

*Mieke BAL*

## Collective Subjectivity in the Essay Film

It may seem paradoxical to devote a reflection on “self-representation,” as the title of this special issue has it, to the fundamentally collective nature of authorship. But in fact, it is not; for the subjectivity that shines through the essay, hence, also the essay film, is anchored in collectivity. Authorship always is, but in the essay, with its hesitant, even stuttering discourse, even more obviously so. And this makes the subjectivity, in its collective nature, more conspicuous (see “Challenging and Saving”). Which, I suppose, is the rationale for this special issue of *Ekphrasis*. The essayistic is in the expression but also in the reception, the reading or watching. How can the author-as-filmmaker then represent herself without turning the self into a main character, as in “first-person” filmic discourse? I will argue that it is precisely because of the collective nature of subjectivity that this is possible, without falling into the traps of narcissism.

In an important book from 2017, devoted to, as her title has it, “slow philosophy,” Australian philosopher Michelle Boulous Walker explores and recommends “essayistic reading” as a strategy for slowing down reading. Slow reading is an activity that is under threat of disappearing due to the internet culture with zapping as its primary skill. The term “screenagers” for today’s young people says it all. Rereading Boulous Walker’s plea for essayistic reading as I am writing this article, has inspired me to revisit Adorno’s essay on “The Essay as Form,” from 1954-58, on the basis of which I had written an earlier article on the essay film, focusing on a film of my own.

Slowing down: Boulous Walker’s strong and passionate advocacy of slow reading fits my own interest in differing temporalities. Specifically against the current tendency for absorption in speed, I

**Mieke BAL**

University of Amsterdam,  
Professor Emerita  
[mieke.g.bal@gmail.com](mailto:mieke.g.bal@gmail.com)

**EKPHRASIS, 2/2021**

**THE ESSAY FILM  
AS SELF-REPRESENTATIONAL MODE  
pp. 10–26**

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.26.2  
Published First Online: December 15, 2021

have militated for the acknowledgment of the variability and the non-chronological nature of time (in art). See also Wyller's *What Is Time? An Inquiry*. I have done so in different projects, such as an article on variations of temporality ("Time and Form"), one on an "aesthetic of interruption" (with Norwegian artist Jeannette Christensen), and an exhibition project in the Munch Museum in Oslo (*Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways*). There, I modified by means of low hanging and providing benches close to the paintings, the habitual display of artworks. These are routinely hung on walls the visitor is supposed to walk along, which leaves little time for close, slow, meditative watching. Such traditional display instills the habit of thoughtless looking, and enforces a museum visit limited to what the body can endure. The present article, or "essay," brings together some of the different aspects of these earlier reflections in view of the essay (film) specifically.

Let me begin with a confession, a self-representation of sorts. The term "essay film" was more or less unknown to me, in the sense that I had never given it special reflection, until I was invited to make one, by Dr. Jakob Mikurda of the Łódź Film School. I did this within one week, with the participation of many great professionals at the School. It was a fabulous experience of collective subjectivity. This happened to be the week before the corona lockdown, in early March 2020. This invitation had been made possible by a grant Mikurda and his colleagues had won, to explore and experiment with the essay film as a form, or genre. This brought the "genre," if we may call it that, of the essay film up for closer scrutiny. I had simply never thought about it, but as Mikurda said in answer to my somewhat puzzled reaction to his invitation: "But all your films are essay films!"

When I then started to reflect on it, it seemed that he was right. But how? So, then I had to come up with something resembling a definition, a characterization, or a theory of the essay film. I tried this in an essay-article on the question of the essay, which I titled around the key meaning of the noun "essay": "Trying" ("It's About Time"). The ambiguity of that word in English, meaning "attempting" and "difficult," immediately inspired me to a further pursuit of ambiguities. The former meaning, attempting, declares the tentative, incomplete, imperfect state of the resulting film. It is in the gaps and holes of that imperfection that the author/filmmaker reveals herself. No smooth perfection à la Hollywood. The latter meaning of "trying," the difficulty, implies, among many other aspects, the need to keep viewers engaged beyond the effect of a mere stuttering, which could be annoying and make viewers impatient. Therefore, to avoid over-theoretical or over-political statement-like utterances, a narrative thread will help, different as this may be from the essayistic point the film is to make. This is the more difficult in a film that is subjective.

I began to see where, in Mikurda's view, and how the point of each of my films crawled towards the essayistic. As it happened, in my ongoing dual practice as academic and artistic experimenter, I had for quite some time been bothered by the current fashion of the term "artistic research" with its many problematic aspects, brilliantly analysed by Kamini Vellodi,

and wished to propose a less hierarchical concept. This became the concept of “Image-Thinking.” Ultimately, this led to a book, in which I attempt to explore the essayistic aspect in the foregrounding of thinking in my films, along with other aspects such as, most prominently, narrative, fictionality, time, space, and voice, and other more specific aspects such as trauma, affect, memory, identity. In that book I investigate theoretical issues in art-making mainly through my own films (*Image-Thinking*). Thinking and writing about the “thinking” part of the dual concept “image-thinking” clarified the presence and importance of the essayistic in all my films indeed. Below I will briefly indicate what the specifically essayistic points are in some of them, with primary attention to the one film I explicitly made as an essay.

