Gathering in the Orphans: Essay Films and Archives in the Information Age

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Abstract:

This research proposes that the essay film, through its reflective and fragmentary approach to structuring text, moving image and sound, and its mediation between filmmaker 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 contextualise the changes the information age brings to cinema.

Essay films, archives and the information age seems on first glance an odd assemblage of terms to bring together. Essay films usually are fixed with adjectives such as difficult, peripheral, intellectual and personal; archives are about the past and connote all manner of things analogue (even if the interface to them is digital); the archive is filled with reels, tapes, files and papers and brings to mind a physical space – a vault, a brick and stone building, a municipal library or a state museum. Unlike essay films they are public repositories, associated with adjectives such as immovable, backward looking, inflexible, inaccessible. The information age, in contrast is digital, paperless, remote, virtual, future-orientated, progressive and contains within it notions of both personal and public space. What might these three things – essay films, archives and the information age have to do with one another?

The goals of the research are to expand the body of work claiming the essay film as a distinct genre and to further explore the technological and narrative aspects of this mode of filmmaking. The research anticipates how this knowledge might be useful in thinking through cinema's future forms and how examples of contemporary practice demonstrate this. This analysis is supplemented by knowledge gleaned from interviews with three filmmakers whose work can in some way be categorised as essayistic - Joram ten Brink, Patrick Keiller and Chris Petit.

The written work is complimented by my practical research – the development of a 20minute film essay 'The Blue Wall', which takes two dates - London winning the 2012 Olympic games on July 6th and the terror attacks of July 7th as a catalyst to explore themes such as the interrelationship between violence and nationalism, regeneration, sport and development legacies, globalisation and national branding and the role of images in each. Through the project work I have explored the impact of several new production and postproduction technologies and the ways in which they support processes and techniques long used by film essayists to interrogate the image world.

Author's declaration:

1. During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification

2. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted

O. Lory Kay, May 2010

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1. Introduction

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 *essayer* - 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, upon which they meditate. 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.

My interest in the essay film is not only as a hybrid genre which elides fiction and non-fiction, 'truth' and reality, filmmaker and audience. My interest is at least as technological and methodological as it is historical and contextual. 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 grounded in marginal histories through which to view the future of cinematic technologies and techniques. Talking with filmmakers 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, some pre-existing and some collected over a period of time to form my own 'personal archive' – that is, material that combines found footage with some I filmed myself or had filmed by others. Through reflections on this work, as well as making connections to texts and films, 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, globalised culture. Its impact on how we view ourselves and the world has had particular implications for audio-visual storytelling. A distrust of grand narratives pushed interest to 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, p 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 because of its plurality, its ability to incorporate notions of multiple subjectivities and conceptions of the real as

well as its transnational dimension which puts essay filmmaking 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 I began this project. In July 2005 two events, separated by only a day, reconnected me to an essayistic practice I thought I had long abandoned. July 6th 2005 London won the Olympics, and then on the 7th London was subjected to a terrorist attack on the transport networks. 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 of them as I could.

As a practitioner, it is the essay film's different approach 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 that play an increasingly pivotal role, such as Google, are large algorhythmic engines pooling fragments of information together. Technologies such as *Photosynth*, or mash-up programmes such as *Wayfarer* or *London Profiler* firstly decontextualise and then collate information sources to create new objects or interfaces. Add to that a cultural shift from what Susan Greenfield describes as being 'people of the book' to 'people of the screen' (indeed, screens replete with images and sounds), and the potential significance to audio-visual communication becomes more urgent (Greenfield 2008, p 155).

How to 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 might 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 decontextualisation and remixing propelled by web-based technologies. With semantic systems 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.

2. <u>The Essay Film – history and methodology</u>

2.1 What is an essay film?

The history of the essay film, I argue, is rooted in an idea of fragments. This tendency is exemplified by early texts and films which explored the formation not of a genre, so much as an approach or an impulse. It is worth revisiting these works in order to trace what the essay film eventually became and what it may yet evolve into. From the compilation film, to the essay film as envisioned by Hans Richter, to the confrontational anti-cinema of the Situationist International via the literary film essays of the New Wave 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.

Scholarship taking the essay film as its focus is not comprehensive and there have been few attempts to even define what might constitute such a genre. Two historical texts, Leyda (1964) and Richter (1986), I will discuss in some detail. Philip Lopate's essay 'In Search of the Centaur' focuses on essay filmmaking, but still from a largely literary perspective (Lopate, 1996). Van Wert (1978) places the essay film as part of the French 'cine Roman' tradition. Neither discussion helped my field of interest. Other scholarship views the essay tradition through the eyes of a particular filmmaker, such as Catherine Lupton on the work of Chris Marker (Lupton 2005). There is more extensive scholarship available in French and German, but much of this work has not been translated into English. Lupton's book on Marker is one example of English-speaking scholars bridging the gap. Most recently has been Laura Rascaroli's book *The Personal Camera* (2009), but this has been a very recent addition and could not inform my early work. Filmmaker and scholar Joram ten Brink identified the same gap in 1999 when he wrote his doctoral thesis on the essay film as an independent genre (ten Brink, 1999) and it is ten Brink's work that I have drawn on most to create a working definition of what constitutes an essay film.

Methodologies employed by essayists revolve around the treatment of what ten Brink describes as the core 'building blocks' of the cinematic image – moving and still images, text, music and sound, as firstly, of equal stature and secondly as 'images' (the term here including also aural 'images') in their own right (ten Brink 2008). Each imparts a meaning, or a potential reading, and the job of the essayist is to locate that meaning and find relationships between component parts. Ten Brink describes this process as 'an aesthetic coherence 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, p 9). Describing the

way he edited 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 categorising 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' (ten Brink 2008). [1]

Essays create new works from fragments, often in a literal way, using found footage, or archive sources. Narrative is brought into question: 'in an essay, event and reflection, object and idea are interwoven and limit each other's development' (ten Brink 1999, p 22). For ten Brink, what characterises the essay film are 'the selection process and the techniques of ordering issues, ideas and events. An essay is based on the premise that issues and ideas are selected as they have occurred to the writer, and not as they generally occur. The writer's experience or perception of the 'what, who where and why' of the subject matter is crucial' (ten Brink 1999, p 22). Ten Brink extends his definition further to suggest that 'ideas within an essay are developed through things, objects or associations and not through a direct line of argument' (ten Brink 1999, p 21). This he says brings the essay into contrast with film narrative where events always follow one another usually as the result of a cause and effect relationship.

The essay is personal and contains an element of self-reflection, either on the part of the person who is 'authoring' the text, or within the techniques the films use. Essay films have a strong relationship to an idea of 'writing' – this means in some cases the desire to allow cinema to write directly, or draw on the idea of authorship. One recognisable feature of the film essay is the first person voice-over – sometimes the voice of the film-maker, or the person who 'narrates' the film to us. Often the subject matter quotes from diaries or travel writing - a homage to the literary roots of the personal essay form. The journey may be a document of actual events or an imagined journey. In the essay film, the relationship between fact and fiction is often brought into question.

Essay films also employ an aesthetic that is self-reflexive, often drawing directly on other films, or quoting from existing textual sources. *Détournement*, repetition, stoppage, caesura, enjambement – many of the techniques recognisable to poetry are employed by film essayists to achieve the effect of creating rupture between obvious meanings or readings – functioning to 'open up' the text, putting the viewer in the position where they must actively create part of the film's meaning. This is what ten Brink describes as the 'cinematic text' becoming the 'reflective text' - the mediating medium

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[1] These rushes constituted material ten Brink had himself shot, but over many years and in many different countries. The process described here was the transfer of this material from a range of material – mostly Super8 to 16mm. While ten Brink was familiar with the material he did not seek to impose a narrative order on it in the way one would a documentary.

between the film maker and the spectator, bound together with the notion that the film maker is present inside the work and introduces it to the audience, asking them to take part in the construction of the film's meanings (ten Brink 1999, p 9). It indicates a Brechtian approach, where distanciation is used to engage an audience, who must work to understand, or construct the film's meaning.

2.2 Reconstructing the past - the 'compilation film'

Ten Brink's suggestion that the film-maker's selection and shaping of the subject matter is a crucial component of the essay film is nowhere more aptly tested than by films which Jay Leyda suggests might best be called the 'compilation film' (Leyda 1964, p. 9). In Leyda's definition, these are films entirely comprised of found or archive footage, re-cut to deliver a different meaning from that which the original film-makers may have intended and sometimes working to compile a variety of disparate sources into a meaningful and cohesive whole.

Films Beget Films (Leyda 1964) traces the history of the compilation film back to the 1920's and 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*, for most of the films made in this form are not content to be mere records or documents' (Leyda 1964, p. 9 – emphasis in the original). Here Leyda indicates an important component of the essay film, that the desire to re-fashion existing material often belies a political component, tied to the ways in which appropriation brings an audience's attention to the way films are constructed and hence meanings are made.

Further clarification towards a working definition is extended during Leyda's discussion of the work of Esther Schub, who worked as an editor in Soviet Russia in the 1920's, cutting fiction films together from fragments delivered to her by the studios. Schub eventually took this practice into the arena of documentary film-making, devising a practice based entirely on reworking existing footage and often going to great lengths to discover rare pieces of historical film from which to build her work. Leyda suggests that Schub's working practices provide us with perhaps one of the founding impulses for the essayistic mode; that in collating together fiction films from individual pieces, Schub eventually made it her work to reconstruct historical moments from previously undiscovered fragments of films. 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.

The idea of working with fragments is also central to ten Brink's definition of the essay film. Like ten Brink, Leyda also stresses the personal qualities that compilation films possess. This is an art born of intuition, for when it comes to re-making films from the fragments of the films of others, there can be no 'rules of engagement.' Highlighting this aspect of the form, Leyda documents the working practices of various essayists, selecting among others, Nicole Védrès' - heir to Schub's practice - explanatory note for a screening of her film *Paris 1900* in 1948 at the Toronto Film Festival:

> One must not explain or describe. Quite the contrary. One must go, as it were, through the outer appearance of the selected shot to feel and, without insistence, *make felt* that strange and unexpected 'second meaning' that always hides behind the surface of the subject. This bearded gentleman – a politician – though very smiling and briskly walking, seems sinister. Or rather, he does not, but the picture does (Leyda 1964, p 79).

This point is reinforced by another essayist whose work Leyda discusses, Paul Rotha, who comments:

> It is so instinctive – and personal. You and your assistants collect footage from every available source. You sit and screen it for hours and days on end. And always you look for two things: first, footage of a *general* nature about various aspects of the subject; second, key shots which *symbolise* a specific point you want to make' (Leyda 1964, p. 94)

Here Rotha suggests clearly that the art of this kind of film-making is in the selection and arrangement of material. The role of editing in any such process is therefore crucial. Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage, even in these earliest examples of the essay form, became the technique essayists gravitated toward, since through the process of allowing one shot to imply or create new readings from another, found footage could be creatively fashioned. Thus in Schub's work action is liberated 'from the definition of time and space' (Leyda 1964, p. 27). Images here speak freely, liberated from their original context; 'each shot has the quality of an image' (Leyda 1964, p 77). It is precisely this type of poetic freedom that Hans Richter envisaged for the cinema and looked toward the essay film to provide.

2.3 Poetry in Motion – Hans Richter and the film essay

In perhaps the first article to use the description 'film essay', Hans Richter - author, artist and filmmaker - wrote in the 1940s about a form of film poetry that would be 'freed from recording external phenomena in simple sequence 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, p 31). For Richter, the essay film was an explicitly experimental creature, not reliant upon (though often incorporating) found footage, but rather 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 1920's, particularly the work of the Surrealists and Dadaist (to which Richter belonged). For Richter, the essay film was specifically a cinema of ideas, at once personal and political, expressive and critical. The role of the avant-garde in their filmmaking as Richter saw it was 'to free the camera from the chains it had been in since Méliès ceased production, by the rhythm of sequences of images; to create a *film poetry* with all the means provided by the transposition of objective reality by the camera' (Richter, 1986, p. 59). Méliès' liberated magical experiments formed the basis of the kind of film language Richter sought. For Richter, these 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 to a lyricism built into a certain bourgeois view of the world another, almost anarchistic lyricism' (Richter, 1986, p. 119). [2]

Prophetic of a contemporary context, where mass media have unprecedented influence over the hard graft of 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* (1986) 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 he regards as its historical task –'to reach the masses and to reach them everywhere' (Richter 1986: 39).[3]

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 recognisable techniques or formal strategies. While films such as Richter's out

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[2] These images are descriptions from the films *Entr'acte*, *Ballet Mechanique*, *Ghosts Before Noon*, and *Etoile de Mer*.

[3] Richter's text, although written some years before was not published until the 1970s in German and in the 80s in English.

of context may appear as little more than playful filmic explorations, within the context of the rise of totalitarian regimes and at a time where the colonisation of imaginative spaces was much more of an issue, they may be considered far more radical than they first appear to be. Leyda's 'compilation films' have at their core the notion of an idea, or a desire to rework the material to say something, be it re-creation, or contextualisation of history through the discovery and re-use of archive sources, or the reconfiguration of extant material toward explicitly political means. In this fledgling history we find the traces of a much more directly confrontational politic; the Situationist International took this counter-cultural impulse and declared war.

2.4 From poetry to protest: The Situationist International – a reading of *Critique de la Séparation/Critique of Separation*

The *Situationist International* were a group of left-wing artists, writers and activists working in France during the 1950's and 60's. Formed out of a prior grouping, the Lettrists, the S.I. between 1957 and 1961, effectively splintered into two factions – one which still believed in the power of art to engage (led by the painter Pino-Gallizio and the architect Constant) and the second vanguard which sought a more direct relationship between art and society, led by Guy Debord, who exchanged the making of art objects for direct action and film production. Debord's method of attack was similar to that of military propagandists and the early 'compilation film' essayists– appropriate the enemy's material and make it your own. Through appropriation, cinema could be harnessed as a revolutionary weapon.

The film *Critique de la Séparation* (1961) shows the workings of several of Debord's main strategies, pioneered by other film avant-gardes, but applied to the S.I.'s militaristic notion of action and intervention – namely *détournement* (the use of citation and reinscription), *repetition* and *stoppage*. In the film, comic books, archive shots, inter-titles, documentary footage and voiceover all combine together to provide a critical investigation of the period in which Debord was living, underpinned by the wry, melancholic nihilism that characterises much of Debord's work. All three techniques work to create rupture in the surface of the cinematic text, through which an audience is then encouraged to question the 'truth' of what is presented. In this sense, all three techniques function as Brechtian distanciation tools, bringing a viewer's attention to the ways in which extant material is engaged and readings made. Through these techniques 'the present is studied as a historical problem, history is recast as a problem of representation, and, above all, the practice of representation itself is continuously subjected to critical interrogation' (Levin 2002, p 331). The film functions as an antithesis to Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un Été/Story of a Summer* (Rouch, 1961); a self-reflective

'ethnographic document' about post World War Two Parisian life.[4] But whereas Rouch's film is a gentle, personal investigation, Debord's constitutes a restless and relentless assault against what he famously termed the 'Society of the Spectacle' (Debord, 1967).

Critique de la Séparation opens with a 'promo' for the film to follow, beginning with an image from a newspaper of a woman in a white bikini. This image had been published in one of the S.I. journals previously, so from the outset the film indicates a multi-layered reference system. This still is followed by an inter-title on which is proclaimed 'coming soon to this screen.' Then a short wide-shot of a riot in the Belgian Congo is followed by a long tracking shot, filmed from a car down a boulevard in Paris (a parallel shot to the same ethnographic documentation of Rouch's work), documenting people at work and leisure; an image of peace and prosperity, which is juxtaposed with the violence and chaos of the Congo footage, but draws a relationship between them (Belgium had been criticised for stoking the unrest in the Congo which escalated following independence, this providing a mirror for a French colonial conflict of their own – Algeria). A woman's voice (Caroline Rittener, who appears throughout the film as a motif of lost desire) recites the opening sentence from the foreword of André Martinet's *Elements of General Linguistics*, 1960): "If we reflect how natural and advantageous it is for man to identify his language with reality, we shall appreciate how high a degree of sophistication had to be reached before he could dissociate them and make of each a separate object of study" (McDonough 2007, p 15). This quotation thematises the notion of 'separation' of the film's title, calling attention to the way in which language and power function, chiming with the real exercise of power in the political sphere exemplified by the suppression of dissent with violence. Rittener then continues to narrate the credits for the film, which is described as a 'documentary' and another inter-title proclaims 'REAL characters! An AUTHENTIC story!' before we see another glimpse of newsreel footage from the Congo, underwritten once more through montage by the images from Paris.

In this opening minute and a half, 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 contextualise the film in the light of real wars being fought at the time. The choice of opening text - Martinet's foreword to a theory of linguistics, emphasises 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, p. 20). Newsreel footage of the Congo becomes the audience's opening introduction of a sustained use of *détournement*, later excentuated by

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

utilisation of clips of various 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. Here pre-existing footage is utilised to open-up or question the original use-value of the material; newsreel footage of the Congo is *détourned* from its original context as neutral, 'factual' material to a visual reminder of events not depicted onscreen, but fresh in the French imagination, thus signifying a deeply political and emotional topic.

Détournement in *Séparation* is nowhere more strongly expressed than in the use of still images, particularly from comics scattered through the film and the use of an image from the story of King Arthur. Both are examples of popular culture – in the case of the comic strip, or *bandes dessinée*, a form which itself borrows the cinematic format in its consecutive display of image frames to tell a story, cited and re-inscribed with new meanings. Comic frame stills are plucked from the original context and used to emphasise a point ('IMPOSTURE') or comment upon the way social spectacles are organised, particularly along gender lines. The image of King Arthur is *détourned* to subvert the inherent masculine heroism of the image and to question the assumptions behind the traditions of courtly valour, the idea of heroism and the creation myths that function to bolster certain political or otherwise world-views. Debord zooms into the still to highlight the two swords pointing toward one another. This shot is preceded by documentary footage of a rocket launching, a photograph from a newspaper clipping of an astronaut, followed by a comic-strip image of a 'heroic' astronaut, poised in front of an imaginary moonscape, carrying a gun, signifying the desire to colonise deep-space with the same macho fervour. The image of the knights is then inter-cut with images of Debord's colleagues and a voice-over which contests the worth of valour and heroic pursuits, reducing history to a meaningless sham:

> The only adventure, we said, is to contest the totality, whose centre is this way of living, where we can test our strength but never use it. No adventure is directly created for us. The adventures that are presented to us form part of the mass of legends transmitted by the cinema or in other ways; part of the whole spectacular sham of history (Debord, 1961).

In both the case of the comic images and the King Arthur drawing, the graphic qualities stand in contrast to the real action frames of moving footage and photographic stills, creating further rupture in the cinematic text, throwing an audience intentionally out of the comfort of seeing the world presented through the lens of photographic realism.

In the knightly image we see also examples of Debord's use of *repetition* and *stoppage*, coming back to the same image to re-inscribe it with different meanings as a different text is heard or the image is

re-contextualised by the sequence of images that occur before and after through the effects of montage. Other key examples include the repeated use and 'interrogation' of photographic stills of Caroline Rittener, where the camera pans across, or certain details are highlighted, an implied relationship drawn as the camera follows her gaze, often to a subject out of frame, the repeated use of documentary footage of a pinball machine game display in close-up, with the balls being flung around the circuit and the tracking shot of the Paris boulevard shown at the beginning of the film. *Stoppage* in Debord's vocabulary includes not only moments when the camera literally stops to investigate a still frame, but any moment when the narrative flow of the film is intentionally paused, or where there is disjunction between sound and image; where, in Agamben's terms there is 'a prolonged hesitation between image and meaning' (Agamben 2002, p 316). Agamben comments that 'it is not merely a matter of a chronological pause, but rather a power of stoppage that works on the image itself, that pulls it away from the narrative power to exhibit it as such' (Agamben 2002, p 317). In this sense, the *détourned* newsreel footage from both the Congo and of politicians and heads of state in ceremony could be described also as examples of *stoppage*.

Détournement, repetition and *stoppage* all function to create literal separation between the viewer and the film and to disrupt an audience's experience of the film as a continuous, seamless narrative. These distanciation tools draw an audience's attention to the ways in which film language is constructed, refusing the possibility of 'identification' or the cathartic reward that continuity cinema offers and of which conventional documentaries also form a strand. Thus, 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 this separation, McDonough sees a paradox - 'that a critique of separation in contemporary society required an analysis *that insisted on separation* – of viewer from film, of film from pro-filmic reality… 'Separation' here implied montage (what the Situationists termed *détournement*, to underline the acts of cultural theft it entailed), not merely as a kind of physical cutting but also as a method of distanciation, and, by implication, of mediation' (McDonough 2007, p. 21).

Not only is the filmic text ruptured to tease out meanings, but the entire process of concluding anything at all is left in doubt. This tonal shift, alongside the physical techniques which Debord uses, turns the piece toward the essayistic, rather than the documentary mode. In the essayistic mode, the 'attempt' that is literally the essay often belies failure. This deep melancholic sense of failed attempts is one thematised by Debord and articulated strongly at the end of the film. At one point, for the duration of over thirty seconds, we see nothing but a black screen, accompanied by Debord's own voice 'As in a blurry drunken vision, the memory and language of the film fade out simultaneously. At the extreme, miserable subjectivity is reversed into a certain sort of objectivity: a documentation of

the conditions of non-communication' (Debord 1961). The film's end musters defiance amid the melancholy, preceded by still shots of friends and colleagues, montaged quickly between images of planes dropping bombs, the film closes on a still image of Debord himself:

> Fair companions, adventure is dead. (Inter-title: "The wine of the life has been spilt. And only the dregs stay in the warehouse"). Who will resist? It is necessary to go beyond this partial defeat. Of course. And how to do it? This is a film that interrupts itself and does not come to an end. All conclusions remain to be drawn; everything has to be recalculated. The problem continues to be posed — in continually more complicated terms. We have to resort to other measures. Just as there was no profound reason to begin this formless message, so there is none for concluding it. I have scarcely begun to make you understand that I don't intend to play the game (Debord 1961).

The gallantry of King Arthur, the heroism of the moon-conquering astronauts, the suave men and heroes of the comic strip have no place in this world-view of the anti-hero and the non-participant. Debord here throws up the impossibility of saying anything at all – the lack of purpose to artistic pursuits. These strategies of incoherence – of doubt, uncertainty, futility and loss – form the central question of the film as McDonough sees it – the extent to which any piece of work 'dealt with the inevitable *failure* of artistic communication today' (McDonough 2007, p 21).

In the strategy of *détournement* we find links to the history of 'compilation films' which Leyda documents, aligned to a similar political project tailoring a particular narrative (of an either documentary or fictional kind) from extant materials and in the process bringing an audience's attention to the ways in which film meaning is constructed. It was this specifically appropriative technique that allowed Debord and the S.I. to consider film-making as a viable strategy in their relentless assault on the Society of the Spectacle and capitalism's relentless co-option of not only social, but imaginative space.

2.5 Writing films - the 'ciné-roman' and the Literary New Wave – a reading of *Nuit et Brouillard* and *Hiroshima mon Amour*

In the work of Schub, Richter and Debord we see the essay film characterised 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 filmmaker 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 1986, p. 19).[5] 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 1986, p. 18).

During the same period as the Situationists were demanding the entire system be overhauled, the politics and aesthetics of image making were being challenged by the 'literary New Wave' - a group of writers and filmmakers also in France in the 1950's and 1960's, clustered together as an alternative to the *Cahiers* directors, such as Godard and Truffaut. If the Situationists' theatre was the streets, the literary New Wave's was the salon. Theirs was a literary cinema, both inspired by and driven from the need to create films that would not only parallel literary achievements, but actively draw on literary techniques to create a cinema that would cut-through the post-war existential malaise, reinvigorate literature and reject the individualism of the kind of authorship that the *Cahiers* directors promoted. The 'literary New Wave' often made use of documentary or archive footage and often inscribed it with new meanings using either voice-over or montage. In the case of these filmmakers, the vehicle for this reinscription was a fictional story, or imagined history. In the context of essay films, the work both defines the genre, as well as tests its outer limits.

The career and films of Alain Resnais, whose work characterises the *oeuvre* of this grouping of films and filmmakers demonstrates this tension. Resnais' shorter documentary films can be clearly identified as essay films, exemplified by *Nuit et Brouillard/Night and Fog* (Resnais 1955) about the Nazi death camps. Here Resnais combines archive footage and still photos with footage shot by the Allies who liberated Auschwitz, combined with colour footage of the camps in 1955. A voice-over (Michel Bouquet) runs throughout the film, interrogating the images. We begin with a view across sunny fields; in the distance chimney stacks, the ruins of tunnels, barbed wire and posts cut into what is otherwise a picturesque rural landscape. But these apparently innocuous scenes come with a warning, for 'even a village fair may lead directly to a concentration camp' *Nuit et Brouillard/Night and Fog* (Resnais 1955). The film continues with its pattern of counterpoint, commentary and

[5] Astruc's essay 'The birth of a new avant-garde: La caméra-stylo' was originally published in 1948.

juxtaposition – of text and image, the voice of Bouquet guiding and prompting our memories of war, which too quickly fade.[6]

Resnais' short films, leading right up to his first feature-length fiction film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) began as documentary commissions. In each case, with the collaboration of a writer, Resnais turns the commission into a critical exploration of the subject, rather than a neutral informative documentary. His methodologies interrogate not only the subject matter, but the process of film-making, and as such avoid the pitfalls of pornographic representation of shocking subject matter. Images are both contextualised and historicised; *Night and Fog* demonstrates that the horror of the death camps cannot be conjured by documentation alone. Mere documentation without context or historicisation runs the risk of becoming pornographic or banal, exemplified in a more contemporary context by the mobile footage of Saddam Hussein's hanging, or the execution of Daniel Pearl.

