

**The ‘Video-Essay’ in Contemporary Art:  
Documenting Capital and Gender for the 21<sup>st</sup>  
Century**

Amy Charlesworth

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how the term ‘video-essay’ or ‘film essay’ has gained particular momentum in contemporary art practice and theoretical debates throughout the past twenty years. Specifically, I examine the work of Ursula Biemann and María Ruido. The thesis plots how the ‘genre’ is considered to have emerged through a post-structuralist framework. Feminist and post-colonial praxis initiated an important critique of the documentary project from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Much of this criticism sought to re-ignite the active qualities latent in the technologies of lens-based mediums: qualities considered to be hidden, or dealt with uncritically in the documentary paradigm. A focus on construction, and a distrust of the ‘reflective’ capacities of the camera to record the real gave way to the mode of the ‘fictive’ and an interest in ‘discursive formations’. Fictive devices were implemented in order to give attention to maligned, purposefully obscured, or not-yet written histories, operating in place of absent ‘official’ documentation.

This thesis argues that the term video or film essay is better conceptualised through a broader, yet nuanced enquiry of the documentary as it has unfolded throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The case studies in this thesis are part of a wider array of works that privilege, once more, the recording capacity of the camera (both analogue and digital), its social purpose and thus potential strategy to enforce change. I explore how these practices straddle, and re-ignite the familiar debates around utility and formal reflexivity in the ‘documentary turn’ of critical art production in the twenty-first century.

The chosen themes of the works under analysis speak to the tension ever-present between form and content, text and context. Here the camera is used to render visible the concealed heterogeneous strands of labour. I evaluate how this practice is specifically apt for exploring the dialectic of waged/un-waged labour, undertaken historically by women. The works consider how female ‘migrant’ labourers are most ‘useful’ and ‘profitable’ to neoliberal capitalism.

The manner in which bodies interact with the abstract flows of deregulated capital and electronic communication, has contributed to a need for re-cognition of the social world. Artists aiming to understand the power of the visual under these reordered circumstances have had to negotiate the vicissitudes of truth once more. I argue that the capacity of the document to provide knowledge and to track lived realities, has made it

a dependable and useful form once more. Its contentious past *is* and *must* be acknowledged, as such debates have re-written our understandings of what the document is, should, and might be.

## Contents

	<b>Page No.</b>
Chapter One – Imaging Capitalism	11
• The work of Ursula Biemann	19
• The work of María Ruido	24
• Surveying the literature 1998-2013	29
• Methodological procedures	33
Chapter Two – Neoliberalism, ‘Feminisation’ and Biopolitical Subjectivation	37
• Analysing the neoliberal terrain	39
• The Spectre of Marx’s ‘General Intellect’ and Biopolitics	44
• Potentialities and Modes of Resistance	49
• The ‘Feminisation’ of Labour: past and present	56
• Subjects of/at Work	65
• Conclusion	71
Chapter Three – Digitalisation and the Biopolitical Artwork	74
• The Bifurcation of the Photomechanical Image	78
• Documentation, Processes and the role of ‘non-art’ in the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	83
• The Digital and the Referent	89
• Some Questions on Clarity and Opacity	93
• Image as Strategy	97
• Conclusion	101

Chapter Four – Political Modernism, Critical Realism and the ‘Documentary Turn’	104
• The Essay as Form: the written and the visual	104
• Critical Realism and Political Modernism	110
• Documentary Inadequacies	113
— <i>The Anglo-American photo-text</i>	113
— <i>Seeing and not seeing: a few remarks on Harun Farocki</i>	116
— <i>The essay film in France and the documentary in Britain?</i>	118
— <i>For Whom? Tensions within the neo-Brechtian turn of ‘political’ filmmaking in 1970s Britain</i>	125
• Political Urgency	128
— <i>Video: social engagement, collectivism and formal experimentation</i>	128
— <i>Chris Marker, the Factory and its Workers</i>	130
— <i>Women: self-determination, representation and real lives</i>	135
• ‘Video Art’: Dissemination and platforms of display	137
• The ‘Documentary Turn’	141
• Conclusion: Assaying the balance	144
 Chapter Five - Images of Alterity: Thinking the Ethical Politically	 146
• Spheres of Production	149
• Questions on spatiality and temporality in <i>Performing the Border</i> and <i>From the Other Side</i>	152
— <i>Absence/Presence</i>	152
— <i>Temporality and the image</i>	156
• Adjusting the Author-Subject-Spectator Trichotomy	158

• Making visible social bonds: relationality and relational aesthetics	162
• Utility: expectations and responsibilities	166
• The Feminist critique of the documentary model	169
• Narration: favouring ambiguity and telling stories	173
• The ethnographic encounter, the ‘Other’ and the politics of looking	175
• Re-inscribing the Political: the event of the image	181
• Conclusion	186
 Chapter Six – Shifts in Emphasis, the Documentary, the ‘Video-Essay’ and Its Futures	 189
• Definition through Negation	191
• Authorship, the voice, and the boundaries of self and other	194
• Towards a critique of fragmentation	196
• Conclusion: Art and Life	200
 Bibliography	 205
 Filmography	 220
 Plates	 224

## List of Plates

	<b>Page No.</b>
<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>224</b>
Fig. 1., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	224
Fig. 2., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	225
Fig. 3., video still, <i>Amphibious Fictions</i> , © María Ruido, 2005, 33 mins	226
Fig. 4., video still, <i>Amphibious Fictions</i> , © María Ruido, 2005, 33 mins	226
Fig. 5., video still, <i>Real Time</i> , © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins	227
Fig. 6., video still, <i>Real Time</i> , © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins	228
Fig. 6.1., video still, <i>Real Time</i> , © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins	228
Fig. 7., video still, <i>Real Time</i> , © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins	229
Fig 7.1., video still, <i>Real Time</i> , © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins	229
Fig 7.2., video still, <i>Real Time</i> , © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins	229
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>230</b>
Fig. 8., video still, <i>Real Time</i> , © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins	230
Fig. 9., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	231
Fig 10., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	232
Fig 10.1., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	232
Fig. 11., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	233
Fig. 11.1., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	233
Fig. 12., advert, research material for <i>Performing the Border</i> , courtesy of Ursula Biemann	234

<b>Chapter Three</b>	235
Fig. 13., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	235
Fig. 14., video still, <i>Writing Desire</i> , © 2011 Ursula Biemann. Some Rights Reserved (by-sa), 2000, 25 mins	236
Fig. 15., video still, <i>Europlex</i> , © 2011 Ursula Biemann and Angela Sanders, 2003, 20 min	237
<b>Chapter Five</b>	238
Fig. 16., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	238
Fig. 17., video still, <i>From the Other Side (De l'autre côté)</i> , © Chantal Akerman, 2002, 99 mins	239
Fig. 17.1., video still, <i>From the Other Side (De l'autre côté)</i> , © Chantal Akerman, 2002, 99 mins	239
Fig. 18., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	240
<b>Chapter Six</b>	241
Fig. 19., video still, <i>Remote Sensing</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 2001, 53 mins	241
Fig. 19.1., video still, <i>Performing the Border</i> , © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins	241

## Chapter One Introduction – Imaging Capitalism

The opening shots of *Performing the Border*, Ursula Biemann's first video-essay, track the mountainous landscape of the border as it sits heavy against the dusk skyline. Our line of sight remains behind the amateurish gaze of the handheld video camera as it points outside the moving vehicle, mapping the soon to be inferred, outer limits of this geopolitical space.<sup>1</sup> Whilst goods move freely across the border from Mexico to the United States of America, and people move without obstruction from the North to the South, those making the journey away from the South meet with relentless, often violent, resistance. On encountering *Performing the Border* for the first time, one is faced head-on with inequality and exploitation. The video-essay is un-apologetically a political work. It serves to inform us of our connection to the predominately female workforce of the American-owned *maquiladoras*. In its commitment to provide a coherent, yet complex account, it is just one example of the compulsion to document: not as a device determined only to convey a truth but as a device to know the world, to comprehend it, in an effort to change it.

This thesis is concerned with video works from the past fifteen years that have been part of a larger shift of interest in the revival of the document. The documentary medium has been re-activated for the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, particularly in artworks that attempt to picture the realities and ramifications of neoliberal capitalism. Whilst Chapter Two will deal with the complexities of this stage of capitalism in detail, neoliberalism can be characterised in a number of ways: the rolling back of the nation state in public and civic life; the primacy of the market and the focus on a good business climate; last, but by no means comprehensively, the commitment to free and unhindered travel of commodities on a global scale.<sup>2</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup> By 'geopolitics' I am referring to the ways in which specific geographical aspects, such as natural resources or the demographics of an area, can be part of a political dispute on a cross-border and/or international level.

<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps useful here to explain on notion of freedom. The rhetoric of this political freedom, where we are free to choose, unhindered by government intervention, is understood by many critical commentators as being conflated with freedom of the market. The neoliberal apparatus works to privatise public assets and open borders to allow the free movement of goods. This, simultaneously, enables access to previously untapped natural resources and labour pools. To ensure, above all else, a 'good business climate' there is a need for workers that are flexible, moveable, and evermore profitable. A need to generate profit (for those who own the means of production) above the re-distribution of wealth is noted by many commentators to widen the gap between the wealthy and the poor, resulting in restricted levels of freedom and

wake of important feminist and post-colonial struggles, these works often pay attention to those rendered ‘invisible’ by capitalist social relations, marginalised because of their gender, race, or geographic positioning. These works, however, make clear that those rendered most ‘invisible’ are those most crucial to the mechanism of a ‘healthy’ and ‘successful’ capitalist economy. The relation between the micro-analysis of mapping personal stories with the macro-analysis of the movement of capital is a complexity that the selected works wrestle with. It is this aspect that, more often than not, means both artists and commentators alike predominately classify the works I have selected for analysis as video-essays. As this thesis unfolds, however, I aim to demonstrate how a strict demarcation between video/film essay and documentary provokes an array of tensions.

Throughout the last twenty years, protest and discontent has sparked engagement with a new space, a socio-economic geography ripe for re-configuration. Events such as the massacre of protestors in Tiananmen Square 1989, the race riots in Los Angeles 1992, the Chiapas conflict and Zapatista uprisings of 1994, the general strikes in France 1995, the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, and the Palestinian Intifadas 1987-93 and 2000-05, can be cited as protests against inequality. At the time of writing the effects of the global Occupy movement, the London summer riots of 2011 and pivotal ‘Arab Spring’ are still unfolding. Whilst, of course, specific, multifarious, and tied to their locales (and, therefore, varied historically culturally, socially and politically), they affirm global unrest. David Harvey, writing in 2009, noted that cultural producers of this contemporary period had awoken to the nature of the problems. He ventured that, just as the art schools in the 1960s became the new spaces for political radicalism, resistance and invention, so would they become once more, as cultural producers increasingly gained greater visibility developing their theoretical, critical and practical weight.<sup>3</sup>

If Harvey’s assertion is indeed the case, we must ask *how* we are engaging with contemporary capitalism: moreover, what does it look like, in time, body and space? The re-ordering of the world post-1989, and the effects of other events, such as the 9/11

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choice hitherto unseen. This focus on individualisation and the severing of social bonds between people, communities and nation states stands accused by many as systematically stripping power and rights from the body of the population. Chapter Two deals with these debates in detail, exploring how, according to Michael Hardt and Antonion Negri, the individual might have gained new agency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> David Harvey, ‘Is This Really the End of Neoliberalism?’ *CounterPunch* 13 March 2009, <<http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/03/13/is-this-really-the-end-of-neoliberalism/>>

attacks and the war in Iraq, have intensified a desire for an engagement with truth, the real and fact, a desire that tells us something of our contemporaneity. With this in mind, it is not surprising that a turn to the document has characterised much critical contemporary artwork throughout the past fifteen to twenty years, for it is the document in judicial terms which stands for legalisation or proof of the truth once more. The demand for a need to document (the title of one 2005 exhibition) is symptomatic of a need to understand not only incalculable one-time events such as 9/11, but also slower, and less obvious changes, such as the right-wing shifts of many European governments, the opening-up of borders for free trade and the problems that ensue for migrants and refugees across the globe. These are just some of the realities which have re-fuelled debates around the politicisation of art once more. Much work, whilst cognisant of the ‘politics of representation’ debates of the 1960s and 1970s, has had to re-balance the urgency for a ‘need to know’ alongside new developments in the politics of knowing, and, thus, in the politics of representing.

The broadest question for this thesis centres on considering how a form such as the video-essay — which operates within (or in reaction to) the wider imperatives of the documentary — engages with the embodied violence of capitalism. Chapter Two, ‘Neoliberalism, “Feminisation” and Biopolitical Subjectivation’, examines this question in the timeframe of the last forty years, and considers the violence that occurs at the interface between gender, sex and race. Chapter Three, ‘Digitalisation and the Biopolitical Artwork’, questions the ways in which technologies of vision and procedures of truth might aid us in our comprehension of contemporary capitalism. It explores the image as a strategic intervention and active component in knowing oneself: one’s connections to others, despite temporal and geographical distances.

Technological innovation often presents new ways to see and know. Chapter Four looks back to the historical moments at which art theory and practice, and film theory and practice have intersected, notwithstanding their different spheres, in terms of both production and dissemination. I acknowledge this cross-contamination when looking to the ‘politics of representation’ debates, both of the late 1920s and the late 1960s. This analysis requires a consideration of the advancements and experiments of Soviet, British, German and French filmmaking. Whilst I note the immediate effects of funding available to ‘experimental’ work at different times, I also note how these levels of support are shaped by broader and encompassing ideologies throughout the twentieth century. In noting the implications and effects produced by, for example, World War

Two, the development of Fascism, protest and discontent, I assess how and why these shaped and shifted the terrains known as Modernism and Realism.

The works discussed throughout the thesis, exist (to varying degrees) as a mediation between attending to the daily realities of life lived under globalised capitalism and the role images take in representing, contributing, and, thus, defining that reality. They operate (and again, some more intentionally and directly than others) as a kind of ‘meta-picture’ or ‘hypericon’, to use W.J.T Mitchell’s term, due to their acknowledgement of, and reflection on, the discourses of images.<sup>4</sup> It is not my intention, however, to privilege the meaning of the selected works, they should be understood rather as providing my thesis with a starting point from which the terms of debate can be set. For example, it should be stated from the outset that *Performing the Border* has been cited by Biemann as an early, yet, formative work. In some ways, when examining how her practice has developed, one can begin to situate certain problematics at play and propagated through the interwoven histories of modernism and realism. As we shall see, I provide analysis which positions an array of modes in her work that sit in closer proximity to (what were at the time) ‘outmoded’ devices. Devices, such as a directive voice-over, reduced attention to self-reflexivity and a propensity for aiming to gain a ‘totality’ underwent significant criticism. Yet Biemann’s writing on her practice (which discusses synthetic spaces, digital flows, de-territorialisation and de-materiality) outwardly betrays, in part, a distrust of realist commitment, a sentiment that is arguably more concomitant with the postmodern critique of the documentary project from which Biemann’s work partly emerges.

I propose that the meeting of the formal qualities, structural forms and social capabilities of the video, on one hand, and the essay, on the other, create a third space which produces a dialectical play between more established and engrained assumptions. For instance, we can conceive of the project of writing, particularly the essayistic mode, as having a sense of interiority, of having an ability to make an incision into the body of

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell defines what he calls ‘hypericons’ or meta-pictures in two interrelated ways. For example, a painting such as *Las Meninas* by Velazquez shows an image of a picture within the painting. Such depiction encourages reflection philosophically, on the nature of pictures. This is not to say that a meta-picture is especially rare but simply to give recognition to the active role of images. See W.J.T Mitchell’s ‘Four Fundamental Concept of Image Science’ in *Under Pressure: Pictures, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, (eds). Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw, (Berlin: New York: Sternberg Press, 2008), pp. 15-24. Mitchell’s work on iconology and the mutually dependent role of image and text can be traced to his works *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1987), *Picture Theory* (1994) and *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005).

the material. In contrast, film can often be understood solely as a record of the real, as skimming over the surface; as being, therefore, always-already exterior.<sup>5</sup> The technologies of the video camera, however, can serve, as the documentary filmmaker Andres Veiel notes, to complicate this assertion. Veiel states that the documentary camera can be made comparable to the seismograph machine, in its ability to monitor and record the smallest of movements.<sup>6</sup> This comparison enables one to explore how the biopolitical production of the subject is further enabled through advanced capitalism. I shall posit that this biopolitical production is served well by the document, for subjectivation is shaped in new ways through changes in technologies in order to collect data about day-to-day life.

Both Biemann's and María Ruido's video-essays explicitly prioritise the economic axis. Chapter Two, therefore, takes as its focus the role women have been required to occupy under neoliberal capitalism. This second chapter examines the argument that specific characteristics needed to advance socio-economic relations after 1970 have been required of (and developed in and through) female workers. The sphere of social reproduction has been subject to renewed critical attention. Moreover, the demand for a flexible worker, characterised by temporary contracts, home-working, self-motivation and unstable hours, casts the spotlight not only on the worker traits of the labour often undertaken by women, but also on 'creative' and artistic labour.

As we shall see, Ruido's video-essays deal explicitly with this confluence of a preferred type of worker. The need for neoliberal capitalism to increasingly colonise, administer and govern every aspect of one's daily life — blurring the boundaries of paid and unpaid labour, mirroring the dialectic of social reproduction and production — is understood throughout this thesis as 'biopolitical'. For Michel Foucault, the corporeal should be understood as of key significance for capitalist societies, a significant premise in his work that is too often understated in the literature. It is through bodies, their social relations and the pooling of general knowledge, that the recent period of capitalism has been able to develop quickly and effectively. Despite recent analyses of capitalism being often defined in terms of 'immaterial', the 'cognitive' or through 'general intellect', I argue that the video-essays selected for discussion attend to a complex

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<sup>5</sup> Chantal Akerman suggests this in a discussion in relation to her exhibition 'Moving Through Time and Space' in 2008. See <<http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/592>>, accessed 11.11.11

<sup>6</sup> See Veiel discussing documentary work <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziAocSANrFw>>, accessed 17.12.11

intersection of the material and immaterial demands of labour on the female body in particular.<sup>7</sup>

Questions of shifts in vision and technology — or, rather, enhanced vision — will be addressed in Chapter Three. Here I will examine the often-perceived difference between analogue and digital technologies and their over-simplified pairing with the real and unreal, material and immaterial respectively.<sup>8</sup> The broader research question asks what is it about the video-essay, in its history and uniqueness, which enables us to think through the fragmentation that is so important to capitalism. Further, how might its form attempt to move beyond imperceptibility? Can, as asked by the photography-curator Inge Henneman, ‘counter-images and the revelation of hidden abuses stimulate new forms of representation?’<sup>9</sup> If so, in what ways might we begin to analyse them? Moreover, Chapter Three will re-address the debates around enhancement and concealment. This requires consideration once more because of the developments of digitalisation. This chapter examines the deadlock resulting from the claim that we can no longer put our trust in the photograph (still or moving), despite our need to do so. This assertion gained prominence because theories of digitalisation stated that the referent — present in the analogue image — had been lost.

The film scholar David Bordwell has intimated that globalised capitalism has loosened the cause-effect linkages of narrative structures. This has resulted, he continues, in an acceptance (and foregrounding) of the fragmentation of vision made manifest through the technology of the video camera.<sup>10</sup> This propensity for

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<sup>7</sup> As Chapter Two expands, ‘general intellect’ is taken from Karl Marx’s section ‘fragments on machines’ in his *Grundrisse* (1858). This section of Marx’s writing underpins a large majority of the terms, mentioned above, used to discuss this late stage of capitalism. Marx claimed that shared abstract knowledge was in the process of becoming the main force of production. Despite the development of the automated machine, Marx argued that social intellect becomes combined, embodied and thus objectified in the mechanisms and products generated by new technology. This combination would, therefore, greatly advance the capitalist organisation of social relations and production.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Jonathan Crary has noted that the development and presence of digital technologies from the 1980s constitutes a ‘transformation in the nature of visuality probably more profound than the break that separates medieval imagery from Renaissance perspective’. See Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1990), p.1.

<sup>9</sup> Inge Henneman, ‘Beyond Compassion: how to escape the victim frame in social documentary photography today’, *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula’s Photography*, (eds.) Jan Baetens and Hilde Van Gelder, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> David Bordwell, ‘The art cinema as a mode of film practice’ in *The European Cinema Reader* (ed) C. Fowler, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp 94-102.

fragmentation and its effects on narrative can be considered as altered further still when one examines the hybridisation of the different strategies of the ‘video’ and the ‘essay’. As we shall see throughout this thesis, the works of artists such as Biemann and Ruido are composites that defy the logic of the video as a time-based medium tethered to chronological linearity. This structure, I will argue, directs the viewer’s attention towards a greater comprehension of space, history and the process of re-telling events. Where linearity might serve to compose (and thus hold together) a film text, the desire to hide such seams is exposed by the recorded image.<sup>11</sup> Here, rather than the recorded image working in sync with the linear structure of writing, it serves the process of re-telling history by carefully exposing how our experience of lived reality is spatial as much as it is temporal. In many ways, this activity of the recorded image tries to counter the notion of a natural unfolding of events captured through the ‘point and shoot’ method. However, as I will detail, despite the influence of a Godardian politics of form (which itself returns to early Soviet and German modes of filmmaking), the works selected for discussion allow greater space for mechanical and impartial aspects and histories of the lens-based image.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, they raise questions around utility. This is discussed in relation to the documentary in Chapter Five. Moreover, I examine how the histories of another French filmmaker, Chris Marker, his involvement with factory workers and his interest in the Soviet filmmaker Aleksandr Medvedkin, provide some useful comparisons when looking at more recent developments within the visual-essay and documentary paradigm.

