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# Gathering in the orphans: essay films and archives in the information age

## ABSTRACT

*This article proposes that the essay film, through its reflective and fragmentary approach to structuring text, moving image and sound and its mediation between film-maker and audience as a part of the way it 'thinks through' its material, presents both a distinct method and a unique history, from which to contextualize the changes the information age brings to cinema.*

*The article expands the body of work that claims the essay film as a distinct genre and further explores the technological and narrative aspects of this mode of film-making, including the use and creation of 'personal archives' in the essay film; database film-making and essayistic methodology; memory, technology and the essay film. The research anticipates how this knowledge might be useful in thinking through cinema's future forms and how examples of contemporary practice demonstrate this.*

## KEYWORDS

essay film  
archives  
technology  
digital  
database  
memory

Essay films are, broadly speaking, a type of authored documentary, which draw also on experimental and fiction film practices. They often incorporate archive material – either literally by using found footage, or as a collection of images collected over a period of time as a kind of 'personal archive'. Derived from the French *essayeur* – to try, or attempt, the essay film places individual experience at the centre of meaning. Film essays tend not to follow a script, but

revolve around a central idea or theme, which they meditate upon. Rather than approaching the subject matter directly, they open up and explore possibilities, often holding open contradictory positions and questioning meanings. The final film is not created from an existing idea, but the idea is found *through* the material.

I am interested in the essay film not only as a hybrid genre that connects fiction and non-fiction, truth and reality, film-maker and audience but also with the technological, methodological, historical and contextual aspects of the form. The research I discuss here was undertaken in connection with my practice-based M.Phil project, 'Gathering in the orphans: Essay films and archives in the information age', at the Royal College of Art, which included a 20-minute film, *The Blue Wall*. This project utilizes a mixture of found footage and images that I had shot myself. Both the scripting and the post-production used database-driven tools, such as information taxonomies and a digital asset management system to code the sounds and images. Archives played a prominent role in both the research and production phases. Thematically, the film referenced two dates in 2005 – 6th July when London won its bid for the 2012 Olympic games and the terror attacks of 7th July. These dates provide a catalyst to explore themes such as the interrelationship between violence and nationalism, regeneration, sport and development legacies, globalization and national branding and the role of images in each. Working on *The Blue Wall*, I approached my mix of raw material – existing programmes, historical archive material, news footage as well as the footage I had shot myself (including still images and audio) as autonomous elements. I interrogated this source material and allowed content areas to emerge. I then used an information taxonomy to guide ordering the raw source into thematic clusters. From those clusters I built small sequences and only after a number of sequences had been assembled, did I write any script material. The finished film, although a 20-minute linear piece, could easily have been rearranged into any number of different configurations (Figure 1).

From a practitioner's perspective, the essay film provides a practical toolset to address issues of fragmentation, an approach to narrative and a critical lens

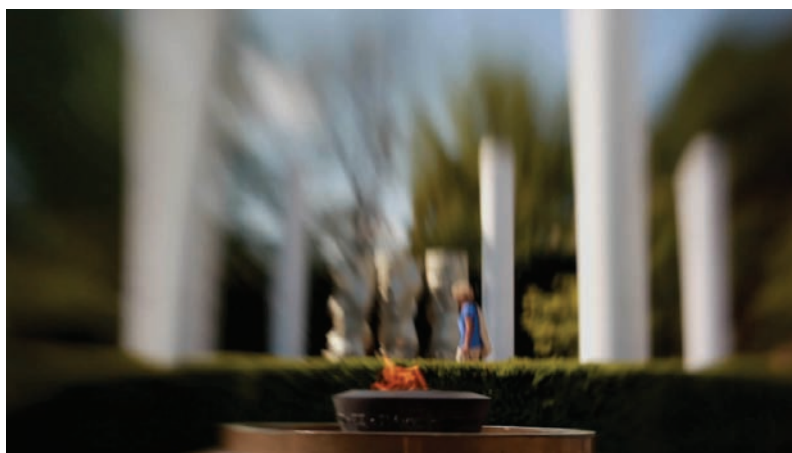


Figure 1: Still from *The Blue Wall* (2010).