In terms of structure, one of the primary aims of the 'literary New Wave' was 'that language should "live" again in film... they were concerned with integrating a highly poeticized text with an image track that would alternate between a sometimes vertiginous mobile camera (long travelling shots) and a rigidly fixed camera (freeze frames) and an editing of dialectical montage (montage of attractions)' (van Wert, 1978, p. 11). The work of Eisenstein was of fundamental importance to the 'literary New Wave' since it was primarily the technique of dialectical montage that allowed them to create an associative text through counterpoint and juxtaposition. This style of associative editing allowed the film-makers to alter time-space relationships and create multiple points of view in the same way that writers such as Proust linked time past with time present through association in their writing. These techniques are evident in both *Night and Fog* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

Hiroshima Mon Amour (Resnais 1959) was intended originally as a documentary about the atomic bomb, but Resnais found it impossible and, not wanting to simply remake *Night and Fog* for a different subject matter, formally resigned from the project, only later to be brought back on once a suitable writing collaborator was found. Eventually Marguerite Duras was chosen. While the film is clearly a fiction, the style of the film-making as well as the approach to the subject matter bear the traces of Resnais' hallmarks as an essayist. The opening thirty minutes of the film are strongly essayistic, exemplified by a particular sequence in which the main character, a French actress who has come to Hiroshima to make a film about peace tells her lover her memories of the place.

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[6] The text was written by Jean Cayrol, who had himself been imprisoned in a camp.

The sequence begins with a pan across a still photograph of the ruins of Hiroshima. A woman's voice is heard: 'I saw the newsreels. On the second day, so they say… I didn't invent this… 'We see worms and insects emerge from a mound of earth. 'On the second day, certain animal species emerged from beneath the ashes… Then newsreel footage of a dog on three legs, limping through the ruins - 'dogs were photographed, caught forever more, I saw them.' The film now combines footage from another fiction film, Kaneto's *Children of Hiroshima* (1952). We see two images from this film – a woman with a bandage around her head, carrying a child on her back as the woman's voice continues - 'I saw the newsreels, I saw them. From the first day, the second day…' A man walks out to meet the woman and the child. We now hear a man's voice, contradicting the woman's memories - 'you saw nothing. Nothing.' After another couple of shots from *Children of Hiroshima* we cut to actual archive footage taken from Hiroshima hospital; the backs of children's balding heads (the woman's voice again - 'Hirsoshima was carpeting itself in flowers… there were cornflowers everywhere'); archive footage of doctors working with the wounded – people who are badly burned ('gladioli and morning glories..'). An image of a child with his lips seared off, open gums and teeth being swabbed by a doctors hand holding long metal tongs ('and day-lilies, springing reborn from the ashes…') and so on as more maimed children are shown and the woman remains ever convinced in her memory of events until finally the man's voice replies: 'You have invented everything' (Resnais 1959).

The 'impossible documentary' that Resnais abandoned has here re-emerged in the techniques he uses to once again question the relationship between history and memory. The impossibility of telling the horror of Hiroshima draws both Resnais and the writer, Marguerite Duras back to the 'attempt' of the essay form. Renais remained sceptical about the project, stating to one of the producers before getting on the plane to go and shoot the film: "I'm going in order to establish that this film is impossible" (Lagier 2004). Yet *Hiroshima Mon Amour* marked the beginning of a number of works involving citation and repetition – films within films that the later, even more labyrinthine works such as *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961) would demonstrate, and these films were to be of lasting influence. Even Duras speaks about her failure to confront the subject. The film developed from the notion of being 'about' the Atomic bomb to being a love story where the atomic bomb is a backdrop. Duras says: 'I couldn't come up with anything. The script of Hiroshima, the screenplay, is my failure. "You saw nothing at Hiroshima", which is the start of the film, is my failure in the face of Hiroshima' (Duras, audio interview in Lagier 2004). This sentiment – the attempt of the essay form and the inherent risk of failure - is a thread running all the way back to Montaigne. The context Resnais and Duras describe is thus one of translation from the literary essayistic tradition to the filmic.

2.6 Time, technology and memory in the essay film – a reading of *Sans Soleil*

Essay films often use the idea of an archive, either literally as the source from where the footage comes, but increasingly in a digital environment as the filmmaker'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 what constitute a type of 'personal archive' and its engagement with new technologies.

Sans Soleil is primarily a film about images and the relationship between images and memory. 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 wanting to make, or indeed made. The notions of memory the film deals with are both personal and collective; the image fragments from journeys made and nostalgia for the disintegration of the left-wing guerilla movements of the 1960s that Chris Marker had spent nearly more than a decade not only documenting, but actively involved with. *Sans Soleil* succeeds in not only treating each of the elements of cinematic language as autonomous, but in treating an image as a memory at the same time as critiquing the process by which an accumulation of private images pass as history.

In Marker's work we see not only the building blocks of the cinematic image reformed and purposed to create new works, but the structure of the narrative move away from anything considered linear to a spatial and associational logic, resembling more, as Edward Branigan observes, a catalogue or a 'hyperindex of stories' (Branigan 1992, p.216). The complex interweaving of location, history, personal reminiscence and authorial voice is 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, 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 record them' (Lupton 2005, p.154).

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. Nearly all location sound is treated electronically, creating a texture which induces memories or alludes to the scene being seen (treated sounds of trains, boats, planes,

rituals, ceremonies) cues scenes to come (the theme to *Vertigo*), or makes associations to images not seen, but referenced within the film (the music from *La Jetée*).

In this way, sound cues the images – elicits them and draws them out. The structure is musical and sound is predominant. In the credit sequence, sound design and mixing are all given lead billing over Marker's own 'conception and editing'. In the film, Krasna suggests to the recipient of his letters that Tokyo 'should be deciphered like a musical score' and admits that while 'one could get lost in the great orchestral masses and accumulation of details' this only creates the cheapest image of Tokyo. Krasna in the film and Marker in his editing find something more subtle –'rhythms, clusters of faces, caught sight of in passing - as different and precise as groups of instrument […] all that fit together like the voices of a somewhat complicated fugue' (Marker 1982). This description of Tokyo in the film is used in the press dossier, which describes the film's structure as being not like a narrative, but more - 'in the fashion of a musical composition, with recurrent themes, counter-points and mirror-like fugues' (Lupton 2005, p.153).

While sound leads the structure, the film's primary theme is an interrogation of images. This is achieved at both a thematic as well as a structural level. The beginning of the film seems to make a direct reference to the structure of cinematic representation in the fragile image of the three children on a road in Iceland then punctuated by a black leader – the *ur-interval* – a non-image. In contrast, the film ends with Krasna's cinematic images rendered electronically as pure digital incarnations while in the narrative a shift is made to the future and a 'world of appearances' – beyond time and the pain of remembering (Marker 1982). Krasna is fascinated by the technology used by a video game designer friend of his in Tokyo, Hayao Yamaneko – an image synthesizer that Yamaneko calls 'the Zone' in homage to Tarkovsky. For Krasna, these treated images tell a truth not possible with documentary recording – 'at least they proclaim themselves to be what they are – images. Not the portable and compact form of an already accessible reality' (Marker 1982).

Images treated through the Zone become the fulcrum point for a series of meditations on the relationship between time, technology and memory. Yamaneko's own thoughts are that 'electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory and imagination […] 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). Krasna later comments that he envies Hayako and his Zone and contextualizes the place from which he writes:

I'm writing you all this from another world – a world of appearances. In a way the two worlds communicate with one another – memory is to one what history is to the other – an impossibility. Legends are borne out of the need to decipher the indecipherable. Memories

must make do with their delirium – their drift – a moment stopped would burn like a frame of film before the furnace of the projector. Madness protects, as fever does. I envy Hayako and his Zone – he plays with the signs of his memory – he pins them down and decorates them like insects that would have flown beyond time and which he could contemplate from a point outside of time – the only eternity we have left. I look at his machines. I think of a world where each memory could create its own legend (Marker 1982).

This centerpiece of the film's narrative draws together the themes of technology, image and memory. 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. For Krasna / Marker there is an implicit relationship between images and memory; he questions how people remember who don't photograph or film. The bible (here the biblical text engaged as a metaphor) for him is a pre-photographic method of remembrance and he states that 'the new bible will be an eternal magnetic tape that will have to re-read itself constantly just to know it existed' (Marker 1982). The structural clustering, of themes, image types and sounds, enhances the spatial logic by which the film operates. Bazin early identified in Marker's work a tendency to move horizontally from them rather than from shot to shot (Bazin in Bellour 1997, p. 112). This experimentation with the means by which the films reading is constructed finds its logical extrapolation in installations and interactive projects, such as Marker's CDROM project, *Immemory*.

2.7 Essay films and the archive – a reading of *Immemory*

The essay film places individual experience at the centre of meaning– the filmmaker who explores a theme or meditates upon a question and, in Brechtian fashion, to 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 explored by Rascoli when she engages filmmaker Harun Farocki's question - '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, p.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, p.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 perhaps more accurately describe it, to locate

traces of the history of the essayistic impulse in new media works. I have discussed the principles of fragmentation, the use of existing sources, the treatment of individual units of the cinematic image in linear films, 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 transfers to 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, 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, p.178). Essayist such as Chantal Ackerman, Harun Farocki, Agnes Varda and in the UK, 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 creation of linear work.

Marker's CDROM *Immemory* (Marker 1998) is a collection of images, texts and graphics, fragments from other Marker films and books, constructed as a hyptertextual 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 exactly an essay film, *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. Whereas *Sans Soleil* has a non-linear narrative structure, it exists and is experienced in time and space as a linear work. There are many examples and instances when this linearity is subverted by the techniques ascribed to poetry (the repetition of the Emu from the Isle de France, electronic sound textures creating a trance, sudden jump cuts to images already seen recontextualized within a sequence, the circular pattern of the narrative). However, with a work like *Immemory* the finished work is a database of possible journeys where users / the audience / the reader can navigate a range of narrative, or non-narrative options.

But Marker has not tried to create a new media project in perfection, preferring rather to take the path of, as he describes it, a 'Sunday programmer' (Bellour 1997, p. 134). In *Immemory* still images, graphics, sound and text are used minimally and conceptually and there is very little use of moving image (owing perhaps to its capacity to use disc space). *Immemory* suggests, rather than is, the archive of Marker's life and work, alluding to the impossibility of an actual limitless storage of ones experiences, thought and dreams, but indicating how, through the technology, such a project might exist as a type of virtual museum.

3. The Essay Film and Archives in the Information Age

3.1 The Archive – traditions and digitisation

Digitisation and the mass marketing of domestic technologies to both record and post-produce images have 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? How might the critical strategies suggested by the film essay be applied in an era where Google has become the 'homepage of everyone's life' as the planning director of a large agency recently described to me and where entries online pass as knowledge.

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.[7] 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, I want to 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 digitisation, 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 on-line 24hours 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 take the role of

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[7] A workflow in post-production terms refers to all the steps and process you take, or can take, in order to move a unit of media further toward completion. Workflows typically map out everything, from the type of format a programme is shot on to how it is edited, encoded and finalised. Digital technologies have made this process much more complex.

archives in the popular imagination 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 largely provide a commercial service (Prelinger 2007).

For the professionals managing archives, the central question of 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, p. ix). This debate is made more complex by the increasing proliferation of image material available to archivists who raise questions around the ontological status of pictures. Professor of information science, Richard Cox thus 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, p.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 in the 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, p. 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, p.3). For Branigan 'making narratives is a strategy for making our world of experiences and desires intelligible. It is a fundamental way of organising data' (Branigan 1992, p.1).

However, media theorist 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, p 226). As cultural forms, Manovich sees database logic and narrative as being mutually exclusive, since the database refuses to prioritise 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, p.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, p.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 database cinema? Brannigan's analysis of *Sans Soleil* concludes by saying that the effects of the film are to investigate 'ordinary life in a society as experienced through popular imagination and mass media' (Branigan 1992, p. 208). But that the constant interrogation of images through techniques such as repetition, freeze frames, putting imagery through synthesizers and suchlike, 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, p. 209). Here is an example of narrative patterning that honours the database's refusal to place a hierarchy on images. And for the information science professor, troubled by the difficulty of interpreting pictures, Branigan offers that *Sans Soleil* constitutes 'an effort to explore the limits of understanding an image as a document' (Branigan 1992, p. 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, p. 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 have collected, 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.

3.2 Database cinema – a reading of *Soft Cinema*

Seeking to clarify what database filmmaking might involve, I used Manovich and Kratky's 2005 project *Soft Cinema*. The DVD contains three films Texas, Mission to Earth and Absences. The 'Soft Cinema' project is a programme, a space and a series of films. It envisages what cinema might become once freed from looking backward to industrial models of image production, that is the cinema of the last 120 years, and looks to what it might become in the future, modelled instead on 'the new structures of production and consumption enabled by computing' (Manovich 2005, no page numbers). In the introductory essay, Manovich outlines that the research follows four directions:

1. Following the standard convention of the human-computer interface, the display area is always divided into multiple frames.
2. Using a set of rules defined by the authors, the Soft Cinema software controls both the layout of the screen (number and position of frames) and the sequences of media elements that appear in these frames.
3. The media elements (video clips, sound, still images, text, etc.) are selected from a large database to construct a potentially unlimited number of different films.
4. In Soft Cinema 'films' video is used as only one type of representation among others: motion graphics, 3D animations, diagrams etc.
(Manovich 2005a, no page numbers)

The techniques discussed in 'Soft Cinema' resemble a computerised version of the same techniques ten Brink describes when making *The Man Who Couldn't Feel* (1997) – collating material into themes and allowing the material to dictate the order and shape of presentation, only in *Soft Cinema* these functions are assigned to a computer's random sampling function.

Text plays a significant role in all three films. In *Mission to Earth* there is a narrator's voice telling the story of Inga, an alien from Alpha1, as she explores earth. In *Absences* words resembling extractions from a diary ('today I am going to leave'; 'I do not belong here') scroll across the screen. The text (written or spoken) of all three films is crafted like a diary; the theme of the films is travel, crafted from fragments of moving image, still image and graphics. In short, the tone, subject matter, look and feel of the films is essayistic (Manovich 2005a).

Watching *Soft Cinema* I was reminded of Marker's introductory essay to *Immemory*:

> 'About *Immemory*'s structure, all I can do is show a few explorer's tools, my compass, my telescopes, my jug of drinking water. As compasses go, I went looking quite far back in history to take my bearings. Curiously, there is nothing in the recent past that really offers us models of what computer navigation on the theme of memory could be. Everything is dominated by the arrogance of classical narrative and the positivism of biology. 'The Art of Memory' on the other hand, is a very ancient discipline, one which - ironically – fell into oblivion as the gap between physiology and psychology widened' (Marker 1998).

Do Marker's use of a database structure and Manovich's use of the essay form bear any further thought? Are the databases that Manovich describes not really a form of archiving? What relevance does any of this have to present and future technologies of cinema? The increasing fragmentation of media sources has been met with an increased ability to pool more and more source material through an ever-greater variety of tools. As technologies start to rely more and more on fragmenting sources, more media become orphaned in the sense of losing their connection to their source. 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, or so it would seem from Manovich and Marker's work, to database cinema. Indeed, they could provide the 'poetics, aesthetics, and ethics' of the database that Manovich seeks.

3.3 The essay film form – re-applications of Bourriaud's *Postproduction*

Contemporary theory offers a useful framework within which to discuss these issues. In his book *Postproduction* (2005), Nicolas Bourriaud takes a term from film and video-production and applies it to the sphere of visual art. I propose appropriating Bourriaud's argument to refract it back on the culture-industries where the term 'postproduction' originated in order to explore how the type of remixing Bourriaud describes in the fine art scene finds an earlier progenitor in the history of film

essay making and to link the traits of these practices to an emerging understanding of database cinema.

Postproduction is Bourriaud's exploration of a group of artists who engage strategies of appropriation, citation and reinscription (*détournement*) within their practice, who move from making 'works' to the creation of situations where the role and function of art can be questioned, or the entire system be turned into a 'base camp' for action (Bourriaud 2005, p. 72).[8] The positions and practices Bourriaud discusses find resonance in the history of essay filmmaking - from an interest in the personal and the everyday, a desire to engage the audience directly, an interest in the construction of meaning and the interrogation of images and sounds. Indeed, the techniques and political sensibility described by Bourriaud in the sphere of fine art can be projected back on the history of film essay making – from Leyda's identification of the compilation film of the 1920s, through Debord' reinscription of popular culture and televisual imagery to Marker's reworking of film and broadcast media. Film essayists practice the art of creating 'time ready-mades' – (Bourriaud 2005, p. 86), recycling, reinscribing, reversioning and interrogating images and sounds. These impulses, I argue, position the genre along a continuum from Vertov to the type of database cinema outlined by theorists such as Manovich.

In the figure of Debord that we see the most explicit relationship between the critical practices documented by Bourriaud and film essay practice in the transition from the creation of 'works' to the development of 'situations'. As Tom McDonough reflects, the Situationist legacy itself is seen as 'a project of archival retrieval, reconstruction and historicisation' (McDonough 1997, p 5). In the motif of the archive, we see not only evidence of a particular architecture, but an approach to information gathering, sorting and narrative construction relevant to the kind of fragmentary media landscape that is the present climate.

Bourriaud concludes that 'to re-write modernity is the historical task of this early twenty-first century: not to start at zero or find oneself encumbered by the storehouse of history, but to inventory and select, to use and download' (Bourriaud 2005, p 93). This is a fine art revision of Manovich's promotion of the principles 'modularity' and 'remixability' in practice (Manovich 2005b). In the techniques and history of the essay film, audiences and producers find not only a palette of relevant techniques, but access to a specifically critical lineage which may strengthen new platforms, not merely as new types of distribution to be co-opted by corporations, but as alternative cinematic modes of production.

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[8] The artists Bourriaud discusses include Cattelan, Gillick, Parreno et. al.

4. From Technology to Texture - The Grain of the Voice in film essay making

4.1 The Grain of the Voice

The positioning of both the audience and the film/work as a site of exploration is what for ten Brink defines the 'cinematic text becoming the reflective text' and for Bourriaud is what constitutes a form of artistic exchange. An element very important to film essay making is the notion of the personal or subjective. Laura Rascaroli's insightful *The Personal Camera* (2009) presents an extended exploration of the role of interpellation, which she defines as the 'enunciational address to the audience', which lies at the heart of all film essays and which presuppose 'the idea of asking a question of the spectator' (Rascaroli 2009, p. 192).

This personal quality or flavour of essay filmmaking is engendered at a granular level – from shot to shot, from sound to sound, from sequence to sequence. It is in, as Roland Barthes describes the 'grain of the voice', described as '*the encounter between a language and a voice* […] the *grain*, the grain of the voice when the latter is in a dual posture, a dual production – of language and of music' (Barthes 1977b, p. 181 - emphasis in the original). This relationship, between the specific texture of a voice – in music, or a filmmaker in moving image, or a writer in text, is what provides film essays with their particularity. However, Barthes argument extends beyond a simplistic exploration of the timbre of one singer over another, but deep into the language of signs and their cultural resonances.

Looking to the Japanese puppet theatre Bunraku, Barthes traces the Brechtian impulse to separate action from gesture, and explores the textual freedom which comes from a language freed from a manipulative and overly simplistic correlation between narrative requirements and the display of human emotion. In contrast, Bunraku in its very definition 'separates the act from the gesture: it exhibits the gesture, it allows the act to be seen: it exposes at once the art and the work, keeping for each its own particular writing' (Barthes 1977a, p. 176). I would argue that separating out the constituent parts of cinematic language in order to investigate anew, find connections and critique the very way film language enunciates in film essay making might also be regarded as a form of gest in the way Barthes, following Brecht, describes when he writes 'the 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs' (Barthes 1977b, p. 188).

In the case of film essay making, this critique takes on the particularity of the essayist him or herself. The desire to question, to pull apart and reconfigure, but in a way that invites involvement (not as private ritual, but as public spectacle made personal and critical) is what provides the essay film with

its openness. Its fragmented, separated nature, matched by a desire to reconfigure, recombine, generate new meanings and readings, make it a rather more productively playful form than its reputation for dry intellectual wrangling may admit.

The impulse toward direct address, the experiment and with it the possibility of failure makes the essay film a compelling form, that while born of a modern genesis is rather well suited to the abundant, but uncertain landscape that is the information age. I asked three filmmakers – three distinctive 'voices' - whose work either loosely, or directly draws on the tradition of film essay making for their thoughts about the relationship between their own practice, film essays and current technological developments.

4.2 Interviews with Essayists

4.2.1 Joram ten Brink – 'the image as an image as an image'

I interviewed Joram ten Brink on 5th December 2008 at Westminster University where he works as a filmmaker, artist and academic. Ten Brink's doctoral thesis on the essay film was written in 1999 and I was interested to know how his thinking had changed over the last decade and what he thought of essay films now. Specifically my questions covered the relationship between essay films and archives, the construction of image sequences in his work and the relationship between sound and image. These questions led onto discussions about what makes the essay form different from documentary or other ways of approaching moving image material and some questions around the historical context of the film essay, particularly as it relates to contemporary technologies and ways of putting together moving image and sound fragments.

Ten Brink trained in the world of ethnography and documentary filmmaking. His doctoral film, *The Man Who Couldn't Feel and Other Tales* (1997) was an attempt to explore a different way of approaching sound and image material. Over a number of years, he had shot footage – 8mm and 16mm from travels in countries such as China, India and Italy. He considered how to use this material, knowing he did not want to make a documentary from it. In our interview, he spoke about the process of taking the actual film material and allowing a structure to emerge. Ten Brink shied away from talking about his collection of images as an archive – instead he thought of them as 'notes', looking at 'the image as an image as an image – what is dramatically inherent in an image that makes it useable later on – so I just looked at images and collected them not as an archive, but as images that I thought in my unconscious mind and view as strong images that can be used later on

for some type of work' (ten Brink 2008). Ten Brink also pushed the importance of sound and music to essay films, stating that for him 'sound is as important as the image – in essay films – it always is, but in essay films is very important' (ten Brink 2008).

Although he didn't describe his own material as an archive, ten Brink recognised the central role the notion of the archive plays in essayistic modes of both writing and making films, but differentiated two distinct methods of engagement – those which construct new films from found footage fragments and those which use the idea of archives as source material to quote, suggesting that '...some of the playfulness, but also some of the authority of the essay comes from the reliance on archive and indeed in my film I do go back from time to time to archive, but I used it in a kind of Montaignian way and not like Leyda, which is a kind of whole film made of…. (found footage fragments)' (ten Brink, 2008). He draws a clear distinction between archive as it is used in documentary practices and in essay films, commenting that 'in documentary archive is used as authority, in essay film the impulse is something different – to reinterpret it or to use it just as image… you make it personal – rather than use it as evidence for a historical… which is what documentary does' (ten Brink, 2008).

Ten Brink had visited the RCA twice and spoken about the methods he uses to make his work. I was interested to follow-up on some of the issues he spoke about. He spoke in a little more detail on the approach he took:

> *I constructed it through a kind of negation… there is always a problem with any kind of work that is non-linear, let's call it experimental - you know exactly what it is not, but you never know what it is in advance, so in terms of the construction, I knew what I was not going to do, rather than what I was going to do.… so I knew I didn't want to look at the material as having any documentary value as such – I want to look at them as images – what I called the building blocks of cinematic image – of an image, of a sound, or a relationship between the image – it doesn't really matter where it comes from. What physically happens – that every single super8 that had to be reprinted on 16. I had 80 – 100 rolls of super8 that were printed frame by frame on super16 and they were printed in I don't know what order we printed them – so it came from the lab on big 16mm rolls and that's how I worked – as it came from the lab, I never cut them and hung them in the bins, like you do – or you did with film – or like you put them in separate bins in Final Cut Pro – and I just worked constantly from big reels and I refused to split them…I created little clusters of sequences and this is basically to see – one image suggested another image and created stories…* (ten Brink, 2008)

I asked ten Brink if he thought there was any particularly close relationship between the essay film form and ways of engaging with new technologies, using the examples of Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* and Marker's use of video technologies in *Sans Soleil*. Ten Brink considered that these films came more from the chance of historical circumstance – the arrival of portable cameras and video technology and that both of these filmmakers were asking questions in their films – of how could these new technologies could be used:

I think what happens to both Vertov and Marker – they happen to work in a technological era, where the big breakthrough came – Vertov had this camera, he had this impulse of doing an essay film... I'm sure 'Sunless' it's really very early stages of video processing and you can see Chris marker being absolutely fascinated – 'I've been making films for twenty years in some way and suddenly I can interrogate it in such a different way'…in the same way that Vertov saw this camera and thought 'oh my god what can I do with it – if I invert it, or if I stop the frame' and so on…(ten Brink 2008)

While the methodology of essay filmmaking – of dealing with fragments and making sense of them was for him something distinct and useful, ten Brink identified the form as belonging specifically to the modernist era and to the avant-garde rather than anything particularly to do with now:

…you can argue that the kind of complexity and the kind of multi-layering that we have now kind of… on the other hand I think it's a very modernist, not post-modernist – because it's so complex, anything goes – on the contrary the essay is a very coherent and very structured and if anything very avant-garde, very modernist… it's not a post-modernist impulse, of putting things because they are just there or just… it's much more organised than that…. - it moves back to early modernism with the fascination with technology. And that's modernism, it's not post-modernism – Moholy-Nagy, Vertov and so on. Back to the roots of the avant-garde – pure modernism. In that sense we are producing pieces of work – there is a real radical shift with technology, but that's exactly the same as in 1910 – Walter Benjamin writes about it and all the commentary - there is a huge shift now (in the early 20th century) and what do we do with it? with technology and what do we do with it and in that sense it is very similar – maybe the outcome will be completely different from modernism and avant-garde, but you know, the fascination with the machine, is the same as the fascination with the computer – it's exactly what Leger and the Dada people pulled apart… (ten Brink 2008)

For ten Brink the essay film as a form arrives from the 'sheer desire to investigate' – it is an 'inclusive, personal and meditative' form (ten Brink 2008). In essay films 'you see it as a real serious attempt to

understand the world – *Man With a Movie Camera* was the same - although people will put on it all this political stuff, which is there, but you can feel his impulse is not to tell you this is the image of Russia – it is something much more deep and sophisticated, and much more profound – it's trying to understand, with the camera and to create with the camera a new world' (ten Brink 2008).