These debates form part of the competing discourses and histories that one can use to plot a genealogy of the video or moving-image essay as detailed in Chapter Four. Essay films (or ‘theory films’, as Peter Wollen has termed them) have historically been

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<sup>11</sup> Here one is reminded of Walter Benjamin’s comparison of the magician and the surgeon to the painter and cameraman respectively: ‘The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web.’ Whilst this is a fruitful analogy, Benjamin’s insistence on the painter as seeking a ‘total’ image and the filmmaker as aiming for fragmentation requires rethinking in the age of digitalisation. Post-production techniques allow the assimilation of fragmentation in a quicker, easier and specific fashion. See Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ in *Illuminations*, (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 211-245, (p. 227)

<sup>12</sup> In examining a set of precursors for practices such as Ruido’s or Biemann’s, the ‘fathers’ of ‘political filmmaking’ gain a great visibility. As my thesis unfolds, I too will examine the roles of figures such as Vertov, Godard, Medvedkin, Marker and Farocki. However, the influence of the relatively unknown and under-researched ‘compilation’ films of the Soviet filmmaker Esfir Schub and French filmmaker Nicol Védre’s might provide a different, yet equally productive antecedent for understanding the role of the documentary newsreel and the question of fragmentation.

considered academic in tone and were initially understood by some as a desire to simply re-transcribe the written into the visual.<sup>13</sup> For instance, projects by Jacques Feyder to re-appropriate Michel de Montaigne's essays from the 1500s or Sergei Eisenstein's aim to make a film based on Karl Marx's *Capital* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (a project formative for Alexander Kluge's 2008 *News from Ideological Antiquity*), can be seen as early attempts to marry the writing of the pen with the recording of the camera lens.<sup>14</sup> An exploration of the relation between realism and modernism in the European avant-garde of the 1920s and early 1930s, and the resurgence of interest in this period in the politically-charged period of the 1960s and 1970s, form the theoretical and historical landscape of Chapter Four. A discussion of the changes in technology and their resulting effects will also be considered. This historical excavation is made because of increased discussions of the 'documentary turn' within contemporary art debates of the last ten to fifteen years. Chapter Four details the central figures, artists, curators and writers, exhibitions, platforms and debates of this period, and aims to provide a cartography of the present. This cartography is placed within a longer history that is inextricably linked to the larger questions presented by the intersections of modernism and realism throughout the twentieth century.

The thesis is structured by the *and/or* of lens-based imagery: its role as evidence (document) and for experimentation (constructed picture). In Chapter Five, the demands of reportage, the ethics of looking, and Adorno's consideration of the utility of the aesthetic category in fulfilling a critical capacity in the face of capitalist exploitation. In Chapter Five, I also consider the violent past of the documentary image and its role in constructing an imperialist configuration of vision. I argue that the history of the role of the documentary image in the coloniser's toolbox cannot be forgotten in our assessment of recent artworks that traverse the paradigm of 'speaking for the other' on one hand, and providing 'a voice for the people by the people' on the other. This penultimate chapter addresses, therefore, how we might experience genuine notions of truth without disregarding the *act of telling* our own histories and those of others.

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<sup>13</sup> Much of the seminal work of British theorists and filmmakers, Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey has been described as 'theory films'. For example, their 1977 work *Riddles of the Sphinx* demonstrates a desire to use Freudian analysis, both theoretically and practically, in their understanding of representation in a patriarchal society.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Astruc's work on the 'camera pen' is considered in Chapter Four. Thought to have derived from the Greek, the etymology of the word photography is pertinent here: for *phos* meaning light and *graphê* meaning drawing or writing, adheres closely to the later confluence of writing with a pen, and the camera's ability to 'draw' with 'light'.

## The work of Ursula Biemann

*Performing the Border*, made by Swiss artist, Ursula Biemann in 1999, examines the young, largely female workforce that produce high-end technological products for many US-owned global transnationals in de-regulated assembly-line plants south of the US-Mexico border. Export Processing Zones (EPZ) quickly mushroomed along cross-border areas in fairly recent history due to the opening up of borders to free-trade circulation.<sup>15</sup> Workers employed in the *maquiladoras*, or the ‘golden mills’ as they are often referred to, alongside garment production, process and assemble constituent parts for consumer electronics that are finished and sold in the US. This ‘Twin Factory’ system quickly developed to become a lucrative way to secure cheap labour, enabling the maximising of profit. In addition to low-cost staff expenditure, *maquiladoras* can be fully foreign-owned, resulting in exemption from tax payments to the Mexican government. As the feminist art-activist collective *SubRosa* notes in the accompanying text to the 2004-05 exhibition *Can You See Us Now?*, plant owners need ‘pay duty only on the “value-added” – that is, on the value of the finished product minus the total cost of the components that had been imported to make it’.<sup>16</sup>

In her work, Biemann aggregates the contradictions of these women’s lives. The work details the profits and technological advancements produced by labour in the factories. We also see how this wealth flows immediately out of the cardboard cities built and lived in by those producers. These are the unofficial towns and cities that are determined by the profit-driven demands of the multinational *maquiladora* factories, not the social needs of the Mexican working-class women who live there. It is a space codified entirely by work, clarified by one female interviewee: ‘Juárez is a world of labour.’<sup>17</sup> These ‘colonias’ or shanty-towns — built from excess waste from the factories, such as corrugated iron sheets, cardboard, and wooden boxes, and without adequate sewerage and electricity systems, grow rapidly as they absorb and become the homes for many migrants travelling north to the border for work. The waste from the affluent US North becomes recycled and reused in the border towns south of the divide. The symbiotic relation between the US and the Mexican towns and cities that run along this line can be witnessed, writes the architect Teddy Cruz, through the way in which

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<sup>15</sup> I shall return to the role of Export Processing Zones in neoliberal capitalism in Chapter Two.

<sup>16</sup> *SubRosa*, see their website, < <http://canuseeusnow.refugia.net/>>, accessed 02.06.11.

<sup>17</sup> Angela Escajeda, *Performing the Border*, Ursula Biemann, 1999.

‘one city builds itself with the waste of the other’.<sup>18</sup> The rejected surplus of one society finds a renewed purpose in the ever-burgeoning towns across the border, where a flexible and relatively immediate approach to building takes precedence in an acutely visible and moving social space. Here, the flows align with the shifting sands on which the unstable structures stand. The area has also become infamous for a series of violent serial killings or ‘femicides’. The final section of *Performing the Border* draws analogies between the dual expendability of female labour and female lives.

*Performing the Border* adopts a mixture of populist formal techniques with certain devices born of political filmmaking. Occasionally mimicking the continual ‘rolling’ information of mainstream news channels, the work indicates a kind of bombardment of information that competes for one’s attention. We see frames within frames, split screens and encounter varied combinations of image, text and voice-over, using either primary, or secondarily sourced and appropriated, imagery and sound. The long and medium shots of the factories, townships and human subjects intersect with re-appropriated found footage, or images of condensed space are articulated by the tracing of the line of the border as it is marked on a map (see fig. 1)

Biemann makes acutely visible the tools of her research. Split into four subsections, the materiality of the work is foregrounded explicitly by techniques that have now become routine devices for making the viewer aware of the process of looking. Blank orange screens - reminiscent of the black ‘leaders’ on a reel of film, and once popular among materialist filmmakers in the 1960s and 70s - fill the screen between the images (found or re-appropriated). The black text, which is then laid over the orange backdrops, anchors, in both English and Spanish, the chapters: The Plant/Le Maquila; The Settlement/la colonia; Sex Work/trabajo sexual; The Killings/los Asesinos (see fig. 2). Simultaneously, we also see in *Performing the Border*, some recognisable hallmarks of mainstream documentary practice. Despite the disruption of the orange screens, the voices of the women speaking, for the most part, act alongside the author’s thesis to bind the viewer to the narrative. However, the decision to highlight the futility of understanding a single image is embraced through constant slippage between text, voice and image. At other moments, the images do not always coincide with what is being said, either via voice-over or script on the screen, or by the person seen in a classic head-and-shoulder frame. As noted, the visuals serve particularly well in centering

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<sup>18</sup> Teddy Cruz, ‘Lessons from Tijuana’, <[http://estudioteddycruz.com/biblio\\_essays.htm](http://estudioteddycruz.com/biblio_essays.htm)>, 15.06.2011.

Biemann's *interpretation* of what her interviewed subjects have said, and such interpretation is not obscured. The work moves through the differing and inter-related places that the women workers of the *maquiladoras* inhabit. It is guided by a clear authorship. Termed by the art historian Angela Dimitrakaki as the 'non-autobiographical "I"', the voice is transferred to the viewer in a theoretically authoritative tone devoid of emotion, broken only by the women interviewed. On occasion, Biemann will speculate, pause to ask rhetorical questions, but only, it seems, to assimilate such suspensions into a much larger 'report'.

*Performing the Border* collects images through the stories told by the recordings of the 'talking heads'. The re-telling of events through individual perspectives is used in much factual film footage for evidential purpose in spite of the fictive components inherent in the act of re-telling. Biemann's writing on these debates makes clear that an attempt to separate fact and fiction is a futile and meaningless task, as when she writes that reality is 'a notion that has proven to be a fiction in and of itself'.<sup>19</sup> However, this thesis seeks to analyse whether the complexities of these debates are critically accounted for, and formally dealt with, in the works selected for discussion. For example, the 'talking head' device is more often than not used to provide a platform from which the subject can speak for herself. When Biemann uses the 'talking head' device in this video-essay, however, it is almost always, save one exception, the case of accounts told by others, not by the *maquila* workers in question.

It is rare in *Performing the Border* for the subject matter of the work to speak; the *maquila* girls and young women exist most often as images: as official, slick, company-produced images or through the clandestine, slightly grainy footage of Biemann's handheld video camera, often taken at night, or filmed in difficult conditions. As viewers, our position is made to repeatedly shift throughout the duration of the 45-minute video. In one particular scene, we make the journey to work with these women; situated behind the camera, we sit alongside them on the bus listening to the saccharine sentiments of a pop song played on the radio whilst the sun still sleeps. At another moment, we are told how the world should know that the women who make garments for other women (primarily in the north-western parts of the globe) live day to day in slum-like conditions, caught in the never ending cycle of working barbarically

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<sup>19</sup> Ursula Biemann, 'Going to the Border: An Essayist Project', *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, Video Works 1998-2008*, (eds.) Ursula Biemann, Jan-Erik Lundström, (Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Sweden, 2008), pp. 13-19, (p. 15).

long hours that prevent them from any life of their own, producing the highest-end commodities which they are unable to share or benefit from.<sup>20</sup> Such a juxtaposition between images and arguments presents a contrast between official and unofficial, fake or real. The perennial question therefore remains: does foregrounding the counter-image simply re-produce the existing structures of control through representational means? Or does affording the same degree of attention to each 'type' of image present a more adequate account of the geopolitics of such a space where technology is thoroughly intermeshed with the body. Criticisms that centre on the notion of re-presenting exploitation through the process of image-making and the orientation of the gaze are inevitable, and as I will explore in Chapter Five, not to be dismissed.

Whilst *Performing the Border* will be my focus I shall discuss some of Biemann's other video-essays throughout my thesis. The thematic focus of these later works illuminates or demonstrates a point about the specificities of neoliberal capitalism, globalisation and labour in the twenty-first century.<sup>21</sup> Other times, particular sections of the videos strengthen - or indeed, contradict - my close reading of *Performing the Border*. This allows me to consider how Biemann develops her handling of the video-essay medium from 1999 onwards. *Writing Desire*, made in 2000, looks at the role the Internet has played in contributing to, and intensifying, images of 'available' women. The 25-minute video examines the online global 'market place' for those seeking love, sex and/or companionship. For Biemann, however, the power relations at play, between the Western man and the so-called 'Third World' woman, are far from balanced. The authorial voice, music, interviewed subjects' opinions and images present a critical account of how women's bodies are as easily 'bought' as any

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<sup>20</sup> Isabel Velazquez, journalist and labour activist, *Performing the Border*, Ursula Biemann, 1999.

<sup>21</sup> The term 'globalisation' gained prominence in the early 1990s to signify a process that spoke to global patterns of social organisation and state interrelations. However, figures such as David Harvey, Edward Soja and Saskia Sassen, amongst many others, are critical of the assumption that such a process is a structural change defined solely by notions of freedom and social interconnectedness. They state that globalisation has a long presence in the history of capitalism and it is thus strategic and exploitative in its aims. Harvey states that from '1492 onwards [...] the internationalization of trade and commerce was well underway'. With this in mind I am vigilant about the ways in which 'globalisation' has entered mainstream rhetoric, ensuring terms such as 'imperialism', 'colonialism' and 'neocolonialism' have been relegated to a 'back seat'. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 53-72, (pp. 53-54). See Sassen's *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*, (New York: The New Press, 1998) and Soja's 'Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis', *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memory* (eds.) Sallie Westwood and John Williams, (London: Routledge, 1997).

other commodity presented for purchase on the Web. Here, cyberspace becomes a new platform through which to further entrench patriarchal relations, particularly along the lines of race and class.

Made just a year later, *Remote Sensing* assimilates the vast array of ways the movement of bodies across the globe can be tracked. Once more, Biemann specifically focuses on women. The 53-minute video-essay attempts to follow the lines drawn by the global sex trade. Routes taken — many illegally — from Manila to Nigeria, from Burma to Thailand, from Bulgaria to Europe are chartered through satellite-produced images. This ‘charting’ exists alongside interviews with women working in the sex industry. Through the re-appropriation of such geographic information systems’ (GIS) imagery and data, Biemann’s video-essay asks us to consider what it means to think we ‘know’ something, or more pertinently, *someone*, from ‘afar’. Biemann works to visually return the personal to such depersonalised records that record a highly exploitive and lucrative global economy, and that functions on a scale not ordinarily visible to the majority of people.

In order to extend my analysis of Biemann’s process of visually ‘mapping’ contested spaces through the array of images and information that allow us to come to ‘know’ them, I discuss *Europlex* (2003) and *Contained Mobility* (2004). *Europlex* (co-directed with Angela Sanders) in many ways examines the very nature of images, carefully tracing movement on the ground, charted by clandestine on-site recording and more abstract data such as co-opted satellite images. The 20-minute video-essay explores how, and in what ways, the borders of outer Europe must be porous. Such fluidity is required in order to supply the Spanish (and by extension the European) economy with a cheaper North African labour force. Here, addressing the ‘business’ of care, Biemann raises the question of not only social production but also that of social reproduction.

The differentiation between a state’s demand for economically ‘useful’ bodies and one’s desire to travel when not outwardly ‘required’ is picked up in Biemann’s *Contained Mobility*. Commissioned by the Liverpool International Art Biennial in 2004, the video-essay considers the itinerancy that one refugee takes around the borders of Europe. By focussing on one personal story, Biemann opens the set of complex power relations that speak to the reordering of national borders in the aftermath of the 1985

Schengen Agreement (and the subsequent tightening of these external lines post 9/11).<sup>22</sup> Biemann contests the older notion that one's identity is tied to the nation-state in which one resides. *Contained Mobility* examines the ingenuity required for gaining access through 'unofficial' routes and explores the processes of subjectivation produced by one continually on the move.

### **The work of María Ruido**

María Ruido's handheld camera in *Amphibious Fictions* (2005) faithfully traces the point at which large advertising boards meet the skyline, the brand names of global multinationals coming one after the other (see fig. 3). The work continually shifts between how things appear and how things are. The desirable image advertisements convey the complex network of social relations that interweave to produce highly coveted commodities. *Amphibious Fictions* focuses on the Spanish northern cities of Mataró and Terrassa, both steeped in the history of textile production.

The video-essay assimilates its narrative through an assembly of direct filming, re-appropriated archival footage, music, voice-over and interviews. Ruido's commentary acts, for the majority of the 33-minute video, as the subtle guiding thread. The author's voice holds together opinions from a range of people, from Spanish female textile workers, sociologists, an ex-syndicalist, factory owners and illegal factory workers; others, their voices off camera, are not named. The specificity of the work lies in the re-situating of these two cities in their radical historical past. The use of archival footage and photos locates the present in its past, rooting the viewer, enabling him/her to create the associated connections suggested by Ruido. We learn of the past through these images and interviews, and of the textile factory workers' struggles to ensure a fair wage and benefits. We also learn of the fissures in this solidarity, past and present. The power of owner over producer is reassessed. Now, new migrant workers take any work they can get and women once again work from the confines of their own homes as production is returned to the principles of cottage industry. This situation undoes, as some interviewed subjects recount, the gains of previous trade union battles.

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<sup>22</sup> The Schengen Agreement dissolved many national borders within Europe making passport-free travel possible between the majority of countries in the European Union (with the exception of the UK and the Republic of Ireland). The agreement saw the creation of one external border meaning a single set of rules for policing the border.

Ruido's 'thesis' explores how the two textile-industry cities have experienced a shift from 'centralised factory-based production' to a system that is 'flexible and information-based'. A lineage is plotted from the industrial cooperative worker tradition of the late 1960s and 1970s to the illegal textile workshops that emerged throughout the 1990s. The title of the work, *Amphibious Fictions*, alludes to the quick, apparently seamless adaptation workers must make as methods of production alter on a global scale.

Ruido uses different formal devices to speak to the transformations, from a region once determined by largely agrarian economies, the spread of the Industrial Revolution, through to neoliberalism's recent use of cheap, de-regulated immigrant labour. The debates are set, in one particular scene, by the competing rhetoric of two economists discussing the impact globalisation has had, and continues to have, on the welfare state throughout Spain. In re-appropriating Spanish news footage of the debate, Ruido details the men waiting for their turn to speak (see fig. 4). The format is one we are equipped to comprehend; the 'objective' stance of mainstream media faithfully providing the two 'sides'. The work borrows on many familiar qualities seen in the video and television format. For the most part Ruido concentrates on her 'case studies'. The cities of Mataró and Terrassa whilst specific in their localities cannot be severed from global processes. In an effort to render clear such connections, Ruido concludes with a visit that takes her out of her own locality — the only time in the film this occurs. She makes a journey to an unnamed British museum and her handheld camera charts the exhibits that house the now obsolete, robust machines of the Industrial Revolution.

Ruido's earlier video, *Real Time* (2003), is concerned, once more, with the subject of work, specifically women's work, artistic labour, and the political role the image has in constructing the representation of these subjects. The work comprises tightly interwoven reflections on the concept of work, the heterogeneous character of labour (its waged and unwaged dialectic) and the exploitation of one's own time. Particular attention is paid to the gendering of affective types of labour, such as care, women's role in the performing of such labour and the resultant 'precariousness' of this work in our contemporary economy. An explicit acknowledgement of Ruido's own labour as an artist in the production of *Real Time* surfaces throughout, forcing the viewer to become aware of her consciousness and the manner in which she may have reached specific positions and decisions. It has a specific genealogy, of which Ruido has made herself undoubtedly a part. For instance, the positioning of the camera for the

recording of group conversations invites the viewer to take part and assume the position of Ruido, sitting by her side. Her questions or murmurs of agreement appear to follow the general tide of the broader informal dialogue. The questions from others, therefore, appear to speak directly to us. On another occasion, the camera pans along a bookshelf, which, one presumes, holds Ruido's books (see fig. 5). On the spines of the books we can read the names of the authors, names such as Shelia Rowbotham, Annette Kaplan, Peter Wollen and Trinh T. Minh ha, inviting the viewer into Ruido's research process. This makes visible Ruido's thought formation, and the effort required to make sense of this process.

Many of Ruido's shots are akin to a wandering vision; we join her in her car or walking along the street. A kind of amateurish application of the camera is adopted in such sequences, which occur with regularity throughout the work. Once more, the research is not obscured from the viewer; rather its construction is explicitly part of the work. For example, when, in both *Real Time* and *Amphibious Fictions*, Ruido uses the portable camera to pan across her field of vision, should something apprehend her attention, the camera's zoom reacts almost instinctively (see fig. 6 and fig. 6.1). As a viewer our look is demanded immediately and without consideration, we are simply pulled along, made to catch up. Alongside these directive camera shots sit, once more, other film clips and still archive photographs. Meanwhile, talking heads harness the meandering thought-process, anchoring it, as much as possible, to the central thesis on the heterogeneous character of labour, its naturalised components, and the paradigm of 'precarity'.

There are substantial excerpts from three texts: Robert Musil's 1930-42 novel *The Man Without Qualities*, Franz Kafka's short parable, *The Silence of the Sirens* (first published posthumously by writer and biographer Max Brod in 1936), and Donna Haraway's 1988 essay *Situated Knowledge: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective*. These extracts tell us, respectively, that this is the time for 'the man without qualities', 'for words without echo', and 'bodies without organs' (from which we must learn). Musil asks one to pay attention to the heroic nature of insignificant day-to-day tasks; Kafka, to be cautious of certain methods of refusal; and Haraway, to encourage us to integrate the vision afforded and annexed to us by modern science.

The insistent attention given to the question and fallacy of producing a 'real time' repositions the viewers, inserting them into the film, highlighting their position in

the narrative. For Ruido, the ‘real’ in *Real Time* is produced. It is not only waiting to be captured but rendered real when put into conversation with other representations, other actualities. As one of the interviewee’s states:

I don’t mean that “the real” is already there, in a self-evident way, waiting to be studied [...] we need to produce a kind of encounter between the event and the name. That event should be collective, in a time in which we all are, let’s say, that in the society in which we live in, identity is not given, but we have to build it with all those loose fragments from our experience and that in itself is an exhausting experience... spending so much time giving a meaning to that emotional implosion, it is a struggle, from one job to another, from one identity to the another.<sup>23</sup>

Direct and re-used or re-articulated footage (both still and moving) is interspersed with orange screens, much as in *Performing the Border*. This device firmly presents a jolt in the visual and aural narrative flow, and aids one in considering the constructed nature of ‘real time’, one’s active role in its formation. In re-directing narrative and signalling the ‘new’ chapter, these blank inserts simultaneously bolster, interpret and give meaning to the flow of images that precede the orange screens, by containing and providing limits for the viewer’s interpretation. A short series of archive and film stills, comprising images of women working in mills and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, are pulled together by the orange screen that recounts: ‘the moment which translates the margins of representation, the necessary cadence needed to watch for the constructive quality of the image, this is real time’ (see fig. 7, fig 7.1 and fig. 2). Here, Ruido intimates that re-animating such images, inserting them into current debates and fields of concern, ascribes a new life to images from a previous point in history.

Conversely, the formal language of *Real Time* is, for the most part, relatively cursory and unpolished, it resists completion. The use of sections from a Chantal Akerman film — *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) — alongside archival images and photographs aims to balance the respective visual qualities, but the images are, all the same, appropriated by Ruido. Akerman’s film explores women’s labour, the banality of day-to-day tasks and the movement from one

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<sup>23</sup> Precarias a la Deriva speaking in *Real Time*, María Ruido. Precarias a la Deriva (precarious women workers adrift), a collective formed in 2002 as a critical reaction to the general strike of the unions in Spain which had omitted ‘care’, unpaid labour, and undocumented work from the broader struggle. See < <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/61>>, accessed 7.01.13, for an account of the beginnings of the collective.