### Trying the Not-Yet-Known

Self-representation does not imply individualism, narcissism and self-indulgence, however. I also recently published an article about authorship, which obviously involves the question of subjectivity. To make a long argument short: I advocate recognition of the fundamentally collective nature of authorship. In filmmaking this is taken for granted. And for essay films, this is both more prominent and more problematic, since the primary maker uses the medium to make a point, and the other participants are asked to participate in this endeavour, without simply doing his or her bidding. One never makes a film alone. In solitary writing, this is not so obvious, but there it should be recognized as well. Thinking, as I tried to demonstrate in one of my films specifically concerned with that activity, is itself collective. The result of that attempt, the film and five-channel installation *Reasonable Doubt: Scenes from Two Lives*, shows how the philosopher who changed thinking in Western early modernity, René Descartes, does his thinking not in solitude but in social interaction with others. Especially his interaction with women, little discussed in the literature about him, had to come forward, given my feminist persuasion (my self-representation). The project was also an attempt (“essay”) to audio-visualize thinking, in relation to the world, as I explored in an article on that project (“Thinking in the World”).

Information on, and photographs, trailers and clips of all my films I mention in this contribution can be found in my website, [www.miekebal.org](http://www.miekebal.org). Some of the films are online, some, for reason of discretion, are not. Discretion is imperative in documentaries, where the personal is political. The documentary value of the film depends on the relationship of trust, and in the case of those films, mostly devoted to issues of migration, identity, and the precarity of life in intercultural situations, posting the films online would betray that trust. In other cases, the films were made by dual or multiple authorship, so that I do not feel at liberty to post them.

In her book from 2017 Laura Rascaroli patiently discusses all elements of filmmaking that pertain to the essay film as well, inflected in particular ways. Montage and sound, narration

and temporality, to mention only the most obvious ones, are taken on in their particularity for that specific deployment in the essay film. The most important one for me is “framing,” the search for an object that cannot be reduced to any of the other aspects, because it is so prominent, theoretically unpacked, yet embedded in the film. It is in the act of framing that the subjectivity of the essay-filmmaker is shown. But there is more to the essay “as form” (to recycle Adorno’s title). Of the many publications on the essay Boulous Walker discusses, I was struck especially by her comments on and quotations from Brazilian scholar Luís Costa Lima, whose rich 1996 book *The Limits of Voice* explores the essay in terms of flexibility, “meandering” (37, 40), and bearing witness (56). As his title suggests already, “voice” as the one-speaker thesis in narratology has it, is a limiting concept, as I also argued in an article on the topic (“Phantom Sentences”). While “meandering” suggests the anti-structural structure of the genre, witnessing comes close to the point of the essay as film, as visual, showing to spectator-participants what is at stake in the framed situation, narrative, life. In witnessing, the self-representation is made subordinate to that of the others whose lives and predicaments are opened up for witnessing, thus transforming their solitude into collectivity.

In my recent essay film, the first I made explicitly and self-consciously as such, the stake is *time*. But it is not slow time, as per Boulous Walker’s plea as well as my own. Here, urgency is primary. The title, *It’s About Time! Reflections on Urgency*, points to the environmental and climatic issue that requires fast action. The exclamation mark foregrounds that. The title is ambiguous; without that mark, it would say that the subject of the essay is temporality. This is also the case; “about” as “concerning.” Coincidentally or not, the film is rather fast-paced.

What is not yet known, in an essay, remains unclear; no firm conclusions can be drawn. This is the beneficial aspect of the essay. Neither about the topic, nor about the author’s “self” can we come up with a clear point. The self-representation in my essay film is in the ambiguity as such of the title. My fondness of ambiguity may be anchored in a love of poetry, which I developed in high school, as well as a resistance against dictatorial clarity—which is not the same as clarity as a tool for intersubjectivity and the dialogic relationality it enables, most importantly in teaching. The ambiguity suggests the bringing together of my thoughts about time, academically in relation to history in its interrelation with the present, which I had developed in a book from 1999; and, as the exclamation mark intimates, the urgency to do something, about the current threat to the planet, which is my personal collectively-subjective preoccupation. Paradoxically, the former, academic point is elaborated in visual form, and the latter, although couched in fiction, mostly in words.

The most effective formulation that I know of this not-yet-knowing is by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, who wrote, in one of those sentences that became an enduring guideline for me: “I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it” (10). Not

only does this phrasing express modesty—the author acknowledges that he doesn't know exactly what he is busy thinking about or thinking out—but also, it qualifies the intensity (“engaged”) and the liveness of the thought-in-becoming (“struggling”). Most importantly, the idea Bollas is trying to think collaborates with him. The author and his “object,” the idea he is working on, do it together. The idea wishes to be thought; it even battles to achieve the status of idea.

