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The Video Essay in the Digital Age

Ursula Biemann

Much has happened since Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil,* which had marked, in the beginning of the 80s, the emergence of a post-structuralist cinematographic practice defined as film essays. The symposium "Stuff it," which we organized in May 2002 in cooperation with the Migros Museum and the Videoex experimental video festival Zurich, set out to map contemporary essayist video prac- tice, which has evolved from the previous body of cinematographic experiments, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how essayism relates to the contingent digital cultural developments today. The purpose of this gathering of international video makers and theorists goes beyond presenting a survey of existing works. It is an attempt to advance and direct the discourse into the digital age.

As a video essayist, I have a personal motivation to bring this particular video practice on the agenda. For a number of reasons, the essay situates itself somewhere between documentary video and video art. And as an in-between genre, these videos often fall through given categories at art events, film festivals and activist conferences. For a documentary, they are seen as too experi- mental, self-reflexive and subjective, and for an art video they stand out for being socially involved or explicitly political.

Video essayists recognize the potential of this ambivalent position and continue a rich production of thoughtful and highly innovative videos. The idea of this conference, then, was to mark the field of a video practice that is at the same time artistic, theoretical and political. So that we no longer look at the essay as an odd "strangeling" that refuses to behave properly within the designated categories, but rather recognize it as a distinct aesthetic strategy. It cannot, however, be the aim of this collection of texts to establish the essay as a genre and to crystallize it into a formula. Its strength lies in the quality of the mediator and communicator between differential cultural spaces.

The last major event dedicated to the essayist film was co-organized by Christa Blümlinger in 1991 in Vienna and centered around a German and French film discourse with strong ties to a literary tradition. Since then, art and media debates have greatly evolved in response to political, cultural and technological changes of the last decade. This prompted a discussion at the Institute for The- ory around the particularities of this video practice and its ability to respond to and express the present time. *Stuff it* sets out to recontextualize the audio-visual essay both technologically and culturally. First of all, it is vital to look at video today within the wider development of new media, the Internet and digital image production and understand how these technologies emphasize or mutate the characteristics of the essay while opening up new possibilities for a critical engagement

with them. The other fundamental shift is induced by the great geographic and cultural diversity of recent essayist video practice which drives the theoretical discussion from a German and French literary tradition to a postcolonial cultural studies perspective.

What makes the video essay so interesting to the Institute for Theory is precisely its commitment to theory. The videos discussed in this book are intensely involved in theoretical concerns and their mediation through a visual language. A theory of film should be a film, believes film critic Edward Small who refers to this audio-visual critical practice as "direct theory." The videos test the possibility of theory-building through visual means, not in an illustrative manner but in a wide range of artistic, poetic, humorous and sometimes rather absurd ways. Absurdity is frequently produced through the disjointed assemblage of visual associations that do not produce continuity in content. But it is exactly these more endearing humorous qualities of the essay that make up for the demanding density proposed by the simultaneous visual, sonic and textual input, which can sometimes be exhausting and frustrating.

The essay has always distinguished itself by a non-linear and non-logical movement of thought that draws on many different sources of knowledge. In the digital age, the genre experiences an even higher concentration. New image and editing technologies have made it easy to stack an almost unlimited number of audio and video tracks one on top of another, with multiple images, titles, running texts and a complex sound mix competing for the attention of the audience. Stuff it! Distill it! Stratify and compress it! seem to be the mottos of the digital essayist.

Film scholar Nora Alter opens the collection of texts with a short review of the literary essay to highlight the many parallels that this critical, innovative written form shares with its audiovisual counterpart. Her thorough analysis of Daniel Eisenberg's use of historic film footage in his trilogy reveals the importance of insisting on the medium film in the 90s for its potential to pass for a document that may enter history. The use of historic film material is also being addressed in Jan Verwoert's analysis of Anri Sala's *Intervista* in which the young Albanian video artist confronts his mother with a found sequence of an interview she had given as a young communists in Albania. The mothers simultaneous distance and identification with this material is what Verwoert refers to as "double viewing" in his text, an ambivalence that makes it possible to tell the story while at the same time critically identifying its construction. His extensive analysis of Sala's video is representative of the lively discussion that has ignited around the appearance of documentary material in the art context in recent times. The following text by Christa Blümlinger explores the essayist approach with regard to the shift in the viewing context for video works from the cinematic setting to the art exhibition space at the example of Harun Farocki's video and installation work. Today's digital video production is to be seen in the context of hypertext and the Internet. One of the questions will be whether and how new technologies transform the previously analogue medium of video to become more dissociative, multi-perspective and hypertextual in the structuring of images and sounds. This approach seems to suit the essayist thought pattern much better than the linear,

filmic narration that is constructed in the analogue montage. In their theory-performance based on the video *Passing Drama,* Maurizio Lazzarato and Angela Melitopoulos explore hypertextuality and non-linear montage with regard to the structures of memory and recollection. They are experimenting with different forms of collecting and writing history through videographic practice and digital image processing in an attempt to come closer to our perception of history and to the mechanism of memory in the machine age.

Essayist practice is highly self-reflexive in that it constantly reconsiders the act of image-making and the desire to produce meaning. It is consciously engaged in the activity of representation itself. These characteristics make the genre particularly suited to study complex relations. Essayist work doesn't aim primarily at documenting realities but at organizing complexities. This ability is very valuable today since video has to respond not only to a changing media environment but also to an increasingly complex society, where the mere depiction of visible realities has become insufficient. The essay is good at capturing the more abstract, untangible processes of social and cultural transitions. Jörg Huber proposes a theory of transitionality, in which he traces and interprets the mediating feature of video-essayism and its ability to make the very process of perception visible. Some of the transitions addressed by the videos discussed in this volume deal with the shift from mechanical work processes to newer technologies, as in Harun Farocki's work. They may address conceptual shifts in gender identity or concern a mutation in the cultural perception of memory and history, as in the videos by Rea Tajiri, Richard Fung, Mathilde ter Heinje and Johan Grimonprez. Along these lines, my reflection on the transnational video explores the parallels between the transnational space of the global economy and the structures of essayist mental space.

A form of transition that is particularly relevant to this discussion literally relates to movements of diaspora, dislocation and migration. There are good reasons why postcolonial artists are such outstanding essayists. Their videos raise the question of how an increasingly ambivalent experience of place, nation and belonging lived by so many cultural producers today has prompted them to develop an artistic language that corresponds to the essayist voice, a voice that speaks from a position of placelessness. On the other hand, essayists are very engaged in rewriting the historical dimensions of places, as becomes evident in Walid Ra'ad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes,* in which he proposes a ficticious treatment of the hostage crisis during the Lebanese civil war, and in Hito Steyerl's *The Empty Center,* which draws an experimental political archeology of the strip between former East and West Berlin. Rinaldo Walcott, on the other hand, opens up an expanded space of the black digital diaspora in the North Atlantic as a video-theoretical space that enters the difficult terrain of memory, slavery and black displacement with an analysis of Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* and Dana Inkster's *Welcome to Africville.*

More cheerful essayist methods use humor as a discursive tool. Paul Willemsen explores Steve Reinke's merry and greatly artistic work, which moves away from recognizable documentary practice to design a creative contemporary milieu around himself that is at the same time highly personal

expression and precise social commentary. Visually sophisticated and with theoretical reference to the very act of seeing, Tran T. Kim-Trang unfolds in *The Blindness Series* a decade of essayist work which covers different pathologies of seeing and not-seeing and their metaphorical values. In the thorough essay *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (Images of the World and the Inscription of War) Harun Farocki pursues an ongoing fascination with the role of technology in forming our perception. His meticulous observations comment on the link between new technologies of visualisations and their role in the organisation of war, as Allan J. Thomas explains in his text.

The videos *Love Hotel* and *Writing Desire* do not comment on visual technologies from afar, they actually enter and move through the electronic terrain of digital images generated by both the electronic communications networks and the landscapes visually generated by satellite media and other visual information systems. In this instance, the simultaneity and multilayeredness of ideas are produced not through linear editing but directly on the surface of the screen. These videos make apparent how closely the virtual, phantasmatic space of the internet resembles the essayist geographies driven by analysis as much as by wild analogies.

Then there are two contributions which move along the intersection of popular drama and artistic reflection: Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Border Stasis* and Steve Fagin's video *TropiCola.* In an interview, Steve Fagin laces an essayist fabric of Cuban life through a discussion of popular timba music. A very subjective approach to the recurring theme of "going places" and bringing back a bunch of disparate observations emerges in a video genre which is by definition essayist: the letter, the travel diary. Some are obsessively visual as Irit Batry's *These Are Not My Images* whereas the narrative remains fragmentary and reluctant. In other works the vocal monologue offers personal and philosophical reflexions that becomes the guiding thread through foreign places. In Birgit Hein's *Baby I Will Make You Sweat,* the author reveals her most intimate concerns relating to sexuality and aging by taking us honestly through her sexual experiences in Jamaica. Unlike the documentary, which keeps the commentary closely linked to the image, in the essay the sound and image levels may diverge to the point of becoming completely asynchronous. In *Europe From Afar* by Eva Meyer and Eran Schaerf, the soft female reading voice seems to belong to a multitude of speaking subjects, who continuously entangle reality and the projections of their image of Europe fabricated from far away locations. This piece, which has been conceived as a radio play and a silent video and is sometimes, but not always, shown together, radicalizes the autonomy of image and sound so characteristic to the essay and highlights the performative moment of bringing them together.

