

# A SPECIAL GUEST OF *TEXT MATTERS*

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## IT'S ABOUT TIME: Trying an Essay Film

# ABSTRACT

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This essay is about the essay, a form (as Adorno called it) of thought alive that is partial in the two senses of the word: subjective and fragmented. Thinking as social, performative, and always un-finished; as dialogic. Through the mythical figure of Cassandra, who could foresee the future but was cursed to be never believed, I tried to “figure,” make a figural shape for the thoughts on the indifference of people towards the imminent ecological disaster of the world. At the invitation of Jakub Mikurda of the Łódź Film School to come and make an essay film, within one week, but with the participation of many great professionals, I was able to create, at least in the first draft, the essay film *IT'S ABOUT TIME!*

The ambiguity of the title suggests the bringing together of my thoughts about time, in relation to history in its interrelation with the present, and, as the exclamation mark intimates, the urgency to do something. The former is enacted by a tableau vivant of Cassandra's lover Aeneas as Caravaggio's *John the Baptist*, with a contemporary painting by David Reed shifting over it; and by interactions with two paintings by Ina van Zyl. The urgency is presented in many of the dialogues, quoted from various sources, especially Christa Wolf's novel *Cassandra*. I argue that “thinking in film,” with film as a medium for thought, is what the essay film's foremost vocation is. Through a reflection on “thought-images,” which I see as the result of “image-thinking,” I also argue for the intellectual gain to be had from “essaying” thought artistically.

**Keywords:** essay, figural, form, meandering, mutuality, partiality, trying.

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The week of 1–8 March 2020, just one week before the coronavirus shut-down, I was in Łódź, making, or trying to make, an “essay film.” This was at the invitation of the “Narrative Media Lab” (dir. Krzysztof Pijarski) of the Łódź Film School, which has an experimental program on the essay film, directed by dr Jakub Mikurda. The School has been the recipient of a grant that allows dr Mikurda (henceforth, Kuba) to invite some people to explore through creative practice what an essay film is: what it can be, what it can do. Even regardless of the question of whether I considered myself capable of making a film of any length or genre in one week, which is trying in more than one sense, I had never thought about this essay-film question. So, I was slightly flabbergasted; but when, upon receiving his invitation, I said so, Kuba’s quick answer was: “but all your films are essay films!” The truth of that answer stunned me. Why did he know something about my work that I didn’t? Upon reflection I had to agree, and was grateful, both for the invitation and for the way it compelled me to think again about my own films in the light of this concept. Is it a genre, an approach, a characterization of a specific content? If the latter, how could I briefly describe the content of each of my films? With my innate curiosity, the topic of the essay film began to haunt me.

I remember the term “essay” from school, where it meant simply: “not narrative.” Given my life-long engagement and fascination with, and subsequent study of, narrative, this doesn’t sound right to me; narrative can well be an integral part of an essay—just think of the deployment of stories as examples. And in light of my resistance against binary thinking, the problem is this: in addition to the simplifying effect of dualism, which is problematic in itself, we must keep in mind that logically, negative definitions are vague; so to speak, by definition. Instead, reflecting on what the essay, as genre, approach or, as Adorno would have it, form, is or does helps understand some nuances which, for me, are very important in cultural production and analysis. I also find it remarkable that Adorno’s extensive writings on literature (two volumes in English) begin with an essay on the essay, thus giving it pride of place in literature. But not as a genre. Rather, unexpectedly, as “form.” To honour this inflection, I give the present essay on the essay-film experience-cum-experiment an essayistic form. But what form is that, if none can be fixed? I decided to give it the formless form of short fragments, presented in alphabetical order by lack of any other order, logic, binary, or hierarchy. Each fragment, except the final one, concerns a common noun and a proper name, bound together for a variety of reasons, different in each case.

## ATTEMPT, ADORNO

Adorno devoted a large part of his essay on the essay as form to bridging the gaps that binary oppositions tend to dig, which he did by means of nuancing, even if he does not foreground that verb. Among many passages I could have selected, this one characterizes the philosophical *tone*—a nuance that goes well with Adorno's use of "form": "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" ("Essay as Form" 9). Along with the series that ends on the rejection of reductionism, of these words of wisdom, "partial"—mind the ambiguity of that word!—and "fragmentary" in particular seem to bring us closer to what an "essay" can be or do. Both words resist the idea of the total, of the encompassing whole, but also, in its shadow, the totalitarianism that seems to have many places of the current world in its grip. In addition to the opposite of totality, "partial" means also "subjective," in the sense of acknowledging that what the essayist brings forward cannot pretend to be an objective, factual truth; "passionate" in that the holder of the view brought forward cares about it; and "rational," since partiality also encompasses the wish to persuade, which can only be done through rational arguments. As for "fragmentary," this accords well with the non-total(itarian). I will keep these two words in mind, foregrounding even more strongly that nothing can be whole.