'labour' to another which often goes unaccounted for. A number of aspects are raised by the inclusion of segments from Akerman's film; one that is of importance is that of time. Akerman's representations avoid compressing the time it takes to do everyday chores, recording them unfold just as they might in everyday life. Ruido too wishes to make visible those varied aspects of reproductive labour that are not valorised by capital. Here the tension remains: how do we 'value' work that increasingly requires immaterial qualities, work that borrows on our experiences, that requires years of accumulated knowledge? A secondary layer that complicates this notion is introduced when Jeanne, the protagonist in Akerman's film, receives money for having sex with her 'client'.

Ruido's *Real Time* determines the markers that allow us to see the slippages between what is colonised by capital and what is not, what is valorised and what is purposefully left undisclosed. The inclusion of Akerman's film also provides the viewer with clear information on Ruido's points of influence and reference. Quite in contrast, and as previously mentioned, is Ruido's decision to not obscure the portable aspects of the video camera. For instance, the viewer sees the effects that such portability has on the control of shots. This decision makes a certain gesture to urgency. It, therefore, brings into focus questions about social use-value (discussed further in Chapter Five). Moreover, Ruido's work confronts the tensions between utility, critical distance and longer considerations of the selected medium. Her work speaks directly to deliberations about an equilibrium, or perhaps agitation, between producing something current that provides immediate social use, or a longer mediation that may impact understanding of the formation of knowledge(s) and thus be of relevance for times outside of its own.

Ruido's 2011 video-essay *ElectroClass*, like *Amphibious Fictions* and *Real Time*, maintains a similar concern for adopting modes present in mainstream reportage. Whilst I do not analyse this later work in any detail, I do briefly consider its aims in Chapter Four. It was made with the support of the Basque Government (Department of Culture) and Ministry of Culture of Spain, and in collaboration with the Bilbao-based arts commissioning organisation, Consonni, and was shown on an experimental channel on Basque television (ETB3).<sup>24</sup> Like *Amphibious Fictions*, it seeks to trace social, economic, political and cultural transformations that have taken place in Spain, specifically in the Northern city of Bilbao. Ruido writes:

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<sup>24</sup> María Ruido on *ElectroClass*, email correspondence with artist, 08.02.2013.

the dismantling of heavy industry not only produced the destruction of an industrial zone that was key to the local and state wide economy, but also the undermining of the social foundations that had shaped relations within the public space for the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The replacement of the old industrial economy with a service economy (prioritised at the urging of the European Union) took on material form with the building of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum acting as spearhead.<sup>25</sup>

Formally, *ElectroClass* integrates much footage taken from the Basque TV archives, state news footage, and direct filming. It also includes segments from other filmmakers' works, some considered to have a role in the history of the essay film, such as Georges Franju, Alain Resnais, Alexander Kluge and Jean Renoir (these figures will be discussed further in Chapter Four). Other sections reference popular culture. For example, we see Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982), John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) and David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). These imagine the sinister outcomes produced by merging humans with technologies and machines. They also explore states of mutation and becoming, elements of subjectivation that Ruido focuses on as she tries to understand the reoriented subject that is required for the post-Fordist economy. These filmic interventions also make visible the heritage from which Ruido considers her practice to emerge from, and to be influenced by.

### **Surveying the literature 1998 - 2013**

The absence of English language, book-length studies on the film- or video-essay, has been noted by scholars Catherine Lupton and Nora Alter — both figures associated with this medium. Lupton's 2005 work on French filmmaker Chris Marker (discussed in Chapter Four) was itself the first book-length study on this seminal figure to be published in English in 2005.<sup>26</sup> Alter's work on German non-fiction cinema from 1967 to 2000 (published 2002) also offers a substantial contribution to the expanded field of documentary.<sup>27</sup> French-language, and more so, German-language publications present a

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<sup>25</sup> María Ruido on *ElectroClass*, see the artist's website,

<<http://www.workandwords.net/en/projects/view/584>>, accessed 28.07.13

<sup>26</sup> Alter published her book a year later. See her *Chris Marker*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press).

<sup>27</sup> Alter's choice to use the term non-fiction is due to her discomfort with the bifurcation of fiction and documentary. She reclaims 'non-fiction' to discuss those works in which 'fictional elements colour the documentary material'. In doing so, she aims to bring a host of work back

sustained and detailed body of research into the specifics of the field. Biemann notes this gap in her 2003 edited collection *Stuff It! The Video Essay in the Digital Age*.<sup>28</sup> To name a few of the German language publications and key writers: Christa Blümlinger on Hans Richter and documentary; Bridget Kämper and Thomas Tode's edited volume, *Chris Marker: Filmessayist* (1997); not to mention Thomas Elsaesser, who has written on the film essay in relation to figures such as Harun Farocki. In more recent years, however, Laura Rascaroli's *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, published in 2009, and Timothy Corrigan's *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, published in 2011, are illustrative of more substantial studies written in English. It is clear, however, that all these publications arise quite firmly from within the discipline of Film Studies. Whilst there is much to be gained from such scholarship, my thesis prioritises the category of the aesthetic and considers how debates formed in art history function when analysing film works that straddle disciplinary boundaries. For instance, it has been crucial for my study to examine photography theory and history, in addition to the display of video works. This analysis has also needed to take into account the formation of the category 'video art' and the effects of installation in art-institutional settings.

Within the field of contemporary art — and I shall discuss this in detail in Chapter Four — literature has predominately existed in short essay form within compiled volumes. At the start of my study, there was little material written on either Biemann or Rudio. This remains the case for Rudio. The most substantial account of Biemann's work at the time was Angela Dimitrakaki's 'Materialist Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann'.<sup>29</sup> However, both artists use the process of writing on their own work in order to illuminate the interpretative contexts in

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under the 'non-fiction' umbrella, which has, otherwise, previously been excluded from it (for example, the film essay, travel narratives, scientific reports, fictional topics, newsreels and documentaries). Alter also notes the absence of book-length English language work on the essay film. Nora Alter, *Projecting History: German Nonfiction Cinema 1967-2000* (Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 7. Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker Memories of the Future*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2005). Lupton has also written a short chapter entitled 'Who in the World: Essay Film, Transculture and Globality', which suggests that contemporary essay film might be suitable for understanding our inter-connectedness under globalisation. See *Telling Stories: Countering Narratives in Art, Theory and Film*, (eds.) Jane Tormey and Gillian Whiteley, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 234-242.

<sup>28</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Stuff It! The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (ed.) Ursula Biemann, (Zurich: Gerr. Klingenberg Buchkunst Leipzig, 2003), pp. 8-9.

<sup>29</sup> Angela Dimitrakaki, 'Materialist Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann', *The Oxford Art Journal*, 30/2 (2007), pp. 205-232.

which they think it is best understood. This literature is quite substantial for Biemann. In fact, Biemann notes in her 2008 monograph, *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, video works 1998 – 2008*, that:

The initial purpose of my writing, particularly in connection with my video projects, was to elaborate on their socio-political content. I regarded such theoretical elaborations as a way of expanding on those issues I had not been able to address directly in the video projects. But, very soon, I developed a need for writing about my work on a “meta” level. Reflecting on my motivations and aesthetic strategies became particularly useful for the reception of my videos in the art context, since the prevailing art critical trends were somewhat unresponsive to my emerging concerns as an artist.<sup>30</sup>

I have mentioned both Biemann’s edited volumes *Stuff it! The Video Essay in the Digital Age* and *Mission Reports*. In addition, there is an earlier edited volume, entitled *Been There and Back to Nowhere: postproduction documents 1988 – 2000* (2000), which takes a significant look at the time spent on the ‘Border Project’ (from which *Performing the Border* emerged, and which would also become *Writing Desire* and *Remote Sensing*).<sup>31</sup> A number of scholars and practitioners who contributed theoretical work to these three edited volumes — such as, Nora Alter, Maurizio Lazzarato, Angela Melitopoulos, Jan Verwoert, Hito Steyerl, Jörg Huber, T.J Demos, Carles Guerra, Jean-Pierre Rehm and Angela Dimitrakaki — also have a presence in a text that was, until very recently, perhaps the most extensive engagement with the new prominence of documentary in recent art: Hito Steyerl and Maria Lind’s edited volume, *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*.<sup>32</sup> Notwithstanding the host of exhibitions and events, discussed in detail in ‘The Documentary Turn’ section of my thesis, the last five years has seen a surge of interest in video-essayistic and documentary modalities in contemporary art production.

Two books require particular note. First is T.J. Demos’ *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (published in 2013).<sup>33</sup> Second, Alfredo Cramarotti’s *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing* (2009).

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<sup>30</sup> Biemann, ‘Going to the Border: An Essayist Project’, (2008), pp. 13-19, (p. 13).

<sup>31</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Been There and Back to Nowhere: gender in transnational spaces postproduction documents 1988–2000*, (ed.) Ursula Biemann, (Berlin: b\_books, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art 1* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), (eds.) Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl.

<sup>33</sup> T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*, (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2013).

Cramarotti's book explores the deployment of journalistic reportage in recent contemporary art production.<sup>34</sup> His argument centres on the premise that recent art practices have begun to 'borrow' the 'tools' of journalism. While Cramarotti does note the 'view of the view' that the aesthetic has the capacity to provide, there is a tendency to over-emphasise a one-way relation in which 'art' takes from reportage rather than a method which keeps afloat the reciprocal relation between a need to know and the politics of constructing knowledge.<sup>35</sup> My thesis aims to contribute to the field in which both these recent publications sit within. However, as the next subheading suggests, greater attention is given to the social, political and economic elements that form institutional spheres.

Demos' book takes a number of artists' moving-image works for analysis, one of which is Biemann's *Sahara Chronicle* (2006-7). His decision to discuss this video-essay illustrates the focus of the book well. The main premise examines how one might visualise the discrepancy that arises between the 'neoliberal claim for free market and democratic participation' on the one hand and 'economic inequality, statelessness, and military conflicts on the other'.<sup>36</sup> Whilst Demos' book considers artwork that is comparable to that discussed throughout my thesis, his interest in statelessness, nomadic travel and diaspora results in a very different line of enquiry. In many ways Demos' insistence on opacity and fragmentation does little to advance the politics of representation debates that were outlined some forty years ago.

In addition, despite laying out from the start the internal contradiction present in neoliberal conception of 'freedom', Demos arguably overlooks the contested notion of the 'new' subject produced by globalised capitalism. He treats the 'migrant' subject as the body most able to transform the current world order. Whilst this argument does produce new possibilities for agency, if not handled with care, it can also take part in displacing action through the process of 'othering'. My focus on neoliberalism, the debates around 'feminisation', social re/production and documentation - which inflect the present socio-economic period and our apprehension of it - hopes to deal with the *relations* between form and content, rather than simply treating the former an expression of the latter. Because of this aim, my reading also affords greater attention to

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<sup>34</sup> Alfredo Cramarotti, *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing*, (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Cramarotti, (2009), p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> Demos, (2013); see Demos' prelude.

the history of a mutable genre, whereas Demos has little room to unpack the all-too-simplistic claim that the documentary mode in the twenty-first century is ‘re-invented’ anew.

### **Methodological procedures**

To expand, my methodological framework is woven from three main threads. First is the Marxist-Feminist debates and praxis of the 1970s. The surge of interest in these complex and highly contested political theories provides a contemporary landscape in which my analysis should be understood. The historical role women, such as Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Leopoldina Fortunati, played in Italian Marxism of the 1960s and 70s allows two adjacent trajectories to be substantiated. The appropriation, development and synthesis of, on the one hand, Karl Marx’s work on the ‘general intellect’ and Michel Foucault’s work on biopolitics, by figures such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno, mark the field of concern. In considering this theoretical work I attempt to understand how recent Marxist-Feminist scholarship (Silvia Federici, Hester Eisenstein and Nancy Fraser, amongst others) provides a crucial set of arguments for understanding terms such as ‘precarity’ and ‘feminisation’. These terms - or ‘theory’, as Federici notes - are central to our understandings of the reconfiguration of work and class relations in today’s global economy.<sup>37</sup> These three theoretical and political elements - Marxian, Feminist and Foucauldian - produce a schema that allows me to understand lens-based works that are essayistic, and/or exist within a thoughtful understanding of the documentary paradigm.

As laid out above, I have chosen three video-essays that function as central case studies: Biemann’s *Performing the Border*, and Ruido’s *Amphibious Fictions* and *Real Time*. I undertake a close reading of these individual works. Later, two other works help to shed light on the specific techniques used by Biemann and Ruido. Chantal Akerman’s *From the Other Side* (2002) will be discussed in reference to *Performing the Border*, while Angela Melitopoulos’ *Passing Drama* (1999) helps extend my analysis of Ruido’s *Amphibious Fictions*. This subsidiary analysis is used, in part, to note specific parallels but also (most productively) to exert pressure on the notion of the video-essay.

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<sup>37</sup> Silvia Federici ‘Precarious Labour: A Feminist Viewpoint’, in *Variant*, issue 37, Spring/Summer 2010, <[http://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue37\\_38/V37prelab.pdf](http://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue37_38/V37prelab.pdf)>, accessed 28.07.13.

This process means I do not use my examples in most classic sense of ‘case study’. My reading operates on the level of attending to certain segments within the videos themselves. In rooting my analysis firmly within the works, I identify a set of questions. These questions, brought to realisation through the works themselves, structure the thesis and its key areas of concern. There is a continual tension present between form and content in all of the works discussed. The interplay of written text and image, of narrative and anti-narrative, particularly in the works of Biemann and Rudio, is mirrored in the act of writing about the works. This translation process – from video-essay to art-historical thesis - presents questions that are both ontologically indeterminate and perpetually unavoidable. The question of the video-essay’s definition, results in analysis that has to remain vigilant to a wide array of material circumstances which have shifted the terrain, and reoriented the position, from which it is best seen and understood. This is attended to most comprehensively in Chapter Four.

Moreover, in examining material that deals with the role of the document and documentary, one can cluster together a host of terms that share similar characteristics. The term ‘video-essay’ can be considered alongside the ‘experimental documentary’, the ‘art documentary’, the ‘docu-essay’, the ‘documentary fiction’, the ‘personal documentary’; or it can be positioned within the history of ‘docu-modernism’, ‘political modernism’ or ‘critical realism’.<sup>38</sup> Yet it is reducible to none of these designations. It is this loyalty to fluidity *and* fact that might be best considered as the only steady determinant for this paradigm. As stated, my thesis will employ a number of works that present problems for any attempt to neatly clarify the genre. Whilst these works have been identified as possessing some of the main attributes of the ‘video-essay’, and while the artists themselves have chosen to adopt the term, by no means do they fit clearly; rather, my key examples have been selected to ask questions both of the ‘genre’ and of one another. These works, and the analysis and discussion they necessitate, go some way in raising the wider issues at stake in the documentary project.

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Documentary fiction’ is a coinage used by the Australian filmmaker Dennis O’Rourke. See Jeffrey Geiger’s ‘The Camera and the Man’, *Third Text*, 12:42, 1998, pp. 3-17 (p. 8). Catherine Lupton regularly uses ‘personal documentary’ in her analysis of Chris Marker’s body of documentary work as a way to make clear the effects generated through self-reflexivity. See Lupton, (2005). ‘Docu-modernism’, for example, had a prominent role to play in the most recent Manifesta (2012, Limburg, Belgium) in the interpretation of the British documentary filmmaker John Grierson’s work.

*Real Time* displays Ruido's knowingness of the unfinished nature of any such project whilst simultaneously maintaining the need to have a product, genre or shape to create and hold such a discussion. Fredric Jameson notes that 'genre is itself a social institution', formed through and by a dominant ideology, or episteme. If we wish to see that dominant *Weltanschauung*, we must take an inventory of sorts in order to ascertain what might be excluded from fitting neatly into a genre. It is only then that we can see how and why cultural products attain the assumed role of 'pure' autonomy.<sup>39</sup> The video-essay may operate within, or be perceived as a kind of non-genre that straddles more crystallised and developed genres. In fact, according to Biemann, we must be wary of 'establish[ing] the essay as a genre' and coagulating it into 'a formula'.<sup>40</sup> A discussion that takes place in Ruido's *Real Time* notes the changed and increasingly intricate world we now live in. Generating a political consciousness, the speakers around a kitchen table reflect, is not easy; the flexibility of an advanced socio-economic system is successful in co-opting anything that tries to oppose it. A suggestion is made that we may need to move in a similarly flexible manner in order that we may transgress and 'mutate'. Innovation is required, the discussants propose, to avoid strengthening and simply imitating the already-present structures. For it is these existing structures, they argue, which strive to uphold culture as a 'bourgeois thing'.<sup>41</sup>

As we shall see, Biemann's and Ruido's works can be considered to be part of a wider body of work that seeks to dispel the fragmentation of life under capitalism and prioritise a re-cognition of our socio-economic system. Their work is not alone in attending to this argument. Whilst focus and form vary in the array of practices, commentators have repeatedly signalled the *re-politicisation* of art practices over the past ten years, accompanying, in part, the new 'sociability' of art set forth by relational and post-relational models.<sup>42</sup> The examples of work discussed throughout my thesis can

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<sup>39</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism', *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 8, no. 1, Spring, 1975, pp. 1-20.

<sup>40</sup> Ursula Biemann, 'The Video Essay in the Digital Age', (2003), p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> María Ruido, *Real Time*, 2003

<sup>42</sup> See John Robert's edited special of *Third Text* entitled *Art, Praxis and the Community to Come*, from 2009 for example. Here Robert's assembles a group of writers (many cited throughout this thesis), who analyse practices which encompass 'new realisms' as Steve Edwards terms it. Such works 'register' a changed conjuncture for art and politics at a time when the 'postmodern consensus of the partial gave way to totalising terms such as "capitalism"'. Steve Edwards, 'Commons and Crowds: Figuring Photography from Above and Below', pp. 447-465 in the above mentioned *Third Text* issue, vol. 23, issue 4, July 2009. See

also be understood as projects which aim to re-engage the viewer with the nature of contemporary capitalism. Artworks, such as those discussed in depth throughout my thesis, position the artist alongside the viewer. As viewers we are called upon to join them in an investigative process that aims to consider how we might ‘picture’ our contemporary world. In turn, my thesis asks how the chosen video works interact with the documentary mode and in what ways the role of representation, in the twenty-first century, assists us in our vision and knowledge of neoliberal capitalism.

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also Gail Day’s essay ‘Realism, Totality, and the Militant *Citoyen*: Or, What Does Lukács Have to Do With Contemporary Art’ which notes the ‘realist impulse’ that has inflected art since the 1990s. See Day’s essay in *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence*, (eds.) Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, (New York and London: Continuum), 2011, pp. 203-219.

*The control of society over individuals is not conducted only through consciousness or ideology, but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society biopolitics is what is most important, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal.*<sup>43</sup>

## **Chapter Two – Biopolitics, ‘Feminisation’ and Subjectivation under Neoliberalism**

The subject matter of the works I address present connections to the broader developments in capitalism throughout the past forty years. This requires particular emphasis on, therefore, the economic, political and social landscape from which the artworks emerged. This chapter aims to secure a purchase on the debates that surround the characteristics of neoliberalism, and post-Fordism since the 1970s.<sup>44</sup> My analysis seeks to understand how the biopolitical production of the ‘subject’ is advanced by the neoliberal, socio-economic model. Lastly, it aims to address the manner in which the biopolitical production of the subject under neoliberalism has become understood as increasingly ‘feminised’.

The role and prevalence of the knowledge economy after 1970, especially in the West, is the context in which these debates are situated. This chapter will explore the prominence of research by feminist scholars such as Hester Eisenstein. Eisenstein’s thesis argues that: ‘the ideology of twenty-first-century feminism lends itself to the principles behind globalisation’.<sup>45</sup> Whilst a polemical assertion, this increasingly well-

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<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘La Naissance de la Médecine Sociale’ in *Dits et Ecrits*, 1994, in Michel Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (London: Harvard University Press), 2000, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Fordism can be understood as a mode of production (1940s-1960s) characterised by industrially mass-produced and mass-consumed products standardised to ensure ease of exchangeability and maintain, ultimately, affordable prices. Post-Fordism, understood as the second ‘transformation’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1970s onwards) has seen a shift to ‘flexibility’ in the socio-economic model. Production processes developed ‘just-in-time’ assemblage, developed competition between workers who had previously been seen as standardised ‘cogs’ in the machine and reduced the need for buffer stocks.

<sup>45</sup> Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women’s Labour and Ideas to Exploit the World*, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), p. 39. Eisenstein notes how in the US, specifically, ‘the argument that all women should work played right into the hands of those seeking welfare reform’, p. 107. Nancy Fraser’s ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, *New Left Review* 56, March-April 2009, pp. 97-98, discusses how there is a ‘disturbing convergence’ of feminism with neoliberal capitalism that requires serious critical attention. Angela McRobbie claims that Fraser considers this convergence as too accidental, underplaying the active role capitalism took in undermining and assimilating feminism and feminists. See *The Aftermath of Feminism: gender, culture and social change*, (London: Sage Publications, 2009).

cited and respected critical thesis will be examined because of the ramifications that particular parts of Eisenstein's arguments have for women in the global South and the economic migrant. The pivotal role that analyses of women's labour has played in recent discussions of the global neoliberal economy (for instance, Eisenstein's premise) leads me to re-consider the theoretical and political writings of figures such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati and Silvia Federici. These theorists and activists emerged and splintered from the Italian Autonomia movement of the 1970s and will be considered in my return to earlier debates on the indissoluble relation between social reproduction and production. I will argue that the examination of the dialectic between waged and unwaged labour is rendered visible once more by the themes of the artworks. An acknowledgement of this renewed relevance cannot be sufficiently understood without looking to the debates on material and immaterial labour brought about by changes in production.