Source: © Olivia Lory Kay

grounded in marginal histories through which to view the future of cinematic technologies and techniques. Talking with film-makers such as Patrick Keiller and Joram ten Brink who work within an essayistic framework and delving into the rich history of both essay-writing and film essay-making has guided me to think through some of the specific challenges of my own project that relies on image and sound archives. Through reflections on this work, as well as making connections to texts and films that have gone before, I aim to discuss the relevance of the film essay to audio-visual culture in a digital era. To use the analogy of time travel beloved of film essayists, to weave the future into the present by examining traces of the past.

Why the essay film and what is its relationship to archives and the information age? Fragmentation has been the buzzword of postmodern, globalized culture. Its impact on how we view ourselves and the world has had particular implications for audio-visual storytelling. A distrust of grand narratives has fostered interest in the local and the subjective. As Laura Rascaroli comments, 'the margins become more attractive than the centre and contingency replaces necessity and immutability' (Rascaroli 2009: 5). It is not surprising, therefore, that the essay film, with its elliptical, highly subjective, often marginal tone of voice is gaining renewed critical attention. As Rascaroli concludes, it is the genre's plurality, its ability to incorporate notions of multiple subjectivities and conceptions of the real as well as its transnational dimension that put essay film-making as a specific form of first-person cinema back on the map.

I had been living in East London for a considerable period of time when the two events, separated by only a day in July 2005, reconnected me to an essayistic practice I thought I had long abandoned. The project I began working on was to have been a fiction – a way to try to make sense of these two seemingly random events. But the pieces would not fit neatly. I read W.G. Sebald, revisited Iain Sinclair and immersed myself in science fiction. My research raised more questions than answers and I could not quite generate the enthusiasm to create any more images than already existed, so I set about gathering in as many found images as I could.

As a practitioner, it is the essay film's different approaches to dealing with fragmented material from a range of sources – the 'orphans' of this title that I am most drawn to. More and more, the technologies at our disposal rely on the notion of collating fragments into a meaningful whole, finding or creating resonance between unconnected sources. The search engines, such as Google, that play an increasingly pivotal role are large algorithmic engines pooling fragments of information together. Technologies such as Photosynth, or mashup programmes, firstly decontextualize and then collate information sources to create new objects or interfaces. Add to that a cultural shift in the West from being as Kevin Kelly terms it, 'people of the book' to 'people of the screen' (indeed screens replete with visual images and sounds) and the potential significance of this shift to audio-visual communication becomes more urgent (Kelly in Greenfield 2008: 155).

How can we make sense of these changes? The history of the essay film is a history of pooling meaning from fragmentation, or reworking existing sources into new things. As a recombinant genre, essay films adopt film material that may not have otherwise been discovered, preserved, developed or distributed. Essay films often draw on physical archives to provide stock or found footage. Much of this 'orphan' material is material that has been shot for one purpose but the essayist uses it for another. This process mirrors the decontextualization and remixing encouraged by digital and web-based technologies. Mashups, for

1 The Semantic Web is the term coined by Tim Berners-Lee to describe Web 3.0. Through a variety of protocols and mark-up languages, this next evolution of the web has seen computers able to process a greater variety of information and thereby to 'use' the web more intelligently. Greater use of machine-readable metadata will further enable many more information-retrieval tasks to be assigned to automated agents – the theory being that this will free people to do more interesting, lateral and associative work.

2 These images are descriptions from the films *Entr'acte/Interval* (René Clair, 1924), *Le Ballet Mécanique/Mechanical Ballet* (Fernand Léger, 1924), *Vormittagsspuk/Ghosts Before Breakfast* (Hans Richter, 1927) and *L'étoile de Mer/The Star of the Sea* (Man Ray, 1928).

example, take existing data sets and use them to build new information sources. With tools such as the semantic web set to place a focus on connection rather than disconnection in lateral and associative ways and on meaning rather than its impossibility, the essay film form may prove prescient.<sup>1</sup>

The history of the essay film, I argue, is rooted in an idea of fragments. This tendency is exemplified by early texts and films that explored the formation of not a genre so much as an approach or an impulse. It is worth revisiting works in this tradition to trace the creature the essay film has become and what it may yet evolve into. From the compilation film to Hans Richter's 'filmessay' (Richter 1940) through the confrontational anti-cinema of the Situationist International to the seminal work of Chris Marker (to plot a highly selective history), the essay film weaves personal voice, a modular narrative structure often with an exploration of technological innovation and always with a critical edge. In a contemporary context, examples of 'database film-making' exhibit stylistic and methodological similarities to the essay film form that bears further analysis.