4.2.2 Patrick Keiller – 'spatialising the image'

I interviewed Patrick Keiller on Friday 12th December 2008 the Royal College of Art where he is currently a research fellow. I had seen both *London* (Keiller 1994) and *Robinson in Space* (Keiller 1997) a number of times and recognised their importance for my own project. More recently I had heard Keiller speak about his video installation project *Londrés-Bombay* (2006) and had seen his DVD installation constructed from archive films in conjunction with the BFI – *City of the Future* (Keiller 2007). Both of these projects resonated with my thoughts about archive and technology as far as the essay film is concerned. The questions I asked were similar to those I asked ten Brink, but more focused around Keiller's background in architecture and how that had led to making multiscreen installation work for galleries. For all the connections I thought were apparent, Keiller, as many practitioners seem to be when faced by the prospect of being boxed into any one category, seemed hesitant to speak directly about what I considered to be the rather obvious essayistic nature of his practice:

> *Well, I wasn't really aware of it until people started telling me that I was in it, which isn't as though that I wasn't aware of the films. But I wasn't aware that it was an established term, and it possibly wasn't as established then as it is now…I hadn't come across the notion that, for instance, 'Sans Soleil' might be an essay film, a sort of film, but I don't mind. I think I would take exception to the term city symphony, but an essay film, it sounds a bit... there is a slight worry about it, which is that one has somehow committed one's self to a genre, which I wouldn't like to think that I'd done, mainly because one does what one can. And the idea that you've actually chosen […] I think that's the thing that's objectionable about it. The idea that one has chosen the path that is called the essay film, I would find that a bit awkward* (Keiller 2008).

We spoke at length about the process of making his individual films and projects, his thoughts on subject material, the background to his practice and touched on his observations on the relationship between filmmaking and art and ideas of database cinema in relation to his work.

Keiller's training as an architect remains a central motif in his filmmaking. He began making films through developing a relationship between slide material and writing narratives based firstly on the slide sequences and eventually moving image. Ideas of collecting and the relationships to early surrealism were important foundations to his later practice: 'my slides were a bit odd. Well, they weren't odd but they were not the usual sort. They were not art. They were more things for an artist to collect. And I discovered this connection or this similarity with what members of the early surrealist group had been doing in Paris' (Keiller 2008). He doesn't describe his early collections of photographs as an archive, but rather a collection – interestingly, for Keiller an archive was specifically something that was old: 'it wasn't a typology; it was just a collection. It wasn't really an archive because it wasn't old, but it was a collection, but it was presented with captions' (Keiller 2008).

The search for a subject and an experimental approach to finding the subject through the work, as well as through the technologies used to make the work are common threads Keiller has with ten Brink. As Keiller writes of his early forays into filmmaking ' […] by that time I had assembled some brief narration with the still, with slides made from black and white negatives [...] quite by chance really I discovered a subject '(Keiller 2008). The subject in question was an old railway bridge, seen from a train window and subsequently visually investigated by Keiller. Throughout this process, Keiller brought an architect's eye to the limits of the film frame, commenting that 'the other problem about the cine camera was that not only could you not see anything but even what you could see was only a minute fragment of what was around you, so it was completely un-architectural' (Keiller 2008). Further he commented that 'the films came about from thinking, well, what can I do with this stuff? So there were these, let's call them, takes of more or less architectural material. The question then arose, well, what are you going to do with it?' (Keiller 2008). What Keiller discovered through his early films was that 'nobody knows how to make an architectural documentary for cinema. That was quite obvious. It was an attempt to find out I suppose' (Keiller 2008).

The attempt of the essay, the evolution of a subject matter and a particular use and view of technology in the uncovering of these aspects seem yet again linked. It wasn't until Keiller began making the installations that the problems of spatialisation seemed to be, if not solved, then certainly placed on a more useful trajectory. Speaking of *City of the Future* (2007) Keiller commented 'the main thing was the spacialisation of this, which was a way out of making films. The great thing was about that, but that was why it was a real discovery, because it solved the problem. You don't have to do it anymore. You don't have to make films anymore' (Keiller 2008).

City of the Future (2007) is a multi-screen video installation with a DVD navigational interface through which visitors can select journeys around various towns and cities in the UK and a limited number of cities around the world, using old film material sourced from the BFI. The project was made in partnership with the BFI who gave Keiller access to the film material. I asked Keiller about the source material:

> *They're early films. No one's forgotten about them. They weren't just in the archives; they were quite well known and many of them were quite frequently screened. And they were not footage either, which is what I started out looking for, but there isn't really much footage as such in the film archives. They throw it away. Nearly everything that I've come across in film archives is films, finished films* (Keiller, 2008).

It was interesting to me that for Keiller's experience demonstrating that from an archival perspective only whole films were kept; the orphan material – the fragments were thrown away. I asked him about whether he saw *City of the Future* as a kind of database film and his thoughts about reconstructing films from fragments. Keiller suggested a working method that was intuitively rule-based and located within the traditions of archival research:

> *So going back to the database; that was partly generated by a database because there was an enormous amount of catalogue research that threw up the rather obvious conclusion that the only films that were going to be of any use in making anything were these early ones, which looked like footage even though they weren't. Everything else had already been ruined by the time it got made. I wasn't going to take Humphrey Jennings' films to bits. I wasn't going to take even colonial, step-by-step filmmaking to bits. I wasn't going to take run of the mill films to bits, in the way that one wouldn't do that, as an archive researcher* (Keiller 2008).

In Keiller's practice, 'database cinema' is inscribed in the research phase of his projects, which cross between linear films to installations. His early attempts to make an architectural documentary now find resonance in larger scale works such as *Londres-Bombay* and *City of the Future*, suggesting that spatialising the image can only be solved by moving outside of the conventions of linear screen narrative, but that this brings with it a number of other problems, one of which is the commercial viability of projects which are difficult to exploit financially as 'products'.

4.2.3 Chris Petit: Interrogating the image

I emailed Chris Petit over the winter of 2009 / 10. Having worked as a production manager on Petit's film *Unrequited Love* (2006) I was interested to follow up on what seemed to be Petit's natural inclinations toward interrogating the image. Writing books, reviews and criticism, I was interested in Petit's thoughts about the relationship between text and image. *Unrequited Love* was a film utilising domestic film technologies, as well as text and images from mobile phones. Technological experimentation has been a significant part of his practice since abandoning mainstream moving image practice.

Petit works between writing and filmmaking and his working practice seems to embody the type of 'cine writing' envisaged by Astruc. I asked him about the relationship between text, moving image and audio and whether his style of writing is somehow reflected in the way he works with moving image:

> I think that one of the developments of the internet is that image and word are becoming more interchangeable if not synonymous. The downsizing of equipment means it is possible to be more contemplative and less premeditated as a filmmaker, making it a process that can be more like writing, in that you find out what it is that you are doing through the process of doing it. That said, TV and film executives are very wary of this method, wanting to know exactly what they are going to see from the first meeting. On a wider scale, some of the novels I have written can be read as "prose films" (eg Robinson and The Hard Shoulder).

I followed on by asking what kinds of qualities he looked for in an image and in his opinion what makes an image different from sound or writing in the way that it 'tells a story'? Petit stated that for him:

> Much of it is unquestioning and more a matter of instinct than theory or practice. Dealing in images, for me anyway, comes down to ways of looking. Film is the art of seeing, Wim Wenders once said. So any manipulation of image is an extension of that argument: how do we make ourselves "see" as opposed to just looking. So the judgement is when to interfere with an image and when to leave it alone. Of the three you mentioned, I think sound is the most imaginative medium because the listener fills in the gaps, and I think that partly explains why it has always interested me in relation to film. A film like Radio On could be said to be sound led and so can the work done with Bruce Gilbert (The Carfax Fragment, Radio On [remix]) and with AGF in Content.

Petit's filmmaking practice is imbued with self-referentiality, from archival quotation of film classics to the use of his own voice to narrate some works to literal technological inscription (reframing from screens, use of CCTV cameras and mobile phone imagery). Petit commented that he thinks that it is because 'digital images are so pristine that one looks for some kind of intervention (one thinks of Robert Frank defacing his photographs to deprive them of their "pristine" nature). That said, on the last film we used a Casio stills camera which could shoot moving images at different speeds, giving everything a very dreamlike and plastic effect, quite different from shooting on tape and then slowing the image down. These images invest the banal with a freshness they otherwise don't have.'

When working on *Unrequited Love*, Petit often spoke about 'interrogating the image' – I was curious to know if this was a self-conscious part of his working practice. But for Petit, each project is unique: 'In that the film is only really looked at in the editing. Because the way of shooting is so on-the-wing, material often fails to conform to expectations. We found earlier on that if you interrogated the image by re-filming or reframing it often acquired a new resonance or meaning. On a simple level, I find it interesting because it breaks continuity and the flow of illusion.'

The role of post-production is central to Petit's working methods. I had observed during *Unrequited Love* that the way Petit and his collaborator Emma Matthews edit Petit's films seems to imply a process of 'allowing the material to speak for itself [...] I suppose the process of editing as I try to do it is a combination of manipulation and as you say let the image speak for itself. Where I feel reasonably confident with modern camera technology, I still feel very inadequate when faced by non-linear editing, but I don't know anyone who is exploiting it to its full potential.'

In addition to working closely with Matthews during post-production, Petit usually shoots his own films, or works with found footage. For him this is a question of economics as well as a preference for working outside of mainstream industry methods. He stated that he'd long ago abandoned conventional filmmaking and had no desire to return to it, but that usually his choice of working methods were a matter of 'trying to overcome poverty of budgets in the best way possible, which is why I usually end up doing most of it myself, to avoid paying others. Hence the interest in found footage and CCTV (diaries kept my machines).' However, Petit also commented that 'sometimes it's easier to use found footage because you're spared all the usual aesthetic judgments about composition etc or dealing with the notion that too much has been shot anyway.'

I asked him what in his opinion have been the biggest influencers in moving image culture today? Did he think new technologies perhaps opened up more options for critical exploration? What would be cinema's legacy to moving image culture of the future?:

Sheer volume means that everything has fragmented or become subjected to the blockbuster syndrome. We're in a period of intense shift --- probably at the end of the first phase of digital technology, which will probably be looked back as a *golden age*… Now that everything is within domestic reach, from filming to editing, the final hurdle is exhibition. Finding a way of getting your films seen in a meaningful way. Unrequited Love, for example, which was shown on TV and seen by 3 people and maybe had one or two public screenings, I thought could have been both interesting and successful as an internet project, but this raises questions of payment and profit and how to make a living out of the material, let alone the whole business of interaction.

My final question to Petit was whether he thought a critical moving image culture is possible within a consumer-driven market economy:

I don't know. Everything is prolific at the moment that its impossible to say. It's interesting that in television, say, stuff that has become popular, such as The Wire, functions in a very conventional way, rather as the 19 century novel did. Whether new creative forms will emerge out of the aesthetics of the internet remains to be seen. If it does then it will probably involve elements of pornography, gambling and conspiracy. Another interesting thing is the resurgence of animation. I am still waiting for movies to discover the musical and artistic equivalents to jazz and abstract expressionism.

In Petit's practice I find a return to the impulses of Richter – a desire to free the medium from its industrial shackles, to place a context around film language that is more culturally extensive and to work in a personally more expressive way. Petit achieves this through turning to low-end technologies and instigating a method of 'writing cinema' in the way Astruc envisaged.

5. <u>The Blue Wall</u>

My practical project *The Blue Wall* is a short film essay (20mins) constructed from both archive sources and footage that I have shot. Thematically it explores two events – London winning the games on July 6th 2005 and the bombs going off the following day. From these two moments in time, the film explores the interrelationship between violence and nationalism, the relationship of the image to each and a range of positions that individuals and groups take around questions of regeneration and development, community, sport and spectacle. Technically the project engages with two recent developments – next generation Digital Stills and Moving image Cameras (DSMC) which shoot small quantities of HD material to solid state cards and a post production system that combines a Digital Asset Management system (DAM) with a post production workflow (Cinegy). Using these tools has enabled me to explore practically and technically many of the issues the film essay raises and come to some conclusions about its relevance to contemporary moving image practice.

5.1 Genesis

In 2005 I was living in Brick Lane in London E1. I had spent the year exploring a project that drew on abandoned industrial buildings around the former dockyards. Then in July two events took the project in a different direction. London won the Olympics and overnight the site of my interest became a hot-bed of public speculative activity, and a day later London was subject to its first terror attack post 9/11.

I began the project by clipping out associated articles and visiting archives. I digitised the material (then limited to found footage) and began to filter through to find relationships. Broad themes emerged – the Olympics as a multinational exercise in national branding, a great opportunity for regeneration or a ruse for developers to be subsidised to build colossal and then subsequently underused developments, depending on your position. Sport itself – the history of the Olympics, the drive toward perfected bodies and the aspiration of athletes for a certain type of competition. Corruption – both within sport itself (doping), within associated development and regeneration projects (in London and elsewhere), the brand of the International Olympic Committee – along with the vast sums of money spent responding to the increasingly over-hyped requests of this small group (a dedicated limousine lane over one of London's busiest bus routes, for example).

My research sources included community blogs, newspapers, archives, online, interviews and conferences and events. I visited the public archives at the BFI on the Southbank, the Women's Library, Bishopsgate and the British Library. I also joined the *Archives for London* society, which linked me into otherwise inaccessible events as well as a community of people interested or professionally concerned with archives. Through my study of Debord and my reading of Sinclair and Sebald I became interested in relationships between mapping and psychogeography and this led to a small study of the art of data visualisation, which in turn led to an exploration of mash-ups of geographical data (*Wayfarer, Open Street Map Foundation, London Profiler* and *Photosynth*). These research strands are not present in the final work, except in a type of associational 'mapping' that film makes with the themes which emerged out of the research.

Because of working fulltime, I was more reliant on online source material than I would otherwise have liked. Access (literally getting myself to the locations where this might be found) and money were the determining factors in which places I attempted to access existing source material from. From conversations I did have with local archives (Bishopsgate and the Women's Library, for example), any moving image material was moved out of the collections they had for preservation reasons. Much of the material that had been held was limited in any case (too much focus on WWII for example), or inaccessible (clips already purchased by commercial archives for which the fees would prove too expensive).

In November of 2007 I attended a conference at the University of Sunderland titled 'Future Histories of the Moving Image', the focus of which was on archives and the place of 'ephemeral' film material, such as home movies, corporate films, amateur film and artists film. The keynote speakers, Rick Prelinger and Patricia Zimmerman combined inspired views and reflections on the rise of interest in both archivisation and amateur film and video practices, which often draw on found footage material. Another part of the conference was dedicated to a discussion on archives and sustainability using multiple arts organisations archives as the examples (Lux online, British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, AHDS Visual Arts, Tate, Rewind and a number of others). The conference acted as a catalyst to refocus the project work into something more self-consciously amateur, explorative and low-tech.

Over the course of 2007 – 2008 I began to film material again, taking cameras out on routes I had previously walked around, documenting changes, seeing what images would offer themselves. In addition, I recorded an interview with Len, a man who had spent his whole life working on the river and the canals as a lineman. He was particularly pro the Olympics as a way to bring money into the

area and I became interested in how issues of regeneration and development both divide and unite communities.

A chance trip to Lausanne for work led to a turning point in the project work. I was there on a corporate shoot and we had taken with us one of the next generation Digital Stills and Motion Cameras (DSMC) – a Canon 5D, Mark II. It is a small, domestic looking camera, but which shoots high definition moving image to a card. The cards we had gave us approximately 15mins of recording time. Because the cameras are domestic grade, they do not attract attention. What interested me most about them was the accessibility they offered and also the process; it was a lot like shooting film from reels, necessitating the same type of thinking that goes on before committing anything to film. Because sound capabilities were poor, it encouraged me to think much more about the images as images, rather than as a part of a sequence of finished film. Because it was possible to shoot both still and moving image sequences from the same camera, the relationships between photographic and cinematic thinking needed to be thought through as I worked. The camera we were working with had a 'lensbaby' attachment, which would skew recorded images out according to the diameter of the aperture fixture.[9] I was attracted to the type of 'intervention' this created in the images and the science-fiction quality the out-of-focus areas brought to the images.

The crew and I ended up with a few hours spare during the day and it was a crisp, clear spring morning. I had earlier walked by the lake and seen, by chance, the Olympic museum in Lausanne. Our schedule offered the opportunity and the crew agreed to take the camera and go for a walk around the park, where we shot a small sequence. That became the basis for a series of subsequent wanderings around the London Olympic site, focusing on a select number of walkways by the canal, in addition to several observational and photographic recces around the City of London, exploring much of the corporate architecture and systems I had become so familiar with in my work within a communications agency servicing the City.

During 2009 and 2010 the financial meltdown occurred and this led to another important theme, already by then being garnered in relation to the Olympic brand and the IOC and that is the at best skewed, and at worst corrupt, way big business conducts itself. The film thus became less about the Olympics themselves and more a (modest) critique of capitalism and consumer society.

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[9] A 'lensbaby' is a flexible lens mounting system that attaches a lens with the capability to alter the aperture manually to the front of a stills camera. Originally designed to work with SLR's it has been mounted to 'SLR' cameras that also shoot high definition video, such as the Canon EOS 5D.

5.2 Technology

Once I had perused a broad swathe of subject material, I began thinking about how to pull everything together. Over the course of 2007 and 2008, I began editing small sequences on standard Avid software. Then in 2009 my commercial workplace landed a large contract for which some bespoke software was commissioned. Cinegy is a Digital Asset Management system (DAM) and a digital workflow, enabling mostly broadcasters and small production companies to streamline their processes and create a workable archive of past material.

My interest in Cinegy is the way it integrates linear programme making with the facility to start to work with a dictionary of images, all associated with their own unique references (a 'Globally Unique Identifier' or GUI, pronounced 'gooey'). Material is recorded, usually digitally, via solid state (chip rather than tape). Cinegy can ingest any type of media, so the ability to pool material from a variety of sources is greatly enhanced. Conceptually and literally, Cinegy is a database, and the 'cinema' that emerges from it is built out of a structure different from (though still referencing), older cinematic languages. For example, Cinegy still uses icons that refer to film editing, such as clip bins and reels. Cinegy to me is a clear example of the direction the film / moving image industry is taking, to a) more database driven in its ways of both creating and understanding media and b) a greater appreciation that the past is of value in financial terms (exploitable media that can create revenue by forming part of a back catalogue). In both instances, reuse and remixing has moved to the fore.

Cinegy provides a technological platform by which to 'think through' the creative, editorial and aesthetic and/or political choices associated with building story material from sound and image sequences. It creates a reference point for techniques and methods previously part of a filmmakers intuitive, artistic capability – the process that ten Brink describes, or Keiller and even to an extent Petit – spatialised associations (because code in the form of meta-tagging, rather than the timelines is the reference point), the image as an image (because story language is no longer determined by the cause and effect relationships that have governed traditional narrative structures). In short, it frees the ability for cultural producers to assign meaning in a different way, encourages lateral thinking and associational editing. For me it indicates that the concept of database cinema, in terms of the production and thinking that goes into producing work, has moved into the mainstream.

Because the film arrives out of thinking through the material, Cinegy is quite literally a tool that enables me to 'write' image sequences much more fluidly. Content becomes more readily modular and remixable and this leads to the potential for play and the discovery of relationships between themes. Because the system encourages a reuse of material, images appear much more as the 'time

ready-mades' of Bourriaud's description. In the function of unique data referencing, each image literally does 'create its own legend' in the sense that Marker describes in *Sans Soleil*. As Manovich predicted, information science has become much more of a driver on which creative and editorial decisions rest.

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 Cinegy create the technical platform for a working process that film essayists have developed in order 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 (a GUI). 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 externalising 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.

5.3 Methodology

I began working in an entirely analogue way, printing out still images from material I had shot and literally cutting and pasting them into a workbook in order to find themes and groupings. Even though at the time it seemed like a redundant and very non-digital method of working, it created a very material relationship to the images I was working with. The process of selection, printing, treatment of still image sequences became a useful rehearsal for using Cinegy where the same processes are embedded digitally into the system.

In effect my cut and paste picture book became the start point for my creation of a project taxonomy – or dictionary of pictures (and sounds). A taxonomy in information science terms is a classification schema arranged in a hierarchy of parent-child terms. The pages I had already collated were the result of identifying themes. In these early storyboards I had worked not in a time-based manner (a chronology starting at the beginning), but rather in a textural / theme based manner – filling pages with images that seemed to group together.

From this process, I identified the following key themes, which in term informed my taxonomy:

- Corporate texture – logos, the blue wall, branding and sponsorship
- Canals – as a transport route, link with the past, man-made structures but which are fluid
- Material generated by other groups (Hackney Wick Curiosity Shop, Polkadots and Raindrops)
- Documentation of happenings or events (photographs of Peter Marshall, UEL's Living Archive project)
- Communities - past and present
- Architecture and change
- Poverty and wealth
- Security and surveillance
- Olympics and continuity (Beijing, London, Rio)
- Science Fiction

I had achieved a number of small edits during the year, but it wasn't until pooling the material into Cinegy that the writing of the film began. The first task was to recreate my image groupings in this new form. Part of my struggle to date has been simply handling the numerous different formats, all of which would create problems when I came to try and work with them. For the first time they were all in one place. From my initial research, paper edits and previous cuts, I created a taxonomy to apply to each image (please see appendix 1.2).

My methods resembled many of those described by ten Brink, Keiller and Petit – using spatial structures and principles to order material, allowing the material to suggest stories and interrogating the image. Cinegy became the working tool to enable this.

During the scripting process I used the keywords from my taxonomy tree to group themes around. I then would edit small sequences together that loosely drew relationships around the theme, for example 'local', 'Olympics', 'City', 'sci-fi' were four of the top-level terms. I started only with images (and sometimes sounds) and allowed the images to create their own relationships. I worked fluidly with still and moving image sequences. Parallel to this (but at a different time), I began collating script fragments. Once a small sequence (usually around two minutes in duration) had been assembled, I would record a scratch voice-over track and then re-cut the sequence, allowing new relationships to emerge. Any changes I would then feed back into the taxonomy. After a number of months, the four key themes had taken shape around which the basic structure of the film was set. Only at this point did I cut and paste all the individual sequences into one timeline and started working the same process through again to create the final 20 minute piece.

Research for the script itself involved firstly writing sections of loose, associative dialogue, in the first person, informed by the research I had conducted over the previous three years and drawing on my own thoughts and experiences of being in London during the period 2005 - 2010. The literal blue wall that encircled the London 2012 site in the early phases of construction found pictorial resonances with the blue-lit tunnels of the dockland railway joining Canary Wharf to the City, which in a macabre twist associated itself with the shaky mobile phone images taken in the Kings Cross tube tunnel immediately after the bombing of July 7th. Just as trains are associated with early cinema, so the tunnel became a type of science-fiction imbued time-travel metaphor for an essayistic working practice that tries in its own modest, idiosyncratic and personal way try to unpick the future from the present by reading the past.

6. Conclusion

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 Video 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 recognisable techniques or formal strategies. 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 which 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 unravelled 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).

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 problematise 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 realised in part by essayistic cinema, and the current drive toward interactivity is written into the structure of a way of filmmaking 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 in order to create, I thought of a new project. I would like to make a film entirely of component parts. Those images and sounds, selected for their resonance, their meaning only as images would be coded in order to be freed. 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 filmmaker 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 contextualise the changes that the information age brings to the cinema.