Clearly, the following pages cannot give a complete survey of the contemporary video essay. But I hope this volume succeeds in showing how eclectic essayist video practice has been in the 90s. It emerges as an aesthetic and discursive form of video making that holds great potential for contemporary digital production in the context of a transformative global culture.

Memory Essays

Nora M. Alter

A mode of audio-visual production called the "essay film" has proliferated in the past decade. This relatively recent genre of film problematizes binary categories of representation, and fuses the two dominant genres of the medium: feature and documentary. Furthermore, the essay film often self-reflexively offers its own film criticism. Like its ancestor, the written essay, it poaches across disciplinary borders, transgresses conceptual and formal norms, and does not follow a clear narrative trajectory. The essay film is rebus-like and hybrid, recalling the operation of memory and dream-work.

What is an essay? Let me briefly present some formulations on the philosophical-literary form. "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 constrained by the presence of individual subjectivity. (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 sixteenth-century social critic and philosopher Montaigne, whose *Essais* (1580) were to exert a deep influence on the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and on a variety of critics in this tradition (e.g., De Sade, Leopardi, Emerson, Nietzsche, Lukacs, Adorno, Benjamin, Barthes). By "essay," Montaigne meant the testing of ideas, himself, 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.

In his 1910 "letter" to Leo Popper entitled "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," Georg Lukacs seeks to legitimate the written essay, which he suggests is "criticism as a form of art."[1] He compares the essay to other forms of literature using the metaphor of "ultra-violet rays" that are refracted through the literary prism.[2] Lukacs characterizes the essay as both "accidental" and "necessary,"[3] a description echoed years later by Adorno in his writings on the essay, where he extolls the characteristics of "luck," "play," and "irrationality."[4] For both Lukacs and Adorno, the essay is fragmentary, wandering, and does not seek to advance truth claims—as would, for instance, the documentary genre in the case of film. Lukacs concludes that the essay is both a work of art, due to what he calls its autonomous, "sovereign" status, and a judgement. Yet, for Lukacs the essential, value-determining thing about an essay is "not the verdict . . . but the process of judging."[5]

Adorno takes up where Lukacs left off and develops further the notion of the essay as a "critique of system" that problematizes the "absolute privilege of method."[6] Thought, he argues, "does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture. The thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself an arena for intellectual experience without unraveling it."[7] Furthermore, for Adorno the essay is the consummate site for critique and its only relation to art is that it is in constant pursuit of new forms of presentation. One such innovation has been made by a group of film and video makers who have sought to produce the audiovisual equivalent of the written genre—what critics such as Edward Small have referred to as "direct theory."[8] Small's starting point is the premise that written film theory, while well developed, is fundamentally flawed since words and written texts are by their very nature inadequate to theorize the constituents of a medium that is audio-visual by its very nature. In other words, parallel to August Wilhelm von Schlegel's declaration that a theory about the novel should be a novel, Small believes that a theory of film should be a film. To this end, he proposes that "certain kinds of film and video works constitute a mode of theory, theory direct, without the mediation of a separate semiotic system."[9] Small extends his observations to most experimental avant-garde production, whereas I would link mine specifically to those productions that are essayistic in nature and that take *critique* as the fundamental force. To quote Adorno once again, 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."[10]

In her 2000 *Wiener Vorlesung,* Ruth Klüger, author of the memoir *Weiter Leben,* proposes a theory of writing Holocaust literature that combines both fact and fiction and locates its discourse in the interstices between the two.[11] The result is a hybrid product "where we cannot really distinguish between the two and confuse fact and fiction."[12] Holocaust literature, she argues, is by its very nature subject to interpretation and accordingly departs from historical facts. Moreover, the complex and often self-protective nature of memory further complicates any clear "historical" rendition. Although Klüger refers specifically to Holocaust literature, I would like to extend the parameters of her argument to include other attempts to represent traumatic events in history. Furthermore, while Klüger primarily treats literature, her argument could just as adequately be applied to the visual arts and film. Indeed, the strategy of combining both fact and fiction in a single form bears a strong affinity with the audio-visual essay.

Let us recall that the essay film emerged during a period of historical crisis. The genre was first conceptualized in April 1940 by avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter. The latter was at the time in exile in Basel, though about to be deported back to Germany. Under these conditions, Richter wrote a short essay entitled "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms" (The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film).[13] The pioneering text proposes a new genre of film that enables the filmmaker to make the "invisible" world of thoughts and ideas visible on the screen. Unlike the documentary film that presents facts and information, the essay film produces complex thought—reflections that are not necessarily bound to reality, but can also be contradictory, irrational, and

fantastic. The essay film, the author argues, allows the filmmaker to transgress the rules and parameters of the traditional documentary practice, granting the imagination with all its artistic potentiality free reign. As Richter puts it:

> In diesem Bemühen, die unsichtbare Welt der Vorstellungen, Gedanken und Ideen sichtbar zu machen, kann der essayistische Film aus einem unvergleichlich größeren Reservoir von Ausdrucksmitteln schöpfen als der reine Dokumentarfilm. Denn da man im 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 phantastischen Allegorie, von dieser zur Spielszene; man kann tote wie lebendige, 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."[14]

Richter does not explicitly link the essay film with history in his writing. However, the essay films he was to make subsequently, such as *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1947), *Chess Sonata* (1957), or *Dadascope* (1963), attempt in their own way, and to greater or lesser effect, to represent specific historical moments, or periods.

Nearly forty years later, when filmmaker Alexander Kluge was faced with the difficulty of responding to the horror of the German Autumn of 1977, he picked up where Richter left off. More specifically, Kluge resorted to what was then an innovative strategy of deliberately mixing fact and fiction in a single film. The result was the remarkable 1978 omnibus production *Deutschland im Herbst*. Kluge argued that the interplay between fiction and non-fiction corresponded to the "coexistence of fact and desire in the human mind," and that only such a slippery form could adequately produce a counter public sphere to that inculcated by the State and the press.[15] This strategy is in part similar to that of Rosellini, who also explored the possibility of placing fictional characters within a historically grounded space, thereby placing both the "real" and the imaginary in the same filmic frame. And as we will see later, Rosellini is an important figure for Eisenberg. At around the same time as Kluge, Hans Jürgen Syberberg confronted a similar dilemma, though in his case it was of how to produce a film about Hitler. Syberberg, too, decided in favor of an essayistic form for 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.[16] What both films try to circumvent is a roadblock called history, which has been reinforced by both collective and personal memory. Since film, video or literature is the work of re-presentation, veracity is an impossibility for a number of reasons. These include the reality of a temporal and spatial lag between the events, for often they took place years earlier and in another place. Or, as Chris Marker quoting Boris Souvarine describes it in the CD-ROM *Immemory* (1997): "L'histoire est quelque chose qui n'as pas eu lieu, raconté par quelqu'un qui n'était pas là."[17] One way to get around the historical roadblock is to make a detour through fiction. Such a path does not presume historical truth, though it neverthe-

less leads to a representation. The trajectory of this road is not straight, as would for instance be the case in a documentary or narrative story. Rather, it winds in a complicated and at times frustrating and frustrated manner. Indeed, this has been the pattern of many audio visual essays, especially those that attempt somehow to understand the intricately woven processes of history and memory.

Let me now, in the form of an example, turn to an examination of how the formal components of one medium—film—correspond directly to the presentation of History and Memory. The works under consideration will be Daniel Eisenberg's trilogy, or rather cycle of films, *Displaced Person* (1981), *Cooperation of Parts* (1987), and *Persistence* (1997).[18] In these films, Eisenberg, the child of Holocaust survivors, returns to Germany and Poland to try to make sense of a history (at once personal and public) and its manifestation in both the present and the past. His return to Europe, and especially the sites of his ancestry and their annihilation, is by no means unique. However, Eisenberg does it *three* times: in 1981, 1987, and 1997. The resulting films thus produce their own historical trajectory and their own contribution to history. For part of Eisenberg's filmic strategy in *Persistence* was to create or establish filmic documents of the present day which might be used by someone in the future. In other words, just as Eisenberg himself has relied heavily on found footage, there is a self-conscious awareness on his part of producing found objects/footage for future use.