Two seminal texts lay the ground for the consideration of the essay film as one of the forerunners of database cinema. Jay Leyda's *Films Beget Films* (1964) traces the history of the compilation film back to the 1920s through various examples where extant film materials, new-found footage, propaganda sources and archive stock were appropriated and re-cut to present new meanings to audiences. For Leyda, what is crucial in any definition of films of this sort is that the term indicates that 'the work *begins* on the cutting table, with already existing film shots. It also has to indicate that the film used originated at some time in the past. The term could also indicate that it is a film of *idea* [sic] for most of the films made in this form are not content to be mere records or documents' (Leyda 1964: 9 – emphasis original). Here Leyda indicates an important component of the essay film – that the desire to appropriate material often involves a political commitment to drawing an audience's attention to the way films are constructed. I would propose that this is the genesis of the 'essay film' – constructing meaning out of found-footage fragments and thereby inviting new readings of the original material.

In perhaps the first article to use the description 'film essay', Hans Richter – author, artist and film-maker – wrote in the 1940s about a form of film poetry that would be 'freed from recording external phenomena in simple sequence'. He proposed that, 'the film essay must collect its material from everywhere; its space and time must be conditioned only by the need to explain and show the idea' (Richter in Leyda 1964: 31). For Richter, the essay film was an explicitly experimental creature, not reliant, on though often incorporating found footage, and a form of free plastic expression with its roots in the early and populist 'trick' cinema of Méliès and influenced by the film avant-gardes of the 1920s, particularly the work of the Surrealists and the group to which he himself belonged, the Dadaists. His experimental fantasies – 'a funeral in slow motion, a ballet of objects games with forms, reflexes, associations between objects and living beings, dances with hats and collars, starfish and naked women's bodies [...] counterpose a lyricism built into a certain bourgeois view of the world another, almost anarchistic lyricism' (Richter 1986: 119).<sup>2</sup> For Richter, the essay film was specifically a cinema of ideas, at once personal and political, expressive and critical. Méliès' liberated magical experiments, such as *Le Voyage dans la lune/A Trip to the Moon* (1902), formed the basis of the kind of film language Richter sought.

Prophetic of a contemporary context, where mass media have unprecedented influence over politics, Richter saw 'the struggle for the film' as a

specifically social and political struggle to secure the means of representation. Richter sought to liberate the cinema from the chains of not only studio production, but from its political incarceration as a tool used to promote bourgeois values. Richter thought that the cinema could be otherwise and the kind of socially progressive cinema he envisaged was one with the essayistic mode at its core. In his book *The Struggle for the Film: Towards a Socially Responsible Cinema/Der Kampf um den Film* Richter wishes to establish why cinema developed the way it did in order to understand what it might yet be and specifically how it might fulfil what Richter regards as its historical task – ‘to reach the masses and to reach them everywhere’ (Richter 1986: 39).<sup>3</sup>

In these early works we see the essay film characterized by several traits – experimentation, political purpose, a relationship to existing source material and a need to let an idea dictate the means by which the film comes into being. Two other aspects of the essay film are its relationship to the literary essay and to the creative process of writing and an attitude to technology. These latter characteristics are most aptly fused in the vision of film-maker and critic Alexandre Astruc, who, with a weather eye to the storm created by the New Wave films, declared that ‘with the development of 16mm and television, the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector, will go to the local bookstore and hire films written on any subject, of any form, from literary criticism and novels to mathematics, history, and general science’ (Astruc 1968: 19). Like Richter, Astruc envisaged the cinema becoming a pluralistic, personal creative medium, once it had broken ‘free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language’ (Astruc 1968: 18).

Richter’s ‘historical task’ might today seem prophetic of social media and the power of online channels such as YouTube to connect with vast audiences instantaneously and Astruc’s vision looks likely to be fulfilled by User Generated Content and the potential of extremely agile recording technologies such as mobile phones. But the history of the film avant-gardes is one of resistance and a commitment to forms of social change as much as it is a set of recognizable techniques or formal strategies. Richter’s poetic impulse re-emerges in the methodology of later, more confrontational essay film practices such as the films of Debord, Straub-Huillet and Farocki. *Détournement* (literally translated as ‘circumvention’ or ‘diversion’) repetition, stoppage, caesura, enjambement – many of the techniques recognizable to poetry are employed by these essayists to achieve the effect of creating rupture between obvious meanings or readings. This functions to ‘open up’ the text, putting the viewer in the position where they must actively create part of the film’s meaning.