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Appendix 1: Working process:

1.1 Analogue cut and paste – forerunner to thematic ordering
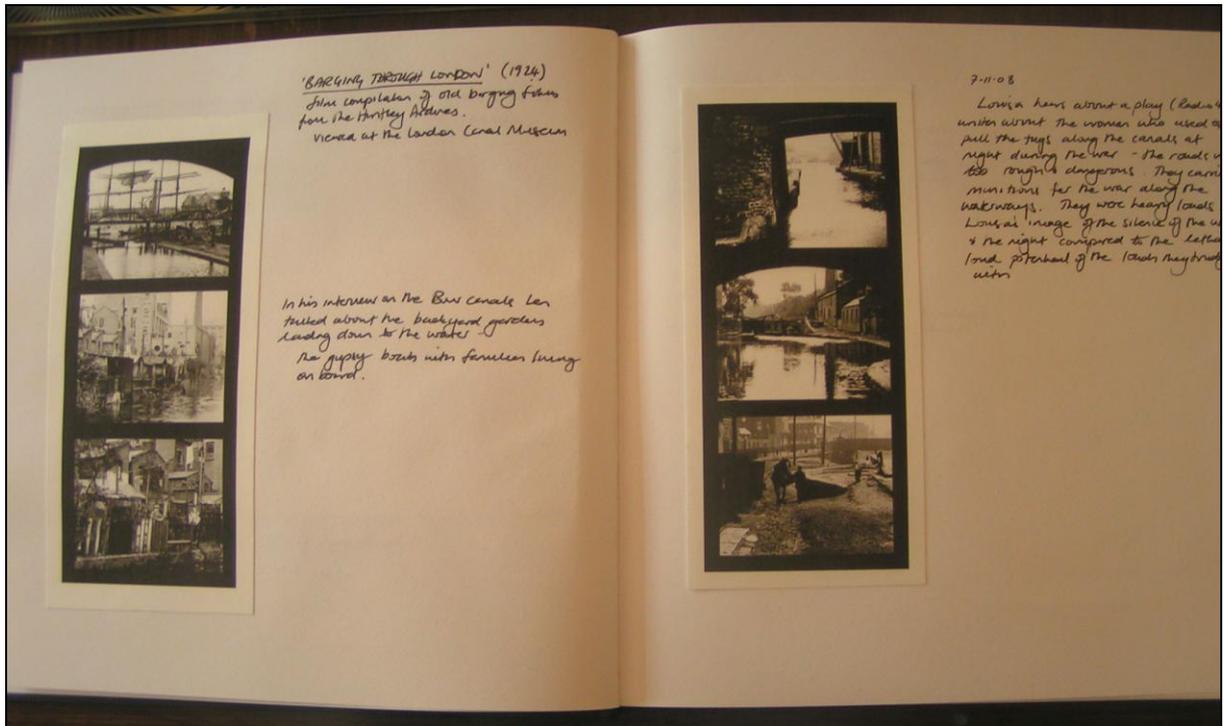
Fig 1: Screengrabs from 'Barging through London', ordered into thematic groupings with scriptnotes.
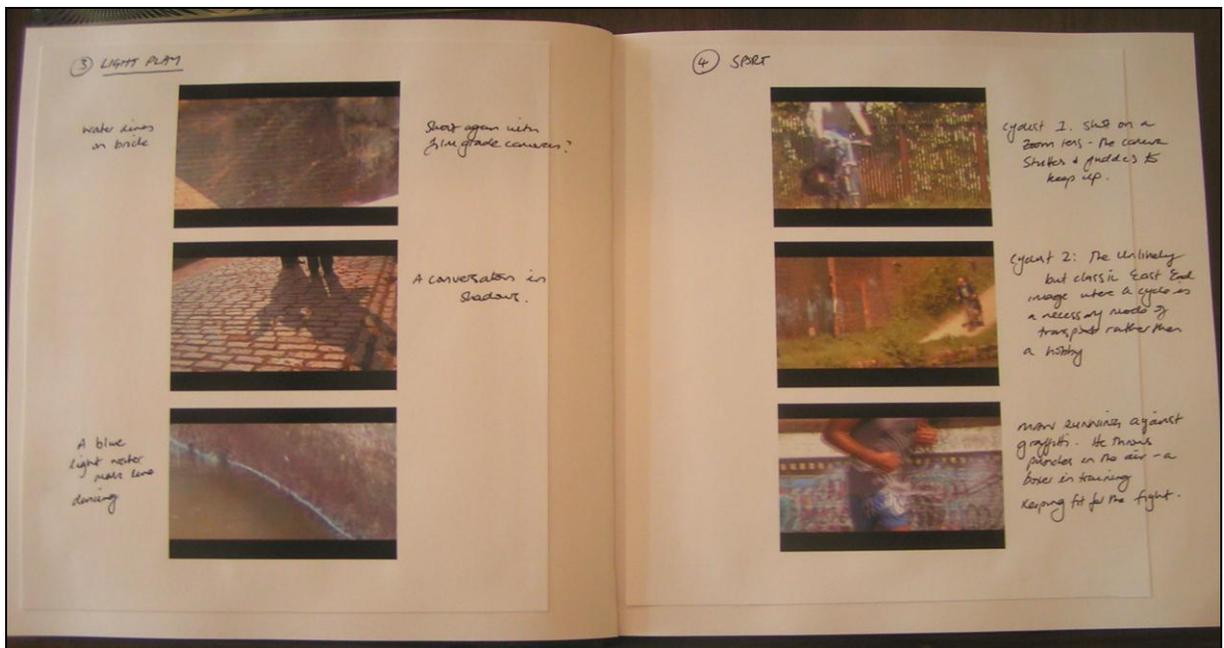
Fig 2: Screenshots from various video material, again ordered into thematic groupings with scriptnotes.
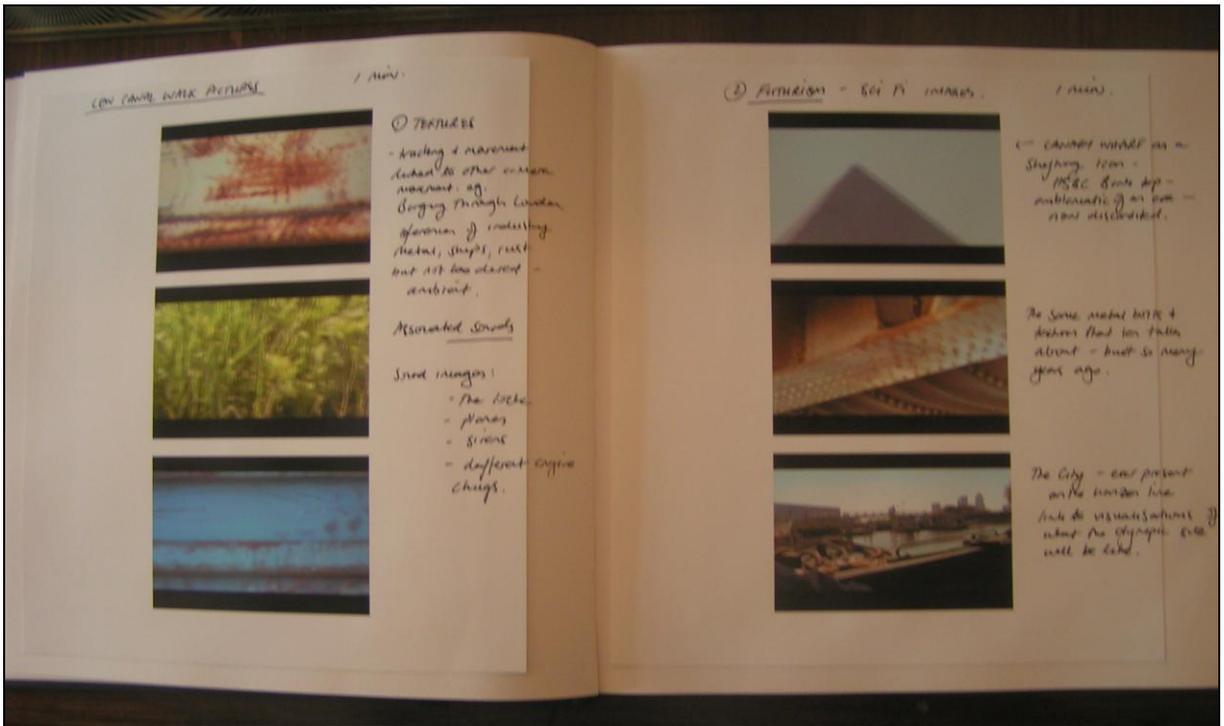
Fig 3: Screenshots from various video material, again ordered into thematic groupings with scriptnotes.

1.2 Taxonomy for The Blue Wall

Archive
    Glimpse
    Fragment
        Films
        Photography
        Text

Local
    Community
        Group
        Activism
    Solidarity
    Leisure
        Rowing
        Cycling
        Walking
        Boating
        Fishing

Journey
    Red
        train
        boat
        bus

Green
    Algae
        Growth
    Water
        Depth

Blue
    Wall
    Tunnel
    Sponsorship

Brand
    Olympics
        IOC
        Five rings
            History of the five rings
        Logo
    Corporate sponsorship
        Logo
        Gold
            Llloyds
            Deloitte
            Visa

Youth

    Graffiti

        Mouth with teeth

        Tags

Development

        Regeneration

            Planning

        Industrial

            Dig, demolish, design

        Construction

            Debris

Olympics

    IOC

        Corruption

    Olympic Delivery Authority

        Dig Demolish Design

    Beijing

    London

        East London

            Stratford

                Stadium

    Rio de Janeiro

    Lausanne

        Lake Geneva

        Museum

            Columns

            Statues

            Olympic Flame

Sport

    Competition

    Amateur sport

        Surrealist games

    Doping

        Scandal

    Athletes

City

    Canary wharf

    Millennium Dome

    Swiss Re building

        Gerkhin

        icon

    Finance

        Wealth

        Poverty

        Financial crash

        Recession

        Bank bailouts

        Bonus

            Champagne bars

Terrorism
    Kings Cross
        Tunnel
    Bombs
    Security
        Physical
            Blue wall
        Virtual
            CCTV
        Police
        Weapons
    Protest
        Crowd control
            Suspect
                Arrest
        Enforcement
            Repression

Time
    Future
        Planning
        Vision
        Science Fiction (Sci-Fi)

    Past
        History
            Historical
        Documentary

Water
    Canal
        Lock
            Water level
            Rust
    Canal boat
        Longboat
    Waterways
    Waste
        Debris

    Reflection
        Mirror
        Abstract

Interview with Joram ten Brink
University of Westminster, 14.00 Friday 5ᵗʰ December 2008

OLK: Jay Leyda defines essay films as creating meaning out of found footage fragments – how does this relate to your own work or your understanding of an essay film?

JTB: His book is about found image - I always thought that the found image discourse is something separate from the thing I deal with. The process of the PhD started accident by meeting John Stezaker – I started to talk to him about all the super8 stuff I had – he was interested in the found image and he tried to convince me to work it all out in terms of the found image he said 'this is your own personal image archive – can you do something about the found image' – but it didn't work. I went to Middlesex and completely moved the centre of my research away from the idea of found images – started to look at the material as rushes and how do I look at rushes. Jay Leyda is much more defined within the world of the found image, which starts with Schub and his book is good, but even when I read his book – the only thing I really like is *Films Beget Films*, which I took on as a mantra for any film that you make – Jean Rouch also used that expression, that whatever he does has got basically one intention – that other people will make films following his films and I think this is a very nice way of looking at how you make films as a process – always create and opening for another film to be made rather than as a final statement.

If I'm a purist about what I consider to be an essay film in my thesis, I consider the filmmaker role in the middle and the creation – the search for a personal voice and so on – I think it's a bit limited in the way one works around found images, because I think found images is a completely different discourse about interpretation, about memory, about re-editing other people's work, which is not really at the core of what essay films are all about in terms of how I understood them at the time. I can see how he might call those sorts of films essay films, for lack of another definition, maybe he looks at it as an essay – you know as a process. Because I also linked it to Montaigne, and to Montaigne referencing existing material is very important – also to Barthes and these people, because some of the playfulness, but also some of the authority of the essay comes from the reliance on archive and indeed in my film I do go back from time to time to archive, but I used it in a kind of Montaignian way and not like Leyda, which is a kind of whole film made of…. (found footage fragments), but there are other ways to describe essay film, rather than as the way I choose to describe it, but I can see that there are too many other issues in the way he defines essay films – you open up a whole new field of research, into the found image, which as I said initially... the collage from Picasso, all these kind of things, which I think in my thesis I kind of allude to this from time to time, but more in the context of montage and collage and, rather than that the core of the work is the found image, which is not the case in the essay film.

OLK: In your work it comes across in the thesis and I think very much in the film as well, this relationship between montage, the editing, the actual process that you use. And I remember when you came to the College you talked a bit more specifically about the bins and bins of material that you were sorting your way through. Can you talk a little bit about how you see the relationship between constructing the film and your actual understanding of essay films – how you define those for yourself?

JTB: I won't claim there is only one way to do it. I constructed it as a kind of experimental work – I constructed it through a kind of negation… there is always a problem with any kind of work that is non-linear, let's call it experimental - you know exactly what it is not, but you

never know what it is in advance, so in terms of the construction, I knew what I was not going to do, rather than what I was going to do.

I knew, for example, if you want to make a documentary film around subjects – or around the rushes that I had - in a documentary what you would do, you would take all the China material separately, the Indian, the Italian and you put them in separate bins and you construct a story out of the film. And what you do in documentary of course is that you impose a story on the rushes and you try to fit it – how a bit from China can represent this, how a bit from India and so on… so I knew I didn't want to look at the material as having any documentary value as such – I want to look at them as images – what I called the building blocks of cinematic image – of an image, of a sound, or a relationship between the image – it doesn't really matter where it comes from. What physically happens – that every single super8 that had to be reprinted on 16. I had 80 – 100 rolls of super8 that were printed frame by frame on super16 and they were printed in I don't know what order we printed them – so it came from the lab on big 16mm rolls and that's how I worked – as it came from the lab, I never cut them and hung them in the bins, like you do – or you did with film – or like you put them in separate bins in Final Cut Pro – and I just worked constantly from big reels and I refused to split them. And I just started to look for images, for connections between images and so on and it took me four years. Not fulltime, because I was working fulltime, but in the evenings – I had the Steinbeck in the garage and really I created little clusters of sequences and this is basically to see – one image suggested another image and created stories and in the end I chickened out and called it 'and other tales' – the film at one level is a collection of tales – there are strong narrative elements in the film. This is what I found interesting – to play with narrative and non-narrative in the same film and I tried one solution to that, but how does it impact on the definition of an essay film? I don't think it is important. It would be interesting to know how Montaigne came to write his stuff – it comes across as freehand, but it is properly structured. It reads as a stream of consciousness, but it's hard to talk about stream of consciousness with a film because it is so technologically driven and the image is more… you are not working with a pen and you can pretend that a moment comes out, but maybe Montaigne wrote like this and maybe this is how he arrived from France to Peru in his beautiful essays, but maybe he did it like that but in film the sheer fact that we watch and watch and watch the film just to cut it – the consciousness – it looks nice on paper – you can say 'my film can be read like a stream of consciousness, but you don't make it like that.

OLK: On this issue of technology – you talk in your thesis about the self-reflexivity in film and in these two films, *Man With a Movie Camera* and *Sunless* and the 'camera-stylo' of Vertov reappearing in the video technologies of Marker. You say you don't really see technology as forming a big part of the essay film, but given that many of the great film essayist reflect on the process of writing – to what extend do you see the technologies of cinema being a necessary part of the self-reflexivity of the genre?

JTB: They are not necessary, but yes they can be used – you can also look – of course *Man With a Movie Camera* is about the camera and in the video by Marker it is the same thing, but I don't think it is a necessary ingredient in it – in my film there is very little – I don't do anything technological to the work and I don't refer to the editing process up front – I think it's a very strong element that is part of the dialogue that you have, but self-reflexivity can also be achieved through different means – through repetition, questioning and image over and over again, isolating parts of the film to make aware the process of making films – one way is to do it through technology, through reprocessed images, or like having the beautiful man with a movie camera, the animation. I think yes, in Cavalcanti yes, with the freeze frame – yes the essence of a freeze frame, you stop the image and if you stop the movement you kind of say to people 'look there's no movement here', or you highlight the movement in the neighbouring shots, but the technology itself it's not a… I think what happens with *Man With*

a Movie Camera… and I have a student now who makes an essay film with a mobile phone and he relates all his work back to Vertov, I think what happens to both Vertov and Marker – they happen to work in a technological era, where the big breakthrough came – Vertov had this camera, he had this impulse of doing an essay film…and you know, what do I do

OLK: Yes, but do you think there is always an urge to interrogate – I mean, the essay as a form for me is always is to find the meaning and interrogate the process of writing, or interrogate a subject, you know there's a very self-conscious attack that goes on…

JTB: Yes, so the interrogation is very pronounced in periods where, I mean, I'm sure *Sunless* it's really very early stages of video processing and you can see Chris marker being absolutely fascinated – 'I've been making films for twenty years in some way and suddenly I can interrogate it in such a different way – I've got my boxes and I can reprocess it in so many different ways' – in the same way that Vertov saw this camera and thought 'oh my god what can I do with it – if I invert it, or if I stop the frame' and so on – or like Marcus is doing it now with the mobile phone – yes so it's inbuilt in the… and then Montaigne, Montagine in a sense is also revolutionary in his time because in his time it was all written in Latin and he personalised it and wrote in French, which was not really done – and Astruc is also – I mean there is the technology, but it leads to other things, I mean Astruc it lead to synch sound which I argue in my book about Jean Rouch is the impulse behind verité, it's taking it to its extreme and now really use the camera as a pen, but then I don't think Astruc even talked about the technology, he only talked about the process of the auteur having the control over the material…

OLK: One of the relationships I'm quite interested in – and I've yet personally to conclude whether there is any relationship is when Manovich talks about database filmmaking and the whole movement of cinema into a computational form – it seems to me, strangely, that on an intuitive basis that there is a relationship between the kinds of techniques, or processes, or artistic methods that one uses in making an essay film – as you talk about in the process of making your film – of going through the material and finding a logic, finding a structure in it and that then determines the output. Manovich talks about this in database filmmaking - the computer takes the place of the artist if you like, do you see – leading on from this question about technology and the interrogation of images, do you see the essay film as taking any particular form in contemporary culture now? Do you see it morphing into any particular…

JRB: Doesn't he cite *Man With a Movie Camera*?

OLK: Yes, a lot.

JTB: As a database film?

OLK: And surprisingly – I don't know if you've seen his piece of work, *Soft Cinema…*

JTB: No.

OLK: It's extraordinary from the point of view of the subject territory – its look and feel – it comes across very essayistically…

JTB: Of course he himself made the connection – I never read it, but as I understand he makes the connection between Vertov as the first database filmmaker, who collects images and tries to make sense of them in a sense. But the essay film is… I know very little of Manovich and these ideas of database – in that sense I'm still stuck a bit in Modernism, in

avant-garde rather than in new kind of ways of… but the idea of the essay – I mean in the same way that Roland Barthes gave it a sense of contemporaneity by the fact that he started to write in that style at the end of his life and he became big and very, very popular and all of a sudden this writing had currency, but then you can say later on that this kind of drifted out, but you can still say that his influence was considerable. In the same way that if now essay film as such has got a place to play in the – I don't know, I mean – Malcom Le Grice – he did a film, you know this big cycle of films that he did – he was working he, he was my boss and he's the one to ask because he always works on the edge of technology – that's really his drive throughout all his career and that makes him a pure modernist and a fantastic artist and without knowing each other he did his big film and I did my big film in parallel and at the end we had a conversation about it and he said 'how did you do the film' and I said 'how did you do the film?' – and of course Malcom did it in his own way – computers were the new baby and instead of doing what I did he took every shot, he logged it in and then he said 'well, I cut my film according to the timecode and database and I thought I would find some kind of solution in this' – but he said 'I don't think I found a better solution' although I think the film is great. And I said 'at the end of the day you only used it instead of me taking pen and paper or memorising all the shots and I think you kind of transferred this function to the computer – kind of gave keywords.' And he said 'yes when keywords matched, I matched the shots'. But, ja… it's just tricking your brain, I mean it's not really what a computer does – or let's put it this way, without a computer you could have done the same. He said 'yes, of course, but I wanted to see what the computer could do for me' – and I don't know if he calls himself an essay filmmaker, but I don't know if this particular sense of essay is a project that is very relevant to a very current or contemporary way of current technological development, because at the end of the day what this technological development.. you still talk about a single screen piece of work, which is projected, or… at the end of the day it's the same – the fact that we don't go to a cinema and watch it on the big screen and I think the essay is a single screen piece of work rather than a wonderful installation, which of course something else is in place, so I don't know how far newish computer stuff, or technology can… I mean what do they do with the HD camera – they just make the same look – the better they are, the better they look like a film camera. The better the Final Cut Pro, the better it resembles film editing

OLK: Yes, I think there are all those various things about technology that one can dismiss out of hand. What interests me about it particularly is the form – in relationship to contemporary culture, is this idea of fragments, of working with a very fragmented situation and particularly the relationship between meaning and fragments, because there are a lot of fragments and a lot of technology and a lot of stuff out there in the archive, or not out there in the archive – on the internet, on the phone or wherever and the essay as a form, the things that I find appealing and compelling about it is this search for meaning and that you find and match particular ways of bringing fragments together.

JTB: But I don't think it's… but you know it from Montaigne and Virginia Woolf and the modernists – I think it existed all the time. Yes maybe now we have more fragments at our disposal, but I think that kind of fundamental thinking, about breaking things into fragments and making meaning out of fragments existed at least since Montaigne, so and at least since early modernism, and even Ronald Barthes in the 70's who made his books of fragments and they became really popular and even best sellers in a sense. So I don't think there is something in particular to us now… that we are more now… I would also claim that there's a limit to the amount of fragments that we can take anyway.. and maybe there are more sources, but even in the 70's and 80's and 90's there was still enough visual material around (me: cp George's lab on growth of the internet – pushing and pulling media up online) to fragment and to make sense of it – you don't need to wait until the last 20 years to say 'now our world is fundamentally is different, because now it's got a huge wealth of visual

information' – it has in a sense but the question is does it go linear? So that the more visual information the more we can cope with visual information – I would question that… I think that to a degree there is a limit to how much visual information you can take and I can see the mobile phone film – you can argue with him that he had much more freedom, but at the end of the day it comes to not a lot of rushes and how much could he intellectually take in? How many fragments? Because he can say oh I can film 24hours a day… it didn't work out like this because when he sat down and started to think about what he was going to do he hit the same glass ceiling, which is the same way you know of processing, so I would question this kind of direct link between technology and…

OLK: I think my argument is less that there is any difference, but it's more that does the essay film – as a form, have any particular uses – is there anything in that method of working, or way of thinking about archives, fragments; things that one comes across…

JTB: Yes

OLK: That has any particular resonance in a culture of…

JTB: Yes, if you talk about… Yes, you're definitely right, I think you can make that argument that this can be, as a methodology, a very useful methodology to make sense, but not necessarily the other way around.

OLK: so if it is a methodology that is helpful, in what way would you see it as being useful in a very fragmented, overpopulated mediascape? How do you see it as being most interesting, perhaps rather than useful?

JTB: Ja, I mean it can kind of get the, get the (long pause) … in one way which is very simplistic and sort of reflects - you can argue that the kind of complexity and the kind of multi-layering that we have now kind of… on the other hand I think it's a very modernist, not post-modernist – because it's so complex, anything goes – on the contrary the essay is a very coherent and very structured and if anything very avant-garde, very modernist… it's not a post-modernist impulse, of putting things because they are just there or just… it's much more organised than that, so yes, I mean you can argue that the essay can project this kind of work and can project a very interesting viewpoint of a huge… of a very big spectrum, but I still think you have to answer to yourself and to the people why you make those particular choices and your ability to deal with is also limited so as I said before, although there are tons and millions more choices now, but our ability to deal with it is still limited I think to what we've always been able to deal with, so we are not becoming capable, our brain of five times or fifty times to absorb more information because there is more information now, there is a limit – we absorb maybe more than we could before, but it's not linear and so… it could be – you could argue that it could be a useful tool to present, you know, a non-narrative, non-linear structure to present a methodologicaly-unmethodological kind of thing, but you can see that Adorno already wrote about it in the 50's, I mean it is not necessarily something which is wow, is now – a new world, a new horizon, which other forms are absolution new forms and new horizons and so on, but this one I'm not absolutely sure, but I think you can use it in an argument to say yes, I find this useful myself for dealing with…

OLK: Overload

JTB: yes, overload, or… Philip Lopate – he is actually a writer, I used another quote of his in the thesis – about slaying the bull

OLK - you can't be a butcher –

JTB: Yes - I think it is very true and you see it in Marker and Vertov and Cavalcanti done with a finesse that is not there in avant-garde, documentary or boring experimental work. He comes from a much more journalistic popular journal writing rather than Montaignian or Roland Barthes or much more or Adorno or so on so he can lament in the age of postmodernism where everything goes, the authoritative voice, which is very strong in the essay can be lost, but there is still very good essay writing going around by quasi academics, if you look at the New Yorker which it is high level journalism, semi-academic, semi-artistic writing, I think you can still identify very authorial voices… he also wrote it a while ago and now there is a rebound (33.47) from postmodernism anyway – Tate modern, from the last two years all the exhibitions are modernist.

OLK: The authorial voice is back!

JTB: Yes, - the good old fashioned Kadinsky…there is a real interest back in the 20's and 30s in a way that hasn't been there in the 70s 80s or 90s
I showed (Lopate) the film in NY – he said 'this is not an essay film' – what would you call it? I love the film – what would you call it? - Poetic documentary… he didn't make that connection, which is fine. But he is not really interested in film as such

OLK: Do you think subjectivity has come back into the frame?

JTB: What now? I don't know subjectivity, but at least there is a willingness and openess to discuss it in more modernist terms, rather than in the way that the last 20years it was discussed as – there are no sacred cows. But now the Tate Modern is willing to say 'hes' the greatest artist of the 20th Century…' and so on. If the work that is done now reflects that, I'm not sure – work is still strongly influenced by non authoritarian voices… it moves in a funny way it's like the mobile phone - it moves back to early modernism with the fascination with technology. And that's modernism, it's not post-modernism – Moholy-Nagy, Vertov and so on. Back to the roots of the avant-garde – pure modernism. In that sense we are producing pieces of work – there is a real radical shift with technology, but that's exactly the same as in 1910 – Walter Benjamin writes about it and all the commentary - there is a huge shift now (in the early 20th century) and what do we do with it? with technology and what do we do with it and in that sense it is very similar – maybe the outcome will be completely different from modernism and avant-garde, but you know, the fascination with the machine, is the same as the fascination with the computer – it's exactly what Leger and the Dada people pulled apart…

OLK: - what do we do with it ?

JTB: with a photocopier – you know, we pull it apart – this is absolutely staggering – and that's exactly where we are. Maybe it comes every hundred years – this crucial point with technology – last time it produced modernism, this time, I don't know what it will produce

OLK: On the issue of voices and authorship – I wouldn't describe myself as an expert on essay films, but they certainly do have a lone male authorial voice? – how do you see gender as playing out in essay films?

JTB: I think it is just it's true – I must say that I (long pause) – there were very few women camera operators in Vertov's time. It's true that you see it's very male, but I don't know that there is a reason other than the usual reason that men control everything. I mean you can look at the work of Agnes Varda – I'm trying now to champion her work everywhere, you know - she is a forgotten heroine and some of her work is essayistic and fulfils those kind of

things. She is a giant, but I don't' know if other…. - Chantel Ackerman, she does not do essay films, but her New York film is amazing - it is fantastic – is it an essay? I don't think so – but there is a lot of personal voice and gender comes up, as with Agnes Varda. Again a woman who should be much more studied – in England they are not studied at all – in Europe they are absolutely revered for every new.. very important. Other than that I don't think there is something inherent in that type of work which is a kind of gender biased voice that comes through – I mean, Virginia Woolf was extraordinarily influenced by Montaigne in some of her writing you can say this is a non male voice who used this form to a degree. I wouldn't know other examples – or why, I'm sure there are more current people that I haven't looked at because in the last few years I was kind of… I dived into another world and I did a book on Rouch and now I work on another project that is very Rouchian in a sense – I don't follow those things as closely in the last 10 years. Because I wrote it in 1999

OLK: You did complete another essay film recently, *The Journey*

JTB: did you see it?

