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Doctorate Thesis

**The role of the video essay in postmodern
audiovisual communication**

résumé

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Introduction

The study regarding the role of video essay in postmodern audiovisual communication will be presented on three different levels. The first one being the adaptation ways of cinematic art to changes in communication technology, the second being the weight of the essay in video art, and the third being the importance of the essay as means of communication in global information.

The essay, as a general phenomena is way too vast to be the object of a single research. Naturally, we can find essay tendencies even in documentaries or fiction movies, but exploring those domains is not related to the present study. The purpose and object of my study is not placing the video essay into a legitimate frame, but to show an introspective glance of an artistic gender that is found in too many media manifestations to have a place of its own. The seal given to it by Manny Farber, namely *termite art*, is not inappropriate when one follows the tortuous tracks of its labyrinth. My mission is to identify the communication network of this hidden being in order to learn its importance in our contemporary society's 'Eco-system'.

Avant-garde, experimental or underground movies have been recently named video art, referring more to movies with non-narrative or non-commercial characteristics rather than those using video equipment in their production. This type of movies are against mass cinematography, considered manipulative, whilst they are proposing a realistic, non-illusionist presentation of reality. Their authors do not tell stories through a well defined structure, but they explore all formal possibilities in order to transfer ideas, sensations or feelings.

Before showing the characteristics of the essay of the video art, in the first three chapters I will show you through the theory of the notions: *Postmodernism*, *essay* and *communication*.

Postmodernism

The first chapter (Chapter 1 *Modernism, Postmodernism – General ideological perspectives*) is about the birth and evolution of the video phenomena in the ideological context of a relation between Modernism and Postmodernism.

The modern era starting at Illuminati is under the seal of a positivist doctrine that has as its base the research of the Universe using Natural Sciences' methods. The scientific research on an illegitimate territory, the human behavior, leads to an incomplete comprehension of the human being and of the whole system of faith. In

its last phase between the two World Wars, Modernism, as a cultural and artistic current, anticipates the crises of this ideology.

The end of the 20th Century had to confront a speedup technological progress and that, for the modern man has become a purpose in itself. The excess of information has led to the need of data base establishment and processing. Thus different biological systems for information processing are researched that leads to cybernetic science. Many of the philosophical ideas of Postmodernism are linked to the appearance of cybernetics.

Taking into consideration the media net that shows humanity as a whole, and cybernetics that studies the complex systems, the myth of *Great Narration* and of *scientific positivity*, according to Lyotard, cannot stand the credibility test, falling into pieces. To sustain the affirmations of this chapter I have used a few explanations of the Postmodernism's theorists:

- Neil Posman affirms that science needs alternative methods of knowledge for the study of sociology and other domains that implies the complex nature of the human being.
- Paul Chilliars explains how to approach the understanding of the complex systems, very specific to Postmodernism. Taking into account that the studying method of natural science cannot be applied to complex systems, man has the necessity to review the scientific investigation method and the idea of men understanding the complex system they belong to.
- Jean Francois Lyotard sustains that the *Great Narration*, expressing a unitary concept of the world seen from the perspective of scientific positivism, is an illusion and its replacement with more micro narrations existing in a system of complex relations is a more realistic approach of the world.
- Thomas Kuhn changes the view of the linear progress of scientific knowledge with the idea of paradigmatic development, a non-linear evolution produced by perspective changes when too many unknowns produce a blockage.
- Gene Youngblood analyzes the matter of the messages transmitted through media systems, that, according to him, forms the noosphere of humanity. His argument against television as a totalitarian centralized system

refereeing human evolution and producing cultural corruption comes to support the idea of a type of communication of a decentralized and free network. When his essay was published in 1977 the existence of the internet was only hypothetical.

The democratization of the media system comes with the WEB 2.0 phenomena that permits the uncensored access to global information. This new type of egalitarianism brings some sociocultural transformations. While the field of information broadens and diversifies the profoundness and accuracy of information lessens. These are the arguments that affirm the need of analyzing the audio-visual essayist language as an alternative for communication, affirmation and reflection of the contemporary man.

What is the essay?

The second chapter (chapter 2 *What is the essay?*) is dedicated to delimitation of the video essays' characteristics. Due to its elusive character, without a clear affiliation, the video essay often stays outside any category, most of the times its tracks are really hard to follow.

The essay is the view of the author on a subject. At the beginning the essay was distinguished in literature, and when author movies appeared it made its presence in cinematography. The general characteristics and style of the essay were stated by Adorno in analyzing it in literature. According to Adorno the essay is situated between two forms of cognition: the scientific one and artistic one. Its first characteristic is suspending the concept and method, avoiding any deductive or inductive construction, its coherency coming from the relation between the concepts. Another characteristic is showing the peculiar, the changing and ephemeral, notions neglected by the positivist philosophy. In conclusion, Adorno opens the doors to any categorization by affirming that the essay is a *form of heresy*.