In Debord’s *Critique de la Séparation/Critique of Separation* (Debord 1961) for example, these techniques create a literal separation between the viewer and the film and disrupt an audience’s experience of the film as a continuous, seamless narrative. Debord’s film, constructed from a bizarre array of still photographs, newsreel footage, comic strip images as well as footage filmed in and around Paris is a type of antithesis to Jean Rouch’s *Chronique d’un Été/Chronicle of a Summer* (Rouch 1961), a self-reflective ‘ethnographic document’ about post-World War II Parisian life.<sup>4</sup> But whereas Rouch’s film is a gentle, personal investigation, Debord’s constitutes a restless and relentless assault against what he famously termed ‘society of the spectacle’. The classical Brechtian distancing devices that Debord uses reveal how film language is constructed, refusing the possibility of ‘identification’ or the cathartic reward that continuity cinema

3 Richter’s text, although written some years before, was not published until the 1970s in German and in the 1980s in English.

4 For an excellent comparative analysis of the two films, see Tom McDonough’s ‘Calling from the Inside: Filmic Topologies of the Everyday’ (2007).

offers and of which conventional documentaries also form a strand. The 'separation' of Debord's film constitutes not only a separation of self from history, of Grand Narratives from events, but literally a separation of image from text and sound from image.

In the opening minute and a half of *Critique de la Séparation*, the viewer is introduced to a variety of sources – archive and documentary footage, voice-over, inter-titles and still image frames, compiled to challenge assumptions, engage scepticism about traditional documentary practices and to contextualize the film in the light of real wars being fought at the time. The choice of opening text – André Martinet's foreword to his *Éléments de linguistique générale* (Elements of General Linguistics 1960) – emphasizes Debord's intention 'to use the cinema reflexively as a means of analyzing the limitations of communication both in social relations at large and within the medium itself' (McDonough 2007: 20). Newsreel footage of the 'Belgian' Congo becomes the audience's opening introduction to a sustained use of *détournement*, later accentuated by clips of various contemporary politicians of the day engaged in various public forms of ceremony, power-broking and deal-sharing, footage of military jets trailing a landscape with bombs and the launch of a rocket. Belgium had been criticized for stoking unrest in the Congo, which escalated following independence, providing a mirror for the French colonial conflict in Algeria. Here the Congo footage is utilized to open-up or question the original use-value of the material, which is *détourned* from its initial context as neutral, 'factual' material to a visual reminder of events not depicted on-screen but current in the French consciousness – the deeply political and emotional topic of the Algerian War of Independence.

In the strategy of *détournement* we find links to the history of 'compilation films' charted by Leyda, which were aligned to a similar political project; a particular narrative (of either a documentary, or fictional kind) was produced from extant materials and the film's construction was foregrounded in the process. It was this specifically appropriative strategy that allowed Debord and the Situationist International to consider film-making as a viable tool in their assault against capitalism's relentless cooption of not only social, but imaginative space. Repetition in Debord's films 'opens-up' images which otherwise come to an audience inscribed with certain meanings, such as 'détourned' newsreel footage. Agamben makes the point that Debord 'makes what he shows us possible again, or rather he opens up a zone of undecidability between the real and the possible' (Agamben 2002: 316).

The 'separation' entailed in Debord's method is distinctly essayistic; methodologies employed by essayists revolve around the treatment of each of what film-maker Joram ten Brink describes as the core 'building blocks' of the cinematic image – moving and still images, text, music and sound, as firstly being of equal stature and secondly as 'images' in their own right (the term here including also aural 'images') (interview with ten Brink 5 December 2008). Each 'image' imparts a meaning, or a potential reading and the job of the essayist is to locate that meaning and find relationships between component parts. The final film is not created from an existing idea, but the idea is found through the material. Ten Brink describes this process as 'an aesthetic coherence [found] through the use of image and sound fragments, put together in a variety of narrative and non-narrative structures with a film, 'methodically unmethodically' edited together to create an aesthetic unity (ten Brink 1999: 9). Describing the way he put together his film *The Man Who Couldn't Feel and Other Tales* (ten Brink 1997), ten Brink related how rushes would arrive from the lab and he

would work with them without categorizing them in any particular way, but rather worked from the structures implied by the material itself: 'I just worked constantly from big reels and I refused to split them . . . I created little clusters of sequences [. . .] – one image suggested another image and created stories' (interview with ten Brink 5th December 2008).