OLK: I didn't see it, no

JTB: I can burn you a DVD if you want

OLK: that would be brilliant. I mean, what had sort of changed in terms of your relationship to the essay film?

JTB: It's a very strange one, it's a very difficult one because I think that in a sense is the background to it – I went on the trans-Siberian express with this group of the conference and I said I will make a film for the museum of modern art in Helsinki which will not be a narrative it will be no travelogue – I will make an essay film. Technology is very interesting, so I took a bolex because there was no electricity on the train and a tripod and I walked 8 days up and down the train and I filmed and all the Russians called me the man with the movie camera…

OLK – (laughs) – that's lovely!

JTB: … which for me was, phew – the best ever compliment! Because I really walked with this thing - I wasn't aware of it that I walked everywhere with this tripod on my back…

OLK: (laughs) Did they use this as a description or did they know what they were referencing – Vertov?

JTB: yeah, yeah they knew - I was constantly changing reels – a wonderful experience – again, I just shot stuff – the only big difference was there was an Australian performance artist with me on the train. He didn't know what he would do, so I said let's do something together. So I got him to perform…he's very much a space performer, so he tried diff spaces on the train. And I said, OK, let's work together and some of it he's in the film – unlike the man who couldn't feel it has a character there – he represents me and my thing which I never did before this thread of a man who is there and I found it hell. The problem is that now I was very self-conscious about the process and I couldn't work in the same way anymore in this free way

OLK: so do you think there's something inherent…

JTB: Ja

OLK: Is there a degree of freedom or intuition about a working method?

JTB: Ja, it's very difficult. And the film is not a great success. People say 'ah, why can't you make more essay films!' and I say I can't make any more essay films – it's very, very difficult - Level 5 I think is a flop is a bad film because he tried to recreate Sunless. And level 5…Have you seen it?

OLK: I know it, but I've never seen it

JTB: Level 5 was premiered at the Berlin Film Festival and I went to see it. Everyone was on a high from *Sunless* and this was the big thing but everyone couldn't believe how weak the film was – partly I think it's being self conscious of the process of sunless and tried to recreate it in a lot of similar ways and it doesn't work. And I think the journey didn't work – I mean all of my films have trains in them, and a kind of like this. I mean, people kind of liked it, but I find it very difficult now. I do collect images all the time and what do I do with them? I'm now so self-conscious, I know exactly how it works – so in a sense you can say that each piece of work is unique the only thing you can really go back to is Montaigne – each piece of writing is unique – no two essays are the same – so that's a very good question - how do you do two essay films the same? And I think it's very, very difficult.

For me to do that essay film was to get things out of my system in understanding what cinema is. It gave me a very interesting insight – at least that's what I claimed I did - to go back to basics - to investigate, to interrogate the image, the sound and the editing from scratch after making films for so long – well, not so long, but enough to have one understanding of making a film. And again, I didn't set it up to be an essay, I set it up to be an investigation into film.

OLK: Do you think essays arrive by chance?

JTB: they arrive by chance, or by the sheer desire to investigate – and I think that's absolutely true about Montaigne and Virginia Woolf and Chris Marker in a sense and Roland Barthes – you can see his writing kind of developed into trying to understand the essence of writing. It's not so much chance, but more the desire to investigate and that is why I would put it more as an Avant-garde than a documentary because it's got that pure kind of avant-garde impulse - to look at the materiality, to look at the structure – to look at anything and everything that is connected within the medium, rather than coming out of an established discourse – you say often, well, I'm trying to square a circle – whereas if you are wanting to be successful you don't do it – you produce a brilliant piece of fiction, or a documentary. So the essay in that sense really sits apart from – and very few people agree with me – they all say no they're documentaries – I think they have to be put inside the world of avant-garde filmmaking. But then you can also have the argument that documentary came out of avant-garde, historically anyway – from Joran Stevens to Flaherty to Vertov, to Kaufmann to his brother, to Vigo to Cavalcanti. These are all giants of the avant-garde. In a sense Documentary was the arty bit of making films - Documentary comes only in the 50's – or the late 30's – I don't know, with Grierson maybe. Documentary was always artistic – there were a whole group of them and they were cinefiles – interested in the cinema in any other way other than making Hollywood movies or big costume drama which was the order of the day

OLK: I agree with you – I think that essay films are something that's different from documentary. And for me it's not important whether they are or they aren't, it's simply the frame that you put around a piece of work – and for me, as a viewer, or as a reader in some cases, it's a more interesting context to think about these pieces of work in relation to

poetry, or in relation to avant-garde and specifically looking at those techniques within a history – and that's where for me the difference are because documentary – yes it's wide and encompassing, but it comes up from a different impulse, I think

JTB: ja, ja - It does – in my thesis I disagree with Renov – my argument was that there was a crisis in documentary because people realised that documentaries are… are… and my reading of his work in the 90's – he changed his mind and it would be interesting to read his latest stuff – there was a sense of a crisis – we got to know that traditional BBC with it's authoritarian voice and structure, then video diaries, thinks essays are the new documentary – he decides to encompass and broaden it. Some of it I agree – the confessional, the private voice, but he also puts Montaigne – he uses it to argue the essay film as a new way of documentary and I don't agree – too much removed from the – like you said, the major impulse of documentary that lies somewhere else

There is a very nice, and I don't know if it's relevant or not – I always liken it to Johan van der Keuken and he is not an essayist as such, but he used to say that – I tried to stop explaining the world to other people and to understand the world to myself' and in a sense the documentary is very much about explaining the world.

OLK: that's a nice definition

JTB: Ja and I learned it from him – at certain points he said it and I though 'oh, that makes sense' and at certain times people asked what is *The Man Who Couldn't Feel* – and I said this is the switch-over from explaining the work to the world to understand the world. And if you take this argument further there's a lot to be said and you can develop this argument - a very interesting way of looking at film – and he said and of course once you stop explaining the world, other things are open to you and then you use the cinema as a tool – it is more inclusive with your own work and you start to develop your ideas through the cinema to understand what's going on, rather than to be forced to use the cinema to explain your ideas to somebody else, which is a different process and I don't think is very interesting. And the strength of his work – it's very interesting, because a lot of it –they are not necessarily essays – I don't know if you know his film *An Eye Above the Well*? – about India

OLK: I haven't seen it, no

JTB: … and Amsterdam, which is a five hours film. Are they documentaries? Are they essays? – I don't know – they are not self-reflexive, they are very traditional, very linear, but the subject matter and the way he deals with it is tops – the way he feeds you and saying 'look, this is my view about the world' there is something much more inclusive and personal and meditative, which essay films are the same thing can be said about Sunless – you know it's not to explain the world, You see it as a real serious attempt to understand the world – man with a movie camera was the same, - although people will put on it all this political stuff, which is there, but you can feel his impulse is not to tell you this is the image of Russia – it is something much more deep and sophisticated, and much more profound – it's trying to understand, with the camera and to create with the camera a new world

OLK: so, At it's heart – you see essay film making as primarily a very personal pursuit, but in a way, uncharacterisable in a sense…

JTB: Yes – I think I say in the thesis - it is impossible to box it in –you can put some kind of argument to try to understand and put some kind of markers around, but you cannot put it in a box and put a label on it – but again, if you read serious work on Montaigne, people will

say again, don't try to box it, because as soon as you do it you pick up another 20 essays of his, which don't conform. So I think it that sense, yes, it's a very…

OLK: Elusive?

JTB: …not elusive, but what you can do is point out some major issues that are helpful to understand the form, but not like narrative structures that you can define. That's why it's very difficult to reuse it – even for me as an artist, it's very difficult for me to go back and trace my steps, to make another film in that style

OLK: That's interesting – what you say about… almost the sense I get is if you try to box it, you exclude yourself from being able to use the medium?

JTB: Yes.

OLK: In a way, it's like you're saying part of the process of doing the film and the thesis – of writing and defining it made it impossible for you to use the same (toolset?) –so is it a self-cancelling process?

JTB: yes – though I think…. Do you want a copy?

OLK: Yes…

JTB: It was a very painful experience – and maybe the fact that I used a character (ref. The Journey) – so I thought I could salvage it by having a character walking through the film, but I was self-conscious that if he takes over I do an injustice to my ideas of an essay film – it worked to a degree I think – people quite liked it - see what you think – I found it very difficult – and I don't know what to do, because again I'm collecting stuff and again I don't know what to do with it. I worked with the musicians again – the sound is as important as the image – in essay films – it always is, but in essay films is very important – in both films I worked with the same group of musicians and I don't know if I can work with them again because we sort of exhausted a bit and they do other stuff. So it will be very interesting to see what I can do with new material

OLK: Do you describe the images you collect as an archive?

JTB: no I describe them as notes – I don't have a … also the images that were based, which were the super 8 stuff that was based on film, I definitely as material that maybe one day used in a film and if anything as kind of questioning anthropology – I was a bit trained – what happens when you go to another country and take pictures…. I knew when I went to china or India I am not going to use the images as documentary – that I'd have to go and collect enough images to explain to the viewer 'what is china about' - I just picked up images which I thought (and no-body has an answer), but which I thought were good – which I thought have enough… this is really what bothers me all the time, even when I was doing the essay film - the image as an image as an image – what is dramatically inherent in an image that makes it useable later on – so I just looked at images and collected them not as an archive, but as images that I thought in my unconscious mind and view as strong images that can be used later on for some type of work – that was the only thing that I could justify taking them, so even if I take images now, I will not take them as documentary – so I go and see something and I just take it. And it has to be a good cinematic image – full stop. Be it the drama, the aesthetics, the composition, the action, the character – there is something there that has to work for me to fulfil those type of criteria – 'this is a good image' – sound is very good, is the drama within the image – which is the best, is the drama between the sound

and image – there has to be something there which makes me think that is an interesting image

OLK: So what…Because I'm doing a lot of my work looking at the way that people make essay films – or relate to them, partly because there are institutional archives and then this whole grey area that I call 'personal archives' – it seems to me there's a very strong thread that runs through essay making, which is about somehow pulling things into one's…. relating to images personally and then creating something new from them…

JTB: Yes…

OLK: How do you understand the word archive?

JTB: I have a problem with them – I made this big archive of arts council movies on the net – and then everyone says 'ah you are the expert on archives' and I say no - I don't have any views on this to tell the truth – I never thought Uriel Orlow (a member of staff at Westminster) – works with archives, reinterpreting existing images – I'm interested to a degree, like how I used it in my film, reinterpreting archive images and I think this is an interesting way of working - it's not something that I personally am interesting in solely – I couldn't do it - I would need to have some of my own material – even though you can say with archive you can make it your own, and reinterpret it and recut it - I don't have strong views on this – the only think I would do with archive – to have as strong images, but also to use them as evidence – Montaigne and the old notion of citation of the classics, not used as authority – in documentary archive is used as authority, in essay film the impulse is something different – to reinterpret it or to use it just as image – maybe what you're doing – you make it personal – rather than use it as evidence for a historical… which is what documentary does. As with Montaigne – before Montaigne you could only write serious pieces if you covered them with Virgil and so on, because that was the authority of your thinking, which still in documentary – if you bring me archive material 'it happened' but in your case, what I did was… but I have very little to say about it because haven't really thought about it deeply enough… so you will do it…

OLK: (laughs) Ah yes, probably I'm thinking about it too deeply. That's really fantastic – thank you. Did you have any other passing thoughts? Anything about the essay film that is hitherto unmentioned?

JTB: (laughs) – No, you're welcome to come again if you want. And if you want me to look at some stuff – or read some stuff, I'd be happy to do it…. I wrote it 10 years ago by now and what happened to me – it was a strange experience, - the film became very successful as a film – I travelled a year around the world with the film and of course I had reaction that were not academic – I wrote the thesis after I finished the film – so it has a completely different life in my world of the film – the way it was received in Japan for example was very interesting. Even this little one (the journey) – it was shown here and two young kids came and said 'man this is a real piece of meditation – you can really get high on this piece'

OLK: (Laughs) that's the thing I love about films – once you've done them, they become their own thing…

JTB: Exactly, and I showed it in Israel in the big film festival and these sort of kids walked to me – 16… and they just used this expression in Hebrew, like – how would you say… 'it's the coolest film I've ever seen in my life… so cool'… they come to me on the stage like that you know…

OLK: Laughs

JTB: just like that … and in Berlin this other woman comes to me and says 'I was in therapy for 20 years – I should have just watched your film…

OLK (laughs)

JTB: - that's it! – I wasted all my money! On 20 years of analysts and there it is! – this is a pure piece of psychoanalysis! I said 'what!' 'Yes, this is a piece of pure psychoanalysis – through and through' – I said 'I didn't know' and then I showed it to a friend of mine – a psychoanalyst who said 'of course - don't' you see that – and he started to read the film to me… so of course you get a very… no I can't… so I had this kind of split life and then I had the thesis came and then some other people are quoting it in other theses. I just read a thesis on the essay film, which I must say was not very good… and Renov wrote I think on essay films in the last few years – yes, I think there's enough. I didn't think about it so deeply since because I was involved in other things.

Interview with Patrick Keiller
Royal College of Art, 14.00 Friday 12th December 2008

OLK: Can I turn your attention to this idea of fragments; broadly speaking, I'm going to claim your work as film essays. I'm not sure how you relate to that. What relationship do you see in terms of the essay tradition, both literary and cinematic?

PK: Well, I wasn't really aware of it until people started telling me that I was in it, which isn't as though that I wasn't aware of the films. But I wasn't aware that it was an established term, and it possibly wasn't as established then as it is now.

OLK: You reference things like Montaigne in your work – literary essay…

PK: I hadn't come across the notion that, for instance, Sans Soleil might be an essay film, a sort of film, but I don't mind. I think I would take exception to the term city symphony, but an essay film, it sounds a bit... there is a slight worry about it, which is that one has somehow committed oneself to a genre, which I wouldn't like to think that I'd done, mainly because one does what one can. And the idea that you've actually chosen... I think that's the thing that's objectionable thing about it. The idea that one has chosen the path that is called the essay film, I would find that a bit awkward.

OLK: Do you know Joram ten Brink?

PK: A bit, yes. I know who he is.

OLK: I did an interview with him last week, because he wrote his thesis on essay films and made this film 'The Man Who Couldn't Feel and Other Tales'. But he was saying, once he became aware that this is what he was doing, it actually made it impossible for him to work in this way anymore. Somehow, through the process of making self-conscious his methods and the fact that there was this genre and the fact that he might nominally fit into it or that what he was doing was actually something that could be described in this way, he actually said as soon as he was aware of that he couldn't do it anymore.

PK: No, but the other thing is of course that it's a term… just because it's a term that people use, you would expect people like him and me to say that because these are terms, critical terms, and therefore they're not terms that we should be using because we're not critics or whatever for stories.

OLK: My interest in them is that they tend to... and this is also from the point of view of practice, I recognised a lot of working methods and ways of approaching film and moving image, sound, text, voice, as a way of pulling together fragments of using archives that was interesting to me personally because I'd also never thought about it as being a particular genre that one would work in. In terms of the working methods that you use in making work, and you work between linear filmmaking as well as multi screen, can you talk me through the process of how you go about making your work?

PK: Well, in as much as there is a process. Well, yes, I can, yes. To go back to the beginning, I was a student here, having previously become an architect, and I had worked as an architect. I didn't just study it because it was a... I did actually - I embarked on the study of architecture because it seemed to me to be an interesting thing to do. I was a bit sceptical about whether I could hack it as an architect because I didn't know that I could do it in the manner to which I would liked to have become accustomed to, if you see what I mean. It's not just to do it, but to live up to your adolescent expectations is another matter. But it

seemed to me an interesting education. It was a practical education, essentially. And, looking back, it was actually quite a good education for doing what I subsequently did, because I didn't actually do very much architecture. In the late 60s one could mess about something rotten and I became very adept at typing and using a photocopier and very occasionally would design something that was either a building or something instead of a building. But mostly it was getting around to doing that, rather in the way that one gets round to making a film. And as a filmmaker one spends an awful lot more time getting round to making a film or not making a film or trying to make a film than one does making the film, because the opportunities to make films are not...

OLK: Particularly forthcoming, shall we say.

PK: Not widespread, no, not frequent. But anyway, I was working and it got to be 1979 with all of that and you've got to make a break for it. And I applied... well, I didn't apply because he didn't advertise. I asked Cedric Price... I knew someone who worked for Cedric Price who was leaving. I knew he was leaving to go and work for Norman Foster. And I also discovered there was something here called the Department of Environmental Media. And by this time I had started to collect found architecture of various sorts, and I've written about this so I can refer you to it if you want to look it up. And I had this slide collection, which is a very common architectural activity. Lots of architects do that kind of thing. But my slides were a bit odd. Well, they weren't odd but they were not the usual sort. They were not art. They were more things for an artist to collect. And I discovered this connection or this similarity with what members of the early surrealist group had been doing in Paris. They'd adopted sites and I'd gone around adopting sites and I thought, well, that's interesting; maybe it's art. So I came back and applied here to the Department of Environmental Media and I also applied to the Slade who didn't respond at all, but Peter, here, was... I got an interview and subsequently was accepted. And I don't know whether he was just fooled by the fact that I was a registered architect, which I was, or whether he thought it was an interesting project. But it was a degree by project in a way, which is what they were supposed to be, but most of the other people, I could never discern a project with the other people and they seemed to have trouble writing their projects. They always got sent back, although mine actually also got sent back by Peter. I had to have another go. He kept fidgeting about it. But anyway, not long after I got here there was a Bolex, which there were bits missing and it had a Sony video lens on it, zoom lens, off a black and white Portapak camera. So there was a certain question over this Bolex but I bought some film and I put it in it and I went round South London in the twilight with some fast black and white reversal stuff and made some rather melancholy footage of ruined factories and things and got it back and projected it and it looked absolutely awful. Actually it didn't look that awful. It looked very romantic but you couldn't see much, because the previous stuff had all been 35 millimetre colour slides and even though I was not particularly adept with an SLR still camera... but you can't go that far wrong with Ektachrome things, and then there was a lot of emulsion so it looked quite sharp. But this 16 millimetre, it was four-X I think, and I don't know why I did it. Well, it was this time of year so it was always a bit dark. First of all, the other problem was you couldn't see anything through the view finder. So I had a very hard beginning with a moving image and began to think that maybe this was not a good idea but persisted with image making and subsequently taught myself the rudiments of black and white photography and produced quite a lot of photographs, some of which I exhibited when the time came at the end of the course. But by that time I had assembled some brief narration with the stills, with slides made from black and white negatives, which, again, was a bit of a palaver because it's quite difficult to make print onto sheet film. It's quite funny because it's so difficult, dust. But I made these two five minute things and then once I'd done that I thought... quite by chance really I discovered a subject, because the other problem with these film rolls was that there was no real reason for it to move. It didn't move. The camera moved a bit – the

tripod really, and nothing was happening really, especially given the resolution. There might have been things happening but you couldn't see them because the resolution was so awful. But then I found this footbridge. I saw it out of a train window. I saw this location out of a train window in the northwest on the Euston line. I looked out the window and saw this thing and I thought, well, that looks like a picture; you should go there and take a look. Some allotments on a hill, two blocks of 30,000 or so going up the hill and meeting at a right angle and meeting in between and there are allotments in between and you see them from the train. And I thought, well, that looks a bit... Mass Observation, I'll go up there. For some reason I cycled from where I was living in NW, all the way to what turned out to be just past Stonebridge Park. It wasn't Stonebridge Park. Stonebridge Park's a station but it was in between there and Wembley Central, which is the same as the railway line. And when I got to this place I found an allotment but there was also this extraordinary railway bridge, a very long, elaborate footbridge, metal footbridge, which goes over about three railway lines. And, for some reason, I don't remember having the idea, but I decided to film walking across this bridge because it was like a tunnel. So the other problem about the cine camera was that not only could you not see anything but even what you could see was only a minute fragment of what was around you, so it was completely un-architectural. This medium seemed to be totally un-architectural, because architectural photography is all about fine grain, high contrast, high resolution, monochrome, usually, images, in the traditional architectural photography, whatever that is. Eric Demaray I think is the guy who wrote the book the book. I don't know that anybody takes any notice of it, but Eric Demaray's a very distinguished architect and photographer. He's also self taught, or was self taught. He was an architect. He trained at the AA and then became a photographer. And there's something about being auto [unclear] that makes people, in my experience, me, being more likely to say... they say things that maybe other people would be more reticent about. Demaray's quite forthright about how you should take architectural photographs because he made it up for himself. He's discovered it so he's very confident. But the other thing is that even with a still camera there's this thing about the field view, so this footbridge, it didn't solve the problems of resolution and all that but there was this funny congruence between the tunnel vision that goes with the camera and the structure, except that you could see over the parapets so you could turn round and because it had this half landings and changes of direction you could do a pan. You could do a 360 degree pan on the half landings and things like that. So I constructed this choreography for a film walked across this bridge and tried it out once with the bow legs, stopping to wind it up every 27 and three quarters. I think it was just one roll. It might have been two but whatever it was it wasn't very long, and subsequently decided to go back with an electric camera, which I'd borrowed from the film school, who lent it to me on the condition that one of the students would operate, so I had to tell him what to do, which is probably... well, it's not the only time but it's pretty nearly the only time I haven't done my own camera. And we made this thing and this turned out to be the second half of the first film I made. It was a two shot film which is really three shots because there's an invisible edit in the first shot. The first shot is on another footbridge over the north circular road, which isn't there anymore.

OLK: And do they have a narration aspect?

PK: So there was this question of what to with the footbridge, which I'd already decided, having made lots of things with slides, is that what you do with the footage is that you write a narration, which was fiction. They were all fiction. There was no documentary intention with any of this. I think if there was an intent at all it was to make something which you might show somewhere that might even be a cinema as a short before a nice film. So what's a nice film? A nice film, or a good film or something, would have been a film noir, so it was an attempt at social climbing in many respects because the idea was that you made this

thing and it wasn't supposed to be experimental film; it was supposed to be pseudo European, a bit of sub Alain Resnais kind of something, except that it's funny.

OLK: Also, the way you describe it is, or seems to be anyway, a logical step as well between the attempt to make sense of this medium in terms of the architectural space, in terms of [overtalking].

PK: Well, a bit. Yes, a bit, but I don't think that was supposed to be explicit.

OLK: Do you think anything was explicit though?

PK: Yes. Well, it might be, yes. Quite a lot of things are, especially in formalist filmmaking. Because I hadn't been to art school before I was unaware and actually rather resistant to the Anglo American experimental tradition. And Peter Gidal, Peter actually is coming in this afternoon, he was teaching. He was on my interview panel and we did have a chat, I think after I'd done this rubbish stuff with the bolex. And he said, oh, you should get a light metre. It wasn't that badly exposed actually but that was about the level. We could talk about it. I told him what I wanted to do. He said, yes, well, you should do it, and then there was this thing about the light metre. So there wasn't a lot. It was a bit homemade all this, you see, because it wasn't coming from anywhere, except for this tradition with this other business with the slides, which was coming from somewhere but didn't seem to be going towards moving pictures.

OLK: When you were collecting these found buildings that you described them once, in what sense did you view that, either at the time or later? And subsequently, what I see is an extension of the moving image, pieces of material that then get shown. To what extent do you regard these things as an archive or a personal archive? Is there an explicit method to them?

PK: I couldn't find anymore. After a bit I gave up because I couldn't find anymore. I'd told myself when I started to do it that this was a response to having lived in London for ten years. I started doing it in 1977. That's what I said anyway. I remember that was something to say about it. Why are you doing this? Well, I've lived in London... By that time I felt that I knew the city very well because I used to travel around a lot, above ground. It's like this thing, when you first came to London you don't know where anything is because all you know about is the tube map and you pop up and there are vast areas of London where there are no tubes, which of course one doesn't ever visit if one is a certain sort of student, which I was. But by the time I'd been there ten years I'd been pretty much all over. I'd never been to Ilford much, but I used to go exploring a bit. It wasn't a typology; it was just a collection. It wasn't really an archive because it wasn't old, but it was a collection, but it was presented with captions. When I came for the interview... No, as part of the application, before the interview, I think I sent off 24 slides in two wallets, two of those plastic things, with several sheets of typed what could have been annotations. If it had been a book they would've been like the text for the picture, but it wasn't just a caption; it was a bit more than a caption. It was somehow to explain why these things might be considered meaningful or significant or what meaning I was reading in them. And they weren't all local. There was some stuff from Italy I think. There was some architecture too actually. There was Hans Shearim's harmony. There was a design of mine, a paper design of mine, Hans Shearim, a building in Berlin designed by somebody designed by somebody called Ludwig Layer. If you go to Berlin, not very far from the avenue that leads to the west side of the Brandenburg Gate...

OLK: I lived in Berlin for five years.

PK: Well, you would know the Wasserturm, but the Wasser research Vorshungsbaum, and Ludwig Layer was this wonderful Berlin architect, that one. There's a thing that launches lifeboats into one of the lakes. It's a very single minded pursuit of some technological performance, an induction of architectural form, and that's what I really like. My main building, I think the thing that started me off on it possibly was this coal hopper pink. It wasn't the same pink as Ludwig's building, but there were these two pink buildings. There was the architect's one in Berlin and there was this one in London near Battersea Power Station which looked a bit like that. It didn't look like it but it was similarly evolved, one thought, although in other ways not because the architectural ambitions of this building were in other ways rather conventional, rather opposed to what one imagined Ludwig's might be, tried to be respectable, had a hat on and things. And it pretended to be what it wasn't, also, whereas the other one was very much trying to convey what it was. I could've gone on looking but I thought, well, it's time to do... I'm not quite sure where the notion of moving came from, because of course, as it turned out in the end, apart from this early stuff, the moving image camera doesn't move very often, doesn't move very much, although it did to begin with. It slowed down in the late 80s. Until 87, certainly, the first four films, the camera is never static. And then there's this other one, which I'm not terribly fond of, where the lenses get longer. There is a tripod and there isn't a lot of movement. If there's movement it's usually on a train or something, so the platform was static. There is a pan in that but it doesn't look like a pan because it's quite a long way.