The first in the cycle, *Displaced Person,* is a compilation film comprised entirely of found footage— several memorable sequences come from Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970). According to Eisenberg, the impetus to make the film suddenly occurred when he saw Ophuls' film:

> As Hitler walked up the steps of La Madeleine I realized that I had stood in that same spot, and read the inscription on the building and sat down there. To consider the fact that during my first trip to Europe, Hitler and I crossed paths in time, really, was a whole metamorphosis of the world in my head; it was a revelation of some kind. Space and time seemed to collapse into one. And I realized, aside from the fact that his political program and history had in fact created my very being, because my parents met in Dachau after the war, there we were crossing paths.[19]

Displaced Person is composed of several interrelated fragments that are repeated numerous times in different arrangements and combinations. The fragments are often interspersed with several seconds of black leader. In between, we see Hitler on a train pulling away from a crowded station as the camera tracks a Red Cross nurse racing after the train, two young blond boys on bicycles, a child washing a doll, children playing in a German town, Hitler arriving in Paris, and a formal dance sequence. The reorganization of the arrangement of the sequences serves to redirect and reorient our relation to the sounds and images, thereby uncovering embedded meanings. Furthermore, Eisenberg manipulates the images with the aid of an optical printer. Thus, for instance, in the sequence with the blond boys, sometimes their bicycles move and the background stays still, and

sometimes the opposite occurs. The effect is to arrest history and development: both the personal and the public. The movement of the boys on bicycles across the screen is abruptly interrupted, and that interruption is constantly repeated and replayed. The characters are not allowed to develop: their progress is halted, unnaturally, and their story is left incomplete. The viewer can only speculate and imagine.

A similar manipulation is at play in the train sequence. The camera focuses on a young woman chasing the train, tracking the movement of her body in slow motion. A close-up of her face reveals the degree of sheer ecstasy and fanatical obsession of her devotion to Hitler. As we realize that the footage is taken by one of Hitler's camera men, the power of the image increases dramatically. The sound track includes Beethoven's Opus 59, as well as a lecture in English delivered by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss on "The Meeting of Myth and Science." In one of the more poignant points in his lecture, Lévi-Strauss states that "if the same absurdity was bound to reappear over and over again, and another kind of absurdity also to reappear, then there was something which was not absolutely absurd; or else it would not appear."

Made six years later, *Cooperation of Parts,* as the title suggests, alludes both to Eisenberg's own sense of fragmentation as it addresses his relationship to the Germany and Poland of his parents as well as to a formal strategy of filmmaking. The film opens with footage taken by Eisenberg at a contemporary European train station (Calais and the Gare de Lyon). However, the voice-over (Eisenberg's own) paradoxically announces:

> Here is the oldest picture I've managed to obtain . . . . It's a picture of a young woman parting with friends at a railway station in Germany. There's no platform next to the train (the image on the screen negates this statement) . . . . She's wearing dark sunglasses. Her hair is long and pinned in back . . . . We know that her two friends would finally arrive in the U.S. sometime in early 1949. So the photograph must be from the summer of 1948. She was trying to convince her own husband to emigrate to the U.S. as well.

By juxtaposing images from 1987 Germany onto a verbal narrative that describes an unseen photo from a Germany of the forties, Eisenberg relates the past to the present, and imbricates, in a manner that recalls the surrealist methodology of Walter Benjamin, the present with the past through the interplay between the visual and audial registers. But there is more. Indeed, the described photograph of his mother, as well as one of his father taken while in a Soviet Labor camp, also stand as signs for when a visual history of Eisenberg's family begins. The family is only allowed to be

> Daniel Eisenberg, *Displaced Person,* 11 min., 1981.

> Ibid.

> Daniel Eisenberg, *Cooperation of Parts,* 42 min., 1987.
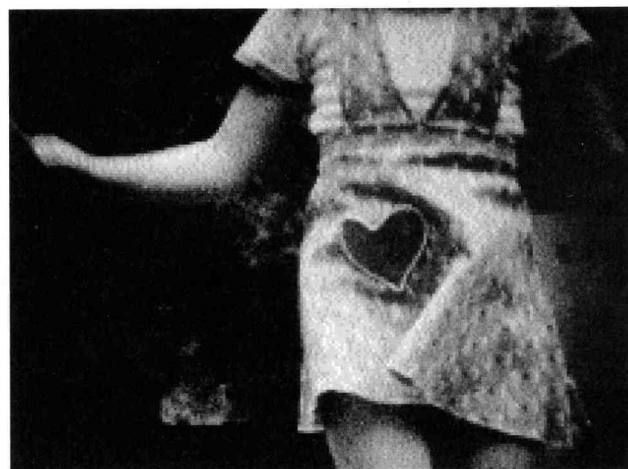
perceived visually intact as an image once the war is over—no other visual trace exists. Thus Eisenberg takes on the challenge of creating a personal visual text in which no personal images remain.

During the next forty minutes of *Cooperation of Parts,* Eisenberg's camera seeks to find traces of the past. This occurs not only in long tracking shots of Auschwitz, Dachau, and the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, but also in the architecture of Berlin. As the camera moves across the architectural landscape, Eisenberg pauses to reflect on images, uttering "True ... False ... False ... True ...." For the past is articulated specifically in the traces of mortars, bombings, bullets, and in the ruins of buildings. Needless to say, this is a past not yet glossed over and "reconstructed" for Western eyes. The last shot in this sequence is of the Sacré-Cœur in Paris. Within the flow of images, the effect is startling and brings to our attention how our own conclusions are already embedded in any representation. In the film, Eisenberg also finds the courtyard of the apartment complex in Poland where his mother spent her childhood years. There, he captures young Polish children and an elderly woman who, perhaps because of the harsh economic circumstances in Poland in the 1980s, *visually* resonate with how characters in the context in which his mother grew up might have appeared forty years ago. Indeed, it is precisely in the former East, where "cosmetic surgery" has not yet been performed to erase all scars of the war, that Eisenberg's camera finds uncanny markers. These he weaves into the fabric of his memory. As in a traditional essay film, the verbal track is dominated by the reading of philosophical proverbs and aphorisms, some of which are repeated at regular intervals. Importantly, many of these pronouncements are not in any obvious way keyed to the images displayed. Rather, they hang in the silence, unmoored—e.g. "Misfortune makes and breaks you," "The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass." and "The longest road is from the mother to the front door." In the case of the latter, the phrase is first said orally, later it is written and finally it appears as a filmed image of Eisenberg's mother's actual front door.[20] The film ends with the following words printed across the screen: "Going down that street ten thousand times in a lifetime ... or perhaps never at all ...."

Ten years later, Eisenberg would once again go "down that street." To make *Persistence*, he returns to Berlin, and to the camps, drawn now by a reunified Germany. More so than in *Cooperation of Parts, Persistence* conveys a sense of the filmmaker as subject. Now, not only is his voice recognizable, but Eisenberg also allows his image to appear on screen. The film opens with a lengthy shot of the angel on top of the Siegessäule, with an effect of wind (representative of history) blowing across its body in an exaggerated fashion. Eisenberg here directly refers with an intertitle to Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* (the angel of history), an image that will serve as the film's overarching trope of victory and catastrophe. Indeed, the film attempts to show the continuous and discontinuous threads of history. The opening credits announce the title *Persistence*, described as a film in twenty-four absences/presences. The film's first sequence features extraordinary footage of a destroyed, bombed-out Berlin. The footage is remarkable not only because of the proximity of the camera (despite its aerial position), but also because of its use of color stock. This is an utter anomaly. Typically, documentary footage of the War and its aftermath is in black and white. Such

footage provides a necessary distance, placing the events firmly in the past. By contrast, the color footage shocks, bringing the scenes depicted into the present. (The footage was obtained by Eisenberg from the U.S. military, whose propaganda division was given stock of new color film with which to document the success of U.S. Airforce raids in 1945.) The next sequence, in black and white, depicts a young boy wandering amidst the rubble and ruins of Berlin. The scene is immediately recognizable. It comes from Rosselini's famous 1947 film, *Germany Year Zero*, a fictional narrative filmed primarily on location in postwar Berlin. Clearly, this film's place in film history is one of the central reasons why Eisenberg cites from it. But just as important is the manner in which *Germany Year Zero* mixes the real with the imagined. This culminates in a highly vexed relationship between the personal and the historical.

Persistence is primarily about Berlin. The film features an overt curiosity as well as an underlying anxiety regarding the reemergence of Berlin as a capital city. For Eisenberg, Berlin functions as a site that transmits the trauma of the Holocaust. Only in Berlin can the traumatic events of the mid-century be represented and reenacted. The reconstruction of the city today is uncanny, for it visually and audially recalls the rebuilding of Berlin forty years ago. Thematically, many issues resurface that had been buried. Freud wrote in his 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," that a typical uncanny effect is "produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality."[21] Eisenberg's filmic production seems to realize such an imaginary something. His confrontation, however, is with someone else's reality—a reality that belonged to his parents. Yet, it has persisted in his imagination and has almost become real for him as well. Thus, after visiting the medical experimentation block of Sachsenhausen where his mother was imprisoned, Eisenberg's voice-over reads a letter he has written to his mother. In the letter he tells her that he does not want to know the details of what she experienced. Complete knowledge is no longer necessary, for it is now felt to be superfluous and obscene. Rather, Eisenberg opts for a filmic strategy marked by absences, focusing instead on what is left unsaid and unrepresented.

Eisenberg's filmic project creates a history of the intermixing of audial and visual fragments from the past and the present. These pieces repeat and resurface throughout the film following a musical structure of variations arranged by Eisenberg. This fragmentary incompletedness stands in sharp contrast to the popular, seamless reconstructions available for mass consumption. As Eisenberg explains, "I am very interested in the idea of fragments, and the way fragments are pieced together."[22] His interest in fragmentation goes beyond an interrupted family history and extends to aesthetic production in general because "it's been part of art-making and aesthetics for a long time in this century . . . . And fragments sometime have a way of reflecting or breaking things apart."

