the post-war period – culminating in Wim Wenders' infamous slogan, 'The Yanks have even colonized our unconscious' – the influence of French film critics and theoreticians in Germany should not be underestimated.[3] It was, after all, the French who led efforts to reintroduce film criticism and production in a country where film critique had been eliminated by the National Socialist regime.[4]

Theorists of the essay have argued from the onset that the genre manifests itself in moments of crisis – political and representational. The function of the essay is not therapy or healing the wounds produced by the upheavals of the day, but crisis diagnosis enabling and encouraging future social and cultural transformation. Certainly, when Richter first conceived of the essay film in the 1920s, Europe was socially and politically in a state of crisis. Conventions of representation, too, had been thrown into disarray, with the post-Cubist developments of abstraction, *Neusachlichkeit*, and the readymade disturbing the pre-First World War strands of modernism. To many, the latter seemed quaint in the face of the ideological battles engaged in by practitioners of different modes of representation in the 1920s.

Likewise, the social and cultural politics of West Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s were also in a state of crisis. Not only the upheavals of 1968, but also the intensification of the Cold War and the installation of multiple nuclear warheads in the region made West Germany a hotbed of unrest and a lightning rod for oppositional practices. These social conditions were paralleled by a deep suspicion of the affirmative nature of modernism and the all-embracing potential of mass culture.[5] During this period, a new generation of directors emerged whose films came to be referred to as New

German Cinema, a name that indicates that a clear connection was drawn to French New Wave cinema of the previous decade. The filmmakers in question, including Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Hans Syberberg, Helke Sanders, Alexander Kluge, Wim Wenders, Hartmut Bitomsky and Harun Farocki, typically interspersed their feature films with smaller essayistic audio-visual projects. These strategies of hybridity culminated in products that were neither feature films nor documentaries. Indeed the Hamburg Declaration of 1979 (see Rentschler, 1988[1979]), penned and signed by 'we German filmmakers', acknowledged the need for a synthesis between the 'feature film' and the 'documentary film', as much as the need for 'films that reflect on the medium' (p. 4). And here it is important to stress that, at the time, what people understood as the documentary genre in West Germany was either a form of American Direct Cinema or a form of Cinema Verité, both of which maintained rigid guidelines meant to ensure that reality was represented as truthfully as possible.

Within the history of film, then, the essay film develops in opposition to the strict genre of documentary. Whereas the latter claims to present unambiguous truth and a relationship to history that is not arbitrary, the essay film allows for contradictions and play. Thus when Kluge was faced in the 1970s with the difficulty of addressing German history, he resorted to the genre of the essay film, finding that the combination of fact and fiction, as well as the inclusion of drawings and other innovative non-realistic elements that this genre permitted, allowed him at once to work his way through this aporia and self-reflexively draw attention to the artificial nature of the filmic medium. Similar difficulties led Syberberg to adopt the genre of the essay film when making his epic *Hitler: Ein Film aus Deutschland* (1977), which relied heavily on dramatic forms of play, fantasy, puppetry and the like to render the personage of Hitler.

From this perspective, the formal means of representation employed by Kluge and Syberberg are as theoretical as anything advanced by the narrative of their films. Inherent to the meaning of these films is that the medium itself can never offer more than re-presentation, and that the veracity demanded by the documentary genre is ultimately unattainable. The essay film, because it plays with fact and fiction, untruths as much as truths, poses problems without answers, and is deeply self-reflexive. As such, it is seen as the ideal genre by filmmakers who want to advance historical knowledge but recognize that this can only be done in a tenuous way.

What I am suggesting is that if in art the audio-visual essay emerges from an attempt to fuse the genre of the documentary with avant-garde or experimental film, in cinema the audio-visual essay develops from the attempt to combine the documentary and the fictional or feature film genres. These two strands of the essay film remained separate in the 1970s and 80s, each with different practitioners, publics and venues. Whereas the essay films of artists were presented in exhibition spaces such as museums and galleries, those of filmmakers who stayed closer to the institution of cinema were shown in repertory film houses or on television.

Audio-Visual Essay Practice Today

The problematization of the genre of documentary film together with the proliferation of audio-visual essays produced by artists and filmmakers alike in the past quarter century have fostered the development of a new hybrid medium. The latter, which effectively blurs the categories of film and art, has loosened not only production practices but also practices of exhibition. Hence, more than ever before, traditional filmmakers are exhibiting their works in galleries and museums, and artists are showing their films in film festivals and cinemas. But the site in which this new medium is the most innovative is the gallery or museum, where the audio-visual essay has increasingly taken the form of the projected image installation.

