

---

# In So Many Words

By Adrian Martin

In the growing – and welcome – discourse on the audiovisual essay as a form of film criticism or study, a bogeyman has swiftly been created: old-fashioned writing (particularly in its certified, academic form), just words, written language, without the full cinesensuality of images, sounds, movement, spectacle, atmosphere, texture ... Who would want to go back to such a grey world of discourse, after being opened up to the possibilities of audiovisual editing on even the most humble laptop computer? Screenshots, mash-ups, collages, sampling ...

Now critics and scholars (myself among them) long to write in an expanded sense of *écriture*, the kind of poststructuralist ecstasy we used to only read about: using the materials of the medium to express ourselves anew, we will be reborn as creatives, maybe even as artists; one day we will all be Chris Marker or Agnès Varda, Harun Farocki or Tacita Dean. Just as John Travolta utters, at the end of Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981), 'it's a good scream', I can say, in all sincerity: it's a good dream. That doesn't mean it's a bad fantasy or a delusion; indeed, it is, at present, an uncommonly enabling dream. But we also have to know, to feel out, the borders, the limits, the conditioning factors of any dream that moves us so deeply and so far.

Let's back up like the proverbial Tonka truck, and grab for some historical perspective on the matter of the audiovisual essay.

One of the film critics I most admire is Raymond Durnat. One of the many reasons I like him is because he's always talking, in a very natural and everyday way, about tricky, complex things that go on in the human brain, and indeed in the entire human being: synaesthesia, left brain/right brain relations, mind/body or eye/hand conjunctions and disjunctions, even analogical versus digital thinking. In a candid, long-lost interview that I helped publish, Durnat explained that he in fact had MBD (Minimal Brain Dysfunction):

In intellectual work I really think in two stages. Right brain dominance, which makes all sorts of approximate comparisons — that's the analogic half [...] First I'm intuitive, muddled, fertile, and all my opinions are easily reversible. Then I reason. (1)

Like many people who grapple with various kinds or shades of mental

---

dysfunction - I faced a comparable situation when the onset of killer migraines scrambled my thought processes (the Emergency Ward initially mistook my first such migraine, at age 28, for a massive brain haemorrhage) and I literally had to re-learn how to remember things through associative leaps - Durgnat was eerily, hyper-consciously aware of the complexity of the seemingly simplest mental operations. And, of course, this influenced - I would almost say determined - his approach to both audiovisual art and the manner of writing about it.

But look at the texts, the books - the great mountain of critical-analytical material that Durgnat left behind when he died just short of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is mostly printed words on a page. Very occasionally (and most generously in his final BFI book, *A Long Hard Look at Psycho*), there would be especially selected frame enlargements from films to refer to and riff off. But no video essays, no CD-ROMs, no Internet databases, no TV specials or episodes of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* under his guidance. There was no Chris Petit or Jean-Pierre Gorin around making an essayistic portrait about him while he was still alive, as there was for Manny Farber (indeed, there seems, at least going by YouTube, to be precious little film or video footage at all of him speaking). It's only words, and words are all he had to take your heart away.

But what words they were! Evocative, jazzy, multi-levelled and multi-layered; thoughts, concepts, models and associations spinning everywhere. 'A jungle gym for thoughts to swing on', as he once said about (of all things) *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987). (2) Words that contained and triggered many things: images, sounds, smells, haptic experiences, feelings, diagrams, lists, sub-headings within sub-headings. Synaesthetic writing; a brainstorm. Doesn't all great writing on film - whatever mode or tone it adopts, baroque or serene - conjure more than what is implied by restricting its semiotic channel to simply material, linguistic signifiers on a page?

Durgnat was prophetic and visionary; as early as the 1960s, he was already using *multimedia* as a driving concept, long before it became a popular buzzword. And he was alive to breakthroughs and movements outside of film aesthetics (too) strictly delimited: cybernetics, for instance. In this, Durgnat had a contemporaneous cousin in Brazil: Jairo Ferreira, whose wild, delirious writing from 1965 to 2003 (for many years in a newspaper for the Japanese community!) frequently contained declarations like this one from 1986 about the future of cinema as he envisioned it:

Amphicinema. New old Greece, techno-pop, electronica. Slow substitution of film by hi-def tri-dimensional tape. Cinema without a screen. Sign cinema, satellite cinema. Informatics is synthesis ...

At other moments Ferreira would conjure the medium of film as he imagined it to be: an *electric book* – knowingly or unknowingly echoing Sergei Eisenstein’s no less prescient dream of a *spherical book*, another of the many, vivid presentiments in the critical literature of our multimedia, digital present day. (4)

I am a mere dabbler in the media theory/history/archaeology of Friedrich Kittler (and the multitude of researchers he has influenced), but I am drawn by his conviction that ‘general digitisation’ or what we know today as ‘interface’ – the mediatic interplay of images, sounds and texts – began not with modern computers, but the Greek alphabet. According to him: ‘In early Greece the phonetic alphabet already amalgamated language, music and mathematics’. (5) As another Kittlerian commentator, Niels Werber, remarks: ‘With one single system of notation (or ‘discourse system’) the Greeks, blessed by the muses, could therefore capture epics and tragedies, numbers and operators, melodies and pitch’. (6) To Kittler, sound and image, voice and text were thus once, in antiquity, closely interrelated (without being reduced or fused into a single thing) and are so again in the digital age. This is a radically different model from that of Vilém Flusser, who sharply distinguishes, in the succession of history, an ancient culture of writing from a modern culture based on what he terms *techno-images* (including cinema, TV and computers).