But, one might legitimately ask, why film? Why is Eisenberg adamant that this trilogy could only have been conceived and executed in film? Why would the use of video, for instance, have been inconceivable? In part, answers to these questions relate to the fact that the medium of film was

current during the time period addressed by Eisenberg's cycle. In other words, he seeks a historical veracity that is not mediated by the introduction of a contemporary medium such as videotape. Although Eisenberg's project is a type of historical reconstruction that acknowledges the degree to which it is influenced by the present, he insists on using material (film footage) that has durability and stands as evidence. The footage from German newsreels, from US bombers, from Rosselini's film, and from Eisenberg's own camera, all share a common trait: they are all made in the material form of celluloid. As such, the differences between the film fragments, whether initially intended as documentary or fiction, propaganda or information, designed for private or public consumption, all achieve an equivalence in their status as witness and evidence. As mentioned earlier, Eisenberg's own films will enter into this cycle of history and contribute to these documents. The importance of using film in the 1990s thus achieves another relevance, for it also self-reflexively points to films' passing as a medium of documentation. For if the second World War was witnessed in celluloid, today's wars are documented electronically. Furthermore, the diverse nature of the filmic extracts attests to the amount of work that Eisenberg had to go through in order to find and assemble the footage which he ultimately used. This difficult task is not to be discounted, for it parallels Eisenberg's role as a researcher seeking to uncover and patch together pieces of a hidden history—one whose immediate access has been blocked. Each visit to the archive thus constitutes the meanderings of an essayist who must weave together many different and disparate threads—some of fact and some of fiction.

The traditional editing process was central to Eisenberg's decision to employ the medium of film. Film editing relies heavily on memory—it becomes necessary to keep a whole project in one's head. This in turn is related to the thematics of Eisenberg's films, which, as I have already suggested, are about the construction of history, memory and forgetting. History and memory are necessarily incomplete and full of gaps, lapses, and absences, and Eisenberg's films are marked by these characteristics. Bits of filmic evidence are put together, forming a Benjaminian mosaic where the truth only appears as flashes in the cuts between the fragments. The process resonates with the experience of a subject trying to reconstruct a memory that s/he did not experience directly. The person is a secondary witness of a trauma, parallel to the experience of a film spectator. The trauma is experienced as what Abraham and Torok have described as "transgenerational memory," meaning that the trauma has been unconsciously transmitted from one generation to the next.[23] In *Cooperation of Parts*, Eisenberg's voice-over reveals the resonance of the trauma: "I wind up asking the same question my mother asks, 'Why me?' It was through her, not through her conscious intention, that these things passed. Like a shock wave felt through several generations." Here it is important to remember that a trauma can only be recalled indirectly through fetishistic strategies. The fetish in this case resides in the fascination that films and photographs as pieces of evidence from a previous time produce. It is as if, by examining these remnants, we could somehow uncover the truth of what happened. Eisenberg's fetishistic insistence on the filmic medium thus encodes material conditions of displacement, rupture, and loss in the very form of the work.

If there has been a gradual shift in the positioning of the spectator as witness vis-à-vis the historical events depicted, Chris Marker's CD-ROM project *Immemory* transforms the viewer's relationship even more dramatically.[24] The piece cannot be accessed without an active and persistent viewer. The CD-ROM positions the participant as a co-writer of history, similar to the protagonist in Marker's earlier film, *Level 5* (1996), who seeks to uncover a hidden history.

Immemory cannot be taken as a pure autobiographical essay any more than can a museum or a library. For although it constitutes Marker's personal archive, the narrative that is woven, the paths that are followed, and the amount of time spent working with the CD-ROM, are all up to the viewer. Throughout the CD-ROM, the latter is given choices of where to click and what routes to follow. For example, the first screen presents several possibilities: War, Film, Photography, Poetry, Museums, and Voyages. If we choose photography we again have several choices: China, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Bosnia, World War II and the like. Click on Cuba and there unfolds (at a speed determined by the viewer) a series of images of Cuba in the thirties. Musical and film extracts can also be accessed. A cartoon cat appears and announces that twenty-seven years have passed, and a newsreel of Fidel Castro giving a speech appears on the monitor. The images are more often accompanied by written texts. Some of these are from literary sources, while others are reproduced telegrams and postcards addressed to Marker.

To navigate through the entire CD-ROM takes hours, and a different voyage is undertaken each time. Thus the history changes each time, depending on where the viewer decides to go. And although the images and texts have been installed by someone else, their ultimate arrangement is left up to the viewer. However, like a deck of cards, after the play is over it is reshuffled and nothing remains of the past game except the viewer's personal memory of the experience. Heavily indebted to Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, each click produces a madeleine that sends the reader into a another long series of meditations.

Marker's digitalized audio-visual montage thus produces infinite possibilities and results in a work in which the spectator co-directs, edits, and arranges the text.[25] Marker thus pushes the viewer to create new texts rather than to merely consume histories. In turn, the work will always remain open, never complete. For in typical essayistic fashion, the viewer's role will always-already be that of continuing the work, perpetually constructing new narrative trajectories and creative possibilities.

Essay films have been sporadically produced for at least seventy years. Recently, however, both their theorization and their production have increased to the point where now the essay film or video is commonly acknowledged as a full-fledged peer of the narrative and documentary genres. While film essays were relatively infrequent in the 60s and 70s, this in-between genre proliferated during the 90s. Today, it seems that essay films are everywhere. Indeed, I would even go so far as to argue that Gilles Deleuze's division of twentieth century cinema into the movement-image (pre-WWII) and the time-image (post-WWII) should be expanded to include the essay film (post the collapse of the

Soviet Union).[26] This highly theoretical and self-reflexive cinema has increasingly come to assume the critical function of the written film theory essay.

1   Georg Lukacs, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay: A Letter to Leo Popper [1910]," *Soul and Form* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1978), p. 2.

2   Ibid., p. 7.

3   Ibid., p. 9.

4   Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form [1954-58]," *Notes to Literature,* vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 3-23.

5   Georg Lukacs, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," p. 18

6   Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," p. 9.

7   Ibid., p. 13. Here we need only recall the audiovisual density of recent productions by Jean-Luc Godard such as *Allemagne 90 neuf zéro* or *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.

8   Edward S. Small, *Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

9   Ibid., p. 11.

10   Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," p. 20.

11   The speech has been published as Ruth Klüger, *Dichter und Historiker: Fakten und Fiktionen* (Wien: Picus, 2000).

12   Ibid., p. 42.

13   Hans Richter, "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms [1940]," in Christa Blümlinger / Constatin Wulff (eds.), *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film* (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1992), pp. 195-198.

14   Ibid., p. 198.

15   Alexander Kluge as cited by Miriam Hansen in "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and the Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to *Germany in Autumn*," *New German Critique* 24-25 (Fall-Winter 1981-82), pp. 36-56; here p. 49 .

16   For an excellent analysis of Syberberg's film see Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

17   "History is something which didn't take place, told by someone who wasn't there."

18   Eisenberg refers to these films as part of a cycle rather than a trilogy. Daniel Eisenberg in conversation with the author (March 22, 2003).

19   Daniel Eisenberg in "Daniel Eisenberg im Gespräch mit Alf Bold," *Kinemathek* 29 (January 1992), pp. 4-17; here p. 7.

20   Daniel Eisenberg in conversation with the author (March 22, 2003).

21   "The 'Uncanny' [1919]," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (1917-1919), ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-73), p. 244.

22   "Daniel Eisenberg im Gespräch mit Alf Bold," p. 8.

23   Nicolas Abraham / Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

24 For two insightful treatments of *Immemory*, see Laurent Roth / Raymond Bellour, *Qu'est-ce qu'une Madeleine?: A propos du CD-ROM Immemory de Chris Marker* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997).

25 This methodology is entirely in keeping with Marker's anti-auteurist manner of working, typified by his tendency to credit himself merely as editor and not as director.

26 See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

Double Viewing

The Significance of the "Pictorial Turn" to the Critical Use of Visual Media in Video Art

Jan Verwoert

The uninhibited use of found media images and the self-reflexive method of reorganizing and commenting on their meaning places the video essayist often in the position of a media critic, whose position, however, remains ambivalent. It may well be appropriate, therefore, to speak of the "pictorial turn" with respect to critical practices in video art, as media criticism often exhibits a distinctive quality of its own in this context: Even decidedly critical positions do not necessarily distance themselves from the commercial mass media they criticize, but instead settle deliberately in the gray area between art and popular visual culture. Reflection often approaches its object so closely that only minimal distance is preserved between the two. This approach ordinarily takes place within the context of media selection. Many artists work with precisely the same mass-media technologies whose functions are the object of their critical investigations.