Essay films often use archives, as the source from where the footage comes, and increasingly in a digital environment, the film-maker's own personal collection of image material, from which a film is gleaned. This approach is exemplified in Chris Marker's seminal *Sans Soleil/Sunless* (Marker 1982) – of interest here for its narrative structure, its recycling of images from his 'personal archive' and its engagement with new technologies. *Sans Soleil* is primarily a film about images and the relationship between images and memory and has been the focus of much critical attention for its provocative deconstruction of documentary methods (See for example Branigan 1992; Bruzzi 2006; Lupton 2005; Rascaroli 2009) In the film, Chris Marker's alter ego Sandor Krasna is an itinerant cameraman who sends letters to an unnamed woman whose voice narrates the film. It is a film of ambiguous time and we are never sure whether the film we are seeing is the film Krasna imagined making, or indeed made. The notions of memory the film deals with are both personal and collective: the image fragments from journeys he has made; nostalgia for the disintegration of the left-wing guerilla movements of the 1960s that Chris Marker had spent almost a decade not only documenting, but actively involved with. *Sans Soleil* both treats an image as a memory at the same time as critiquing the process by which an accumulation of private images pass as history.

The logic of *Sans Soleil* is associational and elliptical – the structure of the film is built from a meditation around a number of 'themes' or image and sound clusters. The film returns, pre-empts, repeats and revisits several key image and sound sequences – images of the Emu in the Ile-de-France, the stray dogs on the Island of Sal, the woman in the market in Guinea-Bissau, the bookend image of the film's beginning and end of the three young children walking along a road in Iceland and the sound of an Indian flute.

In Marker's work we see not only the building blocks of the cinematic image reformed and re-purposed to create new works, but the structure of the narrative moves away from anything considered linear to a spatial and associational logic, resembling more, as Edward Branigan observes, a catalogue or a 'hyper-index of stories' (Branigan 1992: 216). The complex interweaving of location, history, personal reminiscence and authorial voice are played out across a number of geographical locations – Japan, Iceland, Africa, America, France; time zones – the present, the past and a future of 4001 – and through a number of technologies video, Super 8, film, televisual images re-recorded and images synthesized. As Catherine Lupton comments: in the film 'memories are taken to be indivisible from the media that records them, as in an oft-quoted passage that Krasna writes: 'I remember that month of January in Tokyo, or rather I remember the images I filmed of that month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted themselves for my memory, they *are* my memory' (Lupton 2005: 154). The centrepiece of the film's narrative draws together the themes of technology, image and memory, embodied in Krasna's statement 'I think of a world where each memory could create its own legend' (Marker 1982). The double-play on the word 'legend' ('légende') combines the notion of a myth with that of a key to decipher and suggests that in Krasna's ideal world, each memory could have its own code, freed from the image.

To try to re-thread the elements of these labyrinthine issues back together: digitization and the mass marketing of domestic technologies to both record and post-produce images has enabled more and more imagery to exist. How do we make sense of these images? How does a form such as the film essay potentially provide a set of tools to enable this context to be unpicked?

The essay film places individual experience at the centre of meaning – the film-maker explores a theme or meditates upon a question and, in Brechtian fashion, addresses the audience as an active participant. Essay films often employ an aesthetic that is self-reflexive, drawing directly on other films, or quoting from existing textual sources. But who is that author? And how is the reader addressed? These are the central questions raised by Harun Farocki – ‘what kind of “I” is speaking to me through a film and how does a film in addressing me, perceive me?’ (Farocki in Rascaroli 2009: 44). The very definition of an essay film for Rascaroli is determined not by the text itself, but in the location of the audience. For her, the film essay embodies an interstitial authorship, ‘played in the liminal spaces between the empirical author and his or her textual figures’ (Rascaroli 2009: 190).

The relationship between text and reader or film and audience is crucial to the exploration of the essayistic form in the presence of new media – or to describe it more accurately perhaps, to locate traces of the history of the essayistic impulse in new media works. So far, I have discussed the principles of fragmentation, the use of existing sources and the treatment of individual units of the cinematic image in single screen films such as *Critique de la Séparation* and *Sans Soleil*, but what happens when the vehicle of conversation itself becomes broken apart and reconfigured into a different object? When the interaction that the film demands of its audience converts into a literal demand for interactivity of a CDROM or an online work?