My simple point is that words – when used imaginatively and inventively – do not have to be just words. Language and writing are – can be – already multimedial or intermedial (to use the more recent buzzword) in their nature, use and action. It is from here that, in my view, we need to begin conceptualising the rise and the possibilities of the audiovisual essay as a form of film critique and analysis. It is never going to be a matter of swapping a supposedly dead, inert or encrusted culture of literary *explication de texte* for some all-new, pure, creative image-sound idiom. Nor is it going to be a matter of producing an expressive *fusion* of media channels: if the ‘70s taught us anything worth remembering (and they did – quite a lot, in fact), it is surely that all audiovisuals are heterogeneous, or as Frieda Grafe suggested: ‘Only the calculated mingling of formative elements originating in various media, each with its own relative autonomy, generates the tension that gives [a work] life’. (7) Our task should not be the Utopian one of delivering a new, single, fused audiovisual language but, rather, seizing the possibilities inherent in exploring expression *across* forms and media.

So my question, or my intuition, for future, media-archaeological research comes down to this: what are the origins, in writings from the past, of a

---

multimedia, multi-channel approach to critique? And not only writing: also speaking, teaching, radio and TV programs. Recall, for example, the debt that Robin Wood in 1975 expressed to V.F. Perkins' televisual analysis of Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), broadcast in the UK in the late '60s (8) - alongside the better known and better preserved case of the French *Cinéastes de notre temps* series.

Let's take one, fleeting example from within publishing itself - publishing understood not as pure, unsullied vessel for the written word, but precisely as layout, design, a graphic medium. We need to take a glance back, occasionally, at the Petite Planète travel books that Chris Marker was writing and designing in the 1950s (an inspired concatenation of words and photographs) or the comic strips so beloved of Alain Resnais (narrative propelled through the highly self-conscious technique of multiple figures, frames and balloons on a page) - the Right Bank culture of the Nouvelle Vague that so inspired Durgnat with its early, post-war consciousness of the multimedia revolution - to get the full measure of where we all started.

When I was a teenager, I was entranced by this passing remark by Jonathan Rosenbaum about *Cahiers du cinéma* in the '60s: in translating a roundtable, collective text devoted to montage, he regretted that 'it hasn't been possible to reproduce or approximate this jazzy sort of *mise en page*' of the original. (9) It was a lesson I remembered well: when my students read Serge Daney in translation from mid '70s *Cahiers*, I always rub their noses in the often peculiar, innovative, and utterly heterogeneous design layout of main text, images, captions, footnotes and breakout boxes or sections: all of which generate associations inexorably erased in a straight/conventional English translation. And I would refind this same, delightful term - *mise en page* - two decades later, in the course of Raymond Bellour's expanded reformulation of the concept of *mise en scène* in cinema: Godard once again offered the lead, with his graphic design of printed/typed words, stills and superimposed clips exploding in the *Histoire(s)*, but present to varying degrees in all his work. What matters across all the *mise* operations that Bellour detects in cinema - *mise en scène*, *mise en page*, *mise en phrase*, *mise en image*, and so on (10) - are the diverse strategies of 'spacing' and spatialisation, separation and associative combination, that play between all these levels, sparking thought and emotion. The same goes for the audiovisual essay.

I am in agreement with Cristina Álvarez López (in her [article](#) for this issue of *Frames*) when she remarks: 'Before it was physically possible to create video-essays, we imagined them and traced them out in our writing'. For me, this prompts two reflections: first, that writing will never be - and in a majority of cases, should never be - entirely severed

---

from the audiovisual essay genre; and second, that the video-essay form remains, in the final instance, a gesture of *critique*, and not a work of art ... no matter how giddily near to art it may travel.

The audiovisual essay is a mode of critical discourse, and in my view it should never give up that stance. It should not renounce the rationality of critique, but rather seek to install it, multiply it, at every level. Nor should it forego what Bellour, at a film/media festival in Zagreb, once called the 'necessary labour of description' required for every serious, genuine act of critique: not everything is going to 'inhere' in the film itself; every analysis or interpretation needs the careful setting-up of its context, its 'frame', in order to communicate itself. The seductive lure of the audiovisual essay, such as it sweeps over us at present, is precisely the heady illusion it offers, for a moment or two, that all frames and contexts have dissolved - that fragments of cinema, sparked into life by our montage of them, will magically 'say it all'.