The medium of video plays a particularly important role in this process. Video is one of the most popular of all visual technologies. Cameras, recorders and software for video editing on home PCs are now reasonably affordable and easy to use. Television also films on video tape. The use of video surveillance systems is on the rise. Video is one of the most important means of production in our society's collective visual output. This productive resource is quite freely accessible, and that is a boon to media criticism. Working in the medium of video makes it possible to reconstruct, criticize or correct the logic of image production in a performative mode, *from the inside out.*

If we are to understand the unique character of these performative practices in theoretical terms, we need to examine a tacit premise of media criticism—namely, that criticism is possible only from a distance. The implication of this assumption is that "critical distance" to the media in question can be achieved only through negation of the fascinating power of popular visual media—and that the loss of distance is tantamount to regression into an attitude of uncritical consumption. Practices which develop critical positions through direct involvement with the media they mean to criticize defy this premise. They demand a redefinition of the relationship between seemingly polar oppositions such as closeness and distance, consumption and criticism, fascination and analysis.

It seems to me that this attempt to redefine the theoretical premises of media criticism—in the sense of critical practice oriented more closely toward a popular visual culture—can now be seen in the current discussion regarding the "pictorial turn." The purpose of the following essay is to examine several selected aspects of this discussion as fertile sources of ideas for a theoretical outline of the premises of a practical approach to media criticism that investigates the functions

of the medium of video from within the medium of video—and in doing so freely makes use of the visual languages of popular visual media to examine and correct their functions.

The pictorial turn

In 1992, the American theorist W. J. T. Mitchell published his essay entitled "The Pictorial Turn" in the journal *ArtForum*.[1] The text has the ring of a manifesto. Mitchell develops the basic principles of a future scholarly discipline devoted primarily to the study of visual culture. He articulates two fundamental arguments—one might also call them demands:

First of all, he postulates that in our society, the communication of information, like the exercise of power, takes place to an increasing extent with the aid of visual technologies. (Nicholas Mirzoeff describes this situation aptly in the statement "Modern life takes place onscreen."[2]) This trend toward visualization, Mitchell contends, requires new, appropriate forms of analysis and criticism of visual phenomena. In this sense, he calls for closer collaboration between social scientists concerned with ideological criticism and scholars concerned with visual phenomena. Surely, no student of culture with an interdisciplinary orientation would have difficulty supporting such an appeal.

Mitchell's argumentation becomes bolder at the point at which he demands that the "linguistic turn" in cultural studies give way to a "pictorial turn." He criticizes the dominance of a semiotic approach to interpretation in cultural studies. Under the banner of the "linguistic turn," models based upon sign theory and linguistics were not only introduced to cultural studies but also welcomed as critical, progressive and avant-garde beginning in the 1970s.

Mitchell does not question the fundamental legitimacy or the critical potential of this approach. His doubts relate to the question of whether the function and effect of visual media can be described on the basis of semiotic models. In this sense, then, Mitchell defines the pictorial turn as "a post-linguistic, post-semiotic rediscovery of the visual image as a complex interplay involving visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurativity."[3]

What I find interesting in Mitchell's position is not so much the fact that he revives the ontological question of what pictures are but that he undertakes a re-evaluation of the status of visual media. Mitchell accuses the advocates of semiotic approaches of "ocular phobia"—a fundamentally iconoclastic tendency. He finds this underlying tenor reflected in the privileged status of text as opposed to the visual image; in other words, the image as a medium of mythical obscuration is not merely set in opposition to the text as a medium of enlightenment but actually subordinated to it. It seems to me that this blanket devaluation of the visual, this general attitude of scepticism with regard to visual phenomena is indeed a principal feature of certain forms of criticism based on semiology. Thus I regard the appeal to accept a "pictorial turn" as entirely reasonable. And there is reason enough to subject certain ideas about the status of visual media that have quietly established them-

selves as dogmas in cultural-critical thinking in the course of the spread of semiotic approaches to critical reassessment.

Rosalind Krauss's critique of the pictorial turn

Mitchell's criticism struck a nerve, as evidenced by the aggressive tone in which the American art journal *october* in an issue devoted to "Visual Culture" expressed its position in opposition to a pictorial turn in 1990. In harsh terms, co-editor Rosalind Krauss defended the semiotic approach in her essay entitled "Welcome to the Cultural Revolution"[4]—citing Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan in support of her arguments. Her reference to precisely these two theoretical pioneers would seem to have been anything but coincidence. Indeed, I think a number of elements in the theories of Barthes and Lacan have solidified into dogmas of cultural discourse or ideological critique that continue to influence contemporary debate—and that it is therefore entirely appropriate to identify these tacit assumptions and criticize them specifically.

On the whole, Krauss's interpretation of the effect of an image abused for the purpose of ideological manipulation can be described—to use a term coined by W. J. T. Mitchell—as the "Medusa effect."[5] The image casts a spell over the viewer. It transfixes him, robbing him of all freedom of movement and critical distance. This loss of critical distance makes it impossible for the viewer to see through the mechanisms of manipulation. The semiotic tools with which the image generates its message remain invisible to him. The process of semiosis is obscured from his view. Thus he cannot recognize the image as a constructed, coded sign. Instead, he falsely perceives it as a complete whole and consumes the visual statement as self-evident. In the process, the loss of critical distance prompts the viewer not only to misconstrue his relationship to the image but also to misinterpret his relationship to the real world. Not only does he fail to recognize that the image manipulates him, he also misses the opportunity to establish an active relationship to reality guided by reason. Under the spell of the "Medusa effect," the viewer takes pleasure in his own passivity and deception as an escape from reality. This escapist pleasure involves elements of regression and compensation. In simplified terms, therefore, the Medusa theorem postulates the transfixation of the viewer and the disappearance of the sign in the moment of pleasure in looking at the image.

Double viewing: the hedonist scepticism of mobile recipients

The alternative theory I would like to sketch out here has its origin in research on recipient behavior conducted within the context of Anglo-American cultural studies. It is the model of a mobile, pleasure-oriented, yet emancipated recipient of the media of popular culture. The models of reception developed in cultural studies are based on the presumption of the multidimensional character of identification and consumption processes. In other words, a consumer of images can have several different, even contradictory attitudes toward the images he consumes. And he is able to identify with multiple, mutually contradictory forms of identification at the same time. How consumers of

visual images subsequently process these images and incorporate them into their personal view of the world cannot be clearly determined in advance. It also seems doubtful that "naïve" consumers images still exist in our media society at all. The fact that images can be manipulated is common knowledge today. Anyone who has a computer at home can observe and learn how they are manipulated.

Thus one can and should assume that the consumers of popular visual culture possess a certain degree of basic competence in dealing with media—competence that includes knowledge of the unique laws governing the institutions and the formats of visual media. People know how cinema works and are well acquainted with the standard procedure for news broadcasts—in part because broadcasting companies and film studios provide a constant stream of information about the conditions of production in the form of highly popular "the making-of" features. In light of these insights, the view of the recipients of popular culture as unprejudiced and naïve expressed by Rosalind Krauss would seem untenable. To be more precise, they raise serious doubts about her central argument—that visual pleasure necessarily rules out all sensitivity to the "ways in which the significant works" (i.e. the character of the visual representation as a construction, as something made). Indeed, it is obviously true that even sophisticated cinematic illusions not only remain recognizable as illusions but also derive much of their appeal from the fact that they are understood as such. The spectacle advertises itself *as* spectacle. (Such films as *Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* come easily to mind in this context.)

In his study of fan cultures—*Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*[6] —cultural scholar Henry Jenkins develops a very convincing model of the complex dynamics that govern the reception of (popular) cultural media. Viewers register the illusory effects created by these media, Jenkins argues, at two levels of perception simultaneously: "Thus one experiences these effects by 'dividing one's credibility', enjoying the mechanics of these illusions while still losing oneself in their narrative implications."[7] At the one level, Jenkins contends, viewers of a television series, for example, take the fiction generated by the medium at face value. They follow the story line, identify with the protagonists, and become emotionally involved. Yet at a completely different level they enjoy the constructed character of the program, not least of all because it confirms what they already know about the actors and the circumstances surrounding the production of the series. In discussing the relationship of Star-Trek fans to their beloved series, Jenkins writes, ". . . fans see the fictional characters and their actions as simultaneously 'real' and 'constructed', adopting a strategy of 'double viewing' that treats the show with both suspended disbelief and ironic distance."[8]

The concept of "double viewing" thus describes the simultaneity of informed distance and involvement-identification in the reception of visual media. Yet Jenkins does not define this simultaneity as a static balance. He regards reception as a dynamic process in which recipients work out their relationship with what they see actively while they see it. In other words, they assume different atti-

tudes at different times (as Jenkins says, "proximity and distance are not fixed 'positions'"). The experience of one's own mental flexibility at the moment of reception makes the process particularly enjoyable. Jenkins sees identification and distancing, belief and disbelief as related attitudes whose interplay constitutes the unique dynamics of the reception process.

Jenkins attributes special significance to the medium of video in this context, as he feels that this medium encourages and supports an approach to visual material that is highly favorable to the playful-masterful form of reception defined as "double-viewing." Video enables recipients —fans, in Jenkins's study—to record or borrow and watch movies, programs and series in which they are interested however, whenever and as often as they wish. They can watch certain scenes over and over again, by advancing or rewinding the tape, or skip other ones entirely. They can build their own circulation and communication forums through copying or lending, or they can create video archives of collected tapes based on their own personal criteria. (In this sense, Jenkins argues that the use of video forms fosters both multiple critical "rereading" and "intertextual knowledge.") All of these practices underscore the material character of video: Video images may not have the aura of film images, but they are more readily accessible for individual use. Video is a very practical material.