### Pre-Posterous!

Ambiguity, once more... Complexified this time: with hyphen, without exclamation mark, the word means what I gave it the mission to mean: the past and the present changing places. As the term in this heading, however, it combines the “scholarly” term, with the hyphen, with the exclamation mark, indicating, with a wink, the scandalous aspect of my academic work. Before I introduced and theorized the term in my 1999 book, the treatment I gave “Rembrandt”—the quote marks indicating the cultural place, presence, reception of the famous painter, rather than only his authenticated body of works—was taken to task by many. This incited me to take on the task of thinking on chronology further, which is evidence of the collectivity of thought. The term “pre-posterous history” was still criticized by some, and praised, even unacknowledgedly taken up under the different, tamer term of anachronism, by others. And searching for a narrative thread to insure viewers' engagement, my (academic/critical) view of time, with my resistance to the linearity in thinking of art through chronology, seemed to fit well with the inter-historical figure of Cassandra, who floated from Homer and Aeschylus to East-German writer Christa Wolf. In addition to being constantly under discussion, pre-posterousness is (literally) enacted in two forms in the essay film about time, by actors enacting characters who enact other figures. This doubly enacting is part of my essayistic point of collective authorship.

One such moment is when Cassandra takes on the role of a teacher and somewhat pedantically reads a passage (quoted from the beginning of my book *Quoting Caravaggio*) to her student, her lover Aeneas. See figure 1. The latter has donned round glasses, brown boots, and a beige jacket that make him resemble Walter Benjamin. In that secondary enactment he can recall the latter's fifth thesis on the philosophy of history, saying: “[...] For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255, emphasis added). In that guise he is empowered to reply to the teacher, so that a true discussion can emerge. That discussion on the basis of equality is an additional essayistic point of the scene of teaching. On this point of teaching as dialogic and equality-based, see my interviews in Lutters. This scene, through that equality between teacher and students, comes closest to a self-representation.

To make the scene as a whole properly “preposterous” I had a contemporary painting by American artist David Reed shifting over a Caravaggio painting and partly covering the faces of the teacher and the student, a.k.a. Cassandra and Aeneas/Benjamin. Reed’s work has been important to me for a long time, since it is both abstract and baroque, contemporary as it may be. Through his work I had been inspired to reconsider “abstraction,” which I have re-theorized with the help of Deleuze and Guattari’s reflections on it in *A Thousand Plateaus*, lucidly explained by John Rajchman. I discuss Reed’s work in this respect, which integrates abstract forms with sensuous texture, in the book *Quoting Caravaggio*, and the Deleuzian conception of abstraction in a book on the work of Belgian sculptor Ann Veronica Janssens, *Endless Andness*. There my argument is that abstraction can be political, as I had learned from that artist’s work. In the video still of figure 1, again pre-posterously, Cassandra is reading the passage from 1999, and Aeneas/Benjamin reflects on it, then comes up with the key passage from the 5<sup>th</sup> Thesis.

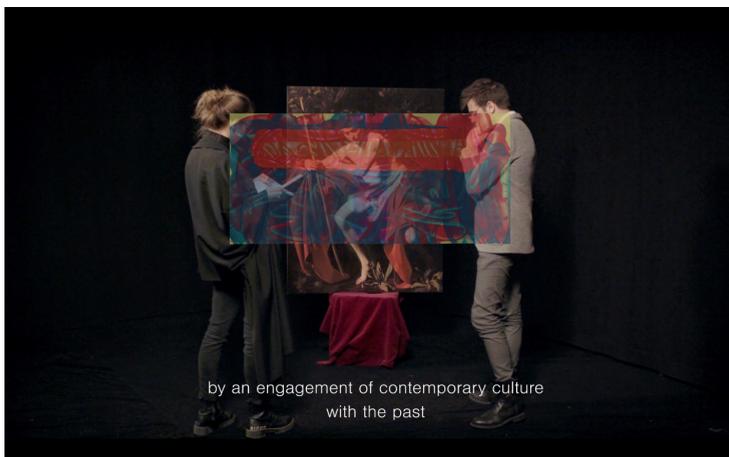


Figure 1. Cassandra/ the teacher (Magdalena Žak) reading from an essay on preposterous history to her student/interlocutor Benjamin (Adrian Budakow). Video still.

The second mode of trying/essaying the problem of chronology—chronology as a problem—is an enactment of my concept of “preposterous history” as I called and elaborated it—the idea that the present, our present views of the past, change that past, so that not only the past influences the present but also the other way around. Initially I had learned, or being altered to this (and many other things) from a book by Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall from 1994 on Tiepolo, which got me started in reflecting on my alleged (but untrue) “ahistorical attitude,” of which I had been accused by orthodox art historians. This idea is visualized—I would even say “embodied”—in a *tableau vivant* of Cassandra’s lover Aeneas as Caravaggio’s *John the Baptist in the Desert*, from 1602. This painting plays

the part of a figure or character in the film. For a long time, I had fantasized of making such a scene, where an actor in the present would try to emulate the figure from the past, and thus transforming the latter, in particular into the sexy young man the painted figure is, rather than a saint. This brings in (homo-)eroticism into allegedly religious painting—something for which Caravaggio is (in-)famous (figure 2).