Theorists and commentators of neoliberal capitalism — figures such as Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Paolo Virno — have characterised this period as one dominated by an increasingly enforced, individualised and fragmented body. This hyper-singularised body, they argue, acts as a conduit for capital flows. Crucially, however, the same body simultaneously, has the potential to resist that flow. This understanding of dual, yet seemingly incompatible, characteristics increasingly articulated on the body throughout this forty-year period is best understood through a Foucauldian concept of power, that is, an understanding of power which sees resistance as prior to domination. However, I will aim to express the difficulties that those stripped of rights (or those who might work in the 'black', or invisible labour sector) face when access to representation, and thus visibility, is nearly impossible to attain. For we must not underestimate how hard dominant powers work to conceal certain dimensions of labour in order to extend profitability and pursue continual regeneration. It is at this juncture that I examine the image as politically strategic in recording processes of subjectivation. The chapter will close with a consideration of how formal innovations of the lens-based image might provide new accounts of subjectivity. These questions are taken up once more in Chapter Three where closer attention is paid to the analogue and

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Whilst Fraser may not spend a great deal of time on how capitalism aimed to undermine feminism — although her discussion on identity politics does serve this purpose in part — I would maintain that the streamlining of the neoliberal paradigm with the advancements of feminisms is co-incident.

digital configurations of the lens-based image and the claims made for a biopolitical art are explored.

### **Analysing the neoliberal terrain**

Ruido's and Biemann's works detail capitalist accumulation as a continual process. Their works locate geographies and specific bodies where a new set of enclosures take place. As David Harvey accurately assesses (taking his starting point as Marx), the body 'put to work' is malleable (not infinitely of course) and able to internalise and reproduce working patterns, generating surplus value which can be capitalised over and above the direct exchange of socially necessary labour time. Harvey's consideration of the body as a receptor and producer of capitalist accumulation is particularly useful when understanding how the maintenance and reproduction of the 'working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital'.<sup>46</sup> Biemann and Ruido each explicitly aim to understand women's role in the labour market under globalised capitalism and consider how the experiences developed through social reproduction might be beneficial to this stage of capitalism whilst also alluding to long historical processes that have repeatedly called upon women's labour to advance and implement said socio-economic system. One particular section in Ruido's *Real Time* attends directly to changes in consumption and production patterns. As Ruido's camera lingers side-on, our gaze hits the side of a young woman's face and torso, stood in what appears to be a kitchen. As the woman's head ever so slightly drops to her chest, her eyes cast downwards Ruido's narrative harnesses the image. The typed text covers the image: 'I am my own enterprise, if Fordism integrated consumption into the cycle of capitalism, post-Fordism integrates reproduction and communication' [...] 'subjectivity is the raw material for immaterial labour.'<sup>47</sup>

It is certainly fair to say that women's presence in the paid workforce has increased since 1970.<sup>48</sup> The scholarship and debates around the feminisation of labour,

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<sup>46</sup> Harvey states, 'the development of capitalist production entails a radical transformation in what the working body is about, following from Gramsci's assertion that capitalism is precisely about the production of a new labouring body'. See Harvey's *Spaces of Hope*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 97-116 (p. 114).

<sup>47</sup> María Ruido, *Real Time*, 2005, 6.52 mins.

<sup>48</sup> This assertion, however, should not be taken uncritically. The discrepancy between women's paid labour and the stability it should afford is starkly evident in Martha Gimenez's essay. Here, Gimenez writes that whilst women work two-thirds of the world's working hours and produce

however, are not solely concerned with this shift alone. This increased presence of women is not per se, as we shall see, the catalyst for the rise in discussion of ‘the ‘feminisation’ of labour. It is argued that what is now routinely referred to as a ‘post-Fordist’ economy necessitates a new type of worker that dovetails with the experiences and histories of women’s labour: this is because those bodies have always had to manage the apparent smooth transitions between what is valorised as ‘work’ and ‘non-work’ in capitalism. This is not the first time in history that women in the West have been explicitly drafted in large numbers to undertake paid work in the macro-structures of capitalism. Women’s role in the munitions factories, land army and collective war effort throughout the 1940s is perhaps the most obvious example. However, the period of globalised capitalism is said to have undergone a broader ‘feminising’ of the economy as a whole.

The sociologist Saskia Sassen notes that from the mid-1980s to late 1990s, ‘Third World’ women have been pulled into the labour force in new and intensified ways. This, she argues, marks a new ‘phase in the history of women’.<sup>49</sup> Sassen charts the manner in which the growth of export production in the ‘Third World’ and the large increase in immigration to countries in Europe and the US show ‘a systemic relation between [...] globalization and feminization of wage labour’.<sup>50</sup> ‘Third World’ women were the preferred workforces for two fundamental aspects of the capitalist economy at the turn of the twenty-first century. First, offshore production insures a low-wage payout and simultaneously — this is very often the first time young, female workers have taken part in paid employment — the chances of workers organising is far more easily controlled by employers. In addition, companies are able to circumnavigate the employment laws of their countries of origin. Secondly, with production jobs moved to borders and beyond, workers in the ‘First World’ economies enter what is often referred to as the ‘information age’ of capitalism. Great shifts of people from one type of labour to another open a new demand for labour in the lower-paid service and caring sectors.

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half of the world’s food they only earn ten per cent of the world’s income, and own less than one percent of the world’s property. See Gimenez’s ‘Connecting Marx & Feminism in the Era of Globalization: A Preliminary Investigation’, *Socialism & Democracy*, 2010, p. 18. and p. 101. See also Suzanne M. Sinke’s ‘Gender and Migration: Historical perspectives’, *International Migration Review* 40(1), 2006, pp. 82-103 for an exploration into the position of women, migration and work post 1970.

<sup>49</sup> Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: essays on the new mobility of people and money*, (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 111.

<sup>50</sup> Sassen, (1998), p. 111.

Here, argues Sassen, is where immigrant women are equally ‘coveted’, drafted in large numbers to work in the lowest paid jobs in hospitals, restaurants and people’s homes.<sup>51</sup>

Changes in production engender new ways to live life and new types of subjectivities best suited to these altered modes. This requirement for uncompromising adaptation has many historical precedents and is not confined to this most recent shift to post-Fordism. Moreover, the demand for women’s subordinated labour can be seen throughout the centuries. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild have charted how women from defeated nations in the ancient Middle East were enslaved as household workers and concubines for the victors; how African women and children, brought to North America between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries made up a large proportion of domestic help; and how Irish women and many Englishwomen from rural areas in the nineteenth century made the migration to towns and cities in England to act as servants for the rising population of the upper middle-class. They stress that the roles of ‘nannies, maids and sex workers’, have been present in the background, undertaking the invisible labour so vital to the sustainment and advancing of a visibly ‘healthy’ economy.<sup>52</sup>

The movement of young women into newly constructed industrialised zones, as seen in *Performing the Border*, although understood as a localised issue, is tied to fundamental transformations in the world economy. Mexican manufacturing/assembly plants first began to spring up in the export processing zones along the Mexico/US border in the 1960s and boomed in the 1980s. Under the government of Miguel de la Madrid (1982 to 1988), the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and advocacy of “open[ing] the country” to globalisation began to take a strong hold. In the years that followed Carlos Salinas’s presidency, commitment to developing the neoliberal project intensified. In a direct response to the economic crisis of the 1980s, Salinas privatised state-run companies, gave legal status to churches, amended the constitutional laws protecting *ejidos* (communally owned farming lands) and supported an economy mainly based in attracting speculative foreign investment. This culminated

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<sup>51</sup> See Sassen’s chapter, ‘Notes on the Incorporation of Third World Women into Wage Labour through Immigration and Offshore Production’, in *Globalization and Its Discontents*, (1998), pp. 111-131, for a detailed analysis of the systemic relation between the employment of women in offshore production plants and the demand for immigrant women’s labour in ‘First World’ countries.

<sup>52</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (eds), *Global Woman: Nannies; Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, (London: Granta Books, 2003), pp. 4-5.

in the signing of NAFTA with the US and Canada in 1993.<sup>53</sup> Biemann cites the closing of the US Bracero Program in 1964 as a decision that resulted in the border becoming ripe for foreign investment. She writes:

When the U.S.A. closed the Bracero Program in 1964, over 200,000 Mexicans who were working on American fruit and cotton plantations in the southern states were sent back to the border. [...] most of them remained in the border towns, unemployed. The sudden and massive rise in unemployment soon created political frictions. The Mexican government found itself in a vulnerable position, resulting in a willingness to agree to plans for a free zone on Mexican territory.<sup>54</sup>

It is clear to see how specific places gain the ‘local struggle’ tag through the concretising of global shifts at these specific locations.<sup>55</sup>

Sassen reminds us that people do not ‘just happen’ to move; migration is often linked to a lack of economic growth in one’s own country. The need for female workers (for instance, in *maquiladoras*, or within people’s homes, as explored in Biemann and Angela Sanders’s 2003 video-essay *Europlex*) demonstrates a ‘market for labour’, reminding us of the active driving forces present in the seemingly inert phrase, ‘labour market’.<sup>56</sup> This need for a certain type of labour is not solely limited to the export zones situated at peripheral sites — whether across borders or on the outskirts of major cities. It must also be understood as existing where a demand is clearly in place. For example, as women in the ‘First World’ began to advance in education and paid work outside of the home, there has been a sharp rise in demand for domestic help and childcare. Cristina Morini provides the statistics for this increase, noting that in 1950 in the US, 15 per cent of women with children were in paid employment, a sharp contrast to the 65 per cent seen in employment in 2007.<sup>57</sup> This fixed demand has a direct relation to the

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<sup>53</sup> David E. Lorey, *The U.S./Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: SR Books, 2005). Moreover, the US-Mexico border was created in 1848 but only began to be supervised by US Customs at the turn of the twentieth century. Claudia Sadowski-Smith, *Globalization On the Line: Culture, Capital and Citizenship at U.S Borders*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Been There and Back to Nowhere: gender in transnational spaces, postproduction documents 1988 – 2000*, (ed.) Ursula Biemann, (Berlin: b\_books, 2000), p. 70.

<sup>55</sup> Sassen, (1998), p. 116.

<sup>56</sup> In *Europlex* Biemann and Sanders address the commute experienced by north-African *domesticas* crossing time zones to work in Ceuta and Melilla, Spanish enclaves in the north of Morocco. Here, the Moroccan women undertake work in the homes of many Spanish families: the forced adoption of the Spanish time zone and the hours of the (paid) working day result in a dislocation from the working days and infrastructures of their own families and own communities.

<sup>57</sup> Cristina Morini, ‘The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism’, *Feminist Review*, no. 87, 2007, p. 41.

increase in global female immigration. We have seen the rise of a new ‘serving class’ composed of immigrant women occupying care roles for the white middle-classes. This phenomena, notes Sassen, replaces ‘the traditional image of the black female servant serving the white master’.<sup>58</sup>

Historically, those who have owned the means of production — white, middle and upper-class men — instigate a hierarchy that means ‘their’ workers’ wages come in at a cheaper rate, particularly so when figured along racial and gender lines. We must also take into account, however, that the systematic deployment of women’s labour is also considered to stem from extracting value from the ‘general intellect’ of this preferred workforce. Cristina Morini has argued that the current preference for flexible workers with unstable hours, semi-permanent contracts and ‘home working’ offices can follow the blueprint of jobs that women have typically occupied. Women’s role in social reproduction has more often than not required an implicit juggling of waged labour around the unwaged labour required in the home.<sup>59</sup> These unstable and flexible working conditions have, historically, often been the most difficult to monitor. They are also the most difficult to organise; it is hard to demand and defend workers’ rights when their jobs are scattered across society with no visible group presence.

Both Ruido and Biemann direct attention to the discursive formations that surround and form the subjectivities of their works. In focusing on what determines those subjectivities, and what must alter as a direct effect of them, we as an audience are directed to the social, economic, political and historical processes that form and ultimately, perform them. An indication of this focus lies in both Biemann’s and Ruido’s interest in the construction of social spaces and in architectural remnants that are too solid to destroy quickly, such as the images of old factories in *Amphibious Fictions* (2005) or the *Lacoste* sign above the carved industrial workers in *Real Time* (2003). (See fig. 8.). Biemann’s *Performing the Border* (1999) spends time circulating the high, barbed-wire fences that obscure the *maquila* factories, and inhabits the places which have sprung up as a result of this outsourced production and its new economy, such as the homes made of material salvaged from the factories, or the bars and streets

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<sup>58</sup> Sassen, (1998), p. 91.

<sup>59</sup> Morini, (2007), pp. 40-59. It is perhaps useful to pull apart the notion of ‘social reproduction’ here into three main strands: the biological reproduction of the species; the reproduction of the labour force; and the reproduction of provisioning and caring needs. See Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill in ‘Perspectives and Framework’ in *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), p. 32.

formed in the desert sand (see fig. 9). The role of the service-based economy is considered in its intrinsic relation to a more materially determined socio-economic system. The contradictions of this new condition or 'spirit' guide Biemann's and Ruido's works in different ways, but what we see in both is an interest in the physical spaces and architectural features that, by their juxtaposition, discernibly figure how one is confronted daily with such contradictions.

Andrew Burke, in his discussion of Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Space*, argues that aiming for a neat jump from past to present cannot adequately express the 'state of things'. He contends that one must include the places 'that seem to run against the grain of the times', for it is these 'residual' and 'anachronistic' elements that construct the 'texture' of our present.<sup>60</sup> Obscuring, forgetting or concealing a dominant, older mode of production or way of life in our assessment of the present, means that we are ill-equipped to deal with constructing the future to come. Due attention, in both Biemann's and Ruido's work, is given to the built environment. The consequences of such changes in production unfold clearly when Ruido directs the zoom of her unstable lens on what appears to be a dormant construction site. The partially derelict buildings still display habitation, as in a small washing-line hidden under drying clothes, hooked from one window to the next. Strict shifts from one mode of living to another do not exist. Rather, as we shall see, elements already present in current ways of governing life develop (or indeed shrink) in order to advance the demands of those with powerful vested interests.

### **The Spectre of Marx's 'General Intellect' and Biopolitics**

Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been

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<sup>60</sup> Andrew Burke, 'Nation, Landscape, and Nostalgia in Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Space*', *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory*, vol. 14, issue 1, 2006, pp. 3-29 (pp. 5-6).

produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process.<sup>61</sup>

Michael Hardt intimates that one can now refer to three distinct moments when analysing the economic paradigms of capitalist social relations since the Middle Ages. The first paradigm is defined by the role of agriculture and the extraction of raw materials. The second, through the onset and spread of the industrial revolution and the manufacture of goods, and, the third and current paradigm, which sees services and knowledge-production as occupying the privileged position in socio-economic production.<sup>62</sup> Considering the types of labour required for this ‘third paradigm’, it is unsurprising that we have seen a rise in theoretical descriptors such as ‘affectivity’ and ‘cognitive capitalism’.<sup>63</sup> Ruido’s *Amphibious Fictions* enables one to pose questions regarding the changes that have taken place over the last twenty years, shifts that have required a ‘new’ type of worker. In the final section of the video, Ruido’s camera records gallery halls that were once the walls of a working factory. The motors that previously sounded the progress of the nineteenth and twentieth century are now quiet, exhibited behind cordoned off rope.<sup>64</sup> Her voice-over asserts: ‘what is valuable now is knowledge’.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Contradiction between the foundation of bourgeois production (value as measure) and its development. Machines etc.’, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 706. Translation Martin Nicolaus.

<sup>62</sup> See a discussion of this in Michael Hardt’s ‘Affective Labour’, *boundary 2*, 26:2, 1999, Duke University Press, pp. 89-100 (pp. 90-92).

<sup>63</sup> Affective labour is best understood as types of labour that borrow extensively on one’s personality traits (and the experiences and knowledge that form such traits). As communication has become a central mode of production in the second half of the twentieth century a key requirement has been to ‘capitalise’ on the manner in which one interacts with others (this can be seen clearly in the rise of the service and care industries). Along with Michael Hardt’s writing on affective labour, and other commentators discussed in this chapter, Kathi Weeks and Nina Power have both provided important historical and analytical work on the role affective labour has on the organisation of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In addition Yann Moulier Boutang’s *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), can also be seen to sit within the milieu of Hardt and Negri and other scholars associated with the French journal *Multitudes* (Boutang founded the journal which is often considered the successor to Jean-Marie Vincent and Negri’s *Future Antérieur*)

<sup>64</sup> Hito Steyerl’s short essay ‘Is a Museum a Factory?’ details the transformation of factory buildings into museums and galleries. This shift in the spaces of overt manual production to cognitive production is presented as a (perhaps too) neat analogy to the broader movements of twenty-first century capitalism as discussed throughout this chapter. Hito Steyerl, ‘Is a Museum a Factory?’, *e-flux*, issue no. 7, 06.2009, <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/71>>

<sup>65</sup> María Ruido, *Amphibious Fictions*, 2005, 27.24 mins.

Cognitive capitalism can be understood as extracting value from not only one's productivity in one's actual workplace, but also the use and implementation of knowledge gained throughout one's lifetime. That is, the workplace is 'no longer the sole centre of training for a person'. Rather, the skills needed are 'activated by the entire social and territorial network within which a person moves'.<sup>66</sup> In the cognitive stage of capitalism, language and mental resources are necessary to produce sufficient surplus value for increased capital gain; life, and how one conducts one's life, becomes work. The ever-increasing merging of the boundaries between life and work clouds the distinction between waged and un-waged labour.<sup>67</sup> If monitoring the daily actions of one's employee has grown in acceptance — most recently orchestrated by and through social media, or by the psychometric assessment 'personality' tests, for example, of Asda or Walmart — Foucault's conception of biopolitics is more relevant than ever for an assessment of our contemporary condition.<sup>68</sup> In fact, post-Fordism, for Paolo Virno, sees a truly reshaped subjectivity that could only have been produced and reproduced to such effective levels through a biopolitical means of subjectivation. For Virno, post-Fordism puts an increased emphasis on the *potential to produce* in everyone. Once labour-power is bought and decisions are made as to how it is best used by the capitalist, it can be governed and refined biopolitically more than ever before.<sup>69</sup>

The notion of the biopolitical production of the subject now occupies a highly visible place in cultural theory. Hardt and Negri, Lazzarato, Judith Revel and Giorgio Agamben continue to advance intense debate on its deployment after Foucault.<sup>70</sup> Judith

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<sup>66</sup> Cristina Morini, 'The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism', *Feminist Review*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2007, p. 45.

<sup>67</sup> Paolo Virno suggests that the cognitive stage of post-Fordist capitalism shares very similar demands to that of a communist age in which the erasure of work boundaries and the dissolution of the state has manifested in a type of communisation of capitalism. This seemingly paradoxical concept is not dissimilar to the 'socialism of capital', a concept used to define the condition of the West in the 1930s after the state intervened to quell the *laissez-faire* of the markets and introduce the project of Welfare. See *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 110-111.

<sup>68</sup> Journalist, Barbara Ehrenreich, has written of the requirement, in much of the low-paying retail sector in the US, to complete personality tests that determine how much of a 'docile', and thus favoured, employee you will be. See her account of undertaking these employment tests in *Nickel and Dimed: Undercover in Low-wage USA*, (London: Granta, 2002).

<sup>69</sup> Paolo Virno, 'Recording the Present: essay on historical time', <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno11.htm>, accessed 01.09.2011

<sup>70</sup> Agamben's work on 'bare life' is often understood as a reformulation of Foucault's notion of biopolitics. Agamben states that the Foucauldian thesis 'will have to be corrected, or at least, completed' as western politics have always been concerned, from the very start, with biopower'. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford California:

Revel asserts that the biopolitical for Foucault is the politics of expression of biopower.<sup>71</sup> The emergence of biopower marks a point in history in which a large-scale shift in the relations of power took place in the government of the population. The shift from sovereign power to biopower at the turn of the eighteenth century witnessed the right to rule via death to the need to rule (govern) via life. Disciplinary power and work on the modern soul in *Discipline and Punish* allows Foucault's notion of biopower to be fully articulated in *The History of Sexuality* (volume one), specifically in a series of lectures given at the Collège de France in the 1970s.<sup>72</sup> Previously, control of the population was augmented through the sovereign rule taking life as direct punishment visible to all (this is expounded with vivid clarity in the chapter 'Spectacle of the Scaffold' in *Discipline and Punish*). The shift, detailed by Foucault, is to the administrative characteristics of these altered relations of power. The dispersed nature of this articulation was far more easily enforced by the processes of internalisation, and thus performed by, and through, individual bodies. This is a move that is not wholly due to the rise of capitalist social relations but is quite clearly annexed.

Silvia Federici has argued that the emergence of biopower in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century remains shrouded in mystery by Foucault's analysis. Some caution, however, is due here, for the opening quote to this chapter is not quite as opaque as Federici might like. However, Federici does rightly assess that the promotion of life-forces and their ties to the 'accumulation and reproduction of labour' are largely

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Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 9. Foucault's assertion that a shift occurs at the turn of the nineteenth century is, for Agamben, inaccurate. Through sovereign law, rule has always been about defining what it means to be a citizen; this defining of what is correct and what is not, produced by the body of the population, sits *outside* the ideologies of the nation state. Agamben terms this 'outside' the 'state of exception'. This argument has gained currency among artists and writers such as Biemann and T.J. Demos when discussing the 'bare life' of the migrant subject under globalised capitalist production. For example, Demos asks: how might one represent artistically, a life that is unable to be represented politically? See Demos' 'A Life Full of Holes', *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art 1*, (Annadale-on-Hudson: CCS Bard Sternberg Press, 2008), pp. 104-128. The question of whether there is an outside to power is addressed with great precision by Judith Revel in 'The Materiality of the Immaterial: Foucault, against the Return of Idealisms and New Vitalisms', *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 149, May/June 2008, pp. 33-38.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Revel, 'Resistances, subjectivities, common', <<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fprevel4.htm>>, accessed 12.08.2011.

<sup>72</sup> Now compiled in *The Birth of Biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) and *Security, Territory, Population: lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

ignored.<sup>73</sup> For Foucault, myriad changes coalesced at this moment in history and enforced a recalibration of life; the accumulation of capital, however, is central for this event. The fracturing and dispersion of dominant power-relations that worked to delineate and control the population continued to advance and develop surreptitiously throughout the last three centuries. The last forty years, which Lazzarato understands as ‘the great transformation’ in the organisation of work, has seen how important the performative aspect of self-government and regulation has become for the biopolitical neoliberal regime.<sup>74</sup>

Foucault sees the intensive cultivation of the individual body as connected to the changes in methods of production and new preferences for labour:

[B]io-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimising forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern.<sup>75</sup>

As a result of, and implicit within, this change, *dispositifs* (which Hardt and Negri link to the first era of capitalist accumulation), regulated customs, norms and values; the prison, the school, the asylum, the factory became increasingly re-formulated and re-fined into more diffuse systems. Here, power is administered through the ‘brains and bodies of the citizens’; where bodies seek to actively cultivate themselves.<sup>76</sup> The emergence of, for example, the ‘psy’ sciences and the

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<sup>73</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: women, the body and primitive accumulation*, (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 16.