In film, the term *essay* is pronounced for the first time by Alexandre Astruc who associated camera with a writing tool. His notion of *camera-stylo* associates the camera with an artistic form of expression similar to literature.

The cinematographic essay is the twin brother of poetry in movies, both of them using the same non-linear structure described by Maya Deren. She distinguishes

the poetic and dramatic language coming from their internal structure and the way they relate to the subject. Thus the poetic or lyrical film has a vertical structure, its main axis being an idea, a sentiment or and abstraction to what all expressing elements are non-linearly linked. The narrative film has a horizontal structure. It presents the events and it gets to a conclusion through a series of linked actions. Generally the narrative type has an archetype form of the story named dramatic structure or diegesis. This template known even in antiquity is based on some steps that lead the narration towards a moralizing final. In a narrative structure the watcher is passive, being part of the experience of and identifying with the protagonist. This is the template the mass cinematography is functioning, it copies, repeats or imitates something that already exists in an ordinary person. A narrative dramatic structure reaches art only by formal means. In other words, a story becomes art through the way it is told.

According to Farber there are two types of movies: the ones that aspire recognition and walk on the path of the *white elephant* often using cliches and the ones made of creative adventure and artistic knowledge, digging hidden galleries like a *termite*. Together with the video development the essay has broadened its boundaries while it has still kept its introspective character and the *termite* behavior.

Thus we can line up a few characteristics that will help us identify the video essay when seen.

The video essay:

- is a form of knowledge between science and art
- has an introspective, auto-reflexive character
- does not follow a formal method
- is an organizing process of complexity
- catches transitory processes
- communicates abstract ideas, intangible thoughts and notions
- has a non-linear structure
- is interested in the processes behind the action

Audio-visual communication

The third chapter (chapter 3 *The paradigms of audio-visual communication*) is about analyzing the types of cinematic communication.

At the beginning of this chapter is Astruc's affirmation regarding the relation between the film and literal language. This underlines that the film language is a synthetic communication form tending to supplement, even to replace (sometimes) the written text. The literal language considered to be a success for now, might become inadequate, too slow, not emotional enough or too detached in the future, not being capable of transmitting mental representations of reality.

The sentence on what the argument of the first part of this chapter is built is: *language is a kind of 'invisible technology', a cognitive instrument*. To support this affirmation we have the functions of the linguistic metaphors, that as an instrument of knowledge aids in understanding the surrounding world.

- The first function is to materialize abstract notions
- The second function is to extract certain notions from their real world defining the ineffable, or as Blaga says, it is used to mirror the dimension of mystery.

This double sense of the metaphor comes from the universal condition of the human being to be situated somewhere between the objective and subjective world.

The birth of the semiotics as a scientific discipline recognizes the importance of the language as a forming function. As long as the language is an intrinsic part of the human condition's complexity it can hardly be researched by a scientific analytical method. Thus the *language as a system* formulated by Saussure is a kind of 'Procrustes bed', a fixed structure where only a dead language can belong says Derrida.

Noam Chomsky launches the theory of linguistic units known as Language of Thought Hypothesis. This theory is taken forward by Jerry Fodor who affirms the existence of a universal grammar within the human biological structure operating by linguistic units named *mentalese*. These *mentalese* are the first carriers of the intentional content.

Starting with the Russian formalists making the first analogy between film and language, through the theory of Metz and till its reinterpretation through a cognitive angle, the way of film criticism often intersects the way of linguistic theory, the parallel between audio-visual expression and articulated language frequently being present.

The goal of the first theorists was to demonstrate that film can be used as a creative tool. Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, Andre Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer

and other names being part of the classical movie theory have defined the means of artistic expressions in cinematography. After being considered the seventh form of art and cinematography has won a stable position among arts, theorists have started to analyze symbols in movies and the way this environment can reflect our social system.

The association of movies and writings that we can find in the producing conception of the *new French wave*, gives birth to the modern theory of movie making, based on Saussure's structural semiotics. Metz's error who was the semiotic father of the movies, who considered the *verbal language* an exclusive language, makes the *movie language* a non-language. But in the same time Jean Mitry has demonstrated that yet cinematography can be considered a language as a meaning of expression that organizes, builds and communicates.

In the 80's movie theory turns its back to linguistic structures and turns towards cognitive practices. Cognition is about the reception of the audio-visual work, appealing to psychology and neural-science in order to underline the characteristic features of human perception, for example cinematic adjournment of distrust or self identifying with the main protagonist.

The movie semiotic is easier to be built around the representation theory known as the Language of Thought Hypothesis. Application of the grammar example launched by Chomsky and Fodor in the movie domain can be a solution for synthesis between *epistemology* and *structural analysis*.