The vision of essayistic cinema is always in some way to establish a direct, personal relationship with its audience, be it through direct address, through use of more agile technologies or through actual interaction. Tellingly, at the advent of the personal computer, Chris Marker was not mourning the loss of cinema, but rather declaring its redundancy: ‘film won’t have a second century, that’s all’ (Lupton 2005: 178). Essayists such as Chantal Ackerman, Harun Farocki, Agnes Varda, Isaac Julien and Patrick Keiller have all found the space of the gallery and the ability to interrogate the image in actual time and space a more compelling proposition than the recreation of linear work. Keiller has spoken to me about some of his early films being attempts to make an architectural documentary for cinema (Keiller 2008), realized with the spatialization possible in later installation projects such as *City of the Future* (Keiller 2007) or *Londres-Bombay* (Keiller 2006).

Marker’s CDROM *Immemory* (Marker 1998) is a collection of images, texts and graphics, fragments from other Marker films and books, constructed as a hypertextual set of journeys. It is a personal archive that, in characteristic Marker style, weaves elements of autobiography with documentary and fiction. *Immemory* was Marker’s first foray into using new media, though the traces of that move could be found in his consistent interest in adopting whatever new technologies were available – tape recorders and 16mm cameras in the early days of sync sound recording; mobile video cameras and video synthesizers in the early days of image manipulation. In this sense, the move to a format other than cinema is consistent with an artistic practice that locates technologies merely as new tools to serve the idea (aka Richter). The history of the essay film is one where technological innovation has always been used to serve



the project – from the proclamations of Vertov to Astruc's declarations of the birth of a new avant-garde. While not an essay film exactly, *Immemory* retains many of the impulses that define the genre and can most definitely be seen as an extension of a practice that is essayistic to the core. The finished work is a database of possible journeys where users/the audience/the reader can literally navigate a range of narrative or non-narrative options.

What is the relationship between an archive as an essayist might use it and a database? How might the culture and history of archives inform our understanding of the development of the database as cinema's newest mode? In my own project work I am pooling the images and sounds I have both created and scavenged into Cinegy™, a new post-production technology that is at once a digital asset management system and a post-production workflow. The very basis of the technology is to treat any media asset as an 'image' – tag it with metadata and pool these fragments together into a variety of outputs. The work of finding associative links or narrative patterns between images is assisted by literally being able to code each unit of media. As I work I ask myself what kind of new sensibilities are engendered by 'writing film' in this way? How do these new tools decode and create?

Before I attempt to connect database cinema to the history and aspiration of essay films, let us briefly touch on some of the central debates and themes that the role of information science, and by proxy, archives have contended with over the last twenty years. Before digitization, the archive was a location usually inaccessible to the general public. For reasons of preservation and also funding, archives were generally only accessible to those who could present a specific case for access – academics, historians, professional researchers. The general public would find the archive a daunting place – generally with limited opening hours, processes required to prove the right to use it and watched over by the custodians of the material, lest anything became damaged. Increasingly, archives are open online 24 hours a day to an increasingly broad demographic – not only professional researchers and academics, but family historians, film and video lovers, educators and fans. Search engines such as Google or moving image repositories such as YouTube have become the default archives of developed societies, yet, as Rick Prelinger from the Prelinger Archives points out, these sites do not fulfil the criteria of being archives in the traditional sense, in that they do not preserve information, lack a guarantee of persistence and live to be a commercial service (Prelinger 2007).

Prelinger points out in fact that 'despite widespread interest, the access door seems to get stickier as the media get richer. While moving image collections are growing at an unimaginably rapid rate [...] and commercial online video services are popping up like mushrooms after the rain, archival moving images generally live in a state of enclosure' (Prelinger 2007). Prelinger is one professional dedicated to promoting access: his belief is that 'wonderful and unpredictable things happen when ordinary people get access to primary materials', and this belief is behind enabling much of the Prelinger Archive material to be accessible online and available under Creative Commons licence: 'Since we gave almost 2,000 of our own films to the Internet Archive for unrestricted access and reuse, we've seen around 8 million downloads in 7 years, and I'll make a wild estimate that over ten thousand derivative works have been made from them' (Prelinger 2007).