OLK: When you're speaking about your films you often... certainly in writing and the interviews that I've read subsequently, there seems to be quite a tight relationship between how you consider your subject material, the process that you, as an artist, filmmaker, architect, however you want to describe yourself, and the technologies that you use. How do you see that relationship between the tools of your trade or how you view cinema, cinematic technologies particularly?

PK: Well, I'm not sure actually. Can we come back to that? Sorry, I've distracted myself. What I should have said is that the films came about as thinking, well, what can I do with this stuff? So there were these, let's call them, takes of more or less architectural material. The question then arose, well, what are you going to do with it? And it was sort of answered by these stills, the tape and the slide, that what you do is you put them together in some apparently satisfactory manner and you write a soporific monologue, which lulls people into the idea of continuity. And in fact the narration... although obviously you can't just write anything. You've got to write something that doesn't put the back up too much, but, essentially, the narration really is a sound effect. It performs the same function as music might, because that was another option, maybe just set them to music. And you think, oh, you can't do that; that's a bit cheesy.

OLK: But also your texts are very... I guess, for me, the most direct relationship perhaps with an essaystic impulse. I'm not meaning that as a pejorative term. I just mean that when I listen to those things it could be anything. It could be abstract sound you could've chosen to do any number of things, but they seem to be very deeply embedded in the culture of thinking through a subject or grappling with a problem or narrating…

PK: Well, have you ever seen one of these short ones?

OLK: I haven't seen the short ones.

PK: Well, you see, the first one was about someone who steals some money. It was a before and... it was captioned as 'the Department of Inversion presents Stonebridge Park, a film in

two parts, part one' and then it starts. And it's about how the narrator... I do the narration.
I speak the narration because I couldn't be bothered or didn't see any point in finding
anyone else, which is one of the reasons I don't show it anymore, much, because I don't
really like... it's not very well written either. But it's about this guy who works in a garage in
Harrow Road and drinks at lunchtime and gets into debt and I think gets the sack and robs
his employer. You don't see any of that. You see this distracted wandering on this peculiar
footbridge and the traffic, but it's to imply, just about, perhaps, that that's more or less
where it is, somewhere near there. And then there's the end of part one, and then part
two... and there's some music. There is some music. There's part of Beethoven's Eroica, so
it was this Napoleonic aggrandisement by the music. And then it's after the crime, so he's
trying to get away. He's leaving and he's, by this time, [unclear], so the bit that actually
motivated making the film, which is this railway footbridge, is the second part, after, so
there's this other monologue which is all about... I can't remember how I wrote it actually,
but it's the sequel. And at the end he gets away, so he gets away with it, but the final bit of
the narrative is delivered with a caption about how he got caught and he escaped and went
to live in Nice. I'm not sure why he went to live in Nice. And anyway, so the next bit is a
sequel where he comes back and invests in property in West Norwood.

OLK: So he was an early Robinson really, wasn't he?

PK: No, he wasn't really.   No, he wasn't really an early Robinson because he was a first
person, you see. That's the thing about this. These were first person narrations, as were the
subsequent three. All the shorts were first person narration and they were not in any way
documentary films, except that they were made with footage which could be considered, to
some extent... they were location footage. It's not even like John Smith where you can view
his film now as a documentary of Dalston because it's quite demonstrative and detailed.
Well, to begin with the shots were like ten minutes, so for writing, you see, right now,
writing for a ten minute shot's quite easy, relatively speaking, because there's no cuts, so
you can go off. You can just go off on something and as long as you keep somewhere near
the trajectory of the picture, you've got quite a lot of time before you've got to think of the
next essay. But as the years pass... in fact, well, quite quickly. I think by the third film, which
was made with a Bolex, manmade without... it wasn't really made as a film. The picture was
just shot speculatively... sorry, taken speculatively, on a trip to Rome, so it's a holiday film
really. And about halfway there I got the first roll process and I thought, ooh, that'll be all
right. Okay, so I'm making a film. And then when we got there the camera jammed and we
ran out of film stock and I couldn't buy anymore rolls of film anywhere, so the film is
constituted as the document of a crazed individual who's walking to Rome, somewhat in the
manner of Werner Herzog. This is the first time I casted the voiceover. It was supposed to
sound a bit like Hertzog in the the Les Blank film, which I can't remember the name of, about
making Fitzcarraldo, where Hertzog says these wonderful things about the rainforest and is
terribly rude about the rainforest, and the sky, and is very rude about the stars in this film.
And he says it with such... his voice is... anyway, I thought if only I could get him to do the
voiceover, but I thought he'd probably much not to handle and if I were him I wouldn't touch
it with a bargepole, so maybe I should just try and find someone who can do that. And it
ended up with Baldeck Shaybell, who's a very nice man, was a very nice man, but sadly he's
dead now. He died in 92. So this film, anyway, was made terribly parsimoniously, so as soon
as you pressed the button on the Bolex it was how long dare I leave it until I take my finger
off the button? So it consists of, I don't know, about ten seconds. Ten seconds is a long take
in this film. So it was terribly difficult and it took me years to make the film, partly because I
didn't really take it very seriously and I was trying to make architectural documentaries. This
was a period when I was beginning to think this was just ridiculous, you can't possibly take
yourself seriously unless you make a proper film. And I got involved with some people who
had an exhibition about Adolph Loos. Yohuda Saffron, who'd been my tutor here, by this

time had migrated out of fine art into architecture, much to my horror because I was going the other way. I didn't want anything to do with architecture anymore. I didn't mind because I was still teaching, actually, but the idea that he should want to be an architecture theorist or something, which he still is, was a bit daunting. But he'd got mixed up with these Nine H people, and Nine H were Ricky Berdette, who's now a professor of goodness knows what at LSE and used to be Ken Livingstone's... used to whisper bad things in Ken Livingstone's ear, and Wilfred Wang , who subsequently ended up running the Frankfurt Architecture Museum, and Yohuda. So Wilfred and Yohuda had got this thing that they were going to have an exhibition about Adolf Laws, because Adolf Laws was kind of the bee's knees for these people. They were very interested in him rethinking early modernism, [unclear]. What's his name? And also Wagner and people like that. And they had this magazine called Nine H, which was privately funded and now, apparently, is eminently collectable. They were terribly rich, which I think is another reason Yohuda was attracted to them. Both Ricky and Wilfred were obviously golden boys of some kind, and there were others as well. And I wasn't anything to do with this lot but I knew what they were up to, and I went off to Czechoslovakia and I went to a lecture by Hermann Czech and he showed these pictures of Loos buildings in Czechoslovakia. I thought, that looks good; we'd better go there, so we set off. We drove all over Czechoslovakia looking at these Loos buildings and discovered this whole... and the other thing, the reason to go there, was to discover about Czech surrealism, which was virtually unknown in the west until 89. Well, no, till just before actually. So I was trying to make this film about Loos, which didn't go anywhere. We got some money off the Arts Council. We all went off to Vienna and it all floundered on Rodney Wilson's... well, whatever. And I didn't really know how to do it anyway. How do you make an architectural...? Nobody knows how to make an architectural documentary for cinema. That was quite obvious. It was an attempt to find out I suppose.

OLK: I can never remember his name but there's the Berlin… teaches at the film school, trained as an architect - Emigholz.

PK: Oh, is he an architect?

OLK: I don't know whether he's an architect but he certainly makes what I would describe as architectural documentaries, in a very pure sense.

PK: Emigholz is a very good example, in my view, of the problem. The only work of his I've ever seen is he did these films of Louis Sullivan bank interiors.

OLK: Yes, I've seen those pics as well.

PK: And you look at these films and you think, it's like a fight between a rectangle and the architect and he's completely…. Why? Why are you doing this? They are rather interesting actually. I'm sure if you're not an architect they're probably very... and I do remember them. Brackage is the same. Brackage does this thing where he goes into caves and it's just... they obviously don't realise that there is this rectangle that comes with making films and it has demands. It really does have quite vigorous... not vigorous. It has quite strong... it tells you something, this rectangle, and if you want to put things in the rectangle and if they're architectural things, then... Well, I'm sure you could do it like that, the way they do it, but I've never been quite convinced. I'm a bit old fashioned, I guess, about it, because all my stuff has taken place within things like the revival of the street, the crisis of modernism in the 70s. And if there's any architectural thinking which comes into the filmmaking, it doesn't actually come very far, it has to be said, but there's a certain amount of baggage that was the basis for London, which is pretty much the urbanism, the revival of urbanism with all that that entails, although hopefully the left hand end, not the right hand end, not the career

end. One wouldn't want to get mixed up with that, but the notion, the sort of Colin Rowe end. There's a book Colin Rowe wrote called Collage City, which is these interesting comparisons. He does things like he compares Corbusier's Unité with the courtyard of Uffize in Florence. One is the negative of the other. So modernism with its [unclear], its destruction of the street and all that, is put aside and what you have to recover is urbanism. And there's a certain amount of that behind the proposition for London, I guess, although, again, it's very difficult because, again, there's this problem with the frame and whether you can put those things in a frame. And if you can, how you can do it, or whether you can do other things, which I'm still having trouble with.

OLK: Can I jump ahead to City of the Future?

PK: Yes.

OLK: Because I'm interested in this film for lots of different reasons and one of the things I was particularly interested in was... and I don't know whether this...

PK: But it's not a film.

OLK: No, a project. Let's talk about it like a project. At one point you had three ways of exploring this material. One was explore, one was tour and one was adventure, and within the BFI Exhibition I don't think it was the Explore. It was simply the maps, wasn't it?

PK: Well, it was and it wasn't.

OLK: Can I just ask you my question so you can take wherever you're going with it? I was interested particularly in adventure, what you thought a narrative way of exploring this material might bring that the other two methods might not bring.

PK: Well, this directly follows on from what I was supposed to be talking about before, which is thing about what do you make? What do you do? 20, 30 years ago the answer was, well, I suppose you'd better make a film. I didn't think you could exhibit any other way. And even today I think it would be difficult because people who do exhibit independent takes in insulation work, there's usually something special about the take, whereas I was just photographing anything really. So one couldn't really imagine exhibiting, for instance, the footage in London as a multi screen installation, and I suppose you could split it up into regions. I've done a map menu for the film, which was precluded. It was superseded by the fact that the BFI released the thing as a DVD, because I got as far as getting an Mpeg-2 file of the film so I could make my own DVDs and I was making this menu out of coloured lines and on a map of London, or, well, a map of the Thames actually because it wasn't really a map; it was just a diagram. I made these diagrammatic menus one Christmas in the funny days, but I never finished it because by that time they were going to do their own. So it looked as if what you did with this material was to make a film. Now, on the other hand... and, again, I wasn't really aware of it before I started work on that project, the archive film, the early film. Let's call it the early films rather than archive films because they're not really archive films. They're early films. No one's forgotten about them. They weren't just in the archives; they were quite well known and many of them were quite frequently screened. And they were not footage either, which is what I started out looking for, but there isn't really much footage as such in the film archives. They throw it away. Nearly everything that I've come across in film archives is films, finished films, and they're not always very well finished but they usually are finished. There are a few bits which look as if they might have been just footage, but, basically, what you find in film archives is films. But on the other hand, early films, as you'll be aware, have this interesting form and a lot of the material slightly

resembles things that you might encounter in my films, by [unclear]. Not the early ones but the long ones. They did start... although, again, the footage in my films, the average length of a shot, or take, is... I think in London it's 14 seconds and in Robinson it's 12, so these are not slow films. These are faster cut actually than those features. It's just that most features have a lot of dialogue which results in long takes so you don't notice that they're long takes because you're looking at the nice people talking to one and other.

OLK: And they move around and they walk about.

PK: And they walk about. Well, even when they don't... They don't always walk around. They move around a lot less than people think. But images comparable to those in my films are usually about half as long, I would guess. I once analysed A Diary for Timothy and I think there are about the same number of shots in Diary for Timothy as there are in London and the film is about half as long, so that's just to give you an idea. But actually the length of the takes in my films isn't in any way like the length of a Lumiere film, and there are longer ones. Lumieres are relatively short for early films. But on the other hand there was a similarity in the subject and there was a similarity with the absence of foreground action, let's say, or not motivated, for instance, say, by foreground action, so there was obviously something going on. And so these films, on the other hand, were individual films, so the idea of putting them together to make a compilation was already... it seemed a bit unnecessary, but, on the other hand, there was an idea to make something. I wasn't just supposed to find them, because, A, they weren't lost, and, B... so there were three routes. The first DVD had three routes, but actually only two of them were built.

OLK: Yes, you mentioned the one that didn't happen.

PK: Or actually I think it was but it only went about two films. It wasn't developed. It was residual [unclear], or not residual because that would mean that it had been there and gone away, but it hadn't arrived. It was a map based... it was an exploratory array which I was delighted to find could be described as a navigable space as elucidated by Lev... what's his name?

OLK: Manovich?

PK: Yes. I thought, oh wow. This was after having already made a database. He didn't even read the book and he'd done it. So that was all right. That seemed very modern. I thought, oh, well. And of course Robinson also is a kind of database film. It doesn't look like a database but it's made out of a database, fairly systematically it must be said.

OLK: I must come back to ask you that.

PK: Yes, well, this is maybe what we should be talking about, but anyway, let's go on. So the two didn't get very far, but the adventure, the question then arose, well, how do you just sit and watch this stuff? If you can't be bothered to push the buttons you don't want it to just stop, so how can one assemble these films in a way that isn't...? In the film archive there is something called The World in 1900, which is a splicer tape, I guess, assembly of a selection of early films put together by two fairly eminent film historians, which is a journey round the world and it's one film after the other. And it's not captioned but I think they tend to talk you through it in presentations, a silent cinema weekend or whatever it is. And I didn't really want to do that so I started to think, well, I think what I'll do is I'll turn this into a story. I'll fictionalise these films, which seemed a rather aggressive thing to do. I wasn't terribly comfortable about it, but having looked at them for so long and having done the [unclear] of putting them on these maps, which seemed, to me, a really good idea, so much so that I

even wondered whether I could patent it, not for myself, you understand, but on behalf of my employer. It didn't seem to occur to me that they might even have a stake interest, but anyway, in any case it's not really original. So that was the main thing. The main thing was the spacialisation of this, which was a way out of making films. The great thing was about that, but that was why it was a real discovery, because it solved the problem. You don't have to do it anymore. You don't have to make films anymore.

OLK: But what I'm interested in is the narrative…

PK: And I, you see, then made a work, almost by accident. I was then asked to make this exhibition in France. The first thing, I thought, well, don't be stupid. They'll just tell me to bugger off. No, you can't do that; it's difficult. It was basically, can you fill this enormous space with something that has some slight relationship to Mumbai and also possibly London, because we've already called it Londre Bombay? And I never found out why they called it that. I think they called it that because they knew it had to be about Mumbai and she wanted me to do it and she knew I'd made a film about London, so she called it Londre-Bombay. There was no more meaning to it than that…

OLK: It'd be interesting if they'd asked you to do it now, wouldn't it?

PK: Well, I don't think we could do it now. In fact I think as soon as the train bombs... Dilip, my colleague Dilip Barmer, who actually enabled it to happen and was the cinematographer too, as soon as the first railway bomb, which was not long after we'd been there... Probably one day when I've got nothing else to do I'll try and make a film out of that footage, but whenever I look at it I think, I don't know that you'd want to make a film out of it. It would be the wrong kind of film, but as an installation it seemed all right. The reservations one might have about a film that just stares at foreign people in a railway station, which is practically all it does, seem to be removed by the fact that it's an environment, so it's not cinema screen.

OLK: What relationship do you see between…?

PK: It was a liberation. This map thing was a liberation from the demands of linearity that come with a single screen film. Now, of course you'd pay a very heavy price for this liberation, which is essentially that no one will ever show this again, whereas with a film it becomes a product and you can sell it. So there is this tension, which is of course exactly what happened 100 years ago to the people who were making these films, but not in quite the same way, because it also happened to the panorama industry. The panorama industry went down the pan, basically because it was site specific. It required an infrastructure. It required a rotunda to put the panorama in, and once people started making films, everybody thought, well, why on earth would you bother with that? There were also moving panoramas, which were these things that came on, on rollers with a mile of canvas with the Mississippi or something and somebody turning the handle.

OLK: In what way though do you think that the problem that gets solved and linked to the idea of why suddenly it's not problematic to be looking at people in a railway station, in what way do you see that as being linked to subjectivity? Do you think subjectivity takes the place of narrative in the ordering of that material?

PK: Well, I think in the installation there's probably rather less subjectivity, isn't there?

OLK: Well, you're certainly aware of your own subjectivity, for me anyway.

PK: What, in the installation?

OLK: Yes because as soon as you enter into and installation space you are embodied in relation to these pictures.

PK: Yes. Whereas with the film, you're lumbered with the filmmaker.

OLK: You're somehow taken into your head. I don't know. There is a relationship there; I'm just interested to know whether you think there is?

PK: No, well, I'm not quite sure what you mean, but I'm more concerned that with the film, one installs one's own. That isn't necessarily, A, what you want to do, and, B, what other people want to see. They don't want to be bossed about. Whenever I see a Paul Rotha film now, which isn't very often, I have to say, and in fact, it's not really to do with it, it's to do with the difference between a montage film and an early single space, just let it happen, film. When you see this past [unclear] cut into close up, and the factory whistle, maybe you'd have to come off come off it, you say, let me do that. I don't want you to do that. Don't [unclear] boss [overtalking].

OLK: So what happened there with the narrative aspect of the project?
PK: Well, the narrative; I felt obliged to make one, and I did, and it was terribly difficult. It took ages. Bits of it were all right. Bits of it weren't that difficult and bits of it didn't take that long. I managed to get a lot of mileage out of…I set up this system where the rules were, for this game, which is more or less what it was, was that you didn't cut directly between films, and that seems sensible because films, by different cinematographers look very different, and there's a disjunction if you go from Lumiere, an Alexander Promio film to a WKL Dixon film, then it doesn't work. It looks silly. So it seemed to be politic to have a caption between the films. Then there are also jump cuts. A surprising number of Lumiere films, contrary to what everybody says, are not single-take films. There are quite a lot of takes in some of them. And some of them aren't very visible. The ellipses in the Liverpool Dock films, basically when the screen goes black, he cuts, and just before it stops being black…if there's a very big building, which is very dark, and he doesn't want to waste film, so he stops. He stops turning. And I don't know whether there's a splicer or not; I think there probably must be, because otherwise there would be light frames. There'll be a slow down and a speed up and there isn't, it just goes from one end to the other end very quickly. Maybe he didn't stop, but I think he did, because they're all 50 feet long. He must have stopped. They're 50 feet long. So he didn't lose any footage, but he did lose some duration from the continuity. But there are other films, where maybe something went wrong. There's the Lake at St James' Park, it's a jump cut for no apparent reason, two-thirds of the way through the film. The film's a bit short anyway. So in those circumstances, I say, okay, when the camera stops to that extent, or in that way, which is most of the time, when it does stop, you put in a caption. So as soon as the camera stops turning, visibly, you put in a caption. And the caption can have as many words as you like but they've all got to be in this font, which is very big. So there were a very small number of words that would fit on the card. Now, very rarely, you can have two cards. At the beginning of Part Two, for instance, if it's in parts, which it was, you can have Part Two, and then a caption, but otherwise you only have one card, otherwise you end up like these documentary films, silent documentaries at the end of the 20s, where nearly the whole film was inter-titles, and there's no footage at all.

So on that basis I started to propose this fictional narrative, which was about somebody, a narrator, the first person of the captions, who, it was gradually revealed, or implied, was trying to kill somebody called Carl Peters, who was a real, historical figure, heavily

fictionalised in his own time, and not long afterwards; his own time being the 1890s and 1900s, was the author of a book called England Und Der Englander. Have you read that?

OLK: I've heard of it.

PK: But have you read anything I've written about it?

OLK: No.

PK: No? So you're not aware of it. So this is not a waste of time. It's not something you've heard before. So Carl Peters was the villain, the sort of Holmesian Dr Moriarty, Professor Moriarty type villain, and in fact there are borrowings from Holmes. At one point he tries to shoot him with an airgun, which is the airgun that the Colonel tries to murder Holmes with when he comes back from Tibet and all those places. And anyway this assassin is also a time traveller, so the time traveller's been sent back from some subsequent period, possibly our own, to assassinate Carl Peters in the hope that without Carl Peters somehow the 20th century will develop in a less unfortunate manner. But Carl Peters, being, amongst other things, one of the first leading figures of German nationalism, so it's a proto-nazi, but he's also a model…actually, I don't think he is a model, but I've managed to persuade myself that he was a model for Mr Kurtz in Heart of Darkness. Certainly one of those people; he's one of those bad men who went to Africa and did bad things. Whether Conrad had him in mind, I mean, I think there were quite a few of them. But he is mentioned.

OLK: And what do you think that that element brings, from an audience perspective? What do you think that the narrative level it brings to the footage that… [overtalking]?

PK: Well, there are two things. There's the narrative element, which is how you get people to sit there for what turned out to be 70 minutes. It's just a hook, which is what it always was. How do you get people to sit through this stuff, which you're trying to make money out of the story? You tell the filmmakers they've got to make stories or they can forget it. And some of them just said, oh well, forget it. Most of the 30 people did forget it. They went off.

OLK: But when you look at it, do you think it does bring anything to the - apart from the obvious stuff that puts ideas in people's heads about… [overtalking]?

PK: Well, the other thing it brings is the fiction, because a lot of what one…one doesn't know very much about life in the 1900s; nobody does. And you might argue, although I don't think I would, that the literature, which is as good a source as any, so I mean, the old thing, I was told to look out for Dracula; I never found a way of getting Dracula in there except the very end, because there's this ship, the last film, the very end of the second part, where the protagonist finally fails to bump him off by pushing him into the machinery of a swing bridge on the Manchester ship canal. There is this boat that goes past, which Peters jumps aboard, rather in the manner of some departing fiend. Or he is rescued by, anyway, which is, I suppose, not a million miles away from…although also Frankenstein, it's an all-purpose motif. And can be conveyed as such within the limits of large font on a single card. But I showed this once, this thing. I showed it only once. I showed it in Leeds, at the Leeds Club, for some people called Lumen, and Roger Palmer, who is the fine art… And I thought, well, I'm not sure about this. There's a bit more work. And most of it was all right, but there were bits that really didn't work at all. And rather like in the film, there are these bits where you want him to shut up, so you can just look at the pictures. Very often the bits that one might consider are the best pictures are where one wants the narrator to shut up; and there are various ways of allowing the narrator to shut up without people thinking something's gone wrong. But in this particular project they didn't have recourse to these ways.

OLK: So was it text and written out, it was just silent?

PK: It was silent. It was all silent. And in fact it was quite extraordinary. I took it to this gig in Leeds and I suddenly realised, I turned it on, and suddenly thought you've never seen this before, you've never sat through this. What if they all walk out? What if they cough all the time? And they didn't cough. It was summer. No one's mobile phone went off. A few people did go out, but I think they were going to the loo, because they seemed to come back again. So I kind of got through it with some residue of self-esteem, but I did find it a bit gruelling. But then this guy wrote a bloody essay about it. There's this bloke called Dave Clark, who's written a book about architecture and the city, or something. Film and the City. One of those books. Not about architecture, actually. Not an Architecture in Film, it's the City in Film, in which there are a number of people. He's written one of the books. He cottoned on. He banged on. He wouldn't give up. I kept saying, well, it's not finished yet. It's not a film. He kept describing it as Patrick Keiller's 'new feature film'. And I'm thinking, he bloody published it in his Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers, or something. And I was mortified. But it turns out that this is one of the reasons I'm sitting here talking to you. The person who peer reviewed the essay was the guy who…

Anyway. So…

OLK: Can I pick up on this point about database filmmaking? This is certainly one of the things that I'm touching on….

PK: So largely it was a failure. I mean, it wasn't a complete failure, because I do actually rather like it. It was very difficult, writing captions. I think that's probably the problem. It's very difficult. Hitchcock, apparently, before he made any films, he was a caption writer. You've got to be that good. And I just hadn't quite cracked it, and began to feel a bit stupid because the other problem with this thing was that there was an idea that the BFI would distribute the product, which they still haven't done. In fact, I wrote to them yesterday, nagging them, don't you think, blah, blah, blah? And because they'd done the exhibition. They seem to be to be so terribly pleased with the exhibition, so I thought, well, maybe they'll do it now. But there was always this problem of, what's on the disc? Do you put that thing on the disc? And that was one of the reasons I didn't develop it, because it seemed to me that train spotters and people wanting to trace their family history, which is the principle market, I imagine, for most of this stuff, in terms of units, would not particularly want to know about someone trying to bump off Carl Peters to change the course of history.

So the other version, what happened was that the tour option replaced the adventure, and the thing in the installation, and there have been two, because it was also in the French exhibition. It was the Londré bin. I suddenly thought, we could put it in there. Because if they want Londre, they can have Londré. So one of the five screens in the BFI show was the Londré one, had already been shown in France, and was originally put together for Ian Christie, because Ian's got this thing that goes round public libraries, which he asked me if I could make something for, so I made a sequence for Ian, which was most of the films made of London that were on the disc already. I just linked; I just programmed the disc so it would just play them in sequence, with maps in between. And it's an interactive; it's a navigable disc, but he doesn't let people do it. But it's all there; if anybody actually found the remote they could do it. Just that they don't leave it around. So that was readymade for France, pretty much. Although I had to change over. I had to develop it a bit, but not much. And then that became the model for the BFI show, which was about making a new top for each of the screens. Instead of one default programme there are five different ones, but it's just a matter of tweaking the substructure so that it has a different default programme. So there's

this combination now of what used to be known as the tour, which is the default. So if you put the disc in your computer, it just plays that endlessly. It just goes on playing this sequence of maps and film, which is organised in more or less as a circular journey, spatially, but if you break into that you can go off on walks. You can interrupt and you can direct yourself around this virtual space. All this taking place, by now, in an actual space, whereas on the computer it's all in a virtual space.