The relation between art and audio-visual communication's technology

The idea through the chapters four (chapter 4), five (chapter 5) and six (chapter 6) is the development of the *audio-visual* and the way artists are exploring its ways of communication.

Thamus's legend affirms that the technological revolution in communication changes the language that in time changes the human thinking. This is an evidence that dictates the paradigms of the world of audio-visual. Thus, the structure of the chapters containing the art of video is related to the appearance of new technologies.

The appearance of cinematography (chapter 4 *Cinematography, Modernism, Avant-garde*)

In 1895 the first cinematographic projection of the Lumiere brothers at Paris

totals two great research directions: one representing the *illusion of movement* and the device necessary to make it happen, and the other one astounding the 'objective' reality named *photography*.

In the first years of cinematography movies were not perceived as art, but as a recording environment. The fascination of that period was the movement of the objects in the frame that had to resemble reality. After David Griffith has transformed the shortcomings of the limits of the screen in the advantage of getting an active role in story narration, the mass cinematography would use the production of dramatic-narrative illusion building an imaginary steadiness.

Futurists are the first ones who perceive cinematography as means of expression, looking to free it from the speculative melodramatic inclination created by its profitable exploitation. Russian futurism makes for the first time the difference between poetical and prosaic language in cinematography.

The Russian avant-garde grants montage with a remarkable importance as means of forming and graphic expressions. The *Kuleshov effect* or *intellectual montage* is a concept formed by Soviet producers who, by observing the power of suggestion of two neighboring frames, experiment the communication between abstract notions. They perceived montage as means to imply the audience in the intellectual and political revolution.

The non-narrative tendencies in the avant-garde cinematography can be seen very early. *The German Abstract Movie*, *the French Impressionism* that opposes narration the same way poetry opposes prose and *Surrealism* with its movies based on disruptive elements, repel the tempting pleasure of the dream, taking only its discontinuous character of dissonant images.

Probably the most important principle of the Avant-garde cinematography is looking for some structures not to comply with the limits of the linear narrative movie. The concept of the non-linear montage specific to the digital era has its origins in the works of Avant-garde artists.

The portable camera (Chapter 5 *The experimental movie and prefiguring of Postmodernism*), the invention of 16 mm film is connected to the production of independent movies and author movies.

The New American Avant-garde rises the European Avant-garde on a terrain less affected by the disillusion of the two World Wars. Due to immigration of many European artists during the 2nd World War in the conditions of cultural and artistic

blooming, all sustained by funds, the American Avant-garde Cinematography would hold a new identity. A new generation of artists would appear who express themselves exclusively through movies.

The New French Wave reunites around the *Cahiers du cinema* magazine a generation of young producers who, promoting the concept of *author movies*, set as a goal restoring classical cinematography as a personal expression, in which the producing prints and visions are placed in front of the story or film-script. Some of them develop solutions close to Avant-garde Art joining an alternative way to classical cinematography.

At the beginning of the 60's we see a crisis of the cultural concept of Avant-garde. The *Beat* spirit rejects both the values of the mass American culture and the European Modernism. Interested in consuming hallucinogenic substances and esthetic spirituality the 'beat' generation prefigures Postmodernism. In America the *Underground* movement became a clandestine resistance having its roots in the radical art of post-war Europe. Being shown clandestinely in alternative spaces, underground or hidden, the underground movies' subjects are anti religion, anti patriotic, anti bourgeois as well as anti Hollywood.

Video and television (Chapter 6 *From mass media to new media*) will open new horizons in the audio-visual communication. The spectacular development of the *televisual* environment will bring some major sociocultural changes. The *televisual* environment will prove itself to be one of the most efficient means of manipulation found in media systems. Regarding the sociocultural phenomena of the television, artists will have two different types of reactions. Those socially involved will use this environment in order to transmit their messages to a large audience, while others will protest against the television transforming it into a sculptural object. Both positions, in the context of the tendencies in art generated by the Fluxus movement in Germany and America, will bring new perspectives in the audio-visual communication. These tendencies are known as *video art*.

In the historical period of the Vietnam War artists are using the televisual environment as a utopian revolutionary tool. These so-called Guerilla Televisions are used as resisting means against massive industrialization and weapon production. Beside being a protesting voice, the alternative television is also a host and a space for exhibiting the video essay.

We often hear that video art should be shown in museums. Its meaning is connected to both searching for a formal frame in order to exhibit the independent video productions and finding some financial source necessary for their achievement. The entrance of the movie in art gallery is made through *video installation*, that, as a sculptural object, is the easiest to be adapted to the exhibiting space.