Ambivalence as a tool of criticism

The development of a practical approach based upon these assumptions involves advocating an approach to visual media that "complicates" our view of the ways in which these media work, in that it gives productive potential to the ambivalent aspects inherent in the media themselves. In other words, it exploits the contradictions of the media—and thus appeals to the capacity of viewers to adopt different, contradictory attitudes toward what they are viewing during the reception process. An interesting example relevant to this context is offered by videos by Walid Ra'ad, such as *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (from a fictitious series of 53 tapes), which he presents as documentary statements by Souheil Bachar, the lone Arab hostage in a group comprised of himself and five Americans which was held captive under very confining circumstances from 1983 to 1993. All of the Americans write books about their experience during captivity. In formal terms, many of the scenes are reminiscent of videos made by abductors and sent to broadcasting stations to publicize their message: A man sits in an apartment without recognizable features in front of a bare wall and makes a confession-style statement while gazing directly into the camera. Only upon closer examination does it become clear that Ra'ad's films are fictional. The narrator on the screen is not the hostage. He merely assumes the victim's position fictitiously in order to play out and undermine the various possible ways of telling "victims' stories" and to emphasize the political nature of their rhetoric. Ra'ad exhibits the mechanisms of the medium in which he works. Yet at the same time he uses the penetrating language and the powerful appeal of the video confession to charge his presentation of the underlying political problems with the intensity of personal experience. Through experimentation with the co-existing, equally legitimate perspectives of belief and disbelief, Ra'ad succeeds in communicating a sense of the problems associated with his subject matter in the

medium of video while exposing the conflicts inherent in the forms in which the medium of video is instrumentalized and questioning the very habits of reception to which his video appeals.

In my view, the production method that corresponds to the form of reception referred to as double viewing is a technique I would call *disjunctive synthesis*. A method of disjunctive synthesis seeks to make use of the two contradictory principles of fascination and scepticism, exploiting the power of fascination in the images to the maximum at the formal level, taking advantage of the possibilities for establishing coherency through traditional narrative means (voice-overs, continuous flow of images)—thus using all of the tools that contribute to narrative closure and thereby maximize the effect of a work of video art. But this would also mean creating a maximum of heterogeneity at the formal level by combining images with different origins, mixing documentary, staged and computer-generated elements, using special effects and leaving abrupt cuts in place. It would be essential to ensure that moments in which illusion is generated and those that create distance remain related at all times—that neither illusion nor distance is sustained alone. Instead, a continuous alternating shift must take place between illusion and distance. Ultimately, the quality and intensity of the video film is a product of this constant perceptual shift.

Documentary approaches in the context of art (finding the words)

It is important to establish that videos which do not exploit the medium's ambivalent qualities for a self-reflexive critique of the media itself are not necessarily deconstructive. And thus video works that employ the tools of "disjunctive synthesis" for constructive purposes are particularly interesting. Anri Sala's video entitled *Intervista* (1998) is a revealing example of such a work. In *Intervista,* Sala constructs a penetrating biographical narrative and uses it to describe the recent history and the current situation of Albania.[9] The video works with simple documentary images and a straightforward dramatic structure, yet leaves room for substantive and formal ambivalence and thus never detracts from the complexity of the theme.

The narrative in *Intervista* proceeds as follows: Sala happens by coincidence upon an old reel of film. The film is a recording of an interview given years ago by Sala's mother Valdet Sala as a young woman and a spokesperson for the Communist Youth Organization for Albanian television. Her words are not audible. The soundtrack is missing. In search of the lost text, Sala journeys to Tirana, where he succeeds with the help of a deaf lip-reader to reconstruct his mother's statements. When he confronts his mother with the text of the interview, she reacts with mixed feelings. She is outraged over the ideological tone of her statements but appears incapable of distancing herself from them entirely. That fact that she believed what she was saying at the time of the interview and had invested years of her life in that belief make her former convictions a part of herself, one she cannot and will not deny.

One of the remarkable qualities of *Intervista* is that Sala uses the biographical narrative to expose

the importance of a people's
revolutionary movement.
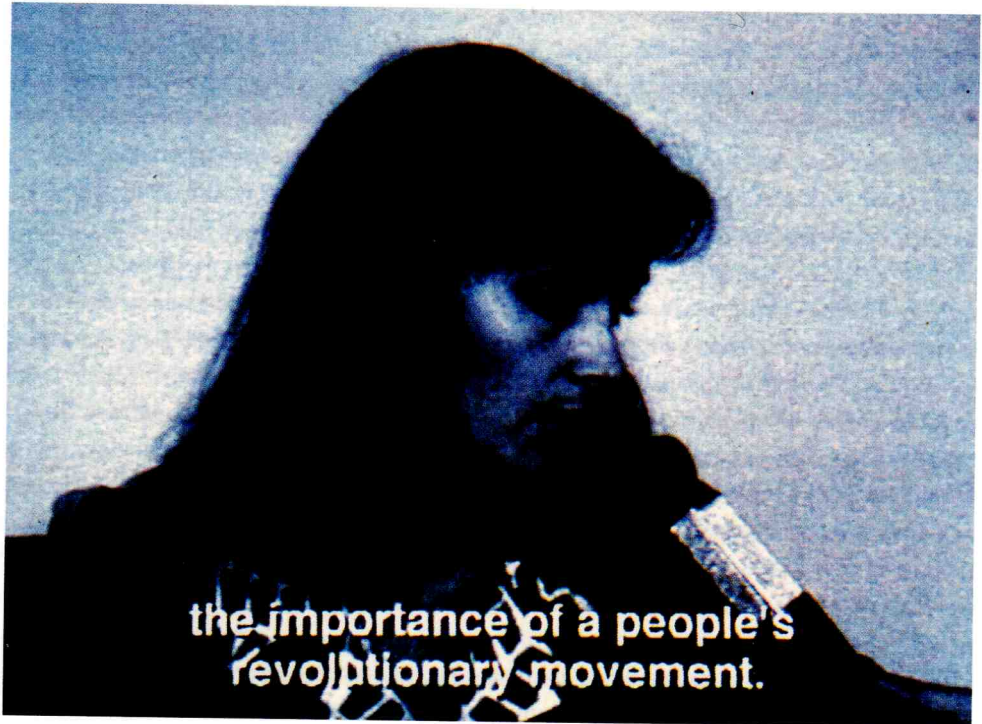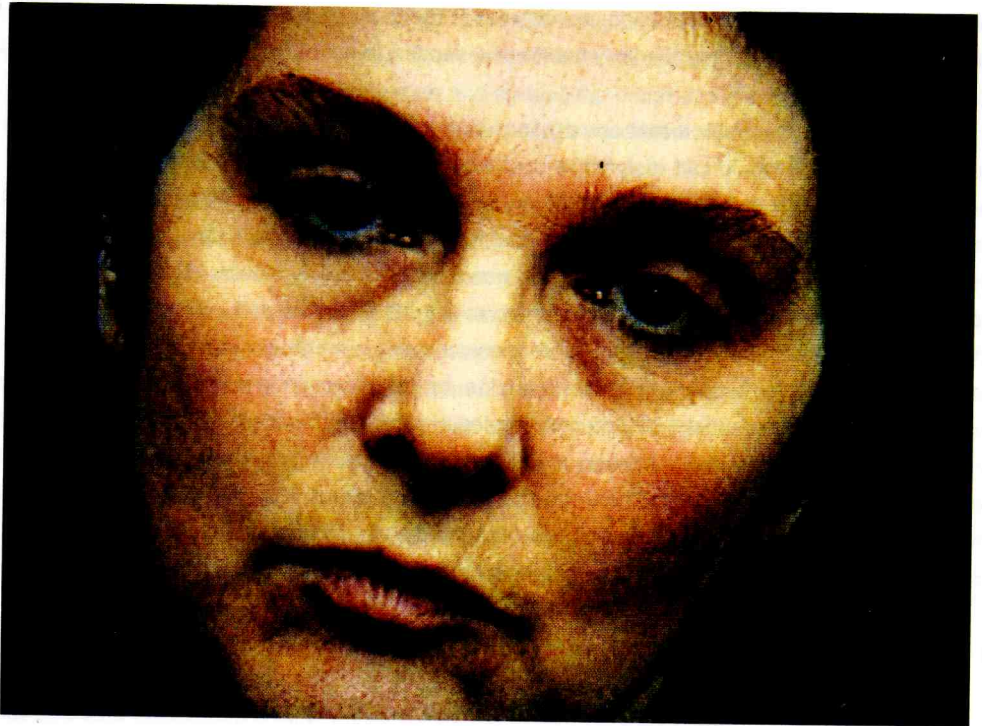
a dimension of experience that is important to an understanding of the past. The relationship between his mother's biography and the history of the country is symptomatic precisely *because* it is ambiguous. The contradictory simultaneity of identification and distancing that shapes Valdet Sala's attitude toward the collective past is characteristic, as *Intervista* shows, of the difficulties encountered by the Albanian people in dealing with the profound upheavals in their society. And Sala maintains the ambiguity at the formal level as well. He counteracts the apparent authenticity of the documentary footage by incorporating staged sequences. Key scenes in the framing narrative, such as the discovery of the film and Sala's arrival at his parents' apartment in Tirana, have obviously been re-enacted. Sala moves the film narrative closer to the realm of fiction. Viewed from the perspective of its potential fictional character, the story of *Intervista* becomes a possible rather than a real one. Valdet Sala's life story takes on the status of a model biography that not only describes a single human destiny but may also be representative of the lives of others.