This is, in its way, a small-scale re-eruption of the fantasia of the 'aesthetic regime' that Jacques Rancière diagnoses so well for the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries at the beginning of his *Film Fables*: free of narrative, free even of the narrative of analytical explication, we dream of the immediate, abstract, poetic sense that will fly like an arrow into spectators' minds when two incongruous scenes are united, or when a familiar image is slowed down or magnified beyond immediate, conventionalised recognition ... (11)

So: words, text, should be right in there with the flow of images and sounds: inside, above, underneath, alongside, wherever (and the position can, of course, shift in the course of whatever mode of *mise en page* that is employed). When audiovisual collages leave text behind entirely, I find that they quickly run the risk of becoming merely cryptic, a wash of *poesis* that has not quite yet managed to fashion itself into the musculature of a real cine-poem (such is the case with the 'Vertigo Variations', whose 'thesis' I cannot really grasp at all, underneath the undoubtedly pleasant, but not yet fully artistic, riot of slow-motion, colour-smearing and sound grabs). (12)

By the same token, that 'necessary labour of description', once the 'ekphrastic' domain of words alone (even in the academic classroom or conference hall), (13) is inevitably changing its procedures or contours: in the era of prodigious screenshots, it is the *economy* of critical word to illustrative image, the balance and weighting of their respective functions, that is slowly altering (and not without resistance, especially among those university students eager to regurgitate the old, tried and tested academic forms of discourse). But, I insist, it is not - ever - the moment to proclaim some total eclipse of word-discourse in the King

---

Kong-like shadow of the almighty cinema.

If, along the hard road to illumination, the audiovisual essay manages to find or create some new eloquence, some new sensation, or evoke some of that 'mad poetry' that George Alexander once found in intense theorising, (14) then that's all for the good: I aspire to some degree of madness of this sort myself. There is another new field, closely related to the rise of the audiovisual essay and overlapping with it, that I have elsewhere called *creative criticism*: it refers to all those forms of playful or experimental writing that form a middle-ground between the 'pure' rationality often ground down by the restrictive protocols of the academy, and the more intuitive, less reflexive processes of art-making itself. (15) This middle-ground is large, in fact is growing as we speak; we have yet to bump against its limits or hit our heads on its ceiling. That's exactly where we are in the development of the audiovisual essay, too: the free, expansive phase. So, let a hundred montage-flowers bloom – but keep just as many words in the picture as well, please.

#### **Endnotes:**

1. Raymond Durnat, 'Culture Always is a Fog', *Rouge*, no. 8 (2006), <http://www.rouge.com.au/8/interview.html>
2. Raymond Durnat, 'Up Jumped the Devil or, The Jack in Pandora's Box', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no. 644 (September 1987), p. 266.
3. Jairo Ferreira (trans. Filipe Furtado), 'Cinema: Music of Light', *Rouge*, no. 9 (2006), [http://www.rouge.com.au/9/cinema\\_light.html](http://www.rouge.com.au/9/cinema_light.html)
4. See Oksana Bulgakowa, 'Eisenstein. The Glass House and the Spherical Book: From the Comedy of the Eye to a Drama of Enlightenment', *Rouge*, no. 8 (2005), <http://www.rouge.com.au/7/eisenstein.html>
5. Quoted in Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, 'Friedrich Kittler: Kultur als Datenverarbeitungsgestell', in Moebius & Quadflieg (eds.), *Kultur. Theorien der Gegenwart* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften), p. 576.
6. Niels Werber, 'The Disappearance of Literature: Friedrich Kittler's Path to Media Theory', *Thesis Eleven*, no. 107 (November 2011), p. 49.
7. Frieda Grafe, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (London: BFI, 1996), p. 56.
8. Robin Wood, *Personal Views: Explorations in Film* (Wayne State University Press, 2006), p. 144.

---

9. Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'Introduction' to *Rivette: Texts and Interviews* (London: British Film Institute, 1977), reprinted at <http://www.dvdbeaver.com/rivette/ok/JR-introduction.html>

10. See Raymond Bellour, 'Figures aux allures de plans', in Jacques Aumont (ed.), *La mise en scène* (Bruxelles: De Boeck, 2000), pp. 109-126.

11. See Jacques Rancière (trans. Emiliano Battista), *Film Fables* (London: Berg, 2006).

12. B. Kite and Alexander Points-Zollo, 'Vertigo Variations', Parts 1-3, *Moving Image Source* (September to December 2011), beginning at: <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/vertigo-variations-pt-1-20110921>

13. Consult the various discussions of critical writing as ekphrasis in Alex Clayton & Andrew Klevan (eds.), *The Language and Style of Film Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2011).

14. Spoken at a public seminar on art criticism in Melbourne during the late 1980s.

15. See my 'No Direction Home: Creative Criticism', in *Project: New Cinephilia* (Edinburgh International Film Festival, June 2011), <http://projectcinephilia.mubi.com/2011/05/31/no-direction-home-creative-criticism/>

### **Copyright:**

Frames #1 [Film and Moving Image Studies Re-Born Digital?](#) 2012-07-02  
this article © [Adrian Martin](#) June 2012