For the professionals managing archives, the central question in the information age is how to deal with information overload – to make informed decisions over what should be kept and how even to define what constitutes a

'record' or a 'document'. What is at stake is enormous, for archives provide us with the traces of what becomes knowable about our societies. As Blouin and Rosenberg state: 'what goes on in an archive reflects what individuals, institutions, states, and societies imagine themselves to have been, as well as what they may imagine themselves becoming' (Blouin and Rosenberg 2006: ix). The increasing proliferation of image material available to archivists raises questions around the ontological status of pictures. Professor of Information Science Richard Cox reflects that 'reading pictures can be complex and confusing. Pictures provide stories, riddles, witnesses, nightmares, reflections, philosophies, memories, theatrical performances and the like, sometimes all at once or sometimes bits at a time as experienced by different individual at different times and in different cultures' (Cox 2005: 214).

The archive is bound as much by what it does not say as what is said; by the material the archivist declined as much as what was accepted. As such archives are a site of constant mediation between the actual materials and the archivist, as well as between the archivist and the user. In this way, the archive as a site of mediation is paralleled by the way a film essayist interrogates images. But the act of cataloguing, coding or even creating is insufficient to address the main question – what does one do with all this information? How can it be rendered meaningful? Historian Carolyn Steedman's conclusion from her many experiences visiting archives is that '*nothing happens to this stuff, in the Archive* (emphasis original). It is indexed, and catalogued, and some of it is not indexed and catalogued, and some of it is lost. But as stuff, it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised' (Steedman 2001: 68).

Questions around the status of narrative in both database cinema and the essay film are crucial if one is to understand how the form can help us understand new cinematic forms. Here I engage Edward Branigan's most useful definition of narrative as being 'a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience' (Branigan 1992: 3). For Branigan 'making narratives is a strategy for making our world of experiences and desires intelligible. It is a fundamental way of organizing data' (Branigan 1992: 1).

However, Lev Manovich argues that a moving image practice which has narrative as its overarching structure has no real place in the information age, rather the database moves to the centre of all creative processes, since by definition creating a work in new media can only be understood as 'the construction of an interface to a database' (Manovich 2001: 226). As cultural forms, Manovich sees database logic and narrative as being mutually exclusive, since the database refuses to prioritize one item over another, whereas narrative creates causal relationships between seemingly unordered items or events. For Manovich, 'database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world' (Manovich 2001: 225).

Yet even for Manovich it is not sufficient to be left with only raw data:

Indeed, if after the death of God (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard), and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners-Lee), the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database. But it is also appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database.

(Manovich 2001: 219)

What is the relationship between a database in Manovich's terms and an archive as a film essayist might use it? How might the culture and history of archives inform our understanding of the development of the database as cinema's newest mode? In Branigan's analysis of *Sans Soleil* he concludes that the effects of the film are to investigate 'ordinary life in a society as experienced through popular imagination and mass media' (Branigan 1992: 208). Yet the constant interrogation of images through techniques such as repetition, freeze frames, putting imagery through synthesizers and suchlike, means the experience of time and space is disrupted such that our experience of time is reduced to 'the mere duration of imagery on the screen. The simple presence of things seems to have triumphed over causality' (Branigan 1992: 209). Here is an example of narrative patterning that honours the database's refusal to create a hierarchy of images. And for the information science professor, troubled by the difficulty of interpreting pictures, Branigan proposes that *Sans Soleil* constitutes 'an effort to explore the limits of understanding an image as a document' (Branigan 1992: 211). Indeed, Branigan concludes that

It might be better, then, to expand the notion of language so that vast dictionaries composed only of pictures and pictorial sequences may be included within that library that makes possible our awareness of things, and our awareness of the causal efficacy of things.

(Branigan 1992: 217)

This idea of the creation of a library in which images are codified simply to allow us to understand the 'causal efficacy of things' is for me a compelling proposition. The images I collected for *The Blue Wall*, of terror (those shaky mobile phone images taken in the tunnel of Kings Cross), but also of pride and joy (London wins and the crowds gather in Trafalgar square) – images of loss and reward, some taken from public archives, some from personal collections, including my own, others gleaned from online sources; the corporate hype, the personal tributes, the surrealist fantasies and memories of other Olympic games and other events – all need only to be coded in order to be decoded. Film essays, in both their methods of structuring fragmented material and in their approach to creating a structure (use of personal voice, text, narratives that often dwell on the relationship between time and memory) offer themselves to database film-making. Indeed, they could provide the 'poetics, aesthetics, and ethics' of the database that Manovich seeks.