<sup>74</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Immaterial Labour’, <<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>>, accessed 11.08.2011. Lazzarato acknowledges the subtleties of biopower and biopolitics that Foucault himself sought to point to in the 1970s. Lazzarato writes that: ‘life’ and ‘living being [*le vivant*]’ are at the heart of new political battles and new economic strategies. He also demonstrated that the ‘introduction of life into history’ corresponds with the rise of capitalism. In effect, from the 18th century onwards the *dispositifs* of power and knowledge begin to take into account the “processes of life” and the possibility of controlling and modifying them.’ ‘From Biopolitics to Biopower’ <<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcbiopolitics.htm>> accessed 11.08.2011.

<sup>75</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: History of Sexuality vol.1*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 140-1.

<sup>76</sup> This movement marks the shift from what is understood as ‘societies of control’ to ‘disciplinary societies’. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 23.

disciplines concerned with measuring and administrating risk, allow processes of government to be implemented from a distance.<sup>77</sup> Rather than the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operating on the body of the population, in a society of control, they are ‘increasingly interiorized within the subjects themselves’.<sup>78</sup> This is enabled, note Hardt and Negri, through changing systems of labour, where communication, networks and information systems have obtained dominance in the material/immaterial dialectic.<sup>79</sup>

### **Potentialities and Modes of Resistance**

Whilst the structure of labour models may have altered quite visibly throughout the last thirty to forty years in the West, recent debates have reconsidered the claims for an uncritical notion of an age of immateriality.<sup>80</sup> Although not as clearly visible in the ‘first’ world as viscerally obvious in the ‘third’, working configurations, as Hardt and Negri argue, have gone through a fairly systematic process of pushing production further from view.<sup>81</sup> In pushing ‘material’ production methods towards the economically poorer parts of the globe, the ‘knowledge economy’ has been able to grow and advance in the economically wealthier nation states. The new form of subjectivity, engendered through such changes, is enforced biopolitically by neoliberal capitalism to ‘regulate’, state Hardt and Negri, life from the interior. Can this rearticulated subjectivity, understood as being varied and present across a diverse range of geographical locations, instigate the same levels of resistance to power envisaged by

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<sup>77</sup> See Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller’s 1992 essay ‘Political Power Beyond the State: Problematic of Government’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 43(2), pp. 173–205.

<sup>78</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, (2000), p. 23.

<sup>79</sup> Hardt and Negri, (2000), pp. 22-26.

<sup>80</sup> See George Caffentzis’s paper, ‘The end of work or the renaissance of slavery? A critique of Rifkin and Negri’, presented at the conference, Globalization from Below, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1998 at Duke University, <<http://www.ecn.org/finlandia/autonomia/theend.txt>>, accessed 10.02.13. Or, Nick Dyer-Witheford’s ‘Empire, Immaterial Labour, the New Combinations, and the Global Worker in *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 13, no. 3/4, Winter 2001, pp. 70-80. Here Dyer-Witheford elaborates on the growing discomfort with the prevalence of the immateriality thesis.

<sup>81</sup> It is important to question here the level of consent nation states have when drawn into agreements with powerful, largely Northern states which trade financial assistance for a stronghold on untapped labour power and natural resources. Silvia Federici, Nancy Fraser and Hester Eisenstein have discussed the development and integration of Structural Adjustment Programmes throughout the Thatcher-Reagan years, in both the Northern and Southern hemisphere.

Hardt and Negri's central thesis in their book *Empire* (2000)?<sup>82</sup>

Before we problematise Hardt and Negri's argument, let us first begin with their assertion that new modes for resistance are ripe for innovation: a demand for action, and an end to apathy, was, they reassured us, expectantly present throughout the 1990s. For Hardt and Negri (as most famously laid out in *Empire*), the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism results a deeper level of colonisation of the body, obscuring direct links to oppressive forces of power. In adopting a Foucauldian conception of power (as multidirectional rather than top down), the space to resist can be understood as ripe for potential.

The notion that we become complicit and active in giving over our entire lives to work emerges alongside the rise of service, or experience-based economies. Although Hardt and Negri's *Empire* notes the dialectic of materiality and immateriality, their work has still been criticised for the ease and simplicity it appeared to have in understanding the re-figured global economy and its new subjecthood: the 'multitude'.<sup>83</sup> The concept of the multitude has also faced much criticism for its ignorance of difference — despite Hardt and Negri's best attempts to note the 'singular' in place of the 'individual' — and for their notion of an idealised 'promised land', which has been criticised as couching strong Christian moral undertones.<sup>84</sup> The prevalence and focus on the ascendancy of immaterial production in their work, does not, many argue, pay enough attention to the increased level of servitude necessary in order for the global information economy to develop to the level it has throughout the West. The 'informal' economy is thus largely neglected and its dynamic relation to, say, high-end finance capital, is vastly underplayed. However, it is widely appreciated in many of the debates around *Empire* and the 'multitude', that Hardt and Negri's contribution enlivened the political project of the Left and broke the prevalent melancholic mood.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Hardt and Negri, (2000), p. 276.

<sup>83</sup> Nick Dyer-Witheford writes that the figure of the 'multitude' (a newly developed revolutionary subject for the post-Fordist economy) is developed from Negri's earlier conception of the 'socialized worker' (the worker Marx prophesied in his discussion of 'the general intellect'). Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Circuits and cycles of struggle in high-technology capitalism*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 172.

<sup>84</sup> See Dyer-Witheford for an exploration into the erasure of difference in 'Empire, Immaterial Labour, the New Combinations', (2001), pp. 70-80 (p. 75). Nikolas Rose and Paul Rabinow have cited the religious underpinnings of Negri's theory of resistance. See 'Biopower Today', *BioSocieties* (2006), 1, pp. 195–217, (p.201), <<http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/publications/2007/01/rabinow-rose.pdf>>, accessed 10.02.2013

<sup>85</sup> This melancholia has been read as a reaction to the failure and atrocities committed under the name of communism and socialism across the globe. Concurrently, the relative failure to

A criticism raised by Gopal Balakrishnan has particular relevance for the body of artwork considered in my thesis. Balakrishnan refers to the ‘messianic-like’ possibilities that Hardt and Negri ascribe to the ‘omnipresent have-nots’.<sup>86</sup> Hardt and Negri argue that this collective subject, the multitude, the ‘world poor’ constitutes this new space of Empire, and this is seemingly still the case, even if they are not cognisant of such power. Hardt and Negri note that those violently shaped by colonialism and imperialism are — in this new stage of capitalism — able to become ‘the most powerful beings[s]’, facilitated by the biopolitical character of late capitalism.<sup>87</sup> However, many of those termed the ‘world poor’ undertake types of labour that would be firmly classified under the ‘material’ dimension of the dialectic. In resisting this latest stage of capitalism, one needs, stresses Hardt and Negri, to claim the network economy. Hardt and Negri seem to neglect the fact that large swathes of people, the new ‘multitude’, have limited access to the sector that is deemed most effective in this new ‘regime’. The potentialities this newer subjectivity might create — those labouring in the ‘immaterial’ networked sectors — hardly appear to tally with the migrant labourer or the *maquila* worker. Hardt and Negri ascribe power to those workers on the lowest rung of the economic ladder, the ‘have-nots’, the ‘world poor’. However, these subjectivities, whilst thoroughly penetrated by the socio-economic model of neoliberal capitalism to the point where work and life are thoroughly entwined, are not the same bodies that have emerged with, and adapted to, the immaterialism prevalent in cognitive capitalism in more affluent spheres of the globe. As Nick Dyer-Witheford puts it, the ‘blood and sweat’ still retains a large portion of many people’s working days.<sup>88</sup>

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transform institutional barriers put in place to stop the emancipatory movements of the late 60s and 70s, and the co-emergence and alliance of Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s, was seen by many as a defeat of the New Left. See Susan Ruddick’s ‘The Politics of Affect in the Work of Negri and Deleuze’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2010, vol. 27, no. 4, 21, pp. 21-45, particularly page 22 for her discussion of the role Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* and later published *Multitude* had in altering this enforced despondency. David Harvey also notes the controversy that surrounded *Empire* in his introduction to *The New Imperialism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, England, 2003).

<sup>86</sup> Gopal Balakrishnan, ‘Hardt and Negri’s Empire’, *New Left Review*, no. 5, September – October 2000, <<http://newleftreview.org/II/5/gopal-balakrishnan-hardt-and-negri-s-empire>>, accessed 13.05.13. It is important to note the fetish-like reliance Hardt and Negri have for the ‘migrant’ subject, as the subject most capable to begin revolutionary struggle. For a broader take on the critical reception of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, see Gopal Balakrishnan, ed, *Debating Empire*, (Verso: London, 2003).

<sup>87</sup> Hardt and Negri, (2000), pp. 363-365.

<sup>88</sup> Dyer-Witheford argues that Hardt and Negri do not take seriously enough the accusations that *Empire* does not adequately acknowledge the continued blood and sweat of material production occurring across the global South. See Dyer-Witheford, (2001), pp. 70-80

The work undertaken in the *maquiladoras* by young, largely un-schooled women, makes for a complicated case for some of the broader assertions presented by theorisations of contemporary capitalism.<sup>89</sup> Dyer-Witheford has suggested that such theorisations of pan-capitalism are significant when we take into account that they are largely the product of male, Northern European scholars. This, he argues, tends to produce a gender-blind approach due to the ‘relatively cursory analysis of the gendered or international dimensions of “general intellect”’.<sup>90</sup> We would, therefore, do well to remember that the realities of ‘un-even geographical development’, as David Harvey terms it, require a nuanced and specific assessment, both for each specific micro-locality, and for the character through which each locality locks in to a larger context and pattern of meaning.<sup>91</sup> For instance, it is clear in Biemann’s *Performing the Border* or Ruido’s *Amphibious Fictions* that Fordism is still very much a compulsory requirement for the development of post-Fordism elsewhere.

Hardt and Negri’s understanding of the dialectic of material and immaterial labour becomes most clear in their assessment of the ‘scrambling’ of the former spatial

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<sup>89</sup> I would like to acknowledge Chandra Mohanty’s questioning of the term ‘un-educated’. She argues that we must pay attention to precisely *what* standards we are holding ‘education’ against. For that reason I have chosen ‘un-schooled’.

<sup>90</sup> Dyer-Witheford, (2001), p. 71. Whilst Dyer-Witheford’s critique is valid, he does not adequately consider earlier writings by Negri that discuss the crucial role of ‘the becoming-woman of labour’ and the increasing demand for labour that takes place within the reproductive sphere. Negri wrote in 1998 that the: ‘feminization of labor is an absolutely extraordinary affirmation; because precisely reproduction, precisely the processes of production and communication, because the affective investments, the investments of education and the material reproduction of brains, have all become more essential’ under neoliberalism. Antonio Negri, ‘Back to the Future: A Portable Document’, <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpnegri19.htm>, accessed 11.02.12. Negri does not, however, note the preference for women to take the place of ‘traditionally’ considered male occupied factory jobs in much of the global South.

<sup>91</sup> See David Harvey’s *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 69-117. Harvey’s work on the ‘uneven geographical development’ of global capitalism makes clear that a nation state’s strategic role in the world economy, its natural resources, alongside the effect of colonialism and neo-imperialisms play a significant role in the varied types of labour which structure that specific economy. Harvey’s notion of ‘un-even geographical development’ is taken from the geographer and anthropologist Neil Smith’s work on ‘un-even development’. See Smith’s 1984 book ‘Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space’. This theoretical and political concept, however, can be dated to Trotsky’s ‘uneven and combined development’. For both Trotsky (and, of course, Marx) this notion accounted for the simultaneous existence of wealth and poverty and implies the co-presentation of different ‘modes of production’ within the capitalist economy.

division of the three Worlds: First, Second and Third.<sup>92</sup> This model of the static, fragmented, assembly-line worker is shot through with the process and lifestyle needed to obtain this type of work: the migration to the EPZs at the border; the aptitude and resourcefulness to build houses out of disregarded materials; the illegal sweatshops that run through the night and fully erase the boundaries of work and home life. This is discussed in Ruido's *Amphibious Fictions* when an interview with a sociologist explains the exposure that multiple illegal sweatshops, in and around the outskirts of Barcelona, had in local media.<sup>93</sup>

What is far more difficult to comprehend, however, is how one is able to become conscious of one's potential to execute subversion when, as Biemann states, the 'golden mills south of the border' have become the testing-ground for de-regulation and exploitation. Moreover, precisely how one might collectivise and mobilise in order to face one of the largest strategic components of the 'success' of the Mexican economy on the world-scale when one's situation may lack the necessary consciousness-raising polis to do so? Biemann's prominent positioning of women activists, journalists and social workers, all older than the very young women she films and codifies as the *maquila* workers, expresses the complexities faced by women. These young women's strategies for negotiating daily life on the border, notes Biemann, are 'multiple and variable', and as the video-essay unfolds, one quickly learns of the fluid methods of resistance that must be taken if one is able to keep up-to-date with the stark contradictions before one.

*Performing the Border* devotes some time to the story of Concha, a woman who, after finding herself pregnant and abandoned by her husband in Juarez, is forced to become resourceful finding work and making money. Concha, we are told via the journalist Angela Escajeda, 'runs a service' for getting pregnant women across the border to the US safely and undetected.<sup>94</sup> This 'service' helps expectant mothers ensure 'a better life' for their unborn children. The freedom of movement offered by a US passport that comes with being born in a US hospital, is highly desirable. This hazardous journey, made particularly so after the intensification of the militarisation of

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<sup>92</sup> Hardt and Negri, (2000), pp. 363-365. I would like to acknowledge, once more, Chandra Mohanty's warning that in consigning every 'outside' of the so-called 'first world' to the 'third world' we create a monolithic 'Third World' that too often acts as shorthand for women of colour and/or of the global South as passive, uneducated and ignorant. See *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1984).

<sup>93</sup> María Ruido, *Amphibious Fictions*, 2005, 02.27 mins.

<sup>94</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999, 03.14 mins.

the border in 1994, is also made with the hope that one day these children's dual citizenships can obtain the official papers required for their families to cross legally.<sup>95</sup> Federici asserts that the body, for women, has been to capitalism what the factory has been for the male waged worker: 'the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance'. For the *maquila* workers (as formally articulated in the video-essay), exploitation of and through the body, and within the factory walls, positions the young workers in an intensely precarious position.<sup>96</sup> Biemann takes us through images of women attached to work benches, informs us how and why many are enforced to enter the sex trade to supplement wages, tells of the violent sexual crimes many are at risk of, and examines how the performative aspects of one's gender needs to be renegotiated carefully to operate across a range of different expectations, from both work life and home life.

Hardt and Negri's conception of the productive potentials of power can be traced to a Deleuzo-Foucauldian conception of power and its always-already present materiality. The maxim that where there is power, there is resistance, in a multi-directional configuration, should be considered alongside the Spinozarist notion of 'affect'. Susan Ruddick has accounted for this adoption of affect in her essay 'The Politics of Affect: Spinoza in the Work of Negri and Deleuze'. She contends that the conception of the 'multitude' subjectivity is predicated on Spinoza's conception of affect. Individual reactions to a situation create singular, but connected, subjects.<sup>97</sup> As we have seen with the story of Concha in *Performing the Border*, ingenuity and innovation are required to bypass, or transform, the main flows of power and capital. The capillaries that deviate from these larger directives can produce resistance. As Judith Revel notes in her reading of Foucault, power cannot be understood as having an 'outside', or even a margin which needs to be pulled to the center. Power has to be challenged from within, as it is ontologically a two-way operative.<sup>98</sup> By removing the notion of margins, or of an 'outside' to power, from the materiality of life, resistance is possible, Revel argues.<sup>99</sup>

One cannot ignore, however, the point that this ontology can become wholly

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<sup>95</sup> Angela Escajeda cited in *Been There and Back to Nowhere: gender in transnational spaces postproduction documents 1988 – 2000*, (2000), p. 88.

<sup>96</sup> Federici, (2004), p. 16.

<sup>97</sup> Ruddick, (2010), pp. 21- 45.

<sup>98</sup> Revel, (2008), p. 35.

<sup>99</sup> Revel, (2008), p. 33.

obscured when the flow of power is accelerated in only one direction. This is the point at which power can seemingly (and understandably) only be conceived of as domination, as top-down. It cannot be forgotten that a person's use of power is heavily limited by multiple factors, such as the nation-state they reside in, their gender and their economic and cultural positioning in that state. For instance, in Biemann's *Performing the Border*, we can see the enforced, subordinated position of the Mexican economy and people in relation to the US after the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Revel states, 'as Foucault quite rightly commented, when the relations of power are glutted, there is no longer power but domination. There is thus no power without freedom.'<sup>100</sup> One's rule over the other is therefore not power in its ontological sense; it is purely, as Revel intimates, domination.

In the wake of feminist and post-colonial praxis, the multitude is offered as a concept and reality that must not, and indeed cannot, ignore the specific needs of different social groups. It does, however, call for solidarity. The role of communication is central to visibility and knowledge of the diversity of struggles across the globe, developed from local problems but tied to a much wider systemic core. The knowledge economy is dialectically entwined with the advancements in communication technologies throughout the past twenty years. Dyer-Withford lists some examples of networked groups that are demonstrating new ways to communicate in order to be become physically cognisant of one another's struggles, such as the Association of Community Broadcasters, Video Terre Monde, and the Association for Progressive Communications.<sup>101</sup>

Giving precedence and space to the very diverse needs of different social groupings, whilst gaining visibility and transnational solidarity (as Chandra Mohanty terms it), is a project that feminism has been trying to negotiate throughout the past three decades.<sup>102</sup> Perhaps Revel's unearthing of a more careful reading of Foucault's conception of power may allow us to re-consider power: when coagulated in one direction and enforcing subordination, it is solely an act of domination. If resistance is prior to the power/domination relation, then one is no longer limited to understanding Foucault's theory of power as diffuse, insipid and negating agency.

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<sup>100</sup> Revel, (2008), p. 37.

<sup>101</sup> Dyer-Withford, (2001), pp. 77-79

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Mohanty's text *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003).

## The Feminisation of Labour: Past and Present

Marx's preliminary writings on the general intellect have, as we have seen, provided key tools for figures such as Hardt and Negri when analysing a post-industrial economy. Marx wrote directly about the 'use' family members had to the capitalist because, first and foremost, they increased the quota of the workforce. Marx notes:

The labour of women and children was, therefore, the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery. That mighty substitute for labour and labourers was forthwith changed into a means for increasing the number of wage-labourers by enrolling, under the direct sway of capital, every member of the workman's family, without distinction of age or sex. Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play, but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family. The value of labour-power was determined, not only by the labour-time necessary to maintain the individual adult labourer, but also by that necessary to maintain his family. Machinery, by throwing every member of that family on to the labour-market, spreads the value of the man's labour-power over his whole family. It thus depreciates his labour-power.<sup>103</sup>

Whilst Marx notes the role of 'free labour at home', it is underplayed somewhat in his reference to social reproduction being 'within moderate limits'. Marx's categories, therefore, of wage labour and 'free' labour have been problematised in feminist discussions around the historical appropriation of women's labour. Marx argued that the limitation of the working day is required to 'restore the health and physical energies of the working class, that is, the great body of every nation, as well as to secure them the possibility of intellectual development, sociable intercourse, social and political action'.<sup>104</sup> However, he does not give sufficient attention to how and why this caring work might become safely annexed to the women's body on account of her sex. Nor does he understand — as figures such as Maria Rosa Dalla Costa sought to examine — the revolutionary role that the encoded 'private' space of the home could play. Along with Dalla Costa, Federici and Leopoldina Fortunati have criticised the manner in which the sphere of reproduction is disguised, naturalised and un-critically appropriated in

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<sup>103</sup> Karl Marx, 'A. Appropriation of Supplementary Labour-power by Capital. The Employment of Women and Children', Chapter Fifteen: Machinery and Modern Industry, *Capital A Critique of Political Economy: Volume One* (1867) (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 372-380.

<sup>104</sup> Karl Marx, The International Workingmen's Association, 1866, first published in *Der Vorbote* Nos. 10 and 11, October and November 1866, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1866/08/instructions.htm#03>>, accessed 27.03.12

Marx's work. For Marx, they state, 'so-called primitive accumulation' leads only to a conception of the waged male proletariat and the development of the commodity. For Federici, however, it leads to the social position of women and the re-production of labour-power. Or as Maria Mies intimates in 1986 (in her discussion of the intensification of the binding of women's oppression with capitalist accumulation), it produces the 'housewifization' of labour through the desire for our labour to be ever more flexible and for it to infiltrate all aspects of human day-to-day life.<sup>105</sup>

Federici's work is important for the analysis of women's labour. Her book, *Caliban and the Witch: women, the body and primitive accumulation* (published in 2004) examines the processes through and moments at which women's labour has been pulled into, and expelled from, various modes of production. For example, women's labour, argues Federici, was a crucial mechanism for the transition from feudalism to capitalism.<sup>106</sup> Patriarchy (women's forced subordination to men) has been criticised as being a problematic notion because of its a-historical character.<sup>107</sup> Federici's historicisation of women's subordination anchors, however, the moment at which the capitalist mode of production (and its subsequent ordering of life) built on, and expanded from, the role of women in the feudal period. She continues to recount that, through the shift to capitalism, the oppression between men and women became exacerbated further when nation-states implemented laws and devices geared towards advancing, at all costs, a capitalist mode of life. Federici, for example, cites the witch hunts of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as an example of the extreme violence and persecution women faced when they did not fit the norms required for the 'cohesion' of capitalism and its reliance on social reproduction.<sup>108</sup> In foregrounding the sphere of social reproduction, Federici asserts that — alongside the removal of farmers from their land (the enclosures) and the devastation inflicted on life through the colonialist and imperialist project — the 'degradation of women' makes up the necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism.<sup>109</sup>

The argument that contemporary capitalism values and borrows from women's labour patterns and experiences, is further strengthened by Cristina Morini when she notes

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<sup>105</sup> Marie Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, (London: Zed Books, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>106</sup> Federici, (2004).