"Essay": in addition to taxing, difficult, the word "trying" means attempting to say something for which no ready-made (literary) genre exists as yet. Perhaps "genre" is not where we should look to understand the essay, then, but rather, explore the word-name itself. The modesty that word includes is crucial. Trying, attempting, groping towards, fumbling, even floundering. That modesty itself acknowledges that nothing is perfect, and also, that no one does anything alone; that making something is collective and social. It also has a temporal consequence, since it intimates the idea that "things," such as artworks or films, are never finished; they are, as the saying has it, "in progress," since "trying" is never over. But "essay" also includes "thought." You don't try something without, first, thinking about it. As it happens, one of my films that Kuba considered essay films, *REASONABLE DOUBT: SCENES FROM TWO LIVES* (2016), concerns precisely thought; the social, collective, performative aspects of the activity and the resulting ideas. According to the essayistic thrust of this film, thinking itself is tentative. Thinking, then, occurs in the essay-mode. This makes the essay an important, indeed, crucial cultural phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On this and my other films, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/>  
This film, on René Descartes and Queen Kristina of Sweden, premiered in the Muzeum Sztuki MOCAK in Kraków, in the film and philosophy festival in 2016. Professor Roma Sendyka

## BI-LATERAL, BOLLAS

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There is one aspect of the essay that I consider as fundamental as modesty; one that derives from it. That is reciprocity, mutuality, reversibility: dialogue, not monologue. Whether or not essayists are alone when making it, they are already responding to other ideas that are around; an essay is bi-lateral. As convinced as the essayist is likely to be when embarking on making an essay, the fact that nothing can be done in isolation—even sitting in a study in front of a computer, one is intellectually, mentally surrounded by others—entails a responsive attitude to the call and contribution of other people to the topic of the essay and the essayist’s argument. This is the dialogic nature of thought, and of the subsequent trying. This holds not only for the other people directly or indirectly involved, but also for what, in our binaristic mode of thinking and considering the world, we too easily take to be the “object.” In my work on visual art I have frequently advocated an open ear and eye for what the object has to say. In this line of thought I have put forward one of my academic catchphrases, “the object speaks back.” By that I mean that the object of analysis must be given the opportunity to resist an interpretation the subject, the academic, comes up with. This can be done by means of a simple procedure: whenever we cite or quote something, or use an image to “illustrate” an argument, it pays off to look back and check the alleged example against what we just wrote about it. If it doesn’t quite match, so much the better; thinking that non-matching through, we learn from the object (Lutters).

This bi-lateral collaboration also holds for thought itself. The most effective formulation of this I know is by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, who wrote, in one of those sentences that became an enduring guideline for me: “I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it” (10). Not only does this phrasing express modesty—the author acknowledges that he doesn’t know exactly what he is busy thinking about or thinking out—but it also qualifies the intensity (“engaged”) and the liveness of the thought-in-becoming. Most importantly, the idea Bollas is trying to think itself collaborates with him. The author and his “object,” the idea he is working on, do it together. The idea wishes to be thought; it even struggles to achieve the status of idea. In a strikingly comparable formulation, Kaja Silverman formulated her theory of the image of, or *as* memory, in the following way:

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made this possible. Simultaneously, the Museum of Photography displayed the 5-screen installation on the same subject, curated by Roma Sendyka and Curatorial Collective, with an Open Access catalogue (in Polish): <http://jagiellonian.academia.edu/KolektywKuratorski> A book on this project appeared later—see Gomulska, Koziol and Sulowska (eds.).

If, in trying to make sense of this strange account of unconscious memories, I am unable to avoid attributing to them the status of a subject, that is because subjectivity itself is in its most profound sense nothing other than *a constellation of visual memories which is struggling to achieve a perceptual form*. (*World Spectators* 89, emphasis mine)

That struggle is not only bi-lateral; given that both Bollas the author and the idea-in-becoming are connected to many other beings, issues and things, it is multiple. Silverman's word "constellation" intimates that same multiplicity. This is also a feature of the essay as form, approach or genre, if we endorse the following summing up in a reflection on Adorno's essay:

Nearly all the familiar topoi are here: the apparent spontaneity of presentation, the emphasis on rhetorical sophistication, the exaltation of the incomplete, the rejection of a purely deductive logic, the eschewal of heavy-handed profundity, the antipathy toward systematic dogmatism, the treatment of non-scientific, often unconventional subject matter, the central importance of play, the insistence on human fallibility, the image of a meandering, exploratory journey. (Pourciau 624)

This list reads like an impressionist painting. The features are like the dots that, without line drawing, end up figuring something. There is nothing systematic about it, which, in positive terms, helps to characterize the essay even better. It helps to avoid any attempt to define the essay as a genre. It also helps to renounce attempts, on the part of the essayist, to fulfil all these expectations, since incompleteness is part of the essay-as-attempt. So, if only as a tactic, it is useful. But how, then, can I begin thinking an essay film? From the awareness of the importance of bi-laterality and with a lack of fear of contradiction, I now reflect on my primary interlocutor, who is a fictional being.<sup>2</sup>

## CHARACTER, CASSANDRA

With multiplicity, reciprocity and tentativeness in mind, it was not easy to get started. I had to design, write a script, without the proximity of all those people I knew were going to be crucially important; I didn't even know them. But the notion that I was to develop something around an issue that