This migration phenomena toward the arts is described by critics as '*black box*' and '*white cube*', two opposite notions with different coordinates in space and time. In the *cinema hall* time is being dictated by the length of the work of art through *diegesis* in opposition with the *exhibiting space*, where time is attributive depending on the availability of the spectator. Thus the works shown in these spaces can be distinguished as narrative or non-narrative. However, some of the artists or some of the works have found themselves in a middle zone, where the difference between art and cinema is not that deep. These *Grey Areas*, as Gregor Stemmrich names them, are where essays can be expressed.

On the way to the museum opened by video sculpture, Inter-media art is coming along and, by practicing a hybrid form between video and performance, it will get the official status of *expanded cinema*. This genre will reunite all non-narrative movie manifestations exploring the space of projected images. Using the simultaneous perception of the multiple projections, video ambient recreates a world within another world, facilitating a synesthesical perception.

The role of the essay in video art

Chapter seven (Chapter 7 *Form and content in the audio-visual essay*) analyzes the relation between essay and experiment within the video art. This chapter is dedicated to analyze the essay both as part of the video art in general and as a part of the Romanian experimental art. The personal project is approaching some audio-visual formulas that are present in the experimental movie.

The essay's boundaries are so imprecise that it is hard to separate it from its environment. The essay and the experiment are part of the same body, just like two 'feet' moving alternatively. This process leads the audio-visual language towards a complex communication form. The video essay as the first integrator of the experiment's conclusions, undertakes from the experimental art the mostly suited and direct expression of subjectivity. On this ground the emblematic name of essay given to an experimental work reduces the experimental characteristic already attributed.

However, the directions or tendencies of the essay are analyzed without extracting the work out of its context.

At a closer analysis, the attempt of astounding the essay in the structures of the experimental movie would be mostly found in the non-narrative movie and then in the extended cinema. It borrows formal elements from processed image movie, yet it is found only very vaguely in the abstract movie.

Digital environment (Chapter 8 *The essay, from the ivory tower to the control tower*) treats the communication *revolution* started by *New-media* concept, seen as a fertile ground to development of the essay.

If the appearance of video and televisual means frees the cinematic art from the movie world, telecommunication, based on the exchange of audio-visual information, brings the principle of interaction and *dialogue*. Web 2.0 are the networks based on user generated contents. Started by Google in 1999, then continued by *Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter* and *Facebook* including the blogs and web applications, the revolution in communication changes the whole cultural context, society and its value systems. New media embraces the advantages of democratization of the *cyber space* with the disadvantages of a permanent connection to an amorphous information source, that empowers amateurism and undermines authentic intellectualism. Thus the Web 2.0 spirit promotes the unauthentic, superficial, ephemeral and artificial, cultivating a minimal attachment towards ideals or people.

The significant weight of the audio-visual in cyber space prefigures the need to extend the language in favor of expressing the complexity of contemporary world. In this context, the video essay, through its direct and informal character, has the chance to become a supplementary universal language used to astound the particular and ephemera in the Postmodern cultural context.

The role of video art transmitting verbally in-articulated moods or expressing abstract notions through audio-visual metaphors, is to emit cinematographic grammar examples that are capable to supplement written language. Contribution of video environment to digital media-sphere is to introduce the two extremes of cinematographic expression: the amateur one and the experimental one. Web 2.0 embraces a whole range of expressions, from the basic function of the camera of catching the moment, to very sophisticated formal speculations.

In this context, the possibility to form an audio-visual grammar resulted from

the intersection of 'termite art' and 'amateurism' seems a plausible formula. As a candidate to a general expression form of the Postmodern culture, the *Video Essay* seems to fulfill the complex communication functions through the followings:

- non-linearity
- expressing a point of view
- communicating of abstract ideas
- astounding transitory processes
- direct communication, disrespecting formal rules

The Video Essay uses a language, be it poetical or abstract, of sounds and images very close to the notion of *mentalese* outlined by Fodor and Chomsky.

The intrinsic need of human being for significance is bound to *narrative knowledge*. The video essay's contribution to narrative knowledge seems significant based on social relations on Web 2.0, as long as the audio-visual dominates this type of communication. If we take a look at the micro-narrations of Lyotard, Chillaers explains it very simple: different groups (institutions, orders, communities) tell different stories about what they know and what they do. Their knowledge do not take the shape of a logical structured whole, but of a narration. These are the tools permitting them to reach their goals and to give sens to what they do. As long as these narrations are local, they cannot shape into one to unify all of them and to embrace the great knowledge. The Postmodern condition is characterized by the coexistence of a heterogeneous multiplicity, a state of actions differently evaluated by different parties. If we take a look at the society as a network, any given narration forms a way or a trajectory within it. The Video Essay is a means of creating micro-narrations in the Postmodern era, setting out other and other ways of narrations, mirroring a fragmented and provisional world.