The simple narrative structure also permits the integration of relatively heterogeneous visual material. The combination of documentary and staged sequences is only one aspect. The artist also embarks upon a number of visual excursions, including scenes of urban life in Tirana filmed by Sala through the windows of a moving automobile. Here and there, the camera shifts abruptly away from a speaking person and focuses on mute building walls or news images on the screen of a television in the background. These interspersed elements play no role at all in the story line, yet they evoke a palpable impression of the urban, social, and political context in which Sala is operating. Thus Sala uses the resources of "disjunctive synthesis" in several different ways. The personal and the political are presented as interwoven aspects of a whole *in Intervista,* but they are also set apart as incongruent dimensions. On the basis of the same principle, documentary images are combined to form a visual texture which, despite its heterogeneous character, never loses its coherency and, despite its coherence, never loses its heterogeneity.

Thus the aesthetics of *Intervista* reinvigorte the debate on the approaches to the visualization of complex contents in the sense of the "pictorial turn." The video clearly shows that conventional forms of visualization do not rule out the expression of complexity, heterogeneity, and material quality per se. The video offers proof that traditional means can be used to create coherence and that the fascinating power of penetrating images can be exploited—but also that heterogeneity can also be achieved through montage of visual material of different origins, through the combination of documentary and fictional, of recent and historical found footage, etc. By telling his story but identifying the narrative as a construction (or fiction), Sala succeeds, in the sense of "double viewing," in drawing upon the principles of fascination and skepticism at the same time.

The detailed analysis of Sala's video relates to the discussion of the increasing spread of video

< Anri Sala, *Intervista,* 26 min., 1998.

works based on documentary approaches in art in recent years. I see this abundance of documentary videos as a clear sign of a „pictorial turn" in the discourse on art from a social-critical perspective. Until the mid 1990s (one might roughly summarize[10]), the installation was the predominant form used to represent attempts to come to grips with social problems. The installation serves as a display: researched material was distributed in the room, and the installation assumed the character of an archives or a project office, from which interventive action could be initiated. The installation-displays were characterized primarily by a "discursive" aesthetic with anti-visual features: wall newspapers, text anthologies, and reading tables dominated the picture.[11]

In a certain sense, increased interest in documentary video works signifies a shift in the medium and its aesthetics in the presence of unchanged thematic concerns and requirements. The objective is still to address and analyze social problems through research and to present the fruits of that research to viewers. Now, however, the documentary video has assumed the function of the "display" formerly performed by the installation. The aesthetics of naming and instructing have given way to the aesthetics of showing and telling. To speak of a pictorial turn in this context is to point out that forms of representation previously dismissed as unworthy (affirmative and uncritical) are now being used by video artists: penetrating visual imagery and narrative biography.

Translated by John Southard

1   W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," *ArtForum* 30:7 (March 1992); reprinted in Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

2   Introductory remarks from Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London / New York: Routledge, 1999).

3   W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn."

4   Rosalind Krauss, "Welcome to the Cultural Revolution," *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 83–96.

5   Mitchell writes, ". . . to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him into an image for the gaze of the picture [is] what might be called the 'Medusa effect'." —W. J. T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures *Really* Want?" *October* 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 71–82, here: p. 76.

6   Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (London / New York: Routledge, 1992).

7   Ibid., p. 66.

8   Ibid., p. 65.

9   The death of Albanian head of state Enver Hoxha in 1985 led to a severe destabilization of the social order. Hoxha had ruled Albania since 1948 on the Stalinist model of a one-party dictatorship and held the country together as an integrating figure. Hoxha's successor Ramiz Alia was unable to maintain that political course. The first free elections were held in 1991. The political turnabout was accompanied by mass flights of refugees and violent riots. The unrest escalated in 1997 in the wake of the bankruptcy of the country's largest investment banks and financing companies, which had been the symbols of hopes for prosperity associated with the introduction of a market economy. Large segments of the population lost their entire fortunes. Civil-war style rebellion ensued. The situation eventually calmed but remains tense even today.

10 The theory of the shift from the installation to documentary video in the context of art in the 1990s was proposed by Georg

Schöllhammer, who made this observation during a discussion that was part of a series of panel discussion on the art of the 1990s I organized in cooperation with the Kunstverein Hamburg in 2002.

11 Pioneers of the concept of the installation as material display include such artists and groups as Group Material, Martha Rosler, and Stephen Willats. In the early 1990s, this aesthetic approach moved to the international arena thanks to works by Renée Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Andrea Fraser, and other artists in the "Services" project developed in collaboration with Helmut Draxler. In the German-speaking region, interventionist projects such as the "Wochenklausur" and "BaustopRandstadt" took up the aesthetic. Its echo was heard at documenta X in the form of the so-called "Hybrid Work Space."

46

The Empty Center

Hito Steyerl

"It is not so much crossing boundaries as frontiers as it is the partial disappearance, dissolution or repositioning of the boundaries themselves. It is the shifting of the boundaries as you try to cross them ... Now you begin to see that we are also talking about the fragmentation of boundaries; the partial breakdown, renegotiation, repositioning of boundaries, about the appearance of new boundaries which cut across the old ones." — Stuart Hall

Potsdamer Platz is a square in the center of Berlin, Germany. Before World War II, it used to be the center of the city, the center of its power. Then it became a deadly minefield, enclosed between the borders of the Cold War. In 1989, the Berlin Wall comes down. The area between the walls, the empty margins of the border, is open. Now, the center returns.

After German reunification, Potsdam Square is rebuilt by transnational companies. In the process, people are shoved out to the outskirts of the city. They are marginalized by the recentering of Germany's political and economic power. *The Empty Center* closely follows the processes of urban restructuring that have taken place in the core of Berlin over the last eight years. In 1990, squatters proclaim a socialist republic on the death strip. Eight years later, the new headquarters of Mercedes Benz arise in the same location.

The film makes use of slow superimpositions to uncover the architectonic and political changes of the last eight years. It focuses on Potsdam square to discover traces of global power shifts and the simultaneous dismantling and reconstruction of borders. At the same time, it traces back the history of ostracism and exclusion, especially against immigrants and minorities, which always have served to define the notion of a powerful national center. Its form evokes an archaeology of amnesia where every single item refers to absence and erasure. What is uncovered is a repeated process of obliteration.

Postcolonial histories

The history of minorities in Germany before World War II often provokes bewilderment. Neither the labor migration nor the refugee movements after World War I have left traces in the collective historical awareness. Migration movements in the wake of German colonialism and the traces of anti-

< Hito Steyerl, *The Empty Center*, 62 min., 1998.

colonial activities in the Weimar republic are even more unknown. Only the existence of Jewish minorities is acknowledged to a certain degree. This form of historiography is not overly surprising. Walter Benjamin wrote that history is always a construction of the powerful.

The neglect of minorities in this kind of historiography derives partially from its formal characteristics in that such historiographies form a grid of knowledge which structurally excludes minorities. Minorities are not primarily defined by their small number, but by their incompatibility with pre-existing categories of identity. This is due to the construction of minority, which involves a maze of conflicting demands. Minority is constructed in between its own conceptions and those of the majority. Since these two conceptions are not congruent, the process always produces loose ends. Yet it is not this residue which is constitutive of the situation of minority but rather the often arbitrary and intense swaying of the categories within which the ever changing construction and classification of minority takes place. In this border zone, the norms of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion are being negotiated, as well as the allocation of humans to all areas of political existence or to the zone of "naked life,"[1] which is completely disenfranchised and stripped of rights. The border space is where the rules are made through exception, and this exception is often identified as minority.

In the film *The Empty Center,* the border space is determined as the empty zone between the walls of the former death strip, the area of the Berlin Wall in the center of Berlin. In the empty expanse between the borders, where empires confronted each other, the competing power claims of nation and capital have consolidated into architectural forms. But in the same space, lost traces of colonial and minority presence can be retrieved as well. This search is not informed by feelings of nostalgia but by a desire to understand how the process of erasure is inscribed into the very foundations of the constructions of power. This space of the border is the dark side of the euphoric poststructuralist concepts of hybridity, carnival and fluid nomadism.

Two types of spaces are intersecting and superimposing here: the political one, which allows for social participation, and the one connected to a state of exception, in which different kinds of minorities are threatened, flexibilized and disenfranchised. These two types of spaces penetrate each other to such a degree that practically in every political space, the state of exception is co-present. This is particularly relevant to minorities, who are often equated with the state of exception.