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of "tactic" as distinct from "strategy" has been developed by Michel de Certeau in the introduction to his 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In a brilliant recent study, Tingting Hui brought it to the present world. Exceedingly briefly put, a strategy is for the powerful who seek to win a battle; a tactic for the ordinary people who seek to live (Certeau xix).

was important to me (“partial”) made it happen in a flash. What bothers me most in the current situation of the world is the general indifference or, at least, powerlessness towards the imminent environmental disaster. So, in view of this bleak state of our world, an essay film, with my belief in the relevance of narrative, and the bi-lateral temporality in mind that I have termed “pre-posterous history,” made ancient history in relation to the (very) near future pop into my mind. At the same time, my narrative impulse called up a character. Cassandra: the prophetess who could foresee the future, but nobody believed her. The most extensive ancient story about her is in Aeschylus’ play *Agamemnon* (458 BCE). The best-known modern retelling is Christa Wolf’s novel, entirely written “in the first person”, identifying (with) Cassandra as the subject, not only of the story but of the emotional heaviness it entails, reflecting during the day she knows she is going to die.<sup>3</sup>

Wolf’s Cassandra is a strong-headed, sensitive, worried young woman, in love with the Greek Aeneas. This character lends itself to the *figuration* of the essay’s warning in visual form: to what Rodowick has termed “the figural” in his attempt to call on especially Lyotard to overcome the tenacious opposition between words and images, and also on Deleuze’s rejection of the opposition between abstraction and figuration in his theorization of images (“Presenting the Figural” 1–44). In the essay film, the figural is where the essay’s argumentation and its narrative concretization in the character can seamlessly merge. Kuba found someone eminently suitable for the role, Magdalena Žak. I had ideas about how to figure stubbornness and despair. I also thought about costume, a shapeless and colourless (off-white) silk dress and a necklace consisting of large links, a chain evoking captivity. Slavery is a topic I have been intensely focusing on in the video project I have just finished and am currently showing, *DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES* (2019). And in Wolf’s novel, Cassandra reflects on her captivity. For the role of Aeneas, Kuba’s creative expertise found the actor Adrian Budakow—like Magdalena, a true find. A preliminary question I had for him was, if he would mind appearing half-naked, in a figuration I had conceived but not yet written. This was an impersonation, as a *tableau vivant*, of Caravaggio’s 1602 *John the Baptist*—an act I had been nurturing for some time as a demonstration of pre-posterous history. Such mundane-seeming issues are all part of designing a film. Thankfully, Adrian didn’t mind.

<sup>3</sup> On pre-posterous history, see my 1999 book *Quoting Caravaggio*. I was alerted to the relevance of Wolf’s novel by the 2012 video-shadow play *In Search of Vanished Blood* by Nalini Malani, and subsequent conversations with the artist. On this work, see the first chapter of my 2016 book *In Medias Res*. My ongoing dialogue with Malani is evidence of the dialogic nature of thought.

Then a title was needed, which would harbour the allusions to the many aspects of the Cassandra figure. Determined to bring together my many concerns about time, the ambiguous title *IT'S ABOUT TIME!* came up. As mentioned above, I have developed a notion of time that acknowledges that not only the past influences the present, hence, also the future, but also the other way around. But the title contains a warning, too: hurry up! figured through the exclamation mark. Hence the subtitle, *REFLECTIONS ON URGENCY*. Another figural aspect of time is rhythm. This has a bodily side to it, which is important if we want to recognize the importance of the body as not separate but at one with the mind. This was a strong issue in my film on Descartes (see note 1).

The backbone of the essay is Cassandra's temporal awareness. Her repeated call for urgency is key, both to the ancient myth and Wolf's subjectivation of it, and to my attempt to make an essay film on this issue. And in addition to these three aspects of temporality, the most personal, intimate moment in the film, I thought, should be one when the near-future infringes on the figures' personal lives. This became the moment when Cassandra dumps Aeneas because he remains too close to the powers-that-be, resulting in a near future in which he would become stultified. This, in her wording, concerns the future—one she rejects. She abandons him with the poignant words: "I cannot love a hero. I do not want to see you being transformed into a statue."

## DIRECTING, DAMISCH

Down to earth again. Like any film, the essay film needs to be "directed." Directing a film in the spirit of the bi-laterality and the multiplicity inherent in the practice of filmmaking cannot be the bossy and hierarchical activity the word suggests in its common usage. Thus, an additional aspect of the "essay" concerns my own role: without formal training as a film director and having landed in a linguistic community whose language I didn't understand, even had I wished to enact directorship in the traditional sense—which I did not—I couldn't have. Instead, I considered the dialogic work of, among many others, French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch, on whose ideas and, especially, intellectual attitude, I had made a documentary I now see as an essay film in 2011. Inspired by his work I felt that the directing was a humble and heavy job of overseeing the many tentacles of the process and keeping these together so that chaotic threads could become a woven tapestry. And obviously, such overseeing was indispensable, yet included unconditional respect for, endorsement of, and indeed, pleasure in the autonomy of the participants. As it happened,