<sup>107</sup> Martha Gimenez and Lise Vogel, 'Marxist-Feminist Thought Today: Introduction', *Science and Society*, vol. 69, no. 1, January 2005, pp. 5-10.

<sup>108</sup> Federici, (2004), pp. 163-219.

<sup>109</sup> Silvia Federici, (2004), p. 13.

the importance of women's 'historic function in the realm of reproduction and domestic work' as a crucial element for understanding this latest 'cognitive' stage.<sup>110</sup> The increased and often indistinguishable blend between one's paid and unpaid labour, or the lines between work-life and personal life, is illuminated by the sociologist Marie Mies' phrase, the 'subsistence perspective' or 'life production', coined in the mid-1970s.<sup>111</sup> This notion dealt specifically with the nature of housework in a capitalist economy as a prerequisite for all types of paid labour and for the accumulation of surplus value. The discussion and prioritising of 'life production' over and above 'commodity production' can be considered in light of an analysis of the *biopolitical* implications of contemporary capitalism.

Integral to neoliberal re-structuring has been the implementation of free trade policies that have opened up nation-states to the easy flow of goods, creating in turn transnational economies and international markets: whilst goods flow freely and unhindered, the movement of people has become increasingly policed. The erosion of the older armoury of capitalism and the effects of neoliberalism have played a substantial role in dissolving previous, established modes of resistance, a notion that is directly referred to in Ruido's *Amphibious Fictions*. One particular interviewee (a female machinist) states that older workers are now in a situation where they are forced to 'lose a large number of things' previously gained. She continues by noting that the vast number of people, both local and 'foreign', will work for the pay offered, driving wage value down: she deduces, 'people put up with too much'.<sup>112</sup> Suggested by this rhetoric, or, rather, latent for manipulation, is the contention that the site of the economic migrant's body is more to blame than the globalised processes of socio-economic and political macro-structures. Whilst it is far more difficult to search for the connections present in a purposefully fragmented system, here we can see those bodies that are forced to migrate for work, and through this re-settlement, to alter their previous work/life models.

The informal sector, consisting predominantly of women and immigrant labour, is unable to gain the kind of status and prominence fought for, and achieved by, an

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<sup>110</sup> Morini, (2007), p. 42.

<sup>111</sup> For a reflective account on the many different but related activist groups emerging in the 1970s and their shared and particular concerns see Maria Rosa Dalla Costa's essay on feminism and *Operaismo* 'The Door to the Garden', (2002), <<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdallacosta1.htm>>, date accessed 29.05.13.

<sup>112</sup> Carmen Lázaro speaking in Ruido's *Amphibious Fictions*, 06.22 mins.

earlier, more established group of workers. Sassen reclaims the term ‘labour aristocracy’ to aid her in the description of the different strata of workers, those afforded representation or not.<sup>113</sup> As Sassen terms it, these workers can be understood largely as made up of those, firstly, with full citizenship and with the associated laws in place to protect them. Secondly, adds Sassen, the roles that men occupied in the industrial factory period gained greater visibility due to the importance said industries had for a nation-state’s economic (and thus social and political) power.<sup>114</sup>

In exploring this notion of an ‘informal sector’ and women’s experiences of waged and non-waged labour, I would like to turn our attention to the concept of ‘precariousness’, a term which has, over the past five years, become fully integrated into common parlance when discussing work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cristina Morini, for example, has noted that ‘precariousness’ has become part of the structural architecture of contemporary capitalism.<sup>115</sup> The increasing commitment to work through the lengthening of the working day (which can be traced back as far as Protestantism’s elimination of saints days); the blurring of the line between work and home space (offices within the home but also domestic and child-care work); and the implementation of part-time, fixed-term, temping contracts: these are all components of ‘precariousness’. As argued, these characteristics have been considered concomitant with women’s experience of labour in its most heterogeneous sense. Federici provides a lucid assessment, for example, of how women have historically been enforced ‘precarious’ workers. She writes that the systematic devaluing of women’s labour and the draconian control of women’s reproductive rights have resulted in women occupying temporary, unstable work and managing multiple workloads, both waged and unwaged.<sup>116</sup> The climate since the 1970s has seen many Western women combine domestic responsibilities with their increasing integration into the paid labour market. Some contemporary assessments have argued that their increased presence across a

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<sup>113</sup> The term ‘labour aristocracy’ was prominent in Vladimir Lenin’s early treatise on imperialism. For Lenin workers in the ‘first’ world benefitted from the profits generated by the much lower wages of their fellow workers in ‘developing’ countries.

<sup>114</sup> We should be vigilant to dangers in the homology created by allying men with Fordist labour and women with post-Fordism, for many examples throughout history and different cultures subvert this assumption.

<sup>115</sup> Morini, (2007), p. 43.

<sup>116</sup> Federici, (2004), pp. 87-96.

broader sector of paid work has instigated a crisis in ‘masculinised ordered labour’.<sup>117</sup> This is, however, a rather general and unsubtle position to take when one looks to the workers that both Ruido and Biemann take as their subject matter, for it is these workers that present a problem for a simple chronological shift from Fordist-style to post-Fordist work.

It is, therefore, important to understand how neoliberal policies have enforced a deep chasm between women of the so-called ‘First World’ and women of the ‘Third World’. Nancy Fraser has commented that both ends of the social spectrum have been affected in marked ways.<sup>118</sup> Educated, middle-class women strive to balance relative autonomy in the paid workplace with roles and expectations in the sphere of social reproduction. The working poor have more often than not, however, faced a different problem: the inability to be available for their own families due to the servitude provided to other peoples’ families. In addition, Hester Eisenstein has noted that feminism’s focus on gender equality was not necessarily perceived by women of colour as the source of their oppression. Rather, community exploitation across women, men and children, racism, the deep effects of colonialism and, in some countries, the lack of basic sanitation and health care have been seen as key issues that require attention first and foremost.<sup>119</sup>

In her aim to understand the valences of feminism for different women, Eisenstein’s argument prioritises heterogeneity, historicity, and specificity. It also aims to criticise the feminist project from within and to consider how its innovations have become appropriated by capitalism since the 1970s. For example, the Family Wage in the US saw the male earner as the main breadwinner for the family; his work was therefore valued as such. Women’s position within the home, by implication, was vastly undervalued. For women fighting to gain financial (and thus wider) autonomy and acquire recognition for the crucial nature of their (unpaid) work, the signing of the Equal Pay Act undoubtedly signalled an important victory. Eisenstein notes how this bill, unsurprisingly and importantly, attracted more women into the workforce. However, the procedures of neoliberalism meant an opportunity was sought to depress and undercut the higher wage of the previously valued ‘male breadwinner’: changes in

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<sup>117</sup> Sara Motta, Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Catherine Eschle and Laurence Cox, ‘Feminism, Women’s Movement and Women in Movement’, *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, Volume 3, no. 2, November 2011, pp. 1-32

<sup>118</sup> Fraser, (2009), pp. 105-109.

<sup>119</sup> Eisenstein, (2009), pp. 73-1-5.

pay legislation provided a chance to streamline wages, and the opportunity to streamline them to a lower value was seized by the incoming neoliberal project.<sup>120</sup>

In order to illustrate the complexities that sweeping changes have for different women, Eisenstein examines what effects the abandonment of the family wage had for women of colour in the US. Even though the family wage was, she notes, deeply patriarchal, it did establish a wage norm that acknowledged the need to support ‘dependents’. To a degree, there was an in-built acceptance of the role and ‘price’ of social reproduction. A government initiative, therefore, although deeply problematic, still provided a safeguard for many women of colour and poorer women. There was still, however inadequate, a reliable source of income on which to plan expenditure.<sup>121</sup> For instance, the importance of gender discrimination as central to feminism is often noted as the point at which, historically, ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ women differ.<sup>122</sup> As noted, it is suggested that gender discrimination is perhaps not the primary concern for the oppression of women in the ‘third world’. In order to critically engage with the feminist project, Alice Walker, for instance, demands the use of the term ‘womanist’ in order to speak to Third World women’s connections to racism and their communities’ economic exploitation across the male/female divide.<sup>123</sup> Such a problematising of the term ‘feminism’ — often linked to a western or bourgeois notion

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<sup>120</sup> Both Federici (Federici, *Caliban*, 2004 and ‘Precarious Labour: A Feminist Viewpoint’, *Variante*, issue 37, Spring-Summer 2010, pp. 23-25) and Eisenstein (Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced*, 2009) have charted the effects that paying women less money has had, and continues to have, on the workforce as a whole. For instance, the contradiction between paid and unpaid work became a key component to the 1960s Women’s Liberation Movement in the West. Eisenstein argues that the systematic change from women basing their economic survival in ‘home-based strategies’ (such as domestic servants, cooking or producing goods for local markets) and women entering the labour force of factories, shops, offices and lastly professions and businesses, played a significant role in the emergence of this discrepancy. Martha Gimenez notes that these general movements can be traced along the lines of the demands of capitalist exploitation. See Martha Gimenez, ‘Connecting Marx & Feminism in the Era of Globalization: A Preliminary Investigation’, *Socialism & Democracy*, 18: 1, 2010, pp. 85-105.

<sup>121</sup> Eisenstein, (2009), p. 117.

<sup>122</sup> Cheryl Johnson-Odim, ‘Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism’ in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, Lourdes Torres, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 314-327.

<sup>123</sup> Historically, and particularly in the US, feminist strategies emerged out of the Civil Rights movement. White radical feminists acknowledge this historical precedent, noting how its importance is often overlooked or underplayed in much literature. It has been noted that as the 1970s saw women gaining equal rights in the West, ‘Third World’ women were only just emerging from the strong hold of colonialism and, therefore, were presented with a different set of problems to overcome. See Cheryl Johnson-Odim’s (1991). Alice Walker coined the term ‘womanist’ in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*

— meant that questions of poverty and development do not get pushed to the periphery of the agenda.<sup>124</sup>

Let us turn to the geographical location of *Performing the Border* in light of Sassen's acknowledgement of the 'push' factors that guide the economic migrant and recode spaces. For Sassen notes that large-scale developments in export manufacturing 'strongly documents the overwhelming presence of women' among this production work.<sup>125</sup> This reconfiguration of gender roles is thoroughly enforced by the macro-processes of globalised capitalist production.<sup>126</sup> Sara R. Farris states that in examining international migration to Europe after 1970, women migrate as two 'types'. First, notes Farris, is the need for familial reunification. Male members of the family used to dominate the field of paid work and thus dominated the 'move for work', with women migrants perceived as 'dependents'.<sup>127</sup> The labour these women often undertake, notes Farris, is unaccounted for because of its position within the 'black sector'. The receiving country's GDP, therefore, cannot hold an official record of all work undertaken, not to mention the women's domestic care roles in their own families.<sup>128</sup> The second migratory 'type' sees women workers as the forerunners.<sup>129</sup> It is their labour that is preferred (for reasons discussed in *Performing the Border* or in Biemann and Angela Sanders's *Europlex*). As Farris notes, the greater inclusion of the so-called 'national women' within the 'official' workforce presents an intensified need for the outsourcing for domestic care, placing migrant women in the position of servitude to another's family on an unprecedented scale.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Mies, (1986), p. 8.

<sup>125</sup> Sassen, (1998), p. 113.

<sup>126</sup> Hester Eisenstein argues that some feminist scholarship sees the inclusion of 'Third World Women' into the paid economy as a very positive move to gaining financial autonomy and as a process that is able to liberate women from 'patriarchal family structures in their rural place of origin'. Whilst we can see that "on paper" this is a valid point, when the women are entering a paid workforce determined by the Northern male economic elite another system of exploitation is implemented. Eisenstein, (2009), p. 134.

<sup>127</sup> Sara R. Farris, 'Interregional Migration: The challenge for gender and development', *Development* 2010, 53(1), Local/Global Encounters, pp. 98-104.

<sup>128</sup> Sara R. Farris, 'Interregional Migration: The challenge for gender and development', *Development*, (2010), p. 100.

<sup>129</sup> Sara R. Farris, 'Interregional Migration: The challenge for gender and development', *Development*, (2010), p. 100.

<sup>130</sup> It is important here to note that each receiving country has specific migratory chains. Farris identifies these different demographics. For women moving as dependents to Europe up until, and including the 1970s, she notes communities from a predominantly Muslim background. The period after the 1970s, however, is characterised by women leading the migratory routes, moving from countries with a Christian Catholic majority (Philippines, South America and

As suggested at the start of this chapter, the feminisation of labour thesis, as we have seen, is not about the sheer increase of women's presence in the workforce. Rather, the argument focuses on the propensity that the neoliberal period has for women's experiences, connections and knowledge(s) in aiding the colonisation of everyday life. Up until the recent scholarship of Eisenstein and Fraser for example, the relation between the political project of 1970s feminism and neoliberal capitalism has not been subject to critical attention.<sup>131</sup> It is necessary to firmly state that the parasitic-like relation neoliberal capitalism has had on feminist politics could not have been anticipated. That does not mean, however, that we should ignore what aspects of the successes of the feminist project were advantageous to the incoming neoliberal regime. Fraser, for example, ties the hyper-individualistic core of neoliberal capitalism to the identity-politics paradigm that arose in the 1970s and 1980s. She argues that the neoliberal project instigated a move away from concerns regarding redistribution to ones of recognition and also pressured complete transformation of 'second-wave' feminism into one variant of identity politics.<sup>132</sup> Fraser continues that whilst recognition was a powerful, and desperately needed, element, feminism over-extended a critique of culture and downplayed a critique of the political economy. In the academy, this resulted in the rise of feminist cultural theory and the fall of feminist social theory. Thus, the balance tipped from 'economism' to an equally one-sided 'culturalism', rather than arriving at a paradigm that would incorporate both redistribution and recognition.<sup>133</sup>

In addition to the streamlining of neoliberal ideals with certain demands instigated by 'second wave' feminism, we should, in addition, also look at the role that female and immigrant labour has in sustaining the official economy. As the writers

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particularly Eastern Europe post 1989). Sara R. Farris, 'Interregional Migration: The challenge for gender and development', *Development*, (2010), pp. 99-100. Doreen Massey has termed this 'highly directed migration', in opposition to an assumption that people move 'blindly' to 'richer' countries, as the specific 'power geometry' of flows. See Massey's *Space, Place and Gender*, (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1994), p. 149.

<sup>131</sup> Whilst Eisenstein makes this question central to her enquiry, others, such as Silvia Federici and Martha Gimenez, have made important contributions. They all develop their critiques from within the project of feminism. The attention this scholarship has garnered should be thought alongside the renewed interest in the role of social reproduction. The political, social and economic effects of the austerity measures (brought about through the most recent economic downturn) are most keenly felt along the demarcations of race and gender. This has resulted in a re-organisation of concerns and priorities for current feminist debate.

<sup>132</sup> Fraser, (2009), pp. 107-117.

<sup>133</sup> Fraser, (2009), pp. 108-109.

addressed in this chapter have shown, we cannot afford to ignore the new army of invisible workers pulled into the care roles left vacant by those now in the ‘official’ economy. With this in mind, Sassen’s notion of the hierarchy of labour, mentioned earlier, is particularly salient for an understanding of our present times as the boundaries between work and life become ever more thoroughly enmeshed.<sup>134</sup>

Lastly, the term ‘immateriality’ features heavily in debates on the post-1970 economy. The dialectic of immateriality and materiality, however, as I have aimed to show, has been perhaps most keenly observed in what feminist analyses of women’s labour have termed ‘labour in the bodily mode’. Michael Hardt notes that this type of labour, whilst immersed all the while in the corporeal, produces ‘social networks, forms of community, biopower’. These aspects, continues Hardt, are affective labour and thus labour of the general intellect.<sup>135</sup> These networks can be seen unfolding in *Performing the Border* when one sex worker speaks of the need to take care of the baby of a fellow worker whose drug addiction prevents her from doing so herself.<sup>136</sup> Here the connections are made visible between the low wages paid by the *maquila* employers, the need to secure additional money — more often than not through prostitution, the economy of the drug trade, the need to physiologically and emotionally survive and the care safety-nets that develop unofficially from one shanty shack to another between women who share similar conditions.

*Performing the Border* speaks to the changes that factory work imposes on the women, changes that are often in acute contradiction to their older (and still present) place of work, the home. In one particular scene, Biemann’s observational lens isolates, from a distance, a young woman churning clothes in a washing drum under the baking hot sun (see fig. 10 and 10.1). If the bleached-out images do not convey strongly enough to the viewer the exhausting nature of this task, the choice to impose a flashing of forty-two degrees in text on top of the image cannot be misconstrued. Biemann surmises that these young girls face complex renegotiations within their roles as women

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<sup>134</sup> Sassen discusses the shift in the market for labour in *Globalization and Its Discontents*, (1998), p. 102.

<sup>135</sup> For Hardt, affective labour is one ‘face’ of immaterial labour. See Michael Hardt, ‘Affective Labour’, (1999), p. 96. Labour in the ‘bodily mode’ is cited from Dorothy Smith’s *The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1978), pp. 78-88.

<sup>136</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999, 31.53 mins.

on the border.<sup>137</sup> Her voice-over recounts that they must navigate:

Different family values, gender relations at work, competition with her co-workers, economic imbalances in the family, power relations with her father, and brothers, and later with her husband.<sup>138</sup>

Such fluctuations between unpaid and paid labour is also presented in *Amphibious Fictions*. Ruido's camera records a woman speaking of her own mother's wish that her daughter not to enter the workforce of the textile factory. Agreeing, the daughter worked from home (and continues to do so), undertaking the same seamstresses tasks but within the traditional value system of the home.<sup>139</sup> Thus, the contradiction between paid and unpaid, and the associations and gains they each might bring, become dissolved into one another; they become entirely naturalised, rendered invisible through the assimilation of one type of work into the other.

### **Subjects of/at Work**

The characteristics of precarity and flexibility have necessitated attention (once again) to women's labour. More widely, this attention has firmly positioned gender and race centre-stage. The subject of work, workers and their representation has an established and critical discourse within the histories of the image. There are numerous examples of the representation of work from nineteenth-century painting, such as Jean-François Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857) or Gustave Courbet's *Stonebreakers* (1849-50) to Vincent Van Gogh's depictions of labourers, postmen and miners. We can also look to the depictions of women labourers in Arthur J. Munby's paintings of Victorian servants and housemaids.<sup>140</sup> *Amphibious Fictions* (and to a lesser extent, *Real Time*) allows us to

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<sup>137</sup> For Eisenstein, despite the changes brought by injections of global capital, which have altered long-standing assumptions of women's roles, traditional power relations and social hierarchies are often too embedded to challenge. Eisenstein, (2008), pp. 144-145.

<sup>138</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999, 23.51 mins. It is worth noting here the growing body of literature that examines how altered patterns of international migration re-inscribe previously determined gender patterns, creating changed, and potentially empowered, subjectivities. Sassen lists this body of work on p. 101 of *Globalization and Its Discontents*. But see, specifically, Joan Smith and Immanuel Wallerstein's *Creating and Transforming Households: The Constraints of the World-Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>139</sup> María Ruido, *Amphibious Fictions*, 2005, 19.56 mins.

<sup>140</sup> Munby's relationship with his female servant, however, is complicated by their eventual marriage. His interest in painting and photographing Hannah Cullwick at work is considered

consider how the figure of the worker and its imaging by the camera's lens have long developed alongside one another: archival photographs of children working the industrial looms, earlier film footage of workers trudging up a hill to factories on the horizon, and women assembling camera parts on a factory line all aim to elucidate such a premise.

The German filmmaker, Harun Farocki, develops this notion further when he reminds us that the first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory. The film *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory In Lyon (La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon, 1895)* by the brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière shows a 45-second film of workers at a factory that produced photographic goods in Lyon-Montplaisir. The 45 seconds detail these workers leaving through two gates and exiting the frame to both sides. This relation between worker and recorded image is the subject of Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory (1995)*. The film offers a detailed mediation on the enduring relation between the worker and the camera throughout the history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Farocki begins with the premise of compiling clips of workers leaving their workplace — from newsreels, to fiction films, to propaganda films — and ends with the feeling that 'with the montage before me, I found myself gaining the impression that for over a century cinematography had been dealing with just one single theme'.<sup>141</sup> Farocki writes that Lumière's film aimed to 'represent motion and thus to illustrate the possibility of representing movement. The actors in motion are aware of this; some throw their arms up so high and when walking put their feet down so clearly, as though the aim were to make walking appear vivid for a new *orbis pictus* — this time in moving pictures.'<sup>142</sup> The filmic image, in its grasp of ideas marks the movement of people as the indicator of the otherwise impalpable circulation of goods, money, and ideas.

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one of a voyeuristic act, playing to particular Victorian values, rather than being a mediation on the social act of recording labour. See Leonore Davidoff's 'Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, Women and Power: Dimensions of Women's Historical Experience (Spring, 1979), pp. 86-141. Artists Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz explore this 'sodomasochistic' relationship in their film *Normal Work (2007)*. See <<http://www.boudry-lorenz.de/normal-work/>>, accessed 23.04.13

<sup>141</sup> Harun Farocki, 'Workers Leaving the Factory', *NachDruck/Imprint* (Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2001). Translation by Laurent Faasch-Ibrahim. Published in *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 21,

<[http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/21/farocki\\_workers/](http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/21/farocki_workers/)>

<sup>142</sup> Farocki, (2001).