Figure 2. Aeneas (Adrian Budakow) enacting John the Baptist. Video still.

To make the essayistic point on preposterous time and the ambiguity of reality more forcefully and more generally, I did not want to limit it to that one scene, and added interactions of Cassandra with two paintings by South-African/Dutch painter Ina van Zyl. Although still a young girl living at home, early on in the film she articulates the question of the difficulty of distinguishing representation from reality—another ambiguity I am quite taken by. She does this in response to her father Priam’s somewhat imposing questioning, superposing a real pine needle to a meticulously painted one. Later, she rests her head down on the floor, in front of a mirror, “accidentally” juxtaposing it to Ina van Zyl’s depiction of just such a head of wavy hair.

### Thinking as Form

The urgency, indicated by the added exclamation mark that changes “about” from “concerning” to “hurry,” is presented in many of the dialogues, quoted from various sources, especially Christa Wolf’s novel *Cassandra*. Quoting from Wolf’s novel was a way to foreground collective subjectivity as well as pre-posterous history, since Wolf recycled a mythical figure from antiquity, and the currently re-actualized power abuse. For, the

mythical Cassandra was given the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo for whom, in whose temple, she worked, as a strategy of seduction. But when she refused to sleep with him he cursed her to never be believed. #MeToo revitalized this eternal inequality between men and women. Wolf's novel predates the revival of that movement, but surely, sexual abuse of power is of all times.

I argue that “thinking in film,” with film as a medium for thought, is what the essay film's foremost vocation is. Not to end up with a definite thought, an idea, but with the movement and the constant process of thinking about it. In that process of thinking, in collective subjectivity, the “self” of the filmmaker comes to the fore. Through a reflection on “thought-images,” which I see as the result of “image-thinking,” I also argue for the intellectual gain to be had from “essaying” thought artistically. This inevitably brings in Adorno's essay. The philosopher devoted a large part of his essay on the essay as form to bridging the gaps that binary oppositions tend to dig. He did this by means of nuancing, even if he does not foreground that verb. In this respect Adorno—and the inspiration he gave me for the essay film—touched on another obsession in my thinking: the resistance against binary opposition as a culturally predominant mode. And, whereas true to the uncertainties of the essay, I hesitated to what extent, and how, this point in my thinking could help me shape an audiovisual artwork, I ended up taking this as a primary feature of the essay film.

Adorno's essay on the essay is rich, anti-linear, in a sense rambling, thus exemplifying the essay as form. Like Cervantes's *Don Quijote* with its rambling, unstructured hectic narration, as I have exhibition-essayistically argued when I showed my video installation based on that novel (“Don Quijote: Sad Countenances”) the form of the essay is its *formlessness*. Among many passages that set my thinking in motion, this one characterizes the philosophical *tone*—a nuance that goes well with Adorno's use of “form”:

The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character. (“Essay as Form” 9).

Along with the series that ends on the rejection of reductionism, of these words pointing to active thinking, “partial”—mind the ambiguity of that word, on which more below—and “fragmentary” in particular seemed to bring us closer to what an “essay,” hence, also an essay film, can be or do; how its form can (help us) think. The form of thinking in the essay as form is predominantly formless, which is a form in itself. But a form that acknowledges and accepts the lack of structure, of wholeness and of delimitation.

Both words resist the idea of the total, of the encompassing whole, but also, through its own ambiguity, in its shadow, the totalitarianism that has so many places of the current world in its grip. “Partial” is the opposite of totality, the not-wholeness, the incompleteness

of the essay as form. Moreover, and relevant for the question of self-representation, “partial” also means “subjective,” as in the phrase “I am partial to...”. This is a key element. It implies the need to acknowledge that whatever it is the essayist brings forward, cannot pretend to be an objective, factual truth. Nor should it; for that pretention would annihilate the indispensable formlessness and thereby obscure the self-representational aspect. That aspect lays in the other meaning of the qualifier. For, “partial” also means “passionate,” in that the holder of the view brought forward deeply cares about it. Why else would they bother making an essay? And what is less obvious, it also means thinking as a “rational” activity, since partiality also encompasses the wish to persuade, which can only be done through rational arguments. Such arguments are the stuff of collective authorship, in the conversation that is its communicative activity. Here the collective nature of subjectivity comes forward most strongly. This desire for persuasion links the subjectivity in the sense of implicit self-representation to the intersubjectivity of dialogue; the collective authorship without which no subjectivity can thrive.