So that, it seemed to me, was a product. That's what I'm nagging the BFI about, because it seemed to me you could put that out and I could maybe combine all five of them in one journey, which would probably be not unlike that of the original adventure, because the original adventure was also a travel. It was a chase, in two parts. It was twice round the British Isles.

So the linearity and the combination of the two modes have been arrived at, eventually, at the expense of the fiction. And the fiction now survives, potentially, as an extra. It could be an extra, but I just think it's a separate project. It seemed to me it was incompatible with the geographical historical function. The public service function of the rest of the project, which was, in many ways, much more important, and I felt very, very silly about devoting so much time to writing these wretched captions, even though they did look quite nice. And they get a laugh. So when people…because there's a ghost, as well, and it's just quite playful, at its best.

So going back to the database; that was partly generated by a database because there was an enormous amount of catalogue research that threw up the rather obvious conclusion that the only films that were going to be of any use in making anything were these early ones, which looked like footage even though they weren't. Everything else had already been ruined by the time it got made. I wasn't going to take Humphrey Jennings' films to bits. I wasn't going to take even colonial, step-by-step filmmaking to bits. I wasn't going to take run of the mill films to bits, in the way that one wouldn't do that, as an archive researcher. One might take a bit. I've got a bit out of one of Paul Rotha's films in one of my films, but it's just one shot. It's not like I'm going to take it to bits and put it together again.

But the previous film also, it seemed to me, was developed in a somewhat comparable manner, not a similar manner, but comparable.

OLK: This is *Robinson In Space*?

PK: Yes. So Robinson's was made from a rather problematic habit of collecting press cuttings, in that I'd started to do this when I was making London. I'd had an occasional fit of cutting stuff out of the paper that was to do with…they were often book reviews, and they were usually to do with critiques of the City. They were the gentlemanly capitalism boutiques, or they were David Kynaston's book about the City of London, or things like that. They were explanations of London's specificity, which, by that time, one was tending to think had something to do with the nature of the English capitalism, rightly or wrongly. And the popular voice of this was Will Hum, who was always banging on about how we should be more like Germany and how engineers deliver [unclear] on how we should preserve our manufacturing industry and how this was their way to run a capitalist economy. And what I subsequently discovered to have the been the Nairn Anderson Theses, which is the notion that Britain is an imperfect, bastard capitalism, a backward capitalism, because it's never had a bourgeois revolution, which is a comforting thought to many people, or was.

OLK: So what happened with the press clippings?

PK: So that's how it began. Now, there then arose the possibility to make another film, or the likelihood of the possibility to make another film, which was of a UK or England-wide nature. And I started to clip stuff that was something to do with that. And I may have already been doing it; I can't remember, because there's this thing about manufacturing industry. There was this constant obsession with manufacturing industry, and the idea that the Tories had got rid of the manufacturing industry, and how are we going to live? How can a modern, industrial economy survive just by selling life insurance? Because the financial services… it had occurred to me, and I'd by then discovered that the financial services sector doesn't export anything. So the City of London doesn't bring any export earnings into the UK economy. Of course it does bring money in, in other ways, but let me not go into that as yet. So there's this thing about the balance of payments, so there was a subject, there were various subjects, and fortunately the newspapers were not then full of this stuff in the way they are now, because of course now if I were doing it I would have to cut out the whole bloody newspaper. In fact it got so bad I stopped doing it. I'm not doing it any more. Most of it you can Google up anyway, so it doesn't matter. But I accumulated quite a large volume of press cuttings, which were to do with, for want of a better term, the economic geography of the UK. And I accumulated them in chronological sequence, and I logged them with my new, laptop computer, my PowerBook 150 that I purchased in 1995, or possibly even late 1994, I can't remember. And I started to make just a list, a Word document, with date. I think the date came first, but I could be wrong. And then the headline or some other summary, in a few words, of what the clipping was about, and as time passed these became less general and more to do with location. So if I saw a picture of something, in the paper, or a mention of somewhere in the paper, I would clip it. I'd think, oh, that might be good. And on the basis of this and quite a lot of other information and exploration, I composed, having by this time the project had been commissioned, and it was commissioned by accident. It was half-commissioned because this nice person at the BBC wanted to make another of those films, London, by this time, having come out and been regarded as a success, rightly or wrongly, because it survived in the cinema for more than two days, which was considered shocking, to some extent. It certainly shocked me.

So that was, okay, you can do that. You can get people to pay eight quid or whatever it is to sit still for 85 minutes underground and watch this stuff, and then go home and tell their friends and more people come. So we could make another one. What was it about? Oh, well, it's about the UK and Europe, because I was supposed to go and live in Berlin for six months.

That was one negotiation. There was another negotiation, which the BFI were trying to get into bed with Nick Fraser, who I didn't know anything about, but in the end, instead of the guy at the BFI and I going to have lunch with Nick Fraser, the producer of London, who is this person called Keith Griffiths.

OLK: I know Keith.

PK: Keith and I went to have lunch with Nick Fraser, but we'd sort of been sent by the BFI, and Fraser was a bit dismissive, and he said to us, oh, yeah, well, what are you working on? And I said, this project; it's about how the UK never got to modernism. It's suppose to be an England Europe [unclear]. He said, oh, I don't know about that. What about Wyndham Lewis? And he started going on about Wyndham Lewis, and I [unclear] why would anybody…? Who has even heard about Wyndham Lewis? I said, I don't wish to…you're a big fan of Wyndham Lewis, forgive me, but I just didn't want to go… It turned out he lived round the corner from where he used to live, or something. He had some private, peculiar interest in Wyndham Lewis. And he's a funny guy, Nick Fraser, because he thinks he's French. He thinks he's the only person in England who's French. He wears a polo-necked sweater, and

he's very bossy, and he's [unclear] and everything, and then he's written the book about being at Eton and how he didn't like it, and you think, well, [unclear] what are you? Come on. You can't have it all for yourself. You can't be the only person in England who knows about France. And you certainly can't persuade me that Wyndham Lewis is interesting beyond five minutes, or something. Just get out of here. Just leave me alone. I didn't say that; I was just thinking, oh, this is a waste of time. And he suddenly said, would you like to make a ten-minute film? And I said, well, don't know, really. Thought about making ten ten-minute films. Which was, as I was saying, that was a very smart thing to say. It's not like you. And he said, well, what about? And I said, I've got this thing about Daniel Defoe. He said, oh, that's good. Send me a page.

So he goes back home. Pays for the lunch, goes back to the office, and he bumps into Tessa, who's the woman who's half-commissioned the film that we're trying to make, and he tells her about this Daniel Defoe thing, and she says, oh, that's nice. And so we end up doing it for her. And it's not ten ten-minute films it's one 80-minute film. But it's based on Defoe. So that's how that got going. It was a sort of accident. But I hadn't thought about it because I was very fond of the book.

OLK: And you took this databasing structure?

PK: No, we probably hadn't got very far. But that was when I really started; when I really went for it, because I thought, well, Defoe was interesting, and he wasn't interested in the picturesque, he was interested in economic activity. You're interested in economic activity; you want to know where the ports are, because you've got this thing about imports and exports. You want to know where all the stuff in the shops comes from, and why you never see it on the roads. Because it's a mystery. It's still a mystery. You go to John Lewis, there's all this gear, it's all imported, where does it come from and how do we pay for it? It's a real mystery. It's not a mystery to me any more because I found out, although of course it's different now, but it's not that different. But in those days it was a real mystery, and one expected from…the longer the Tories were in power, the more one expected that it suddenly would just all collapse because there was nothing to pay for it. There really wasn't anything to pay for it. It was just a scam that you can dig up the financial services business. None of these people do any work. They're all stupid. They're really annoying. They clutter up the supermarkets. Sainsbury's was unbearable in Wandsworth Road because there were these stockbrokers, in my shop, because they'd all bought houses in Wandsworth and they were going home from work. And you say, and this was unbearable. This was the context in which London had been made. The occupation. So it seemed quite likely, given what Will Hutton was writing about Germany, and they still made cars and everything, and they don't fall to bits, and people buy them.

OLK: Prescient almost?

PK: Well, no, because it wasn't really true. That's the thing. So that was the mission. So the data, there was then a reason to choose what to cut out, but it was also geographical, because of course all the places one came across, I mean, I remember, during the Scott Enquiry, reading about Ridden Dock, and I thought, that looks…and there was a picture. You said, that's amazing. And it turned out places like that, they weren't just used to export bits of the Supergun to Iraq, and I didn't believe when that came out… The Supergun, I didn't believe it. I really had to eat my words. It was the beginning of everything. I thought, [unclear] it will fall to bits. People wrote in the paper about how you couldn't make a gun that long. It didn't occur to us, of course, that you could just prop it up on a hill, which is what they were going to do.

So Ridden Dock, it not only had been used to export bits of Supergun, but it was also, all these places had been used during the coal strike to import coal. So there was this secret economy. There was a secret material economy, which turned out to be the subject of the film. Of course it's not secret at all, it's just that it all takes place in places where nobody ever goes. And they don't not go there for any sinister reason, it's just because, well, why would you go to Immingham? Who wants to go to Immingham? There's nothing to look at. And even when you do go, there's nothing there. That's the other mystery. It's invisible. Not only is it out of the way, you can't even see it when you go there, because the ships…there are only two ships, but they're so big, that's why you only need two of them and no one ever gets off, because they haven't any money. So there aren't even any shops. So to some extent that was what the film was about. And one needed to organise this information. Of course I wasn't just aimlessly wandering about, looking for ships of docks. I had a vague idea where they might be found, because I'd, by this time, purchased a copy of Port Statistics, and read it, inasmuch as you can read things like that.

And the other thing was that it turned out that actually the manufacturing industry hadn't gone away, it hadn't disappeared, it was just different. And the reason why we could still go and buy, or the people in Beaconsfield could still go on buying BMWs and Mercedes Benz cars, on the way to their life insurers, on their way to an equitable life, in Aylesbury, where they all worked, is not because the country is about to go bankrupt but because it still has a vigorous steel industry, which exports more than it's ever done in history. It's just that the steel industry doesn't employ that many people.

So in that sense there was a process; these realisations, which were mainly visual; they were made mainly…these discoveries, if you can call them that, were mainly made by just going and having a look, and maybe a couple of phone calls, but it was all motivated by still this accumulation of not very well informed press cuttings, which were then sorted. And the way they were sorted was that although they were accumulated chronologically, they were logged chronologically, and having, by this time, made some marks on a map, and drawn a line, which was supposed to represent a schematic route between the dots on the map, and indeed did so, and followed this line, the way it worked is we went out on the road in two-week stints. Not two weeks continuous; two weeks in succession. We'd go home at the weekend. And then two weeks' gap, in which I would edit the footage. And then we'd go off for another two weeks. So at the beginning of each two weeks I would pull out all the press cuttings that related to that bit of the journey and put them in order in a file, in one of these…so that I…we could more or less go at them one at a time. And sometimes there would be nothing to do. But there was an idea that when you got up in the morning, and you drove to wherever it was, one would have an idea of what to do. And sometimes, very often we had an appointment. If we wanted to go to Teespool, we'd have to get permission, so we'd have to get in. And there was somebody to do that. Not full time but permanent; she worked for somebody else, and was setting us up. She could devote a reasonable amount of time to us, on demand. So not only could we prepare, but we could ring up and say, can you fix it? We want to be there tomorrow? She was very persuasive, and she'd pretty much be able to do anything. This is the person who got me into Downing Street. Not inside, you understand, but on the scaffolding.

And so there was this process of taking…sorting, to be [unclear]. And it was carried out on the laptop. It was basically cut and paste. And gradually this document was changed from a very long list of things in chronological order to a very long list of things in some sort of spatial order. There were some things that stayed chronological. There were some things that never got moved; but the things that were pertaining to locations generally got moved. And the whole thing was subsequently exhibited. Richard Wentworth had this exhibition called Richard Wentworth's Thinking Aloud, in which he selected two things to do with this

project. One was the map, which was basically an ink line on acetate, drawn over an old school atlas, I think, or a calendar, or something, spiral bound. It wasn't the real journey, but it was a schematic representation of the real journey. And the other thing was that I faxed him this list. I didn't have a fax machine. He printed it out, on a roll, continuous roll of paper, so we could caption it. We captioned. It was a very long caption, but it described a list of press cuttings, compiled in chronological order, and sorted geographically. That was the basis for the narrative, if you like, of the film. In the narrative is simply an account of this series. It's described as a number of journeys, but it's actually one intermittent and continuous journey between these various places.

OLK: So when you recognised this…. [overtalking].

PK: We then returned to that. Having assembled the picture, having edited the resulting footage in the same order, I then returned to this information as the basis for the research from which I wrote the narration. So it was used twice, in that sense.

OLK: Manovich talks about different narrative and the cinema has moved into this new culture of being able to essentially what I take to mean using computational functions to deliver what previously artists or subjectivities had come up with. What do you think about it, particularly in relation to….. [overtalking]?

PK: Oh, I think it's all a lot of nonsense. I mean, everything I see…I shouldn't say it's a lot of nonsense, but it seems to me that I see no evidence for this. I see a lot of evidence for a flight into all sorts of characters. I mean, it depends what he's talking about. He's talking about something, which, perhaps he thinks ought to exist, but as far as I can make out, doesn't. I mean, it probably does, here and there, but if you think about what's actually happening that people are going to look at, I see none of that in, for instance, Steve McQueen's film. Steve McQueen's film looks quite scenic but it looks like narrative about the man starving himself to death. And you can't get much more narrative than that. But on the other hand, that's cinema. Maybe he thinks that cinema is not an option. Peter Greenaway has been going round for years, talking about how no one watches anything for more than two minutes. But I don't believe him. I think it's more of a problem for making [?] things, actually. Maybe because it's such hard work. I mean, it's very difficult. I'm just about to start trying to go back to it, after an extravagantly long time. I haven't been excusing myself from even making strong efforts to make a film for donkey's years. I managed to find things to do, but not really by choice, it must be said, in the mean time, while I'm waiting, like some dreadful Bleak House. My art has been in Chancery, and the Lord Chamberlain has finally given me the opportunity to make another film, and I'm sitting here thinking, oh, Jesus, do that?

OLK: Here we go again.

PK: It's a bit difficult. So the idea that one has to…you've really got to bolt it all down, it's a bit scary, in a way, because it seems so old-fashioned, on the one hand, but also, because one has sort of got out of the habit, inasmuch as one…well, I was never really in the habit anyway. It was always a bit of a struggle to make these things, and you forget; as soon as you've finished it you think, oh, that's nice.

OLK: Like having children, so I hear.

PK: You forget about all the… well, no. That's the other way round. You forget about the… because they fail to grow up. That's the other thing. They fail to grow up and turn into these wonderful things that you never thought they'd ever be. So in that sense the children,

the having the baby…the baby is the film, and then the film grows up. And having the baby is the bit you forget. Not that one has them if you're the male person. It's difficult to have a baby birth.

OLK: I'm aware that we've got that thing going. I've got two questions I'd like to ask you to finish up with, and one of them is quite a long take on some comments that you made about City of the Future. And you talk about discovery and archive film of these found virtual spaces. Talk very much around 1910 as being this time when a certain space was shattered, in relation to technological, social and geographic shifts centred around this period of time. I mean, what about now? Do you see any particular relationships between moving English culture and the societies we occupy? How do you think…. [overtalking]?

PK: I haven't purchased any of those. There is this question of moment that one of aspects of the project that I'm working on at the moment is that we have a continual…well, we don't have a continual discussion, but Doreen is very anti-moment. She's always telling me off for buying into Le Fevrean moments, because that's basically [unclear], nothing of that is original. It's the moment…well, you've probably read it. It's the moment of Cubism; it's Henri Le Fevre. It's the moment that we shattered. The space that we shattered. And I suppose, for me, it's most easy to talk about in terms of modern architecture, because that's where I came to it first, with Raymond Bellour,, who nobody seems to read that much any more, but a terribly good book, and he very distinctly locates this shift from one modernist space to the next. It's not, like Le Fevre, from some sort of quasi-traditional space, or even for the urbanism lot, for the Victorian city. The space that gets shattered is sort of Berlarga. So it's like modernism with…I try to hang it on oil. I mean, not terribly convincingly, I think, but hang it on the car. But you can't read it here. There were cars in 1910 but there weren't very many. There's the thing about widening The Strand. That's the one thing I've come across; The Strand was widened, I think just before the First World War, for the traffic. So the difference between the Berlarga modernism and the Moly-Nagy modernism could be the motor vehicle. Or it could be oil. But I don't know why. It's just that there's the first modern space, which has the electric trams, and electric lights, and the trains, and everything seems to be going along fine, and then all of a sudden there's this funny thing. And I think the other person who writes about it very well is David Harvey, and Harvey is writing about it retrospectively, because he's trying to identify the next…using the process, in writing about it, identifying the forum moment as being that of 1973-ish. Now, I'm not quite sure where that leaves history, but in terms of modernity, or that second stage of modernity, if we can call it that, which I wouldn't presume to do, definitively, but just for the sake of the next two minutes, begins around 1910 and ends around 1973. Now, of course there's a question now, whether the post modernity is, as we speak, ending, and very many people have been banging on in the papers about how it has, inasmuch as whatever it was, it's stopped, and we're now into the next bit, but I don't know that anybody's put forward some formulation of what the next thing might be, but it does rather look as if something's [unclear], which puts all my Nairn Anderson Theses, it makes it look a bit parochial, although it always was a bit parochial, but in the sense that the argument against the Nairn Anderson Theses is the one that…or an argument is Owen Wood, if you follow this along, you come to Owen's book, which it was only pointed out to me after I had made Robinson's Space… Did you know about it?

OLK: I know Robinson's in Space. I know about the connection.

PK: Do you know about Owen?

OLK: No.

PK: Well, there's a guy called Paul Dave, who teaches in East London, who started writing about my films in the New [unclear] Review, subsequently in a book that's edited by Andrew Heeson and he pointed out to me this book, called The Pristine Culture of Capitalism, by Owen Meiksons Wood, who's a Canadian historian, Marxist historian, from Bjorkist in Canada, who argues, very convincingly, in my view, against the Nairns thesis, by which time I had also come to the conclusion that whatever it was that was the problem, it wasn't that. There was no sign of gentlemanly capitalism in England. This is globalisation. This is the UK as a permeable, the most capital, permeable economy in Western Europe. That's what we were really talking about. We weren't talking about [unclear], and Oxbridge. That was all true, but that didn't really make it. That wasn't the point, really, any more. It was modernity. It was post modernity. So in a sense that's why that film has…I went on record as saying it had a happy ending, not because that was good about that, but because it wasn't…all the shortcomings that the film was prompted by that one associates with the UK were not problems of decline, they were the results of political choices, and therefore could be altered, whereas decline is just something you think, oh, well, there is nothing we can do. We're all going to…no old age pension, because there won't be any money. Which was the Tory…on the one hand the Tories were claiming, we're the most something enterprise culture in Europe, and on the other hand they were saying, we can't afford a welfare system because we're so poor, now. And both of these were a lot of nonsense. The answer was that we can't have what we want because someone's decided we're not going to have it. We're not a social democracy. And then, even with Labour, social democracy suddenly nose-dived, talking it downas though it was the last, the most unfashionable thing since the Hillman Avenger.

So that's how that project ended up. Now I don't know where we are, to be honest. I haven't the faintest idea.

OLK: But you obviously don't agree with Manovich's basic thesis, which… [overtalking]?

PK: Well, I don't know what it is. I haven't read the book. I can't remember why I looked at it, but I read the contents and I laughed, because here was the database and the narrative space [overtalking] don't have to read that theory anyway, so I just put it back in the library. And I did see him speak at the Tate, and I didn't think he had anything to offer, really. I just thought, this is a lot of flannel. This guy's just on the make.

OLK: But in terms of your…in terms of specific… [overtalking]?

PK: I shouldn't really say that. And then it was he came here. I didn't go, but I heard there was a lot of banjo about iPhones, and I thought, oh, just forget it. We don't want that.

OLK: In the context… [overtalking].

PK: I distrust people like that. And what else would I do? Any practitioner would, I think. If you don't know what to do, you ask Manowich, but if you think you might, then you're probably better off not knowing. It just makes life difficult.

OLK: The question circulates, in a way. I was chatting to Joram last week. We were talking about the Man with a Movie Camera, and we were talking about that particular moment in time, which was a different period in time that's largely categorised a period of early film making where some of the impetus and exploration and infusion of desire to put things together in a different way came directly, obviously, from the technological, sociological changes that were happening. If the thesis goes and we have reached a certain different point in time, where whatever it was that was post modernism is ending and we're moving

into a different [unclear], do you detect in your work, in your interests, in any or your colleagues' work or interests, anything particularly that shaping up that's new, that's different about how you're either treating the subject material you're perennially interested in, any of the technologies that you use to make your work, is there anything on the horizon line that feels interesting or exciting?

PK: Um. Well, I don't know that it's on the horizon line, no. I mean, I am as much of a sucker for all this stuff as the next person. [Unclear] has very bad effects on what I do, in that I haven't really done anything since I got connected to the Internet. I mean, literally, I've really done almost nothing since 1997, which is when I took out a subscription with an Internet service provider, except be on…well, not even on it, but spend time sending and receiving emails, and looking at things, and so in terms of productivity, it seems to be very difficult to get it to do anything that isn't very ephemeral, because…it's not quite true to say that I haven't done anything. I have done things. I've made these DVDs, this installation, although you can't see it any more, I've still got the footage. Now, the problem with all of these things is that they're…I mean, I don't know what you do with a DVD when DVDs don't happen any more. I mean, I've already got…I've just got to the point, recently, where I had to transfer some U-Matic video on to something else, because somebody wanted to see it. I had a U-matic tape about Walter Segal actually. It was Walter's 101st birthday and it was the 20th anniversary of the Lewisham Self-Build Association's second scheme as an event. And I said, oh, I've got this video if you want it. They said okay, so I sent that off, so I had to put it on a DVD. And that meant I had to go... Basically Graham, there's a DVD player, copy it from DVD to something else, I've forgotten, a digital [?] to capture it and made a DVD. Now that City of the Future DVD is the result really of me thinking this is quite an interesting computer application, what could I make with it? Most people who make DVDs, they make a film or there's a film already made 50 years ago, good film, and they want to release it on DVD. So it's not like... it's just another medium. Now, I'd been using this stuff to generate concepts and I don't suppose it will be around for another five years. That's an extreme case because of course one can imagine that it would be possible to redo it. It's a bit like the tape slide [?] thing, you know. Every time one exhibited that the technology was different, so you had to redo it. It wouldn't be the end of the world if I had to rebuild the City of the Future; it wouldn't take more than a few weeks. But you can copy between projects in DVD Studio Pro. If I make a mistake, if I forget to copy something before I start fiddling with it again, I can find myself in deep trouble, and I've done that once; I did do that once. I had to start again.

OLK: It was tape editing.

PK: No, it's much worse because with tape editing, as long as you don't throw the bits away you can put it back together again. But with a DVD Studio Pro, like with file cards, you can copy between projects. But with DVD Studio Pro you can't cut and paste. It's all got to start from scratch. If you muck it up, if you take a wrong turning, if you spend a week and you decide, oh, I shouldn't have done that, I should have left it the way it was, well, no, it's worse than that. You can't copy things in. I'm not explaining it well but I think you can probably get the idea. Everything comes from a single beginning. That's bad enough, but the whole thing is just going to disappear at some point and these files would be unreadable. Now that's one thing and the other thing is that video formats, which have got to a point where HD Cam, which is what the India thing was originally in, HD Cam; it wasn't exhibited in HD Cam because you couldn't get 30 HD Cam projectors, that would be silly, but the footage is HD Cam, which I've forgotten how many pixels. It's a lot of pixels, 19, 20 x 1080 or something, and it looks all right anyway. You can live with it. It's not like with video. I've been out with an HDV camera and making the sort of thing... it works all right, I like that, but do you want to keep it? It's appalling, it's just rubbish. It's not there and there's also a

problem of what you keep it on. Increasingly one doesn't do it on tape. So, first of all, you don't have to look at it because it doesn't look nice. And even when it does look nice, there's this question about where you keep it. Keep it on tape, and I suppose you do actually, and that's all right. But I couldn't think of anything other to do and at the moment I've been originating on 35mm negative and transferring from negative to video for rushes. So I've got that. That is a roll of 35mm; that's one roll. Usually there are about four, not very much on these cassettes. And you take it home, put it in there, it looks absolutely awful. And not only that, it's got sparkle and it's got gate weave. [background noises] And if you project it, if you print it and project it, you don't see the gate weave, it's invisible. But you put it in there, it's all over the bloody place. So you think, oh, god, I should have just used DV, what am I doing. And the labs are all in utter chaos so at the present time, technologically, it looks a bit problematic, which is not uninteresting but it's not Utopia. It's not quite what people claim and meanwhile one's kids are looking at YouTube and there's this stuff. And you say, well, why would anybody want to look at mine, it's just awful. It's just a blur, what is it? So for somebody like me who's spent half their life banging on about high resolution architectural images, it doesn't look too good really. The alternative to this was HD Cam and if I went to Fact, I could probably get them to rent their HD Cam camera for not a million pounds a week. It's not like you have to go to Soho. But I don't know how to work it; I wouldn't even know how to set up the card, it would take me three months to work that out. So I'd probably have to get someone to do it for me. And how long is that going to last? How long are these tapes going to last? Not very long. Not physically, I mean physically they'll last for ages. There was nothing wrong with the U-matic tape even though it was 25 years old; it was fine. It was just there was nothing to play it on. And with digital, the other thing, I've made a film in a medium... We originated a film called Dirty Lapidated Dwelling. For various reasons we shot it in Beta SX which is something which I'd never heard of before and haven't really heard of since, but it's not quite digibeta. It's a digital Beta format which was developed, I think, for the likes of portable. It was a kind of portable digibeta and why Beta wasn't considered portable, I don't know. But John Wyver used to say, oh, no, you're engineers, don't be difficult, [unclear] is what he's talking about. And we got somebody – I've forgotten his name, a guy in the East End, Ron Peck – had got this thing going which was all in Beta SX so we could get camera for a long period for a relatively modest design fee, so that seemed sensible. So we ended up, we did it on Beta SX and we onlined it onto digibeta. Now I've not got a digibeta copy of that film; I've got a Beta SP letterbox, 16 x 9 letterbox, integral by three, so I can't make DVDs except letter box ones. And I thought, no, this is a bit stupid so I tried to crop it and the final copy fell to pieces. So I went up there and I said can you make me a digi copy and they said, no, we've only got one machine so we'll have to send it out, we'll have to charge you [inaudible], which they are. So I asked David over the road, I said can you copy digi to digi. He said yes, we'll put it into Final Cut and then play it out back onto digi. And I thought, well, that sounds all right. But I'm not sure it is. And we did that because it was basically free; I just had to buy a tape and save 250 quid or something, and I didn't want to show the tape, I just wanted something I could make a DVD out of. But there's always this thing about although it's digital, you can go from one digital format to another, but no one ever knows how you get from one to the other.