they, and especially camera operator Magdalena Bojdo and sound engineer Jacek Harasim, immediately relieved me of any concern I might have had about the relationship between my script and their work of realizing it. They had studied it, understood its thrust, and their interpretations are what ended up as the film, figurally shaped by the actors.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, directing remains a necessary element. For, in response to my insistence on multiplicity, Kuba's pointed and relevant question, "how about authorship?" cannot be discarded. In this respect I was reminded of an article I once wrote in dialogue with a brilliant American linguist, Ann Banfield, who claimed there are sentences without a narrator. Yes, but then, where do those sentences come from, within the narrative "subjectivity network," as I had termed it (*Death and Dissymmetry*)? The key issue is not so much the copyright, the right to show, or the income generated, which, in the case of my films, is a non-issue anyway. What matters is *responsibility*. Having written the script and, therefore, bringing forward, with some insistence, the different conceptions of temporality with today's urgency at the core, taking on the role of director is less a privilege than an ethical duty. It means taking responsibility for what the essay is saying, or trying to say—not only to "it," which, as per Bollas, desires the best way of coming across, but also towards the interlocutor, spectator, or engager; the essay's second person, or "you." And by acting as "creative producer" in a profoundly collaborative spirit, Kuba endorsed a part of that responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

## ESSAY, ELIOT

Keeping current the list of features of Adorno's essay on the essay, I now want to foreground the final characterization of that list, "the image of a meandering, exploratory journey." In a short film, with such a short production time, this feature of the essay might easily be overlooked or even disappear. Yet, aesthetically, as well as intellectually, each word of this phrase counts. The "image" aspect must not be overshadowed, especially in an (audio-)visual medium. More on this below. But the combination of the two qualifiers, "meandering" and "exploratory," that lead up to the temporal-spatial metaphor of the journey, are key to understanding a film that calls itself an essay. Luckily, the conception of historical time as bi-lateral takes

<sup>4</sup> See my short film—HUBERT DAMISCH: THINKING ALOUD, 20'13", 2011. Of Damisch's scholarly work I have been especially inspired by his *Origin of Perspective*, in view of the "pre-posterous" historical perspective for which it sowed the seed.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*. My response combined two of her book titles, also her *Phantom Table*, and was adopted by the editors for the volume title: Bal, "Phantom Sentences."



care of the former. For this, the fragment from T. S. Eliot's 1919 essay with its deceptively obsolete title ("Tradition and the Individual Talent") that has guided my reflections on history (*Quoting*), was called upon once more, now to inaugurate the meandering aspect. Cassandra, with her constant warnings, should also figure as the teacher of historiography, explaining to her lover Aeneas how time refuses to be plotted as linear. Meandering is, then, what counters linearity. This scene includes the impersonation of Aeneas as John the Baptist, a scene where the "teacher" explains preposterous history through Caravaggio, and a contemporary painting by American artist David Reed also shifts into the reproduction of the Caravaggio, over-layering parts of it. Moving across the image, Reed's painting becomes a character.

"Exploratory," which seems a self-evident feature of the essay, one that enhances the tentativeness of the arguments, takes from "meandering" a spatial nuance, which suits the medium of film very well. This feature also re-calls the bi-lateral aspect. The teacher-student interaction is dialogic when Aeneas appears in the "class" with Walter Benjamin-style round glasses, armed with the latter's text on history. He does not disagree with the teacher, but comes up with arguments that give her historiographic diagnosis more depth and urgency. Together, they explore historical time. After some discussion in which teacher and, now, the philosopher, take turns speaking, he quotes from Benjamin's fifth thesis of the philosophy of history: ". . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably" (255, emphasis mine). This, of course, is where Eliot and Benjamin shake hands; it is what clutches Cassandra's argument, strengthens my choice of topic, and unfolds the ambiguity of the essay film's title.

## FILM, FREUD, FLAUBERT

The moment we went out for the first shoot, and the only one set outside in the city, it started to rain. Not a heavily pouring rain that would be a figuration of disaster, but still a firm rain. At first, this seemed unfortunate. But soon, we realized it actually helped the mood of the scene. For this was the scene where Cassandra begins to seriously doubt her commitment to Aeneas, along with her suspicion of others. Under the impact of politics, she seems to endorse the binary thinking of that institution and practice when she says:

Maybe I am being contaminated by the relentless drawling on of the men of the Council. I begin . . . to divide the people I meet into two groups in view of an unknown future emergency. You can count on him, not on him.

And soon, for her Aeneas ends up on the wrong side of that divide. How did the rain participate in the filmmaking? Here, an aspect of the essay, specifically the essay film, that may be unexpected comes in: mood.