As for “fragmentary”, this accords well with the non-total(itarian). According to Boulos Walker, in her engagement with Adorno and Costa Lima, the fragment is the smallest, shortest form of the essay (62–69). Partial and fragmentary: I will keep these two words current, since both integrate the non-ending with the subjective, foregrounding even more strongly that nothing can be whole. “Essay”: in addition to taxing, difficult, the word means “trying”; attempting to say something for which no ready-made (literary or cinematic) genre exists as yet. As I argued in the previous section, the essay’s greatest value is that it is investigating the possibility of an insight that is not yet known. Perhaps “genre” is not where we should look to understand the essay, then, but rather, explore the word-name itself. The modesty that word includes is crucial. Trying, attempting, groping towards, fumbling, even floundering. That modesty itself acknowledges that nothing is perfect, and also, that no one does anything alone; that making something is collective and social. It also has a temporal consequence, since it intimates the idea that “things,” such as artworks or films, are never finished; they are, as the saying has it, “in progress,” since “trying” is never over. But “essay” also includes “thought.” You don’t try something without, first, thinking about it. As it happens, one of my films that Mikurda considered essay films, which I already mentioned, *Reasonable Doubt: Scenes from Two Lives* (2016), probably the most obviously essayistic one of my films, concerns precisely thought as its primary topic; the social, collective, performative aspects of the activity and the resulting ideas. According to the essayistic thrust of this film, thinking itself is tentative. Thinking, then, occurs in the essay-mode. This argument is most characteristically “me”: my view, passion, and conviction. This makes the essay an important, indeed, crucial cultural phenomenon. This is also Boulos Walker’s ultimate point in her book.

In order to emphasize the collectivity of subjective authorship, and due to the remaking of literature in film, I freely quote from the source novel I embedded in the script for the

film. Cassandra is constantly thinking in Wolf's novel. She begins to seriously doubt her commitment to Aeneas, along with her suspicion of others when she feels the collective nature of subjectivity. The word "contaminated" rings a loud bell in our time of the pandemic. Under the impact of politics, she seems to endorse the binary thinking of that institution and practice when she says:

Maybe I am being contaminated by the relentless drawing of one of the men of the Council. I begin [. . .] to divide the people I meet into two groups in view of an unknown future emergency. You can count on him, not on him.

And soon, for her Aeneas ends up on the wrong side of that divide. This is the moment, at about two-thirds of the 31-minute film, when she looks more and more concerned, and acting upon her thinking, she ends up breaking off her relationship with Aeneas. The latter's face expresses how flabbergasted and saddened he is. He does not speak a word. But his mood is very visible.

### Feeling: Moodiness

Cassandra dumps Aeneas because he remains too close to the powers-that-be, resulting in a near future in which he would become stultified. This, in her wording, concerns the future—one she rejects. She keeps looking concerned, talking to him, while they walk downtown in the rain. That accidental rain contributes to the couple's mood. Cassandra abandons him with the poignant words: "I cannot love a hero. I do not want to see you being transformed into a statue." These are the final words of Wolf's novel. In my film, there are still ten more minutes to go, during which Cassandra asks a passer-by (played by Mikurda) how Rodin's strong, masculine *Thinker* has been transformed into a starving woman. This is edited-in footage of a sculpture by Spanish artist Fernando Sánchez Castillo, from 2018, which I have discussed recently (in "Exhibition-ism: on Temporal togetherness," with images on page 10). The sculpture spoke to my feminist persuasion, which it represents, in all its complexity. Clearly, whereas Aeneas walks away in a very sad mood, Cassandra remains lively, preoccupied as she is by the future. Her final words in the film are: "The future is now."

In fiction, *mood*, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2012) among others insisted, is crucial. In film even more so, due to the intermediality, where images, language and sound interact and reinforce the effects of one another. Gumbrecht proposes this through the multi-semantic German word *Stimmung*, which also refers to musical harmonizing. Mood, in film, is a (sub-)medium, not simply the object of representation, if we engage with art on the mode of affect. In *It's About Time!* mood is very much participating in the ideas about time and the ways these are being conveyed. Mood is a form of affect. Affect, wrote American literary

scholar Charles Altieri, “comprises the range of mental states where an agent’s activity cannot be adequately handled in terms of either sensations or beliefs but requires attending to how he or she offers expressions of those states.” (47). Affects, he continues, “are ways of being moved that supplement sensation with at least a minimal degree of imaginative projection.” (47). He then specifies the affects according to a hierarchical range spanning from beyond sensation to passion:

Feelings are elemental affective states characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate processes of sensation. Moods are modes of feeling where the sense of subjectivity becomes diffuse and sensation merges into something close to atmosphere, something that seems to pervade an entire scene or situation. Emotions are affects that involve the construction of attitudes that typically establish a particular cause and so situate the agent within a narrative [...]. Finally, passions are emotions within which we project significant stakes for the identity that they make possible. (48)

From this taxonomy it is clear that *mood* is the affective domain where film and viewer can most easily share the diffuse sense of subjectivity, and where the filmmaker indirectly represents herself.