In the history of the essay film, audiences and producers find not only a palette of relevant techniques, but access to a specifically critical lineage that may strengthen new platforms. In media production, those platforms look likely to rely on machines making links between previously unlinked pieces of information (the semantic web) and the human imagination being freed for other lines of enquiry – a thesis proposed in Marker's *Sans Soleil* when he claims that 'video games are the first stage in a plan for machines to help the human race – the only plan that offers a future for intelligence' (Marker 1982).

Many of the techniques used by film essayists seem particularly suited to database-driven systems such as Cinegy – associational editing, montage, horizontal structures, the integration of many types of media, including still as well as moving image, graphical elements, music and sound. I would go so far as to suggest that the technologies underpinning systems such as these create the platform for a working process that film essayists have developed to create

resonance and meaning from disparate sources. This is achieved in a number of ways:

- 'Each image creates its own legend':  
Within a digital asset management system, each 'image' – be that a still image, moving image, audio or graphical imagery is assigned its own unique identifier. The 'story legend' then associated with that clip is embedded in the metadata.
- Metadata underpins a 'dictionary of pictures':  
Visual language is coded at the level of mathematical formulation involved in the encoding and onward delivery of media material. The metadata associated with each clip forms the basis of the 'language of images'. The taxonomies involved in tagging information and associating it with clips, forms the working 'dictionary' by which image material (still image, moving, graphical and sound) is then assigned. The taxonomy drives the database which forms the spine of the project; a 'hyperindex' of potential story material (in Branigan's terms).
- 'Horizontal editing':  
The system encourages, or even embeds thematic associations and 'horizontal linking' – taxonomies are derived from themes, into which any number of words can be applied. Images generate their own language through the attribution of terms, pre-defined, agreed and accessible.
- Aesthetic and creative processes associated with poetry:  
If the idea needs to be found *through* the material, then the system offers a means of externalizing the subjective techniques that essayists have fashioned over a number of years into a way of creating 'database cinema' driven at the level of code.

The essayistic impulse is one of attempt – a direction of travel and a mindset for exploration, rather than a definitive checklist or map. Its techniques have always served a political purpose – from Richter's vision of a progressive cinema, to Debord's critique of capitalism's co-option of physical and imaginative space. As a history of the essay film shows, work can be personal and simultaneously problematize the notion of authorship. In the never-ending flow of media, where wars are fought to win 'hearts and minds' and public opinion may turn on the influence of a better or more convincing image, critical strategies and a tool-set that allow for the production of competing versions of reality are all the more necessary. Those realities might well draw on the same image set, taking pre-existing visual languages, pulling them to a stop, interrogating them, reconfiguring them, mashing them up and multiplying the processes by which films beget films.

Leyda's vision of a cinema where each shot would have the quality of an image is a vision realized in part by essayistic cinema, and the current drive toward interactivity is written into the structure of a way of film-making that queries as much who the audience is as what the film is saying. Like Marker, I too think of a world where each memory could create its own legend. Thinking through the ways in which digital asset management systems code to create, I thought of a new project. I would like to make a film entirely of component parts. The images and sounds, selected for their resonance, would have metadata associated with them, which would allow them to be re-contextualized and freed from a timeline. Traceable through their unique references, I would

be able to learn of their new homes in other media configurations. The orphans would have been gathered not under one roof, but flown the nest.

In the past, the orphans of cinema, the ephemeral bits, the off-cuts and the outtakes would have vanished into the dustbin of history. The information age puts value on them, calls for an aesthetic and an outlook that encourages reuse, remixability and reinterpretation. The language of taxonomy, the science of information on which concepts of database cinema ultimately rest, embeds its own language with 'parent/child' terms, making the familial metaphor explicit. Ideas pursued by essayists to deal with film as a modular, independent structure provide a working method more suited to digital environments, where fragmentation, remixability and database structures are the rule of thumb for most creative practices. The essay film, through its reflective and fragmentary approach to structuring text, moving image and sound, and its mediation between film-maker and audience as a part of the way it 'thinks through' its material, presents both a distinct method, as well as a unique history, from which to contextualize the changes that the information age brings to the cinema.

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Olivia Lory Kay completed an M.Phil by practice at the Royal College of Art. She graduated from the NFTS as a fiction director in 2005 and works commercially as a creative director for a London-based communications agency. Long fascinated by the relationship between cinematic technology and narrative development, her research work has drawn her to the strange hybrid form, the essay film – mixing the worlds of fiction, documentary and experimental film-making, looking always to the personal voice and often experimenting with recent technologies.

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