Mood, in film, is a (sub-) *medium*, not the object of representation, if we engage with art on the mode of affect. Affect, wrote American literary scholar Charles Altieri, “comprises the range of mental states where an agent’s activity cannot be adequately handled in terms of either sensations or beliefs but requires attending to how he or she offers expressions of those states” (47). Affects, he continues, “are ways of being moved that supplement sensation with at least a minimal degree of imaginative projection” (47). He then specifies the affects according to a hierarchical range spanning from beyond sensation to passion:

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Feelings are elemental affective states characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate processes of sensation. Moods are modes of feeling where the sense of subjectivity becomes diffuse and sensation merges into something close to atmosphere, something that seems to pervade an entire scene or situation. Emotions are affects that involve the construction of attitudes that typically establish a particular cause and so situate the agent within a narrative. . . . Finally, passions are emotions within which we project significant stakes for the identity that they make possible. (48)

From this taxonomy it is clear that *mood* is the affective domain where film and viewer can most easily share the diffuse sense of subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

The specificity of mood goes further, especially in connection to Cassandra’s situation. She is facing both disaster and personal death. In a brilliant meditation on war and the confrontation with mortality, Silverman, relying on Heidegger, writes that we can assume (or fail to assume) our finitude affectively, rather than rationally, “by way of a mood rather than abstract knowledge” (“Shining” 325). In connection to her own focus in this publication, facing death in war, Silverman offers an illuminating distinction between fear and anxiety, derived from her reading of, mainly, *Being and Time*. Silverman writes:

Fear is the affect through which we apprehend the “nothing” in the mode of a turning away. Anxiety is the affect through which we apprehend it in the mode of a turning toward. Fear fails to reconcile us to the nothing,

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<sup>6</sup> I cannot go into the different conceptions of affect. See Alphen (“Affective Operations”) for a lucid explanation, and Alphen and Jirsa (eds.) for a useful and varied collective volume.

because it always *represents* the attempt to specify or concretize the nothing. Anxiety, on the other hand, “attunes” us to it, because it is the affect par excellence of the *indeterminate*.<sup>7</sup> (“Shining” 325, emphasis mine)

To create a mood appropriate to facing the disasters the world is staging; to create a mood that helps determining how to respond to them, an essay film needs both representational reticence and exuberant staging of mood. This is where the rain became an ally. The discrepancy between mood and events, not the representation of the latter, produces the effect of invading the viewer’s affective capacity. With the cheerful mood of old musical films like *SINGIN’ IN THE RAIN* (1952, dir. Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen) or *LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG* (1964, dir. Jacques Demy) in our “memory of cinema” (Rodowick, *Philosophy* 1–23), the sad mood becomes stronger by contrast.

A first requirement of a film of any kind is that it must keep its viewers engaged. This is one of the functions of narrative. Mood is an aspect of this narrative engagement, and is frequently enhanced or even imposed by means of music. In the essay film, music’s manipulative power can be resisted, by a sparse use of music, or even avoided. That films tend to be narrative regardless of the presence or absence of a clear plot is due to the movement inherent in film. In an essay film a plot is secondary to the argument, but it supports it, so that viewers remain engrossed in it, taking in the argument through the narrative plot. However, in order to let the stream of the argument remain the most important aspect of content, that plot works best in its supportive function if it is as fragmented, scattered, as the essay form tends to be in its resistance to wholeness, according to the Adorno list. The various roles Cassandra and Aeneas play towards each other, such as lovers, teacher-student, art critics and impersonator, and debaters, are fragments of as many and more potential plots, none of which is really developed. The cinematic image, including its mood-colour, as an image in movement, is the glue that holds the fragments together.

Freud theorized the emergence of the image from the unconscious “struggling to achieve perceptual form,” in Silverman’s formulation (*World Spectators* 89). Yet when it came to cinema, he thought it induced superstition and a belief in magic. This facile rejection was caused,

<sup>7</sup> The first part of this quotation paraphrases Heidegger’s “philosophy of mortality” (Silverman’s phrase, 341) in *Being and Time* (228–35). She adds a note explaining the multiple connotations of the German word *Stimmung*, which means “mood,” as well as “attunement,” including in the musical sense. Importantly for Heidegger’s philosophy of being in the world, Heidegger characterizes mood as the attunement of *Dasein* to something else.

I speculate, by the fact that he was only able to think *about* film, but unable to think *in* film, or to historicize preposterously. Thinking in film, with film as a medium for thought, is what the essay film's foremost vocation is. Laura Mulvey, whose seminal 1975 essay ("Visual Pleasure") had an indelible impact on film studies, later wrote that Freud's rejection of the cinema was caused by the fact that he could not work with the dialectic, instead of linearity, between the old and the new (*Death*). What she calls "dialectic" corresponds with my "pre-posterous" because it eschews the resolution. But just reading Freud's Dora case again, which originally bore the significant title "a fragment," the cinematic quality of the scene descriptions is striking.<sup>8</sup>

Film's history "as a medium" (Rodowick, *Philosophy* 6) is more alive than ever, now that the distinction between analog and digital is fading away. Three authors who had a key influence on twentieth-century cultural history and the conception of the image, created instances of what American art historian Michael Holly (*Panofsky*) theorizes as the predictive image—an idea quite close to my preposterous history. They wrote about how they despised the new art of cinema and yet began to write cinematically. Freud, as we have just seen, but also Proust and Bergson, each in their own way and within their own disciplinary field all held cinema in contempt. Yet, they wrote *in* images, and about images, like the art historians Holly shows to be deeply, visually impacted by the images they sought to decipher. Thus, they helped us understand film even when writing against it.