The mood of Aeneas when Cassandra refuses to follow him and separates from him is reinforced by the rain that came down in the afternoon of the shoot. Cassandra herself is not more cheerful than he is, however. The rain brings their moods together, and “colors” the dramatic moment of their separation. Mood, according to Altieri’s taxonomy, is a subcategory of affect. It has been called upon to help us articulate the effects hitherto called political or ethical, aesthetic or sexual, under a unifying rubric that does not depend on the figurative quality of a given artwork, as the prior centrality of representation would by necessity assume. Indeed, affect as a central concept has two advantages. It helps to provide the cultural disciplines with a *unifying* and with a *comparative* concept that can bring such divergent art forms as painting, film, video, music, and exhibition practices, under a single perspective, while still allowing differentiation, both between media and between artworks. For the essay film with its features as discussed above, mood can be considered central.

The most lucid, succinct explanation of affect was written by Ernst van Alphen (2008). Film scholar Eugenie Brinkema’s timely call for affect’s analyzability brings us back to the humanities’ primary skill and task for the larger cultural world (2014): detailed and subtle analysis of the complexity and nuances of art. She attempts to point out, in (film-)texts, what it is that triggers the affective intensity between the artwork and the viewer or reader.

The task that I was to develop something around an issue that was important to me (“partial”) made it happen in a flash. This is, for me, what self-representation in essay films

most typically is: the filmmaker brings strong commitments to be represented, even if she is herself not visible at all. What bothers me most in the current situation of the world is the general indifference or, at least, powerlessness towards the imminent environmental disaster. So, in view of this bleak state of our world, an essay film, with my belief in the relevance of narrative, and the bi-lateral temporality in mind termed “pre-posterous history,” made ancient history in relation to the (very) near future pop into my mind. At the same time, my narrative impulse called up a character. Cassandra: the prophethess who could foresee the future, but nobody believed her. The most extensive ancient story about her is in Aeschylus’ play *Agamemnon* (458 BCE). The best-known modern retelling is Wolf’s novel, which is, apart from the nine first lines, entirely written “in the first person.” This compelled identifying (with) Cassandra as the subject, not only of the story but of the emotional heaviness it entails, reflecting during the day she knows she is going to die. This inflects, of course, her mood.

Affect facilitates analysis of the *agency* of the essay film. To put it succinctly: the affective effect is a specific instance of the more general concept of performativity. Here, again, it helps unify what earlier concepts kept separate. For, in its interest in “what happens” to receivers of works of art and literature in what we can now best call the “event” of art, the concept of affect unifies such divergent effects as sexual arousal, political manipulation, ethical and intellectual edification, the compulsion to reflect, and, as the case may be, religious inspiration. It can even account for the eagerness to learn, to have new experiences, or to fondly remember old ones, that would fall under the didactic mission of art and museums. To sum it up in one word, affect *activates* viewers. This is, precisely, what the essay form is attempting to do. It is in that activating that the maker represents herself.

The character of Cassandra, a strong-headed young woman, helped me in my commitment that I was to develop something around an issue that was important to me (“partial”): the general indifference or powerlessness towards the imminent environmental disaster. So, in view of this, an essay film, with my belief in the relevance of narrative, and the bi-lateral temporality in mind that I have termed “pre-posterous history”, made ancient history in relation to the (very) near future pop into my mind. The modern retelling in Christa Wolf’s novel is entirely written “in the first person,” identifying (with) Cassandra as the subject, not only of the story but of the emotional heaviness it entails, reflecting during the last day of her life. “Mood,” here, is an understatement. In terms of “the figural,” according to Jean-François Lyotard’s attempt to overcome the distinction, even the binary opposition, between language and images, Cassandra lends herself to the *figuration* of the essay’s warning in audio-visual form. The concept of the figural and its potential for analysis is lucidly explained by Rodowick, in “Presenting the Figural” and specifically for visual analysis by Ionescu in “The Figure in Time.” The film ends on a wild dance Cassandra performs, ending on the words just quoted.

## Locating Ideas

The making of an essay film also implies choice of locations, which, in their turn, show, or represent, the combination of the maker's tastes, moods, thoughts, struggles to form ideas, interactions with the other members of the subjectivity-collective, and much more. I end this essay with a brief discussion of locations. I already mentioned the accidental rain in the city centre of Łódź. Another revealing location is the Pałac Herbsta in that city, a department of the museum Sztuki, to which we had obtained access thanks to the director Jarosław Suchan, a long-term collaborator-friend. The Palace in which we set the dwelling of King Priam and the Queen Hecuba, where Cassandra is still living at the beginning of the film, has all the features of a pre-posterous cultural heritage. It is beautifully ornate, very "royal," and as such so museal that it clearly also evokes the contemporary. There was another temporal element to this: since the museum was open to visitors, the shoot could only take one and a half hour. Hence, another "urgency" was at play.