The work of Harun Farocki provides a good example of this recent development. In the past five years, Farocki has begun to exhibit his film and videotape work in the form of three-dimensional installations. A recent project, *Eye/Machine* (2001), which addresses the ubiquity of electronic surveillance in everyday life, was designed as a split-screen projection playing in a continuous loop in the exhibition space. The installation transforms the thematic component of the videotapes in several ways. First, the continuous loop at once recalls the persistent replay of media images on television, as well as the panopticon effect of satellite and other surveillance cameras on contemporary subjectivity. Second, the eerie silence of the installation places the spectator in the overarching position of a surveiller of information. Vision is thus stimulated, but in an alienated way, and the viewer becomes a detached observer of mute images.

Farocki's use of the split screen produces what he refers to elsewhere as a 'soft montage' (Farocki and Silverman, 1998: 142). This is a form of montage in which two separate images are juxtaposed with, and occasionally superimposed upon, one another, resulting in a 'general relatedness, rather than a strict opposition or equation' (p. 142). Moreover, according to Farocki, insofar as the filmmaker employing this method of montage does not 'predetermine how the two images are to be connected', the viewer is given greater freedom to establish associations and meanings. This manner of relating images is distinct from the 'strict opposition of equation' produced by a linear montage of sharp cuts (p. 142). Soft montage allows for an increased flexibility and openness of the text for the spectator – associations are suggested but not formally mandated. This form of montage parallels Adorno's essayistic schema in a number of ways. For instance, in both 'discrete elements set off against one another are brought together to form a readable context', and 'crystallize as a configuration through their motion'. Thus the constellations 'form force fields, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay's gaze' (p. 13). But whereas for Adorno the placement of a constellation follows the linear logic of writing, Farocki spatializes these theoretical configurations through the medium of film. The philosophical concepts or constellations are thereby translated into audio-visual juxtapositions.

Such fluidity is in stark contrast to the dehumanized visual controlling systems critiqued by Farocki's videotapes – systems that permit little or no space for interpretation or flexibility of vision. By creating a space between two images within which to meditate and make associations, Farocki interrupts the mechanized image-making systems and unsutures the gap between technological and natural vision. For, in contrast to a single channel videotape that would impose a monocular, technologized vision on the spectator, by the very nature of their regime, Farocki's two-channel installations open spaces for thought, interpretation and reflection, demanding new modes of reception. The associations constructed by the viewer thereby form a historical narrative, actively assembled by the viewer. The form assumed by the essay in Farocki's installation is a long way from the one-dimensional form of the written text. Beyond even the two-dimensional audio-visual form of the screen, the essay has now been translated into the context of a three-dimensional installation.

To justify the claim that essayistic film or video installations such as Farocki's sculptural *Eye Machine* are contemporary versions of the original literary form, let me briefly return to Benjamin's theory of translation. For Benjamin (1969b[1923]), translation was above all a 'mode', meaning a variety of expression, a new arrangement or a new form (p. 70). Only works that have a certain 'translatability' can be translated with any degree of fidelity to the original. 'Translatability', Benjamin observes, 'is an essential quality of certain works', by which he means that 'a specific significance inherent in the original' can be put into the words of a different language (p. 71). This 'specific significance' is related to 'pure language', or to the theoretical or philosophical core of what is to be translated. At best, the new translated text becomes an 'echo of the original'; the reverberations that come to make up the new alien form are necessarily distortions.[6] Although Benjamin refers exclusively to written texts, he does not exclude the possibility of translation from one medium into another. Indeed, in 'The Author as Producer' (1986[1934]), he argues that 'we have to rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres, in view of the technical factors affecting our present situation', and thereby indicates his keen awareness that new media such as cinema and photography will transform established genres and produce new forms (p. 224).

The essay's inherent flexibility and transgressiveness, partial products of its hybrid nature, increase its 'translatability'. Fragmentariness, which for Adorno was a central characteristic of the essay, is a distinguishing feature of most contemporary essay films. Interestingly, Benjamin (1969b[1923]) also evokes the image of the fragment when discussing the process of translation, noting that 'both the original and the translation [are] recognizable as fragments of a greater language' (p. 78). Thus, the written text in both Adorno's account of the essay and Benjamin's consideration of translation represents only a shard or fragment of a much larger whole. Then, too, for both Benjamin and Adorno there is a fluidity of languages and concepts, with Benjamin maintaining that the act of the translator is to move from one language to another without being bogged down by literal meaning, and Adorno (1993[1954–8]) 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. (p. 13)

The move from the written page to the audio-visual form presents a similar freedom of movement. The filmmaker/artist can opt to transfer certain elements and leave others behind. As a result, the new 'essay' may bear only a fragmentary resemblance to the original, but that does not make it any less faithful.