Bergson, according to Olivier Moulin, rejected cinema because its movement was false: the frames that together constitute the image produce only an illusion of movement. Freud rejected it because of its alleged vulgarity, but more importantly, because of its tricking, its illusionist magic. Proust was so adamant about the superiority of photography over cinema that he took pains to write in "contact sheets" rather than cinematically. His writing brings us to the photographic form going in the direction of cinema, that is, towards the irreducibly pluralized and moving image. Rather than adventuring into cinematographic writing, Proust explores photography's productivity to the point of absurdity: framed and focused, the photograph is serialized; not according to a pluralization of the focalisor or the object, but rather according to a process of off-setting that produces marginal changes in visibility, which become the object of the quest. If projected, his images would be cinematic, as the cinematic image is fundamentally a still one, according to Mulvey. Perhaps it is tragic irony, or a farce (mind the ambiguity of the term "preposterous") of history, that

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<sup>8</sup> On "thinking in film," see my book with the eponymous title. Space is lacking to analyze the cinematic imagery in Freud's text.

all three influential men rejected cinema because, while they were eminent theorists of the moving image, they were unable to enter it experientially, to be a witness to what happens inside that fictional space; to attempt, to “essay” it.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to these resistances within the unreflective contamination by that influential cultural novelty, I propose another essayistic reversal: Flaubert, who wrote *before* cinema was invented, was an eminently cinematic writer. He went out to scout for locations, designed what he called scenarios, and wrote passages that read like film scripts. A brief passage of the second chapter of the first part of his *Madame Bovary*, when Charles is on his way to his first encounter with Emma, reads like this:

About four o'clock in the morning Charles set out for Les Bertaux, wrapped in a heavy coat. He was still drowsy from his warm sleep, and the peaceful trot of his mare lulled him like the rocking of a cradle. Whenever she stopped of her own accord in front of one of those spike-edged holes that farmers dig along the roadside to protect their crops, he would wake up with a start, quickly remember the broken leg, and try to recall all the fractures he had ever seen. The rain had stopped; day was breaking, and on the leafless branches of the apple trees birds were perched motionless, ruffling their little feathers in the cold morning wind. The countryside stretched flat as far as the eye could see; and the tufts of trees clustered around the farmhouses were widely spaced dark purple stains on the vast grey surface that merged at the horizon into the dull tone of the sky.<sup>10</sup>

One sees the colours (or lack of them at the nightly hour), hears the trot of the horse, then in close-up Charles's sleepy face, followed by his attempt to remember his knowledge. A hard cut to another close-up, of the birds on the tree branches, foregrounds Charles's loneliness, and makes the transition to the long shot of the country road more dramatic. This shot will be durational, lasting long enough for the hunger for human encounter to intensify. In the last sentence we see an elongated perspective, with the compositional device of patches of dull colours to turn a line into a landscape. A shot list of this moment-scene-image is easy to make.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On Freud's resistance to cinema, and the fundamental stillness of the cinematic image, see Mulvey (*Death* 33–53). On the cinematic in Proust and his “poetics of the contact sheet,” see Bal (*Mottled* 191–212).

<sup>10</sup> Given the many different editions and translations of this world-famous novel, citing page numbers is pointless. The chapters are short. On Flaubert's cinematic writing, see especially Pierre-Marc de Biasi (esp. 453, 476–77, 481–82).

<sup>11</sup> For more on Flaubert's cinematic writing, in connection to painter Edvard Munch, see my *Emma & Edvard* (25–43, 57–61).

This passage is not only cinematic; it is also, through mood, a preparation for that first encounter. The combination of visuality, duration, movement, and preparation for action together constitutes the cinematic as the “fourth dimension”; timespace and movement collude. The emptiness of the road from the darkest night to the beginning of dawn sets up—or “frames”—the originating view of the young woman who will change Charles’s life, as well as her own. In quite precise ways, then, Flaubert designs for us an essay film about film. This brings to our understanding of the essay another important aspect: self-reflection, and media on media: a “meta-”aspect. Thus, his writing accords with Erlend Lavik’s speculation that the video essay might well become the future of academic film and television criticism. Pre-cinema, pre-video: in pre-posterous thinking, it means that not only cinema influenced literature and art, but also the other way around. Such writers called for the invention of cinema; they made it something to “attempt.”<sup>12</sup>

## GENEROSITY, GIRARD

By now it should be clear that, unless a maker can boast an impressive record in the (non-)genre, it is hard, nearly impossible, to raise funds for the making of an essay film. Most essay-films, therefore, are the work of people inventive enough to know how to find generosity. With this search for generosity the making begins. I have experienced it myself, especially when, for the making of *DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES*, any public funding was out of my reach, yet generosity replaced it. The co-makers—camera operators, sound engineer, actors, editors, set photographers, lenders of locations—were all willing and ever eager to participate without adequate or even any payment. Their generosity was motivated by the pleasure they took in contributing to a project in which they believed, and thus, once I had a tiny beginning of support, I was able to make the entire project as planned, in record time.