The rain, the Palace, and other locations became figures, even characters. This we had experienced and experimented with in earlier films as well. Especially in *Reasonable Doubt*, partly set in two Palaces, locations became active participants. The first palace was Queen Kristina's dwelling, for which we had been received in Nieborów Palace, a quite pre-posterous place belonging to the National Museum of Poland. Access to that palace was a great gift, the more important as the original place of Kristina in Sweden no longer exists. The second was the Palazzo Corsini in Rome, where our interlocutor professor Harald Hendrix, director of the Royal Dutch Institute in Rome, who also played the modest role of Kristina's valet, had earned us access with the Italian ministry of culture. In Nieborów the palace appeared a bit resistant, when Kristina walks through its large rooms and corridors as if to take possession of it. The Palazzo Corsini had a strong "reality effect" (to recycle Roland Barthes' term) in the sense that the historical Kristina actually lived and died there, in the very room where we filmed that final scene with its feminist tenor. There, after Descartes' death, Kristina (played by Finnish actress Marja Skaffari) discusses with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (played by Dutch actress Johanna ter Steege) about Descartes' compassionate understand of Elisabeth's youth trauma, and his blindness to gender difference.

But of course, not all locations have that semi-historical royal look. Earlier on in the film, Descartes (played by Thomas Germaine) walks in the dunes, a landscape where he can be, and think, alone, but well aware of the others in his life. And in *Madame B*, the film and installations I made with Michelle Williams Gamaker in 2013, among many participating locations is the fancy designer store L'Eclaireur in the Marais quarter in Paris, where the essayistic point of "emotional capitalism" so termed by Eva Illouz in *Cold Intimacies* is very convincingly enacted by Emma (Marja Skaffari) and the salesman, played by the store's real salesman Pierre Lassovski, who had never been in front of a camera. He played his role to

perfection, which he was capable of because it is his real profession. This scene is essayistic in its inclusion of a reality effect. In figure 3 it is visible that the salesman, who never oversteps the boundary of decency, is helping the insecure costumer Emma to confront her insecurity, and overcome it through over-spending. This is a very precise imaging of emotional capitalism as Illouz theorized it, but Flaubert, in his literary imagination, prophetically shaped it. Other scenes in this film were set in a museum (the Musée de la chasse et de la nature, also in the Marais), or outside, near a lake in Finland. And many different places. But always to great participatory effect.



Figure 3. Emotional capitalism in practice. Photo: Thijs Vissia

If I am bringing up the aspect of locations in terms of the essay film, it is because invariably, after having screened these films, members of the public would bring the settings up, with suggestive remarks on the “roles the locations play.” And those were moments I realized how strongly these sites “represented” me, the film I wanted to make and through which I wanted to make an argument. This is more or less obvious in the documentaries, but in fiction films it is not. There, the search for what we as makers considered appropriate locations was not, or not only, based on filmic beauty. Instead, we looked for places that were suitable to partner with the ideas of what we called “theoretical fictions.” I write “we” not only to acknowledge the collective subjectivity, but also specifically the co-directorship of Michelle Williams Gamaker, with whom I have made many films. The first of the “theoretical fictions” was based on fictionalized presentation by French psychoanalyst Françoise Davoine, of her argument with Freud regarding the analysability of psychotic patients, which he had denied. Our 2011 film and installation project *A Long History of Madness*, an essay film if ever there was one, was set in many different places, one of which was a real, albeit obsolete psychiatric hospital on the island of Seili off the West coast of Finland. Here, the island itself, as such,

participated in the life sentence the allegedly mad received. When interned there, they were required to bring their own coffin. Other participatory locations in that film are the analyst's office, the carnival of Basel, and many more. And whether or not I was physically present at the shootings, in the editing I kept seeing myself in relation to it.

## Trying Together

In this essay on the essay film I have tried, to use that verb once more, to bring out those aspects of my essay films, most centrally of the latest one but also of some of the others, that to me seem to be the most revealing of myself as the film-maker who tries thinking in film. These aspects, such as the groping, trying, difficult work of thinking ideas not yet formed, the resistance against chronological thinking, against the idea of totality, and the contributions of moods and locations, all make, circumscribe, or define the essay film. There is no more suitable word for the combination of these aspects than its genre name: essay film.

The most difficult task in writing this text was the request to reflect on self-representation. It made me blush with embarrassment to appear so self-involved. However, from the start, with the title, I have argued, implicitly and explicitly, that the essay can only reveal a self that is plural, collective. For as I wrote apropos of Descartes: no one thinks alone. Even solitarily walking in the dunes, the philosopher stops to think about how the interiors of the stones he encounters might look. An essay film *A Thing Among Things* by Giovanni Giarretta (2015) participated here, constituting the focalized object Descartes sees in his mind. Many other artworks, hence, also their makers, participated in this film. To make visible what is invisible is the primary task of art. That visibilization concerns most of all those others, including other things, without whom and which no thought can be shaped, no film can be made. And no subject can exist, live, and self-represent alone.

## Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. "The Essay as Form" (1953–1958), vol. 3, no. 23, 1991. *Notes to Literature*, vol.1. Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholson. Columbia University Press.
- Alpers, Svetlana, and Michael Baxandall. *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*. Yale University Press, 1994.
- Alphen, Ernst van. "Affective Operations of Art and Literature." *RES: Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 53/54, Spring/Autumn 1994, pp. 20–30.
- Altieri, Charles. *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*. Cornell University Press, 2003.

- A Thing Among Things*. Directed by Giovanni Giaretta. 2015.
- Bal, Mieke. *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis*. Edinburgh University Press, 2022.
- . “Time and Form: The “Unthought Known.” *Aesthetic Temporalities Today: Present, Presentness, Re-Presentation*, edited by Gabriele Genge, Ludger Schwarte, and Angela Stercken, Transcript Image, 2020, pp. 113–28.
- . “It’s About Time! Trying an Essay Film.” *Text Matters*, 2020, vol. 10, pp. 27–48.
- . “Challenging and Saving the Author, for Creativity | Sfidare e salvare l’autore, per creatività.” *Vesper. Rivista di architettura, arti e teoria | Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory*, no. 2, *Materia-autore | Author-Matter*, Spring-Summer, 2020, pp. 132–49.
- . “Thinking in Film.” *Thinking in the World: A Reader*, edited by Jill Bennett and Mary Zournazi, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, pp. 173–201.
- . *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness*. Sternberg Press, 2020.
- . “Don Quijote: Sad Countenances.” Bilingual edition English-Spanish *Don Quijote: Tristes figuras / Don Quijote: Sad Countenances*. Cendeac, 2019.
- . *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic*. Mercatorfonds, Press, 2017.
- . *Endless Andness: The Politics of Abstraction According to Ann Veronica Janssens*. Bloomsbury, 2013.
- . “Phantom Sentences.” *Phantom Sentences: Essays in Linguistics and Literature Presented to Ann Banfield*, edited by Robert S. Kawashima, Gilles Philippe, and Thelma Sowley. Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 17–42.
- . *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Bal, Mieke, and Jeannette Christensen. “An Aesthetic of Interruption: Stagnation and Acceleration.” *ASAP Journal*, vol. 4, no 1, 2109, pp. 85–112.
- Barthes, Roland “The Reality Effect.” In *The Rustle of Language*, edited by Roland Barthes, translated by Richard Howard, 141–54. Hill and Wang, 1986.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations* (1942), edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn. Schocken, 1968.
- Bollas, Christopher. *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. Columbia University Press, 1987.
- Boulos Walker, Michelle. *Slow Philosophy: Reading Against the Institution*. Bloomsbury, 2017.
- Brinkema, Eugenie. *The Forms of the Affects*. Duke University Press, 2014.
- Costa Lima, Luís. *The Limits of Voice: Montaigne, Schlegel, Kafka*. 1993. Translated by Paulo Henriques Britto. Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Davoine, Françoise. *Mother Folly: A Tale*. 1998. Translated by Judith G. Miller. Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. 1980. Translated by Brian Massumi. Athlone Press, 1992.
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*. Translated by Erik Butler. Stanford University Press, 2012.

- Illouz, Eva. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Polity Press, 2007.
- Ionescu, Vlad. "The Figure in Time: On the Temporality of the Figural." *Working Through the Figure: Theory, Practice, Method*, edited by Laura Marin and Anca Diaconu. Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2018, pp. 11–61.
- Lutters, Jeroen. *The Trade of the Teacher: Visual Thinking with Mieke Bal*. Valiz, 2018.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Discourse, Figure*. 1971. Translated by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon. The University of Minnesota Press, 2020.
- Rajchman, John. "Another View of Abstraction." *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts*, vol. 5, no. 16, 1995, pp. 16–25.
- . *Constructions*. MIT Press, 1998.
- Rascaroli, Laura. *How the Essay Film Thinks*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Rodowick, D. N. "Presenting the Figural." *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*. Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 1–44.
- Vellodi, Kamini. "Thought Beyond Research: A Deleuzian Critique of Artistic Research." *Aberrant Nuptials: Deleuze and Artistic Research 2*, edited by Paulo de Assis and Paolo Giudici. Leuven University Press, 2019, pp. 215–33.
- Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. 1983. Translated by Jan Van Heurck. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.
- Wyller, Truls. *What is Time? An Enquiry*. Translated by Kerri Pierce. Reaction Books, 2020.

### Mieke Bal's Films Cited

- A Long History of Madness*. Directed by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2011. Cinema Suitcase, 2011. DVD.
- It's About Time! Reflections on Urgency*. Directed by Mieke Bal. The Polish National Film, Television and Theatre School in Łódź, 2020.
- Madame B*. Directed by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker. 2013. Cinema Suitcase, 2014. DVD.
- Reasonable Doubt: Scenes from Two Lives*. Directed by Mieke Bal. 2016. Cinema Suitcase, 2016. DVD.