From this perspective, the nature of the essay encourages and promotes its translation not only into different languages but also into other media and forms. Benjamin (1969b[1923]) described Rudolf Pannwitz's *Die Krisis der europaischen Kultur* as one of the finest treatises on the freedom of translation (p. 80). That the work Benjamin evokes centers on crisis is not coincidental. Crisis, both in form and content, is intimately linked to the production of the essay. The contemporary crisis to which the explosion of audio-visual essays in the 1990s responds is both historical and formal. The shift from analogue to digital ushered in a new visual regime of signification in which claims to fact-telling truth disappeared altogether. Similarly, in geopolitics, 1989 heralded the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Second World communism and a radical reconfiguration of the world order. Taking the dual significance of 1989, it is not surprising that many of the audio-visual essays produced around this period reflect upon topics such as history, memory, technological reproduction and vision.

The continuing 'afterlife' of the essay in audio-visual media attests to its inherent 'translatability'. That the genre would today take the form of an artistic audio-visual production fulfills Lukács's original conceptualization of it as a mode of critique enclosed in an aesthetic form. The contemporary relevance and inherent adaptability of the essay is indicated by its translation beyond audio-visual installations into digital media such as CD-ROMs and DVDs.[7] The experimental, playful and critical dimensions of these new productions echo the vitality of their literary antecedent. And these new productions, as with the highly theoretical and self-reflexive cinema that was the product of the essay film, continue the critical function that the genre of the essay was initially developed to perform.

Notes

1. According to Adorno (1993[1954–8]):

   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. (p. 9)

2. Richter (1992[1940]) proposes a new type of filmmaking, the 'essay film', which combines documentary with experimental or artistic film as follows:

> In diesem Bemühen, die unsichtbare Welt der Vorstellungen, Gedanken un Ideen ischtbar zu machen, kann der essayistische Film aus einem unvergleilich größeren Reservoir von Ausdrucksmitteln schöpfen, als die reine Dokumentarfilm. Denn da man in Filmessay an die Wiedergabe der äußeren Erscheinungen oder an eine chronologische Folge nicht gebunden ist, sondern im Gegenteil das Anschauungsmaterial überall herbeiziehen muß, so kann man frei in Raum und Zeit springen: von der objektiven Wiedergabe beispielsweise zur phantastische Allegorie, von dieser zur Spielszene; man kann tote wie ebendge, künstliche wie natürliche Dinge abbilden, alles verwenden, was es gibt und was sich erfinden läßt – wenn es nur als Argument für die Sichtbarmachung des Grundgedankens dienen kann. (p. 198)

Richter cites his own 1928 film *Inflation* as an early example of an essay film, and argues that works such as his *Dreams That Money Buy* or *8X8: Chess Sonata* are further developments in this genre.

3. Wim Wenders, as cited in his 1976 film *Kings of the Road*, 35mm, 176 min.

4. By 1947, essay filmmakers Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, along with film theorists Andre Bazin and others, had begun to organize annual retreats in Germany. The aim of these meetings was to revitalize the German film sector. The seminars included film screenings, lectures, and discussion, and were attended by young film critics and theorists such as Friede Graf, Ulrich Gregor and Enno Patalas, as well as by the filmmakers Wolfgang Staudte and Paul Rotha. The cultural education offered by the French critics and directors provided an alternative to the Hollywood staple promoted by the American cultural affairs division. Graf, Gregor and Patalas went on to found, with the help of others, the important journal *Filmkritik* in the 1970s. Also on the editorial board of this journal were the young essay filmmakers Hartmut Bitomsky and Harun Farocki, and Alexander Kluge was an early contributor to its pages.

5. Theorized in the 1930s and 1940s by Herbert Marcuse (1968[1937]) and Frankfurt School writers such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1988[1944]), these critiques were widely received in West Germany in the 1960s.

6. See Benjamin (1969b[1923]):

> The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [intention] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original . . . Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at the single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one. (p. 76)

7. Chris Marker's *Immemory One* (1997) is an example of a CD-ROM essay.

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