I am telling this mundane-seeming story because I believe generosity is a feature of the process of making an essay film; a process that is essayistic in itself, and therefore, I wish to put generosity forward as a concept for cultural analysis. It is not, or not only, that the Łódź Film School was able and willing to invite me, but it was clear that the participants added to the task they had taken on. What they added was that surplus that makes for quality in the (always provisional) end-result: adequate preparation,

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<sup>12</sup> See also the probing article by Laura Rascaroli. There is a clear tendency to this meta-aspect; many essay films are analyses of other films.

insight into the project, ample willingness to redo takes and sound recordings, and above all, intense identification with what the essay film was going to try and convey. All together I see this as generosity, which is why I propose to consider it as a useful concept, in addition to a social and human value. This is a concept not only because it helps us notice aspects in cultural domains, but because its opposite is much more visible, and can use a countering force. For, it is not always self-evident, in a world where competition and, hence, jealousy, reigns. Whereas “jealousy” is usually considered negatively, its source, competition, is not only encouraged but is the basis of our economic, educational, and for a large part, social system. The French philosophical anthropologist René Girard was the first modern thinker to have brought competition as a key concept forward and has thereby had a great impact on literary studies, feminist thought, cultural analysis, and more. Generosity is not the opposite of competition, but it is a force that can counter it.<sup>13</sup>

## HANDS-ON, HECUBA

Let me give only one example of this generosity that seriously impacted the mood and tenor of the film. This came from another aspect of the essay film, which derives from the previous one, its “apparent spontaneity of presentation” (Pourciau 624). This formulation harbours a suspicion that the spontaneity is only apparent, whereas this is neither verifiable nor relevant. In contrast to such a suspicious formulation, I propose to consider the spontaneity, or the “hands-on” quality of the process as an important element in the analysis of the essay film, neither as genre nor as product but as approach and process. The example concerns the participation of Monika Talarczyk. Coming in at the last moment and thanks to Kuba’s recruiting effort, Monika played Hecuba, Cassandra’s mother. Here, the lack of prior preparation combined with the limited time we had access to the location, seemed actually to offer an advantage, which in turn made me aware of that hands-on aspect of the essay film.<sup>14</sup>

When the father Priam, played by Grzegorz Małecki, hollers to call Cassandra into the palace because “you are needed here,” a slightly tense

<sup>13</sup> Girard’s theory of competition has been taken up in important ways by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and, in a close analysis, brilliantly brought to bear on contemporary literature and film by Ernst van Alphen (*Art*, 99–119).

<sup>14</sup> The location, the Herbst Palace (Pałac Herbsta) which is part of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, was an amazingly brilliant location for the palace of Priam and Hecuba (with thanks to the museum’s director Jarosław Suchan and staff). It is one of those locations that almost become characters.

situation occurs. This might cast a somewhat simplistic authoritarian light on the parents-daughter relationship, against which Cassandra does not really protest, but which viewers might give a stereotypical negative interpretation. Instead, Magdalena Żak—alias-Cassandra played with brilliant understanding of the mind of a young woman in that situation: anxious, slightly polemical but also at a loss about what to think; angry and loving at the same time. Monika Talarczyk, who just came in for this scene and was barely aware of what had been going on so far, and had not witnessed the sad mood of the scene that was shot the day before but edited after this one—the scene of the lovers’ splitting up in the rain, just described—was able and willing to approach her “daughter” with the empathy a mother would have, yet asking her the critical questions that were needed. No over-acting, no excessive mood-cultivation, no caricature of either an authoritarian or a sentimental mother, but a sensitivity to the disposition in the room led to a very subtle, adequate atmosphere in which the three actors could make the scene together. It is important to realize this process aspect as characteristic of making an essay film, if only because of the dependency of the generosity mentioned above.

## IMAGINING—IMAGING

And if we continue reflecting in this vein of process rather than product, more aspects the film essay shares with other forms of filmmaking that depend on generosity rather than on official funding (only), come to the fore. In combination with the most central feature of the essay—the argumentation inherent in it—I must account for the (audio-)visual nature of film, and how it fits in. For, this is, at first sight, in tension with argumentation. I contend that the aspects discussed so far can collaborate to add something of great impact on the essay “as form” (in Adorno’s phrase). What I want to probe for a moment is how the image and the argument melt together. This is what is currently most frequently called “artistic research”—a search through analysis through artmaking. The concept is quite problematic, but the undertaking is worthwhile. In such an endeavour, the search is neither for direct academic answers nor for tools for mood-manipulation. It comes closer to an attempt to make “thought-images” (from the German *Denkbilder*) by means of its counterpart, the activity of “image-thinking” that helps understanding and reasoning on an integrated level of affect, cognition, and sociality. I have called the specific genre of video production that seeks to create thought-images in previous video works, “theoretical fictions.” This is the deployment of fiction to understand and open up difficult theoretical issues, and to develop theory



through imaging what fiction enables us to imagine. It is how Leonardo da Vinci solved his problem of making his complex, abstract knowledge concrete and thus, clearer for himself, and understandable for others through visualization in painting. My guess is that it was his understanding of that aspect that made Kuba characterize my films as essay films.<sup>15</sup>