While retaining this knowledge on the relation between images *of* work and the *work* of images we must also consider the feminist engagement with the persistent neglect of the unwaged labour dimension, and the desire to render it visible. Kay Hunt, Margaret Harrison and Mary Kelly's *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry* (1973-5), a collective project which explored the naturalisation of the gender division in labour, provides an important precursor to the concerns raised in both Biemann's and Ruido's work. This focus on women's labour can also be seen in Europe and the US. For example, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Maintenance Art*, or her work *Care* (1973), brought the private domestic responsibilities of cleaning and caring into the public domain. In the gallery Ukeles performed these everyday tasks by stooping to wash the museum's granite floor on her hands and knees. Other women artists sought to utilise the familiarity they had with the banal objects needed to care for the home, using them as source material for the work, or, in some cases, deploying them as art objects themselves. Artists such as Ellen Lanyon, Marjorie Strider and Muriel Castanis gained momentum and recognition throughout the 1970s for instigating and examining the waged and unwaged dialectic.<sup>143</sup>

The film scholar Elizabeth Cowie has suggested that in order 'to represent "work" a film must engage not only with images of work in the already organized definitions of economies, politics, unions, it must also engage with its own processes of defining'.<sup>144</sup> Rather than focusing solely on the self-reflexivity of the filmmaker, Cowie draws attention to what work might mean at a specific moment in time and space. She directs us towards the types of discourse created by work in an effort to maintain it and speak of it. For instance, the female *maquiladora* workers in *Performing the Border* are said by other women in the video-essay to receive extremely low pay for their work in the factories. Such paltry pay necessitates sourcing extra income. As most have migrated from the poorer southern regions of Mexico, many are uneducated to the level required of *domesticas*. For many, we hear, the sex industry is the only option for supplementing their income. The factories, therefore, have a substantial role to play in the formation of the sex industry in this particular region. The 'golden mills' ricochet

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<sup>143</sup> For a short introduction to these artists' practices, see Lucy R. Lippard's *Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*, (The New Press: New York, 1995), pp. 62-65.

<sup>144</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, 'Working Images: the representations of documentary film', in *Work and the Image II*, (eds.) Griselda Pollock and Valerie Mainz, (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2000), p. 177.

through every facet of these (predominately) young women's lives, playing a significant role in both shaping subjectivities and the geopolitical space of the border.

The low wage paid to young female workers in the *maquilas* devalues their labour power, resulting in the growth of the sex industry along the border. The correlation between the two industries is, of course, not unique to this place or period of time. The spread of prostitution throughout the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe, notes Federici, was partly linked to the devaluing of women's labour and their forced move into the 'private' sphere of the home, eventually, in the nineteenth century, being consolidated in the figure of the 'housewife'.<sup>145</sup>

Cowie's suggestion that one look at the process of defining allows one to note the limits of the single, un-interrupted image of work. Filming women at work on assembly lines may be an accurate depiction of the motions of work but simply displays the factory owner's preferred depiction of work, the glossy attractive image. This limit is encapsulated quite neatly by Biemann's use of re-cycled 'official' footage of the pristine, clinical images (depicting engaged, industrious young female workers) exported by the companies to promote and entice a prospective workforce. Biemann's manipulation of one of these images subtly undermines the image of work without needing to provide clandestine recordings from inside the factory gates (from where her camera is repeatedly removed). Biemann reuses footage of a young woman dancing amongst a crowd of people, setting it against the entertainment provided by the recruitment initiatives of incoming, foreign investment (see fig. 11 and 11.1). However, Biemann changes the soundtrack from the one played by the band on stage. Now the young woman's body moves in time to the music layered over the image; five seconds of dancing is set on a loop, the original organic movement is transformed into a mechanised, fragmented, action which neatly echoes the rhythms performed daily on the assembly line. Here the woman's image is made to promote and produce, but it is not her own. Looking closely, one can see that these images are taken from a television shown in another scene behind the only worker interviewed by Biemann. The discrepancies between what is exported by the dancing women and the realities of life in the *maquila* as told by the woman in front of us give further resonance to formal aesthetic decisions.

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<sup>145</sup> Silvia Federici discusses the effect of devaluing and reducing the wage system, pauperisation, and thus criminalisation of the working-poor. See Federici's *Caliban* (2004), pp. 76-85.

The arrival of the *maquilas*, the workers they attract and the new consumer power afforded to them has had significant implications for the marketing and selling of leisure time on the border. Biemann films haphazard, poor-quality footage inside a nightclub in Juárez.<sup>146</sup> The entertainment consists of male strippers and the dj's calling out the hometowns and villages of the young women in the bar, many of whom work in the *maquiladoras* during the day. However, it is the last segment of the video-essay that most vividly and coldly articulates the commodification and exchangeability of their bodies. Titled 'the killings', Biemann finds that the victims of the 'femicides' that have been taking place on the border since 1993 are frequently the assembly-line employees of large-scale corporations such as Philips or Samsung.<sup>147</sup> The contradiction is that the new power that women might gain through access to some financial autonomy, is quite literally stripped from their bodies in the most violent of ways. Biemann suggests that the bodies of the workers are as disposable for the killer(s) as they are for their employers at the *maquiladoras*. Such is the high turnover of the workforce that management discard workers as easily as they hire them in their preference for young workers.<sup>148</sup> Biemann chooses to speak to this traffic by foregrounding police and

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<sup>146</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Perfroming the Border*, 1999, 18.00 mins.

<sup>147</sup> Biemann notes this through found employee clothing and through interviews with local journalists and labour activists. See the National Organisation for Women's website <<http://www.now.org/issues/global/juarez/femicide.html>>, accessed 27.2.10, for an account of the murders that still continue to take place in Juárez. See Julia Monárrez Fragoso's paper: 'Serial Sexual Femicide in Ciudad Juárez: 1993-2001' for a thorough account of the ages and professions of the victims, details of the crimes, police responses and lack of sentencing of these crimes. Fragoso also provides an important account of the effects of the *maquiladoras* in the border city of Juárez. <[http://www.womenontheborder.org/sex\\_serial\\_english.pdf](http://www.womenontheborder.org/sex_serial_english.pdf)>, accessed 9.9.2012. The documentary *On the Edge: the femicides in Ciudad Juárez* made by activist and artist Steev Hines in 2006 also provides an account of the murder of over four hundred and fifty women and girls since 1993. According to other sources figures are suspected to be much larger (over 800 women found murdered by 2005 and over 3,000 missing cases). <<https://www.commondreams.org/view/2009/08/03-8>>, accessed 10.9.12.

<sup>148</sup> Saskia Sassen has identified a specific preference for employing a young workforce within the export processing zones. Newly developed EPZs attract many first-time female workers. The foreign investment of EPZs, argues Sassen, dominate 'new industrial zones, objectively and culturally, thereby creating linkages to the countries where the capital originates'. She continues, 'the familiar image of America as a land of opportunity' can still 'operate as a strong pull factor'. Sassen, (1998), p. 119. In addition, small hands make the precision work of electronic assembly work easier. Biemann has also commented on the irony of a younger workforce, prized for their better eyesight, developing visual impairments through assembling technologies that enhance vision (surveillance, microscopes and endoscopes). Biemann in Imre Szeman, 'Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann', *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* vol. 24, no.1/2, January– June 2002, pp. 91–109 (2002), p. 99. Hester Eisenstein has noted that: 'The average Mexican worker, for example, spends about three years in *maquiladora* employment.' See Eisenstein (2009), p. 26.

subsequent news reports, which display the patterns developed by the perpetrators, and which detail the switching of the clothes of the tortured, raped and murdered. This exchange of clothes mirrors, for Biemann, a pathology fostered by the factories: in the demand for an ever-higher profit margin, the employees remain nameless and faceless. *Performing the Border* speaks directly of the necessary commitment by capitalism, as a social-economic system, to aggravating racism and sexism (see fig. 12, an advert — which encapsulates the appropriation and aggravation of such divides — gathered by Biemann in the early stages of her research for *Performing the Border*).

Federici has argued that the effects of globalised capitalism and the increased position of women in the workforce have seen an ‘explosion of violence against women’. As Biemann seeks to argue in *Performing the Border*, Federici suggests that men’s relative loss of power and prominence in the waged arena has destabilised previously established modes of masculine subjectivity. In fact, Federici goes as far as noting that the ubiquitous presence of the redefinition of women’s social position, if only relatively minor, has transformed women into a ‘new common’, something that everyone can have a piece of.<sup>149</sup>

Ruido’s *Real Time* deals with different types of labour and positions them alongside one another, mediating on the present and the past and on the process of defining through images. The work also creates an analogy between women’s invisible labour and Ruido’s own artistic labour, both of which sit at odds with work ‘proper’ as established throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Presented through simple roundtable discussions, in which the artist herself takes part, and the foregrounding of the research and selection process, the thesis begins to take shape.<sup>150</sup> Ruido does not allow any ambiguity in her line of thought. A discussion with another artist towards the end of the video clearly identifies their shared interests in altered methods of production. These methods closely align with mainstream businesses’ increased propensity for ‘project’-based methodology. For example, ‘Laurence’ recounts how a collaborative research project ‘Digitals’ looks at material generated by interviews with workers at a Volkswagen factory. She recalls how one interviewee argues that ‘what becomes relevant in contemporary capitalism and corporations is that now, they are

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<sup>149</sup> Silvia Federici, <<http://www.generation-online.org/p/pfederici.htm>>, accessed 15.01.2012

<sup>150</sup> Moreover, Ruido states: ‘the materials and conditions of the work process (books, films, interviews, financing, time limits...) seek to demonstrate the hierarchies implicit in any ordering of knowledge and in the production of any ‘document’ and ‘story’, <<http://www.workandwords.net/en/projects/view/488>>, accessed 02.08.2011.

incorporating work models taken from the artists...the ideas of projects, commitment...flexibility'.<sup>151</sup> The artist's labour model is thus a strong paradigm to emulate for the contemporary labouring body. Not unlike the women's and migrant's body, it has historically had to transmute across the reproductive and productive boundaries in a fluid fashion, an ability that is now highly desirable for all labouring bodies in contemporary capitalism. Ruido and her interviewees postulate that the artist must always be 'at' work: walks, trips to the cinema, all free time, provide a space through which to 'develop' new projects, as life infiltrates work, work – as demanded more than ever before – enters life.

## Conclusion

This chapter has sought to analyse the re-calibration of labour relations through changes in production over the past forty years, it has examined how values have been re-orientated, altering the lives of individuals. Whilst the mechanisms of Fordism brought 'industriousness', 'specialisation' and 'rigidity', Farris rightly counters that the monotony of the labour process was, at the very least, compensated for by the incentives of 'security and the guarantee of a new consumption pattern'.<sup>152</sup> The chapter has aimed to identify what guides the new subjectivity. The privileging of a more 'flexible form of accumulation' allows the fleeting and the immaterial subject to take a lead. The 'unofficial', or types of labour that constitute the 'subsistence' sector, have been annexed to women's experiences. Federici's writing details how this annexation has been intentionally increased by the capitalist project. I have sought to argue that an understanding of recent scholarship, concerned with the shift to immaterial aspects of 'production' in the latter part of the twentieth century and early twentieth-first century, cannot be achieved without a consideration of the dependence on networks, care- and knowledge-economies. One must pay attention, therefore, to women's and 'un-official' worker's historical positions in these types of work and 'non-work'. It is within such supposed peripheral spaces as the outskirts of cities and national borders that the revelation of the contradictory aspects of capitalism is made most visible.

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<sup>151</sup> 'Laurence' interviewed in Ruido's *Real Time*, 2003, 27.40 mins.

<sup>152</sup> Sara R. Farris, 'New and Old Spirits of Capitalism' *IRSH* 55 (2010), pp. 297–306

Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis,

<[http://www.academia.edu/550625/New\\_and\\_Old\\_Spirits\\_of\\_Capitalism](http://www.academia.edu/550625/New_and_Old_Spirits_of_Capitalism)>, accessed 29.05.13.

The quote that opens this chapter clearly prioritises the body, the corporeal, and the material, as the locus for capitalist accumulation. Marx noted how epochal socio-economic shifts, such as that from feudalism to capitalism, re-ordered life. For him, this violent tear — from one mode of living to another — takes place at the site of the body. I have sought to demonstrate how the biopolitical thesis can provide a nuanced understanding of the internal restructuring of capitalism, particularly throughout the last forty years. Moreover I argue that the biopolitical thesis deals most adequately with the relation between the material and immaterial. When understood from the Foucauldian account, we avoid a strict separation between the mind and the body. However, it is too often assumed that if one locates a section where Marx or even, indeed, Foucault, writes on the labour of women, children or migrants, one can counter the sustained attack on the gender-blind (and race-blind) components of their projects. I have detailed how changes that have taken place most recently in economies in the west have meant the immaterial dimension of work has gained visibility. Those bodies that have had to explicitly combine the dimensions of labour that are both valorised and not valorised by capitalism, cannot be maligned, or considered a parallel issue in our assessment of the labouring body. A sole fidelity to the Marxian, Foucauldian, or indeed, feminist project is unsuccessful when understanding the demands required of, and performed by, the body in neoliberal capitalism. Shifts once more in the economy have allowed one to re-assess the supposed ‘unhappy marriage’ of Marxism and feminism. The video-essays of Biemann and Ruido deal closely with the contradictions these different models pose when they become articulated on the body.

This chapter has argued for an understanding of ‘invisible’ labour as fundamental to the success of capitalism. More than ever, neoliberal capitalism requires invisibility, fragmentation and our separation from one another. Aspects of the important project of identity politics, recognition and difference to the neoliberal regime, have been reconsidered respectfully, yet, critically.

In focusing on the dialectic of paid and un-paid labour, and the absolute necessity of the ‘subsistence’ sector of the economy, our sense of the working body is re-aligned for the twenty-first century. At our current juncture, the term ‘worker’ encompasses a re-configured labouring body, one that notices the variations in the types of labour and one that most crucially acknowledges the fundamental aspect of reproduction in order to facilitate production. As we have seen, Marx’s decision not to focus heavily on the role of reproduction in any complete, detailed sense — not to

mention the role many Marxist and socialist feminists have had in re-addressing this aspect — has been, and continues to be, crucial for understanding our present condition. A continued appliance of a Marxian methodology reminds one that the introduction of amending legislation to aid women's emancipation, or to gain representation and rights for 'illegal' workers, will require persons in another part of the world to be exploited for such gains.<sup>153</sup> Images that display fragmentation, whilst remaining vigilant to the 'politics of form' debates, work hard nevertheless to make visible the socially, historically, economically and politically interconnectedness of our lives.

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<sup>153</sup> Martha Gimenez, 'Connecting Marx and Feminism in the Era of Globalization: A Preliminary Investigation', *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 1 (January-June, 2004), pp. 85-106, (p. 89).

### Chapter Three – Digitalisation and the Biopolitical Artwork

Integral to the altered process of subjectivation under neoliberalism has been the process of representation. The role of representation in knowledge formation(s), therefore, requires attention. Technological innovations throughout the last twenty years have ushered in a dominant positioning of the digital over older analogue production. As a result, the speed at which digital images are able to circulate, through the proliferation of devices, website and software, such as YouTube, WeTransfer, Vimeo to smart phones and sensecams, has resulted, it has been argued, in the image gaining a new kind of sovereignty. Much scholarship has located 1989 as the burgeoning moment for digital technology. This notion of a digital reign resulted in uncritical claims that the referent of the lens-based image has been abolished, that is, losing what some have considered to be the defining characteristic of the photomechanical image.<sup>154</sup> Where the representational, or registrational, elements of the analogue once defined image production, the role of simulation increasingly became the defining aspect of the digital image.<sup>155</sup> This chapter pays attention to these debates because the video-essays addressed incorporate both the digital and the analogue in the fabric of their work.

The theorised ‘omni-directional’ features of the digital image will be considered within the broader framework of globalised capitalism and the debates discussed in the preceding chapter.<sup>156</sup> The notion of ‘reproducing’ can be understood as severing the link

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<sup>154</sup> I am referring specifically to William J. Mitchell who sees 1989 as the onset of the digital age. See Mitchell’s *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 57. Philosophers and media theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Jonathan Crary have added to these debates. See Tim Lenoir’s account in his forward to *The Philosophy of New Media*, Mark B.N. Hanson, (London: MIT Press, 2004), p. xiii. See also Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>155</sup> Yvonne Spielmann, in her essay: ‘Expanding Film into Digital Media’, makes a case, for the electronic image (televisual, video) as acting as an intermediary between the binary oppositions of analogue images of representation, and the digital images of supposed ‘simulation’. This assertion operates in her argument more broadly when she states that the relation between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media is able to present a different conception of organisation, one that calls for an examination of continuities and discontinuities over breaks. Yvonne Spielmann, ‘Expanding Film into Digital Media’, *Screen*, 40:2, Summer 1999, pp. 131-145.

<sup>156</sup> The digital image has been theorised as being differentiated by its manipulation of temporal elements, otherwise given in the cinematic filmic image. The notion of the ‘omni-directional’ speaks to the layering, compression, simultaneity and density in the digital image. These elements are considered to mark a shift from temporal to spatial forms of the image because of their manipulation of the vertical and horizontal ways of organising. See Spielmann (1999).

between the original and its site of production.<sup>157</sup> The copy is thus considered ‘siteless’. In conceiving the digital image this way, however, we de-historicise it, rendering meaningful production and action mute in the process. Whilst this chapter seeks to determine what technological invention can bring to vision, I am also mindful of ascribing to technological developments sole responsibility for determining a new subjectivity outside history and thus context. An exaggerated technological determinism might conceive of digital culture as simply matching, replicating and distributing our contemporary subjectivity. This approach would make invisible technology’s active role in producing new processes of subjectivation.<sup>158</sup>

Dziga Vertov’s writings on the ‘Camera Eye’ meditate on the technology of the film camera and its inbuilt ability to see what was hitherto invisible to the naked human eye. Already, Vertov’s account introduces a discussion grounded in understandings of ‘truth’ and perceptions of the ‘real’. Vertov states:

Our eyes see very little and very badly – so people dreamed up the microscope to let them see invisible phenomena; they invented the telescope...now they have perfected the cinecamera to penetrate more deeply into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena so that what is happening now, which will have to be taken account of in the future, is not forgotten.<sup>159</sup>

The camera for Vertov punctures the fabric of the everyday. This idea is expanded by Walter Benjamin when he writes that the ‘Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer’ in his 1936 essay *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Benjamin continues: ‘The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality,

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<sup>157</sup> In a Benjaminian sense, this removes the aura, which is otherwise provided by the place in which the work is made, its site of inception. ‘Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*, (eds.) Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, volume 3, 1935-1938, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), pp. 101-134 (pp. 214-215).

<sup>158</sup> This is discussed, for example, in Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock (eds) *Digital Cultures and Other Virtualities: Renegotiating the Image*. In their introduction they discuss the circumnavigation of the sputnik satellite around the globe. They compare sputnik to Hannah Arendt’s considerations of the fantasies of transcendence that abound in man’s reaction to technological advancements. Here, Bryant and Pollock note how the human performs an ‘inverted’ process of ‘mystification’ of the real relations of such technological production. This mystification then enforces a ‘power over the very humans of whose minds and hands they are a product’. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>159</sup> ‘Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups’, Dziga Vertov, 1926. See the short article: ‘Dziga Vertov’ by Jonathan Dawson, <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/vertov/>>, accessed 02.02.2012.

whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue.<sup>160</sup> These early and fertile moments for the deployment, investigation and use of the photomechanical image configure the ‘camera eye’ as a tool that is something more than just a device to simply record what is ‘out there’. For a consideration of this idea in more recent times let us consider some of Harun Farocki’s works made throughout the 2000s. To a degree, the questions that arise from video-essays such as *I Thought I was Seeing Convicts* (2000), *War at a Distance* (2003) and *Serious Games* (2009/10) are shared concerns of both Biemann and Ruido. For Farocki, the visual field, populated by inmates of a Californian prison, is drawn not only by the guns of the guards that maintain a watchful eye, but also through the lens of the surveillance cameras in *I Thought I was Seeing Convicts*. Both *Serious Games* and *War at a Distance* mediate on the mutually dependable relations between those images that are taken ‘from the field’ so to speak and those generated to simulate the field. These visuals aim to inform, prepare, predict and expose. Concomitantly, they also obscure through a desire to produce a visual that serves a particular purpose for a particular institution or collective need.

*Performing the Border* contends with the contradictions one must face when living at the bleaker end of late capitalism. In a work concerned with visibility, Biemann inserts an image of the *maquila* workers soldering components destined for products that will enhance vision. The women themselves are connected to their workbenches by prostheses that protect against powerful electromagnetic charges. In an interview Biemann states that:

A good part of the equipment produced in the maquiladoras are optical technologies: medical and cyber optics, surveillance instruments, x-ray satellite technologies, micro- and telescoping, audio-visual media, identification, scanning, digitizing, controlling and simulating electronics. They all improve our optical range from entering the tiniest particles to peeking into deep space.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Walter Benjamin: selected writings*, (eds.) Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, volume 3, 1935-1938, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), pp. 101-134 (p. 116).

<sup>161</sup> Imre Szeman, ‘Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann’, *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* vol. 24, no.1/2, January– June 2002, pp. 91–109. See pp. 94–95.

The same women producing some of the world's most advanced technology in the EPZs return to makeshift homes without access to running water and electricity after the shift ends.

Biemann's work considers the myriad ways that we can now *see*, becoming in many ways a consideration of vision. She focuses on optical technologies, as we have seen, in *Performing the Border*, *Writing Desire* and *Remote Sensing*. This focus not only describes the daily tasks women performed on the assembly line (in *Performing the Border*) but also allows us as viewer, and her as author, to construct an account of capitalism's use of the body by such technology. The co-option of varied types of images — camera technologies that allow one to see in the dark, to see from outer space; those that simulate and provide reconnaissance, or provide pictures taken at such close proximity that apprehension is lost — enable one to document life. This documentation does not necessarily transcribe how life is 'seen' with the 'naked' eye, but rather considers how it is *known* through a combination of both the physiological capabilities of the eye and the mechanical inventions that contribute to its enhancement. The compilation developed in works such as *Writing Desire* and *Remote Sensing* deals concurrently with daily intricacies and large-scale complexities, with a good deal of the precision honed by newer technologies.<sup>162</sup>

The analogue image, arguably because of the camera's role in the colonist's toolbox (to be expanded in Chapter Five), can be considered to have closer ties to defining one's subjecthood, to capturing and owning it, and to closing down the processes of subjectivation. Arguably, then, the changes brought by newly developed technologies, engender an appreciation for the potential of representation as an open-ended process. Surveillance, for example, gathers information in order to control and process information, and to subject life to micro-administrative procedures. This rejection of stasis is perhaps best enunciated as our 'liquid modern times', by the sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman.<sup>163</sup> This processual collection of data by the camera eye

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<sup>162</sup> Exhibitions, such as *CTRL [SPACE] Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, at Karlsruhe in 2002, explore how new media technologies effect theorisations of the image. It is posited that the shift from architectural space to surveillance (arising out of the new information technologies) reconfigures our understanding of 'looking'. See the exhibition catalogue, which goes by the same name, published in 2002 by ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, Germany and Massachusetts of Technology.