OLK: I know. I work in a commercial...

PK: So we onlined that film. The camera cassettes were going into the machine and it was coming out as digibeta. And I said is it actually a digital transfer between the SX and the digibeta? And nobody knew, so it was quite likely that it was actually analogue. So all this generational business, Manovich talks about that, doesn't he? He talks about the quantitative thing, about how analogue media, whatever they are, there's always the generational loss and how naive people believe that doesn't happen. But actually, even if it doesn't happen, you still never see the real thing, so to speak. So it's not that different really

and that's obviously the case. So preserving the longevity of this material, even though it's digital, seems to me to be also questionable. So one's always driven back into the absurdity of having a material source which is, I assume, why artists, so-called, go on originating material on film, although of course the most famous artists, the Bruce Naumans don't and never did. They certainly might be now but I don't think they ever did. But the Tacita Dean's the Steve McQueens, the Wilsons, they've got this peculiar insistence on 16mm film, which I can't stand really. I never liked 16mm much anyway just to touch; it was always... it smelled funny it's too thin. You know, you lose the bits. But when they come you'll have... you still end up with a pile of cams; it's just that you can't actually see the stuff while you're making the film. So it's not good news really except that I can do it in bed, which is probably worth all of that actually, if one were to be honest. The idea that you can just wake up in the morning, press the button and carry on working, it probably isn't very healthy but it beats commuting. If I saw an Avid again I think I'd just fall about laughing.

OLK: But I'm aware that time is getting on. But one of the last questions I wanted to ask you, which I don't know what your opinon about this is, but in terms of subject material and style…

PK: The thing is, it doesn't seem to affect the form. It makes me do silly things, but I think that's something else. I am doing silly things. I am now perfectly capable of turning the camera off and letting the whole roll run through it, which I could never have done before. But I think that's because of nobody watching, so that's nothing to do with digital technology. It's also because it's cheaper than it used to be because other educational discounts, so sorry...?

OLK: I just meant because the work I've been doing recently and the research, I've been reading a lot of psychogeographic texts about London and guess who I've been reading? – Iain Sinclair - how do you relate your work in terms of compare, contrast what you do to Iain's writing? Do you see any relationship whatsoever?

PK: Well, it depends what you mean by Ian's writing, I suppose.

OLK: His practice, shall we say.

PK: The way I write is not really worth talking about, but it's not like the way he writes.

OLK: I was thinking more of the relationship between thematics subject areas, film-making or...

PK: For a long time I tried to distance myself from magic, which is not because I don't believe in magic, but because I don't believe in that sort of magic. And when I say magic, I don't really know what I mean. I mean the notion that the... I don't know what psychogeography means. I have a vague idea and a vague memory of what it meant for the people who invented it. And I've always been moaning about people using the word, especially when they put a hyphen in, which was not supposed to be there. It's a bit like people who put a hyphen in Czechoslovakia; they were very naughty people. People who put a hyphen in psychogeography are similarly suspicious, in my view, and only a bit more than people who have actually used the word in the first place, because it seems to me that what we are doing, if it's a we, but what people nowadays are doing has not really got very much to do with what they were doing in the 50s, and certainly not for the same reasons. What they were doing in the 50s was for serious reasons; they weren't just trying to make Sunday go with a swing, which is kind of the way it pans out these days. They were not North London hobbyists – and I don't mean Iain, I mean all the people who follow in his wake. I mean

there is an industry now; there are tedious infantile books written about psychogeography by people who don't really know what they're talking about, as far as I can make out, inasmuch as I know anything about them. So it's something that I try to steer clear of, just as a term, but on the other hand about two years ago I finally worked out... With the aid of an essay by somebody called Roger Luckhurst I finally made the connection between the sort of critiques that we've been discussing earlier of the gentlemanly this and Nair Anderson that, between that sort of thing and the always superstitious stuff, this kind of occultism, this modern occultism of London – you don't seem to get it in Manchester although I do know of some people in High Wycombe – but basically it's Iain in London and his curious relationship with Ackroyd, which I don't quite understand because everybody seems to think that Ackroyd nicked it off Iain. But Ackroyd's the one who's selling all the books, not that Iain doesn't sell books, but Ackroyd is Mr Palimpsest, isn't he? Mr Superstition, Mr Occultism. So the critique of Ackroydism, which I again have had explained to me by a friend and by Mr Luckhurst, Roger, who I've now met, and they have explained why this should be at this particular point in the history of London. And of course it's all to do with the City, the capital C City. It's to do with the City and its occult power which is basically another word for our powerlessness with relation to the City. It's got nothing occult about it at all; it's not about magic at all.

OLK: Like the rise of the Gothic novel when Darwinism arrived…

PK: And in fact it's a repeat of that Gothic, the Gothic, the late 19th century Gothic which I never realised was Gothic, but was turned into... because, being an architect you think of Gothic in a rather particular way which of course is why I didn't like Ackroyd to begin with because of all those things he said about [unclear] who's the greatest architect this country's ever produced. And this man comes and writes a book about 20 years of [unclear] witchcraft and writes it in a silly voice too. So I never bothered with Ackroyd; I always thought he was just taking the piss. But of course he's a million pound industry or something, so you can't really pretend he doesn't exist or that he doesn't mean something. But it what it does seem to be is this interesting relationship between powerlessness and Gothic horror. So London, it may be morally indefensible, but it's so awe-inspiring, which is the kind of Ackroyd position, rather like, well, I don't know what it's like, but anyway. So once that had been sorted out, I felt I had some sort of vague idea and it didn't seem necessary to worry about it anymore in quite the same way, because it just seemed like, oh, I don't want to go there. Now I know I can go there. But, on the other hand, funnily enough and quite separately from all that, I have suddenly found myself doing it in that I've got all mixed up in this Tudor rebellion which I still don't know very much about. But I've found myself gravitating as if drawn to...

(laughter)
OLK: You do know we're taping this…

PK: Yes, it's under embargo because I may, of course, disappear. I may vanish from the earth very shortly. But anyway I've got very interested in this location which turns out to be the site of all these interesting events in the past, and I didn't know. That's the thing, I didn't know.

OLK: This is new research.

PK: I just saw it. Again, from a train. I saw it from a train and I thought that's very interesting, what's all that about. And it's not just one location; it's three very close together, possibly four. It's this nexus or node or something; goodness knows what it's of,

but there's all this stuff that happened. And so that's quite funny because it turns out that one was doing it all along. (laughter)

OLK: I'm not sure about that. I don't know where you're going to now, but I think the work that you've covered...

PK: It's terribly funny to see something and think... and even curious that it is worthy of image making.

OLK: inspiration…

PK: Well, no, I actually shot the pictures. I've been going there for months and I put it off too. I thought, oh, that's a bit evil, do something else with it, let's do combine harvesters or something. Because even thought the harvest was months late this year...

OLK: Like used buildings really.

PK: But there wasn't any more combine harvesting going on so in the end I pitched up at this place, only last week, or possibly the week before. I shot nearly all... everything so far. I don't think I'll do anymore, or very little anyway, and there it all was. So how this will get into the... quite difficult, but it is like oh, dear.

OLK: And you see alarming relationships.

PK: Yeah, except that it's all about... on the other hand it's not that remarkable. You could probably do it anywhere, dig very far, but it is surprising high-density in this particular place. But apart from that, I don't know Ian very well. The thing is, he's very nice; he's very generous in his support to many people so it's a big favour, and he's tireless. He's always up to something, whereas I'm very slow. I think that's the biggest problem with it. The biggest problem with all this moving image business is that really it's a real millstone; once you start doing something, unless you can be quick, it just stops you thinking. I've lost years of my life in stupid repetitive activity which is of very little value. I don't just mean editing; I mean just things that one really shouldn't probably do. It just isn't cost-effective. Because it's actually quite difficult and this is something which is maybe useful to you, because, for example, this film, the digibeta thing, the film which almost certainly should have been a book, except you don't get paid for writing books and you get paid for making films for Channel Four, so it appealed. Most people who make films, they don't make any money but they get paid for making the films, otherwise they just couldn't do it because it takes so long, or it doesn't necessarily take a long time but it costs so much money. So most people make films with other people's money and they don't get anymore money. Whereas most authors write books in their own time, maybe with an advance, but unless you are extremely exceptional or well-connected you don't get large advances. But if you're very luck you might make a bit of money out of the book later on, although you probably don't, actually. There is a strong attraction therefore to making films because you can get paid for doing it, but the price of this is that it's very difficult to say anything in a film. The narration of a feature film is about 6,000 words, something like that. So I made this film about houses which was supposed to me coming round after the end of the Tories, remembering that I used to be an architect before the Tories and that I knew quite a lot about housing and the history of housing and the predicament of house building and what housing could be, how good it could be, how bad it is, all these things. It was, well, these are new times, we have to do something. And there were a lot of similar initiatives at the same time and the one that I was in wasn't really an initiative, but there was a lot of thought in the architectural profession and around it of exactly this kind in 1996, just before the election, thinking, well, what are we going to do if

Labour got in. You know, we can all go back to work, basically, we don't design shops anymore. And of course it didn't happen. But it could have happened and the notion of modernising house production was also in the air a lot. But to make a film about that, one had somehow to try and explain that this was not the first time that these questions had been addressed for an audience that had never previously thought about them, and that took up most of the time of the film. So the film never actually addressed its subject really and there were two subjects really. There was, first of all, is there an opposition between domesticity and advanced capitalism, which in any case is not a very visual subject.

OLK: A challenging one.

PK: Of course, but in a book; if it's anything, it's a book. And the other thing was is it time or do we truly expect someone to have another go at this question as to whether you could modernise the production of dwellings, which again is quite easy to visualise because you can show how it was addressed in the past, how it didn't happen. You can take pictures; you can make pictures of things and string them together to develop this train of thought, but it still doesn't get very far because it was very difficult to do that while asking not why don't we do this, but isn't it odd that this never works. That was already too difficult to say in a film. And it was the same when Robinson... although Robinson in space [?] for me was this journey of discovery, or whatever you want to call it, which was about how the UK wasn't a declining capitalism, it was just capitalism to put it simply. Nearly everybody who has written about that film, with one or two exceptions, one of which I'll send you actually, if you don't mind.

OLK: Yeah, I'd love to see it.

PK: Because it's much better explained than anything I've said. But nearly everybody, like all the film critics, say this is a documented industrial decline. They didn't listen; they just thought. They just saw what they thought they were going to get, which was a sort of standard melancholy account of the decline of a great industrial economy into shopping, which is not really what was on the screen. But, on the other hand, one can very well understand why they would think that because, as I've already said, the narration is really just a sound effect. If you just look at the pictures, that's what it looks like. So there is a problem, it seems to me, about pursuing these arguments, or I've had problems. Maybe there isn't actually; maybe there's just a better way of doing it, but I've certainly found it very difficult to pursue a complicated train of thought in a film.

OLK: Which possibly brings us round to my question about essays, because in the traditional sense, as I understand it, the essay is grappling with a theme and idea and coming to some kind of conclusion or not, as the case may be, which in some sense you think lends itself quite well to moving images because they always tell their own story somehow anyway, and there's a degree of haphazardness about what story you end up telling when you hit the next shot. But what you're suggesting is the very fluency in the medium is a difficult thing to master.

PK: Well, I think it's partly because there's a thing about time. In order to explore a picture you need to look at it for quite a long time. And if you've got a picture in front of you, you can do that. But if you're watching a film and, first of all, you might not want to do that next, and secondly, even if you leave it, there's this problem about the longer you leave it there, the more people who don't want to look at it are going to get cross. So even if somebody does want to look at it, the authorial control over the presentation of the material is quite unlike what it would be with the book. And that's one of the things that's nice about all this because potentially, as Laura and others have written, you can do that. You can stop; you

can go back. You can run it [unclear]. You can cut to close-ups for two seconds and then something else, then hold. You can stop the whistle and look at where you... You can't have more steam, of course; you can just have slower, the same amount. But one could imagine a situation... One of the things I would decide is whether to cut my negative, whether to edit film. Well, first of all, how many versions to make, whether it's a 80 minute version or however many minutes it is, which is a conventional experience in continuity, single continuity, or whether to make something else as well, or whether you can make something instead. But, in any of that, there's a question of whether to cut the negative because once you've cut the negative you can't really stick it back together again. And if one doesn't want to cut the negative, then that's a difficult question which is to do with the sorts of things that you're... Is it okay to make a film where you have to press the button to get the next shot? You can imagine that; you can imagine that, okay, every shot in this film is an hour long but the voiceover goes on for 20 sessions.   So you watch it and then, when you've had enough, you press the button and you get the next shot. I can imagine that; I'm not sure quite what it would amount to, but it's possible. It isn't possible for me because I haven't got hour long takes, but there are takes where one thinks, well, I like looking at this today but maybe I wouldn't like it tomorrow. And it's a judgement. It's a pretty arbitrary judgement. We used to make such judgements. Everything I've ever done with a narration, the picture's been cut before the narration was written and they were all made to a target length, these films. None of them reached it. Actually one, only one, was ever on the button and that was the telly one which they never showed, so it doesn't get you anywhere. So the footage in that is 78 minutes, ten seconds, which is a 90 minute TV slot with ads. The others were always a couple of minutes over their target length because we just gave up. We'd give up and say, oh, we can't get [overtalking]. Can we get two seconds out of this? It's just too difficult, you know. And each part would be laboured over in the most awful way, but without the voiceover, so of course as soon as you put the voice on it would look different anyway. You don't want to have to make the decision, all these strenuous efforts to make a just a decision about where to cut – this frame or that frame? All that rubbish. So, in a way, one wonders whether one shouldn't just not do that anymore. So it's not just whether you stop it, but I suspect most people, even people who watch funny films, really don't want to be that personally involved in it. They just want something, a nice night in front of the telly. Again, the other difference actually between the films and books – and it's not hard and fast different but it tends to be the case and many filmmakers bleat about it and Goddard bleats about it famously, although I can't quite remember where – is this thing about if you write a book, a history book, you're quite likely to get reviewed by historians. And of course that may be bad; they might be your worst enemy, history circles, but the chances are that the person knows a little bit about what they're writing about. But if you make a film, it doesn't matter what it's about, it'll get reviewed by a film critic. And most film critics don't know anything about [unclear] critiques in the British economy, but they probably don't. So you've got to suffer. And even with art it's not quite like that. That doesn't seem to be on the agenda because it seems to me that whatever essay films are, they are not art, and one wants to be art, or one wanted, until recently anyway, to be art. And all the artists are trying to make films and doing rather well at it, by the looks of it, somewhat embarrassingly. And of course one tut-tuts endlessly about *Hunger*. I haven't seen it, but it sounds like the most appalling tear-jerker. I'm sure it's very good, but in terms of... how can you do that, you know, you're not supposed to do that, you're an artist. No one seems to pay any attention to these considerations anymore and there might be some philosophical difference between... or inconsistency. There might be some philosophical inconsistency or aesthetic, or conceptual inconsistency between making a film for the cinema, which clicks all the right... makes everybody burst into tears or whatever it does, an emotional, a cathartic film, let's say, when not very long ago you were making gallery art which, whatever it is, generally doesn't involve very much of that. And he's not the first. I like the guy but you tend to think

that's just a formula, I can't live with that. It puts you off. So the thing about making films is that it's always judged as a film.

OLK: And not the subject.

PK: Yes. And I used to moan about that, but actually I don't think you can moan about that because the experience of watching a film is much more problematic than the experience of reading a book. You can write a good book. Well, this probably isn't true actually, but it seems to me there is some justification, put it that way, for the critique of a film almost ignoring what it's about. Because basically it's can you sit through it, which isn't quite such a problem with a book.

OLK: No, because you can put it down and pick it up again.

PK: You can put it down and pick it back up again. You could struggle with a book; even a badly written book about something you're really interested in, it's worth reading a badly written book about something you're really interested in because you can gain something from it. I'm not sure it's worth watching a badly made film about something you're really interested in because I don't think the subject survives. It certainly doesn't survive as easily.

OLK: I think you're right.

PK: I don't think it's a hard and fast rule, but I think there is a distinction there. It's not absolute, this distinction, but I think it is there. So that's another problem about trying to elucidate that argument or something in a film, difficult. And it's partly because of the length, also because of the predicament in which the viewer finds themselves.

OLK: Do you think things like, the simple one, DVD technology as the stop/start, the domestic play functions and the way most people consume...?

PK: Well, that just makes the film more like a book, so maybe why not just do a book? You don't have to carry... It's much easier to read a book, I think. But the downside is that in order to make a book, you've usually got to have a publisher, whereas anybody can make a DVD. All you need is a computer and that's always been another distinction, which is that filmmaking is wide open to vanity projects, whereas most books have to get past the publisher, not all.

OLK: The market needs to be on demand, online.

PK: Well, but is there?

OLK: Well, in the sense that a lot of vanity projects are probably migrated off to...

PK: Oh, yes, because nobody reads them.

OLK: But did they ever read them when they were taken through by the publishing house?

PK: No, but when you say it's a market, it's to supply a market.

OLK: Yes, certainly. Thank you very much.

PK: You're welcome.

Email exchange with Chris Petit
December 2009 / January 2010

I emailed Chris Petit over the winter of 2009 / 10. Having worked as a production manager on Petit's film *Unrequited Love* (2006) I was interested to follow up on what seemed to be Petit's natural inclinations toward interrogating the image. Writing books, reviews and criticism, I was interested in Petit's thoughts about the relationship between text and image. *Unrequited Love* was a film utilising domestic film technologies, as well as text and images from mobile phones. Technological experimentation has been a significant part of his practice since abandoning mainstream moving image practice.

OLK: You write as well as make films – what's the relationship between text, moving image and audio for you?

CP: Depends on the film. In *London Orbital* and *Unrequited Love* I was concerned with 'adaptation', of translating written word into image without making a literal translation of the book in the way usually understood by adaptation. A film like *Asylum* was significantly sound led, was about the process of recording. The work with Bruce Gilbert, and the importance given to music throughout, sometimes suggests to me that the films are more concerned with sound, plus the way that sync sound has been used less in the film of the last 15 years. The image is often off-centre, which is probably connected with my belief that too much has been shot and we're in a state of image overload.

OLK: sound seems an obvious away of addressing the image overload you describe, along with self-referential practices (machines recording images aka CCTV, refilming, reframing etc.) but are there any particular other ways of handling image material that you think confronts or explores this state of overload? Does it always necessitate some kind of method of reuse or reinscription?

Does the existence of so much more image material motivate or demotivate you creatively?
CP: Digital images are so pristine that one looks for some kind of intervention (one thinks of Robert Frank defacing his photographs to deprive them of their "pristine" nature). That said, on the
last film we used a Casio stills camera which could shoot moving images at different speeds, giving everything a very dreamlike and plastic effect, quite different from shooting on tape and then slowing the image down. These images invest the banal with a freshness they otherwise don't have.

OLK: When you were making *Unrequited Love*, which utilised moving image from a range of sources, you spoke about interrogating the image. I had a feeling at the time that you were talking about a method that was part of the way you made films – is that true?

CP: In that the film is only really looked at in the editing. Because the way of shooting is so on-the-wing, material often fails to conform to expectations. We found earlier on that if you interrogated the image by re-filming or reframing it often acquired a new resonance or meaning. On a simple level, I find it interesting because it breaks continuity and the flow of illusion.

OLK: As above - any other methods or strategies that you have used, or would use? Spatially, these conform to the idea of the frame and some type of linear logic or sequencing - what about as moving image ceases to be quite so boxed within those conventions - 3D, mobile technologies etc. What new methods do you think might be required to interrogate images in these contexts? do these developments interest you at all?

CP: Again in Content, we used a lot of computer screen technology (e.g. You Tube) --- a whole new aesthetic which hasn't been reflected that much yet. However much everything has been shot to death I remain encouraged by how unobservant most cinema is. In many cases, it barely aspires to be a visual medium, only a form of recording.

OLK: What do you think about the description 'essay film' – does it relate at all to how you see your practice?

CP: Hate it. It always leads in one move to Chris Marker, which I have nothing against, but it always seems a lazy definition and always suggests because of the word essay that it's not proper cinema somehow.

OLK: Do you find, though, that your style of writing is also somehow reflected in the way you work with moving image? or are they totally different practices? what about comments by people like Astruc - the whole camera-stylo thing and trying to find more direct relationships between writing and recording pictures? do you think a convergence is possible - or even desirable?

CP: I think that one of the developments of the internet is that image and word are becoming more interchangeable if not synonymous. The downsizing of equipment means it is possible to be more contemplative and less premeditated as a filmmaker, making it a process that can be more like writing, in that you find out what it is that you are doing through the process of doing it. That said, TV and film executives are very wary of this method, wanting to know exactly what they are going to see from the first meeting. On a wider scale, some of the novels I have written can be read as "prose films" (eg Robinson and The Hard Shoulder).

OLK: Have there been any methods of either filmmaking or writing that you return to? Any techniques that you gravitate toward or process that you find yourself re-engaging with?

CP: Not really. Conventional filmmaking has long been abandoned and I have no desire to return to it. Usually it's a matter of trying to overcome poverty of budgets in the best way possible, which is why I usually end up doing most of it myself, to avoid paying others. Hence the interest in found footage and CCTV (diaries kept my machines).

OLK: Is there any creative / technical or conceptual difference to you using found footage, or footage you've shot yourself?

CP: Sometimes it's easier to use found footage because you're spared all the usual aesthetic judgments about composition etc or dealing with the notion that too much has been shot anyway.

OLK: Many of your films seem to be self-reflexive in their treatment of the tools you use to make them – do you make this a self-conscious part of how you construct projects? Is it interesting to you at all to build this critique in as a part of what you're doing?

CP: Not sure. I think it's probably a combination of anti-professionalism, non-professionalism and a childhood liking for cross-section diagrams. I have always liked things which reveal their process as they unfold.

OLK: The way you edit your films seems to imply a process of allowing the material to speak for itself. Do you see what you do as having any relationship to the idea of archives as either personal collections, or as found footage?

CP: Well, archive and memory are fascinating in themselves. And I suppose the process of editing as I try to do it is a combination of manipulation and as you say let the image speak for itself. Where I feel reasonably confident with modern camera technology, I still feel very inadequate when faced by non-linear editing, but I don't know anyone who is exploiting it to its full potential.

OLK: Could you explain in a bit more detail how this combination of manipulation and letting the image speak for itself works? what kinds of qualities do you look for in an image? what makes an image different from sound or writing in the way that it 'tells a story', in your experience?

CP: Much of it is unquestioning and more a matter of instinct than theory or practice. Dealing in images, for me anyway, comes down to ways of looking. Film is the art of seeing, Wim Wenders once said. So any manipulation of image is an extension of that argument: how do we make ourselves "see" as opposed to just looking. So the judgement is when to interfere with an image and when to leave it alone. Of the three you mentioned, I think sound is the most imaginative medium because the listener fills in the gaps, and I think that partly explains why it has always interested me in relation to film. A film like Radio On could be said to be sound led and so can the work done with Bruce Gilbert (The Carfax Fragment, Radio On [remix]) and with AGF in Content.

OLK: How would you characterise moving image culture today? – What areas interest you most?

CP: Image overload. The depressing thing is how everything has become more conventional/safer. YouTube, for example, is pretty dull. Cinema is mainly conservative but ingenious. And actually the most interesting stuff is TV's equivalent to the conventional novel e.g. The Sopranos, Mad Men, The Shield and The Wire.

OLK: What do you think have been the biggest influencers in the demise of critical moving image culture - or is that too big an assumption; have new technologies perhaps opened up more options for critical exploration? What's cinema's legacy to this in your opinion?

CP: Sheer volume means that everything has fragmented or become subjected to the blockbuster syndrome. We're in a period of intense shift --- probably at the end of the first phase of digital technology, which will probably be looked back as a *golden age*.

OLK: What technologies do you think will be most significant to filmmaking in the future?

CP: Good question. Now that everything is within domestic reach, from filming to editing, the final hurdle is exhibition. Finding a way of getting your films seen in a meaningful way. *Unrequited Love*, for example, which was shown on TV and seen by 3 people and maybe had one or two public screenings, I thought could have been both interesting and successful as an internet project, but this raises questions of payment and profit and how to make a living out of the material, let alone the whole business of interaction.

OLK: Are there any successful examples of this (either critical and/or creative and/or commercial) that you can think of? you mentioned Keith (Griffiths) is increasingly interested

in the internet as a platform - do you think critical moving image culture is possible within a consumer-driven market economy?

CP: I don't know. Everything is prolific at the moment that it's impossible to say. It's interesting that in television, say, stuff that has become popular, such as The Wire, functions in a very conventional way, rather as the 19 century novel did. Whether new creative forms will emerge out of the aesthetics of the internet remains to be seen. If it does then it will probably involve elements of pornography, gambling and conspiracy. Another interesting thing is the resurgence of animation. I am still waiting for movies to discover the musical and artistic equivalents to jazz and abstract expressionism.