Zone of indeterminacy

The video *The Empty Center* analyses the former border zone between the walls in its relation to the state of exception. In this area the symbols of the new political and economic powers arise over a period of 10 years: government buildings and company headquarters. The new powers are consolidated during a period of transition within this undetermined zone between the former borders. In this place, history is written and history is erased. The video probes different construction sites
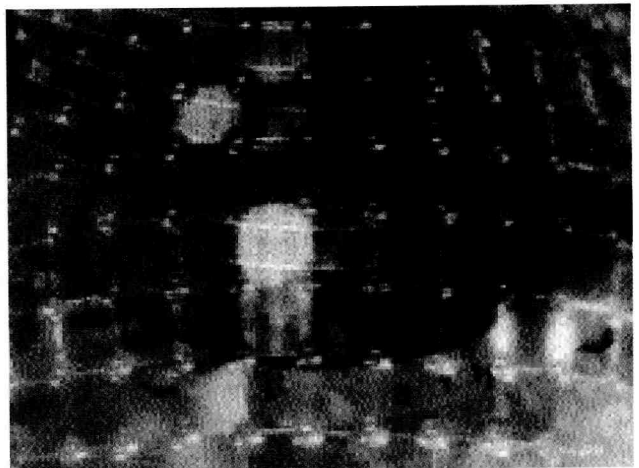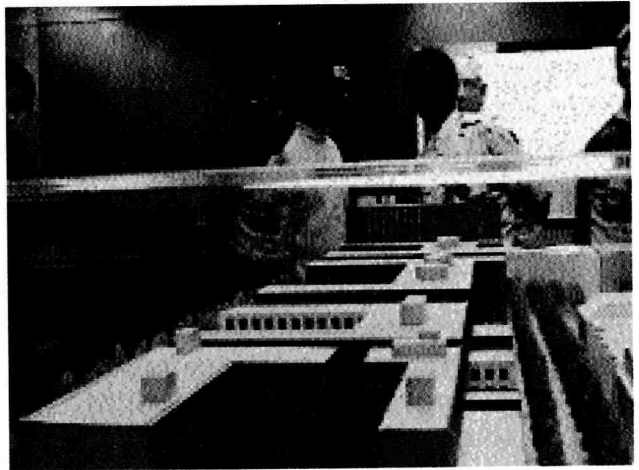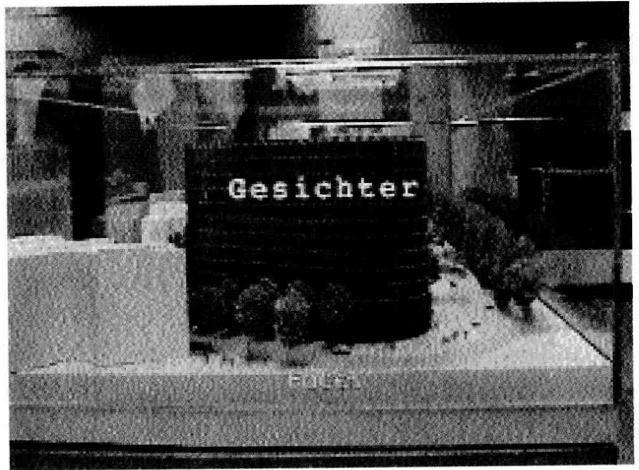
lize in the area between the former walls, transition formally becomes visible between two images which show the same place at different times and document its architectural transition. There is always one part of the picture which remains the same while everything else changes. The reflection on repetition and difference became the formal backbone of the film. In a wider sense, these transitions refer to the question of repetition and difference within history. Does the past repeat itself? Do parts of it return while the rest changes? Does it return with a difference? Or does it return as something else? How can we relate the different patterns of exclusion and nation-building in German history? Is it possible to relate the colonial policies of the Bismarck area to the present treatment of foreigners and minorities in Germany? Wouldn't this type of relation between different types of exclusion infer a relativist stance towards the genocide during the Nazi period? On which basis can we position these different historical periods in relation to one another?

In this sense, the video essay is a document of a period of transition—also on the level of visual production modes. It documents the technological transition from celluloid to digital processing technologies. All images were either shot in HI-8 video or 16-mm film—but the postproduction was entirely performed on nonlinear editing systems, which enabled me to visualize the process of excavation and of the visualization of different layers of the terrain. By incorporating not only different strata of history of the place but layers of different technologies as well, the video turns into an experimental project of a political archeology.

Translated by John Southard

1   Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), p. 19.

tory of the *Waffen-SS* refers to a history of partly nationalist, partly anticolonial movements who tried to realize their anticommunist, anti-Western and often racist and anti-Semitic goals in joining forces with German Nazis and Japanese militarists. But Berlin was also the scene of early anti-colonial communist internationalism. Zhou Enlai, later head of state of liberated China, and M.N. Roy, secretary of Comintern, both spent time in Berlin working in diasporic and internationalist communist circles.

Most interesting is the connection of the sceneries of Weimar Republic commercial exoticism with the deportation camps of the early 20s, erected on the legal base of the state of emergency. The area of the new building of A+T company was taken by a building called "Haus Vaterland" (house fatherland). It housed a Japanese tea room, a Turkish coffee shop, a Spanish Bodega, a Russian vodka pub, a Wild West bar, a French bistro, a palm tree hall and the so-called Rhine terraces. The architect and critic Siegfried Kracauer has analyzed the building as a symptom of a depoliticized employment culture obsessed with efficiency and hygiene. He meticulously notes the praises of the various attractions in the advertisement brochure of Haus Vaterland: "Bavarian landscape, Zugspitze with Eibsee, alpenglow, dance of Bavarian Boys, prairie landscapes at the big lakes, Arizona Ranch with cowboy songs and dances, Negro-Cowboy-jazzband." Rationalized escapism is central to the architectonic constitution of the building itself: embodied in the convolution of facades and stage scenery, whose geography is taken "from popular songs". The former Askari soldier Bayume Mohammed Hussein is working here as a waiter. He lost his German citizenship in 1933. He died at the concentration camp Sachsenhausen, where he was deported in 1943 because of "racial disgrace."

The earliest "concentration camps" in Germany were opened shortly after World War I. They were called "concentration camp for foreigners" and served as internment camps for refugees who could not be deported to their countries of origin. Their inmates were mostly Eastern European Jews, but also Latin Americans, Asians and suspected Communists of all nations. Although the camps were called "concentration camps," they did not implement anything even remotely resembling the later extermination policies of the concentration camps of the National Socialist period . The main connection between both types of concentration camps is a legal one. Both were legally based on laws relating to the state of emergency. This state of emergency was proclaimed several times during the Weimar republic and became permanent during the Nazi period. The state of emergency means a suspension of rules and the chaotic creation of new, arbitrary rules—the rule of force—at the expense of those minorities defined as exceptions.

Time lags

The formal structure of the video is a recreation of the structure of the former border zone between the walls. Long superimpositions show the transformation and reconstruction of single buildings within a period of five years. Just as the legal framework and the structures of transition materia-

to unsettle the myth of "tabula rasa," of an empty spot without historical depth, which informs all new building activities.

In the 90s, on the former premises of the Palais Mendelssohn, former residence of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, a Jamaican women is selling pieces of the Berlin wall and GDR transit visa in a souvenir tent. Her own residence permit is only temporary. The souvenir tent was removed and a large new building has been erected.

Reconstruction plans for the area of the former chancellery of the Reich were highly controversial. In the 30s, the building was reconstructed by the Nazi government as their headquarters. This structure included the famous Fuehrerbunker, where Hitler and Goebbels committed suicide in 1945. But the building had been in use before the Nazi period.

In Bismarck's times the so-called Congo Conference was held here. A genocidal private colony by the name of Congo State owned by the Belgian King Leopold as private property was legitimated. At that time, arbitrary borders were drawn across a five meter high map of Africa. They became commonly known as "Berlin Borders." After German reunification, the adjacent subway station, which integrates parts of the former chancellery's marble decoration, is renamed from "Thaelmannplatz" into "Mohrenstrasse" (Thaelmann was a former communist leader, whereas Moor street refers to black musicians in the Prussian King's army).

May Ayim comments on this act as an erasure of antifascist memory in favor of sentimental colonial reminiscences, as an act which is symptomatic for the rising racist resentments articulated in many acts of violence against foreigners and people of color in the Berlin of the 90s. While a part of the area has been reconstructed during the GDR period as a residential area, another part is now supposed to be used for the premises of the Federal states mission buildings. The debate becomes heated over the third part of the area, where a memorial for the murder of the European Jews is planned. In 2000, neonazis are repeatedly marching on the site in order to protest against the building of the memorial.

The newly built Sony headquarters on Potsdamer Platz include the old Hotel Esplanade. In 1940, the "Indische Legion" (Indian Legion) is celebrating the Indian day of independence there. It forms a part of the Waffen-SS, is led by the nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose and was largely recruited among British POW'S from the Indian subcontinent. The German government had supported anti-English opposition among Indians since World War I and financed part of Indian political diasporic activities in Germany. These contacts laid the groundwork for Bose's later activities.

The history of the Indian Legion is one among many stories of non-German troops which actively supported fascist rule and aggression. Besides the Indian Legion there was an Arab Legion, a Bosnian and Albanian Legion and other troops from most occupied countries. The multicultural his-