The challenge to make a video project based on a literary text, especially one that has an antique and a contemporary version, is quite specific in its troubled relationship between content and form, and between the narrative and visual aspects involved. The “research” part, based on a literary-cultural analysis of the literary texts, was, firstly, to decide which aspects of these are crucial to make a work that has a “point”—the point that the essay attempts to think out, develop, and convey. Secondly, that point had to make connections between artistic and social issues, and to improve our understanding how these two domains can go together, in the present, with the collaboration of the past in what we call “cultural heritage.” This term, again, is somewhat problematic, since it suggests the passive reception of a gift. Instead, the importance of the past for the present, seen as bilateral, must be foregrounded, especially in a work that is “about” time. And finally, of course, the selected aspects and fragments had to be “audio-visualisable,” to be able to liberate them from confinement in the linguistic domain that requires (individual) reading, and open them up for collective perception, interpretation and discussion. But some reflection on what an image is and does is needed here. It seemed relevant that Wittgenstein’s ending of his *Tractatus* (1921), “Of what one cannot speak, one should keep silent,” was modified later into “Of what one cannot speak, one can still show.” The importance of showing is to enable *witnessing* as an engaged activity against the indifference of the world. The theatricality of play-acting and display helps to turn onlookers and voyeurs into activated, empathic witnesses.<sup>16</sup>

To integrate image with argument, the essay film needs to yield “thought-images” or *Denkbilder*, created by means of “image-thinking.” The thought-image was a favourite literary-philosophical genre of the group of writers of the pre-WW2 Frankfurt School of social thought. The small iconic texts Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer, and others wrote were texts only. What did the word *Bilder* do there, then? This is where

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent relevant critique of the concept of “artistic research,” see Vellodi. On this search in Leonardo’s work, see Fiorani and Nova. Ernst van Alphen proposed the concept of “image-thinking” as a counterpart to “thought-images,” an idea for which I am very grateful. His concept, in the form of a verb, is more dynamic, rendering the interaction between thinking and imaging more forcefully (Personal communication).

<sup>16</sup> See the final sentence of Wittgenstein. On his change of opinion, see *Philosophical Investigations* #41, commented on by Davoine and Gaudillière (159, 170, 173).

“image-thinking” can meet, and yield, “thought-images.” This is a literary genre of miniature essays. In a study of the genre, US-based scholar of German Gerhard Richter describes the thought-image thus: “The *Denkbild* encodes a poetic form of condensed, epigrammatic writing in textual snapshots, flashing up as poignant meditations that typically fasten upon a seemingly peripheral detail or marginal topic” (2). The words “snapshots” and “flashing up” suggests the quick flash that Benjamin urges us to preserve by means of recognition: “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 is never seen again” (255). This “literary” congruence between the thought-image and Benjamin’s choice of words led to the scene where Cassandra and Aeneas, in the process of their slowly developing divergence, discuss the issue of time, mentioned above (see section “ESSAY”).

Richter continues: “the miniatures of the *Denkbild* can be understood as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual, hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production” (2). This recalls the key moment in the reflection on the importance of images from the past that I have inserted in the discussion between Cassandra and Aeneas. It comes from Benjamin’s fifth thesis quoted above. It also connects to the question of historical truth. Here, we need Adorno again. In this regard, in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes:

What cannot be proved in the customary style and yet is compelling—that is to spur on the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken literally, to strike sparks through a kind of intellectual short-circuiting that casts a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps sets it on fire. (322–23)

As in Benjamin’s thesis, the language here is again both visual and shock-oriented, with “sparks,” “short-circuiting,” “sudden light” and “sets it on fire.” This is thought alive, and this living thought is active. It has agency. And it is visual. Thought needs a formal innovation that shocks, as in Bollas’s and Silverman’s *struggle*. Thus, it can gain new energy and life, involve people, and make thought a collective process rather than the kind of still images we call clichés. The essay film’s attempt to achieve such “sparking,” shocking innovation lays in the anachronistic bond between present and past, and above all, the trans-mediation, the intermediality of the audio-visualization of a literary work. In view of the need for witnessing, such a messy “thinking” form enables and activates viewers to construct their own story, and connect it to what they have seen around them. Thus, the multiplicity of making is extended to the viewer-

engager, who participates as a co-maker. In order to make images complex, effective, multiple and affectively powerful, we must make thought visible. This requires the imagination, but then, also, the making-perceptible of thought. We must, in other words, *image* ideas.

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I have not yet reached half of the alphabet. The other letters can also each be developed into concepts relevant for understand the essay film, and names of people who are important for those ideas. With the J comes the jeopardy of memory in the case of trauma, and early psychoanalyst Pierre Janet as an inspirator, along with Martin Jay's historization of the image by means of his concept of visual regimes. With the K comes Cassandra in her more traditional spelling in her Greek and German incarnation, coupled with Kuba as the inspiring force behind the entire experiment. The L calls up the transition from "live" as in theatre to "life" as in the social world, connected as they can be with the help of Lacan's concept of the gaze as the visual variant of the linguistic order. With M I can return to movement, and bring in the French philosopher Marie-José Mondzain, who is capable of connecting moving image and political movements on a highly sophisticated level. And so it goes on. What precedes is neither complete nor whole as a view of the essay film. True to its object—which has been struggling along to become something—my essay is first of all a demonstration through practice of what in my conception an essay film can be, or rather, try to be.

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