<sup>163</sup> Bauman develops this metaphor as a means to assess the fluid manner in which our lives are now constructed; a construction styled by consumer products and conflated with buying patterns. Bauman's conceptual apparatus and its relevance for understanding the role of images,

tracks the here and now. Can ‘real time’ therefore follow, and perhaps even anticipate life? Might that result in determining and restricting possibilities of subjectivation? Or, might we be able to deploy this overt movement to invent new and different ways of being in the world? The latter point has been theorised and experimented with by the sociologist and philosopher, Maurizio Lazzarato and the artist, Angela Melitopoulos. I shall return to this consideration of ‘image as strategy’ with a closer examination of their work and writings on the technological capabilities of the digital video.

This chapter focuses on how, and under what circumstances, digital technology might engender new ways of seeing. As with the role of perspective (and its incorporation into the body of the camera, and the micro and telescope lens), the digitalisation process has had a large impact: firstly, on *what* we see; secondly, on *how* quickly we see it; and thirdly, on *where* we see it. In making this assessment, we need to return to the debates that have plagued the photo-mechanical image in its analogue form to see if, how and why they may still be pertinent for our current assessment of the lens-based image at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Bifurcation of the Photomechanical Image**

In 1975, Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen provided a detailed account of how and why, since its inception, the camera lens has faced questions about its relation to the real and its problematic position between the perceivedly opposing fields of art and science. In order to make this argument, they begin by a return to the 1889 writings of the British photographer and writer, Peter Henry Emerson. In charting Emerson’s (and others’) work, one is able to see that simply opposing the two roles of the photographic image — aesthetic and subjective and scientific and objective — was an inadequate proposition. Snyder and Allen note how Emerson cautions his fellow artists who wish to legitimate the medium of the camera as art. Emerson argues that art students should, on the contrary, treat the camera as no different to other accepted mediums (such as painting); here the technology should not assert new possibilities and overshadow the higher pursuit of making art. Moreover, Emerson saw the role of art in fitting neatly with the demands of the time; that is to strive for ‘naturalistic’ representation. Those

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and particularly surveillance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, can be seen in his and David Lyon’s book *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013).

using the camera should aim to present a copy that would be as realistic as possible; the visual impression, he asserted, should show the viewer what they would have seen had they been there themselves.<sup>164</sup> A difficulty arises in Emerson's argument. He demands that the indexical characteristic of the photograph — brought about by certain technological advancements — should not be afforded special attention. The artist, however, appears to be playing catch-up, for the desire to produce a faithful 'copy' of what one *sees* demonstrates a need to compete with the skills most valued at the time of Emerson's writing.

Snyder and Allen note that the idea of the photograph as one of the plastic arts held strong currency up until the 1910s. However, after 1910 a shift in opinion was underway. It became more commonly accepted that the *raison d'être* of photography was its ability to overcome subjectivity, a characteristic otherwise associated with painting. Moreover, it was this unique characteristic of photography that should be celebrated: photography's automatism was capable of 'removing the human agent' state Snyder and Allen, 'from the act of reproduction'.<sup>165</sup> This consensus continues, they argue, into the 'modern' period, where the photograph is understood to undisputedly have a specific connection with 'real life', a connection not considered possible in the same manner (if at all) with the other 'traditional arts'.<sup>166</sup> Rudolf Arnheim's work as both a film and art theorist (and psychologist) presents a further inflection on this position. Arnheim argued that lens-based imagery (both still camera and film) could provide a different encounter with the world from that provided by *pure* indexical objectivity. Arnheim does not dispute that the photograph captures 'physical objects', 'their image' becoming impressed by 'means of the optical and chemical action of light' upon the celluloid.<sup>167</sup> He does argue, however, that the camera's eye is able to apprehend the real whilst providing a different mechanism through which to see it. Photography for Arnheim was capable of transgressing 'a mere mechanical copy of nature', thus moving closer to the accepted category of art and yet also retaining a

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<sup>164</sup> Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, 'Photography, Vision, and Representation', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Autumn), 1975, pp. 143-169 (p. 144).

<sup>165</sup> Snyder and Allen, (1975), p. 145.

<sup>166</sup> Snyder and Allen cite the philosopher Charles H. Caffin to make this point. See Caffin's *Photography as a Fine Art* from c.1901 (New York: Amphoto, 1972).

<sup>167</sup> I should note, that although Snyder and Allen's article deals primarily with Arnheim's writing, they do note other writers who advanced similar claims to that of Arnheim. They cite: Etienne Gilson's book *Painting and Reality*, published in 1957, R.G. Collingwood's *The Principles of Art* (1958), William M. Ivins's, *Prints and Visual Communication*, and lastly, E.H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1960).

degree of indexicality. It is this indexicality that we translate as having a certain documentary value. Arnheim argues, therefore, that the documentary ‘value’ attached to the lens-based image engenders a different set of questions around truth and authenticity, ones that we would not ask of other types of art.<sup>168</sup> It would seem, therefore, that for Arnheim, the photograph is both art and more than art.

The photograph, therefore, is considered to have a degree of documentary value that other artworks cannot possess. Arnheim argues that this fact is a unique tendency envied by the artist. The function the lens-based image has in ‘human society’ is one that the painter, composer or poet fails to procure. Nevertheless, Arnheim argues that this suggested ‘envy’ of photography’s documentary quality is felt from the opposite direction, for it is the very same property (the documentary value) that curtails the ‘inner vision’ of the artist, enforcing creativity to fall short. However, the idea that one medium is better suited to the translation of thought puts photography at a severe disadvantage since a medium such as painting has occupied a lengthy and privileged role in the arts. Over time, painting has been explored and refined, its properties better understood. This sustained deployment had not yet been enjoyed by the photographic image. Arnheim continues by stating that the artist who selects the camera as his/her medium must accept this limitation, and focus instead on the ‘visual peculiarities’ of photography, for example the grain on the filmstrip.

Snyder and Allen’s contributions to these debates make a distinction between the ‘visual’ model of photography and the ‘mechanical’ model. The visual model is described as the camera operating as the eye does, the end result being an image showing what we would have seen had we been there ourselves. The mechanical model puts an emphasis on the necessary connections present between what we see in the photo and what was there in reality; it may not strive for displaying to us *how* we might have seen it, but it does act as a reliable testament to what existed. An example of this distinction is brought to light by the authors’ use of the freeze-frame as a device capable of showing motion: although we are not seeing a scene as we would have seen it for ourselves, in their chosen example we are seeing an accurate document of the order of

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<sup>168</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, ‘On the Nature of Photography’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 1 (September), 1974, p. 155.

racehorses crossing the finish line.<sup>169</sup> This mechanical model offers the scientific knowledge of the real.

These kinds of images have a tendency to stand up as objective in some way, in a manner, moreover, that is not dissimilar to the small recording devices used by police following ‘illegal’ immigrants on the ground in the darkness of the desert night (see fig. 13). These images disclose something we might not ordinarily be witness to, but do not attempt to create a lens-based image akin to how we, ourselves, may see it. Although, note Snyder and Allen, the photograph cannot be considered to replace vision, its objective to apprehend event(s) can be understood as a final product of sorts, as an end result. It is this halting of vision that enables one to acknowledge the photographic image as a document of an array of causes and effects. Thus, we ascribe a certain degree of veracity to the photographic image. We see it as a kind of end-point from which to make assumptions or decisions, a document that gathers information to present our image back to ourselves.

It is, however, clear that an aim for either objectivity (the scientific model) or manipulation (linked to the art image) is also determined by the subject matter depicted and its intended destination for reception. The mechanical model may emphasise a direct relation with reality but it does, in certain instances, show inadequacies in how we might experience reality. For example, one is often called upon to alter exposure, or optimise an image, in order to translate how one really saw. It is true that the technological determinations of the machine may not be able to present a faithful indication of the scene. For instance, the flash may bleach out the colour otherwise experienced by the photographer, altering the actual ‘look’ of the physical scene. It is then up to the photographer to intervene, before and after the photographic act, in order to give a closer account of reality.

Different moments in history force the prioritising of either ‘art-photography’ over the objective, scientific document, or vice versa. With so many caveats in place, Snyder and Allen argue, we would be better placed in asking what social, cultural, economic and political delineations exist for the photographer at the time in which the

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<sup>169</sup> Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen: ‘while photographs do not always show us a scene as we would have seen it, they are, because of their mechanical origin, an accurate record of the scene as it actually was’. Whilst the viewer does not *see* the ‘equine blur’ crossing the finishing line, the reference to the horses is recoded by the mechanical operations of the camera which is able to slow the event down, and capture a second-by-second account. This gives us a faithful account, but nevertheless, an account the viewer does not experience. See pp. 157-160. ‘Photography, Vision, and Representation’, (1975).

image is taken. Moreover, we should consider what techniques and methods are used to mark out a subject for consideration. Is the imager-taker complying with such things or is s/he exposing or transgressing them; and if so, for what purpose and for whom? Many recent video essays employ a variety of different lens-based images. In doing so, they make obvious the different spheres to which the image might ‘belong’ and the demands ascribed to it, thus illuminating varied methods and needs for definition. Even the technology of the ‘autonomous’ surveillance camera’s technology is codified by the demands it aims to serve, seeing what it is programmed to see through a particular set of parameters established by the institution for which it is put to ‘work’.<sup>170</sup>

The convergence of a biopolitical mode of living, neoliberal capitalism and the possibilities engendered by digitalisation signal a different moment for vision and thus for the role of the documentary in the latter part of the twentieth century. Yet in many ways, as we have seen, it is plagued by the same old debates, debates that we cannot afford to ignore. The panopticon was developed — firstly, as an architectural and subsequently as a theoretical model — to view or see bodies in the nineteenth century, as Foucault famously detailed. He argued that it ushered in a new kind of disciplinary power hitherto unknown. We can argue, then, that the digital image is born of a new kind of government, with its deployment by and within political and military spheres. This process (keeping in line with Foucault’s conception of power) needs to simultaneously be understood in its inverse: the digital image does not just emerge from, but also *forms* this changed mode of governing. One can turn to previous periods — the invention of perspective in painting, or that of photography itself — which led to paradigmatic shifts in seeing and knowledge production. With that in mind, the development and use of thermochemical imagery, satellite imagery, x-rays and remote sensing can be understood as panopticons for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is, therefore, my contention that digital images allow for relations of biopower to be articulated in new and different ways. They are able to mark and carve out new ways of knowing life.

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<sup>170</sup> Snyder and Allen note: ‘The passport photograph and the police “mug shot” are each produced by formulas regulating choice of lens, framing, and lighting. The Kodak manual, *Clinical Photography*, for example, contains 118 pages describing a wide variety of methods for photographing the human body, each method appropriate for the characterization of a separate set of conditions or symptoms.’ Snyder and Allen, ‘Photography, Vision, and Representation’ (1975), p. 164

## Documentation, Processes and the role of ‘non-art’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The centrality of ‘administration’ to the biopolitical thesis places the document as a valued instrument of knowledge formation, because the historical weight, veracity and ability to be assimilated into data, have meant the document can be relied upon to make conclusions. In examining the role that the document plays in contemporary art, a figure that must be accounted for is the art theorist, Boris Groys. For Groys, documentation can take the form of paintings, drawings, photographs, videos, texts and installations. Understood in this way, ‘documentation’ is not markedly different from the mediums in which art is usually produced.<sup>171</sup> Groys argues, however, that it is indeed quite distinct; ‘Art documentation’ offers the artist a way to deal with, and make sense of:

complex and varied artistic interventions in daily life, lengthy and complicated processes of discussion and analysis, the creation of unusual living circumstances, artistic exploration into the reception of art in various cultures and milieus, and politically motivated artistic actions.<sup>172</sup>

The obsolete ‘artwork’, understood as something that embodies art itself, is unable to accomplish this task. ‘Artwork’ for Groys represents a ‘dead’, finalised end product: it is no surprise, he contends, that the museum is too often compared to the cemetery.<sup>173</sup> This focus on documentation, on process, on explicitly enabling the structures of daily life to be rendered as form, is vital to the art historian John Roberts’ understanding of the avant-garde. Roberts writes that the ‘new’ is a common denominator for what can be considered avant-garde. Following Adorno’s argument, however, this ‘new’ is not to be confused with a propensity towards the ‘trendy’ or latest style. Rather, it lies in art’s

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<sup>171</sup> ‘Art documentation’ for Groys is not to be confused with the making of any finished artwork that is then documented. Rather ‘documentation becomes the sole result of art, which is understood as a form of life, a duration, a production of history’. Boris Groys, ‘Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation’, from the catalogue to Documenta 11 (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), p. 110.

<sup>172</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 54.

<sup>173</sup> Groys’s problematisation of the category of ‘art work’ can be traced to Peter Bürger’s 1974 book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger examines the crisis that the concept ‘work of art’ faces when applied in understanding works of the avant-garde. That is, works that cannot be explained and understood along any established existing theorisations of art. This assertion returns, for Bürger, to the notion that art, like life, is based on *activity* and not a final product or object. See *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 55-68.

ability to be ‘non-art’, in art’s ability to resist its own institutionalisation and the terms ascribed to it.<sup>174</sup>

Historically, documentation, and particularly the role of the camera, has become part of an apparatus of the administration of life. It is able to take stock, record, and act as a means of intelligibility by which to understand the body of the population, whether it be to ‘uncover’ a new community or better understand one’s own, often with problematic consequences. By way of example, we might look: to police reporter Jacob Riis, whose photographs exposed slum conditions in New York City in the late 1800s; to Lewis Hine’s work as a photographer in the US and his project which sought to expose child labour and working conditions amongst the working class and to the infamous Pittsburgh Survey; or to the British-based ‘Mass Observation Project’ (MOP) of 1937 (led by Tom Harrison and documentary/Surrealist filmmaker Humphrey Jennings and journalist Charles Madge). These were all large-scale projects that aimed, in a broad sense, to ‘take stock’.<sup>175</sup> It is true that Riis’s and Hines’s work helped raise awareness and ushered in government funding and policy change improving the lives of ordinary working-class Americans; however, familiar tensions present themselves once more. Alongside Steve Edwards’ argument that figures such as those aforementioned (and those involved in the Mass Observation Project) were ‘metropolitan intellectuals’ reinforcing damaging stereotypes despite their socialist principles, sits Maren Stange’s critical approach to this history.<sup>176</sup> Stange’s *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America 1890-1950* provides a study of how the photography of Hines, Riis, Evans and Lange all aimed, in a variety of ways, to incite reform. This reform accorded closely with the worldviews expropriated by the institutions to which the figures were annexed and often resulted in moralising, as opposed to genuine gestures that sought to truly understand the complexities faced by the working poor who ‘featured’ in the photographs.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> John Roberts, ‘Avant-gardes After Avant-Gardism’, <[http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=370](http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=370)>, accessed 12.02.13. Roberts also gave this paper as a talk at Documenta 12 (2007) with David Riff and Dimitry Vilensky from the Russian collective Chto Delat? (What Is to Be Done?).

<sup>175</sup> Nick Hubble ‘Mass Observation and Everyday Life: culture, history, theory’, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp 1-10. Even at moments in which the hard facts of documenting life as it is lived appear to take a lead, Hubble dedicates sections of his book to the cross-fertilisation of English Surrealism and the British documentary project in the 1930s.

<sup>176</sup> Steve Edwards, ‘Disastrous Documents’, *Ten.* 8, vol. 15, 1984, pp. 12-23.

<sup>177</sup> Maren Stange’s *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America 1890-1950*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Art documentation, according to Groys has to follow, or track the complexities and intricacies of daily life; it is better conceived of as an activity with no finite end and perhaps best understood, we might add, as a ‘working’ art form.<sup>178</sup> If life has increasingly become a ‘resource’, Groys argues that art production cannot help but respond in a biopolitical manner. If daily reality is, in our ‘age of biopolitics’, known through the procedure of micro-administrated processes that take the forms of ‘planning, decrees, fact-finding reports, statistical inquiries, and project plans’, it is no surprise, contends Groys, that new practices in art begin to adopt similar methodologies.<sup>179</sup> Relations between art and life must therefore be considered anew. Art documentation for Groys aims to move beyond the pre-occupation with the thematisation of the space between art and reality and to deal less opaquely with life and its movement.<sup>180</sup> For Groys, the ‘traditional’ arts (he includes within this the applied arts of architecture, fashion, product design and advertising) do not have access to ‘life itself as pure activity’ precisely because they have been too orientated towards ‘products’ or ‘results’. He concludes that art made in the age of biopolitics cannot concern itself with finished presentations of life; rather, it can only show the process of documenting.

Snyder and Allen argued that the qualities of the photomechanical image have been understood as having the ability to commit a moment in time to the celluloid strip. This ability to ‘commit’ and suspend reality lends a degree of the veracity of that moment: the document, as noted above, can prove things. We know that this assumption in and of itself is not enough for reading the photograph. However, this understanding attests to the photomechanical image as inherently possessing a propensity towards an ‘end result’. In noting Groys’ discomfort with the art work as ‘product’ and its clear unsuitability for this ‘biopolitical age’, how should we understand the use of the lens-based image when the procedures of digitalisation have become pervasive?

Importantly, Groys argues that documentation ‘inscribes the existence of an object in history’; it ‘gives a lifespan to this existence’. Rather than curtailing life, the document is able to ‘narrate’ life, instead of consigning it to the past; documentation is

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<sup>178</sup> Groys, (2008), pp. 54-55.

<sup>179</sup> The strategic governing of the day-to-day lives’ of individuals means, for Groys, an acceptance that life can no longer be considered a natural event. What Groys fails to make obvious is the rise of the socio-economic and political implications of capitalism and its role in the emergence of biopolitics as attended to by Foucault in *The Will to Knowledge: History of Sexuality vol.1*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 140-1

<sup>180</sup> Groys, (2008), p. 55.

used as a way to track time. It evokes, argues Groys, the ‘unrepeatability of living’ and that is how it is closest, as an art, to life. Documentation therefore can give something or indeed someone a history. This sense of connecting a seemingly un-recognisable past to an altered present is dealt with in Ruido’s *Amphibious Fictions*. When speaking of the radical worker history in the two northern Spanish cities of Terrassa and Mataró, still photographs of banners and flags, marches and factory work cast our present experiences back into the past, materialising our current knowledge and foregrounding the notion of process as political strategy.

In order to speak of the sexual abuse and murders of hundreds of women and girls in Juárez, Biemann chooses to re-display the sensationalist local channel news footage, which shows the women’s identity, before and after death; their images, over which they have no control, fill the screen. However, in her attempt at dealing with this salacious material, Biemann obscures their images. Instead, in an effort to not ignore the heinous crimes, and in using the very material that authorities deploy to categorise these women (administrating them even in their death), she inserts a roll call of nameless police case numbers, dates, ages and causes of (often brutal) death. The list of torture enacted on many of these women and young girls emphasises the absolute necessity of telling these atrocities.<sup>181</sup>

One could argue — as the next chapter does in its discussion of Akerman’s investment in the motif of absence — that Biemann’s chosen method is adopted out of respect and made in an acceptance that some things cannot, and should not, be represented, particularly when the artist seeks to critique the enforced lack of control women have of their own image, even after death. A decision to mediate around the notion of absence, as I argue later in the thesis, is at risk of ignoring what takes place, arguably as a result of a commitment to the ethical over and above the political. Perhaps Groys’ conception of documentation, akin to living, through its tendency to avoid repeating and reaffirming, in its ability to track and follow movement instead, affords a change in conceptualisation here. The role of documentation (and the techniques afforded through digital post-production) allows the visibility of these horrors without using the same tired images that are loaded with the ideological imperatives of police departments and news agencies and shaped by the pressures

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<sup>181</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999, 39.53 mins.

and procedures of the Mexican government, its relation with its national neighbours, and figures and institutions of the economic elite.

Despite the renewal of serious attention to the document, the curators of Documenta 11 were required to defend their decision to include much documentary work. This obligation reminds us of the continuing validity of Martha Rosler's warning that: 'only the brave curator will show the documentary'.<sup>182</sup> It is still possible to see a privileging of what has been accepted into the art canon over and above the politics of the camera's interaction with the real. Once again, we should heed Rosler's warning. Defining video within the formal terms of an established art historical narrative instead of accepting, and paying critical attention to, its relation with the media and broadcasting, results in us overlooking the potential of the medium. The challenge the moving image presents is thereby repressed rather than accepted.<sup>183</sup>

Bearing this continued problem in mind, taking into consideration the intensification of a biopolitical subjectivity, and following Groys' trajectory, perhaps it is possible to affirm a shift in how one now *perceives* the possibilities of documentary medium. Devices such as essayistic narrative(s) and experimentations in montage are enabled not just by newer technologies but by the *combinations* of both older models and new devices. Specific historical moments have favoured particular prefixes for containing the medium of the documentary. At some moments, 'experimental', 'theory', 'non-linear', 'poetic' or 'art' have been sufficient; at other times, noting the importance of the spatial qualities of essayistic writing is crucial. These variations can all be understood as attempts to categorise and institutionalise within the established arts infrastructure. In employing a medium that cannot escape its past, one must note that the strength of the lens-based image is paradoxically its greatest weakness. Both the mainstream media and the art market are extraordinarily flexible and adept at utilising the two-fold capability of the camera, co-opting artistic and scientific innovation proficiently. Dealing with the images produced by and through such disciplinary frames alongside a consideration of the long history of the documentary (as covered in Chapter

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<sup>182</sup> See Okwui Enzavor's 'Documentary/Vérité: Biopolitics, Human Rights, and the Figure of "Truth" in Contemporary Art', *The GreenRoom: reconsidering the documentary and contemporary art I*, (Annadale-on-Hudson: CCS Bard Sternberg Press, 2008), pp. 81-85, and Martha Rosler's opening sentence in her essay: 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment', *The Block Reader*, (1985/86) (Routledge: London & New York, 1996).

<sup>183</sup> Rosler, 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment', (1985/86) *The Block Reader*, (1996), p. 259.

Four), provides some of the determinants needed to understand the ‘genre’ of the video-essay and its prominent position in a new ‘politicised’ contemporary art field.

Through the simple filming of a conversation around a kitchen table, Ruido’s *Real Time* discusses the space for criticality within art production. A participant takes up a spare chair at the table; whilst stating that some structures allow for the co-option of form to take place more easily than others, he argues that we must continually change our methods as producers. He states: ‘what is true is that some structures allow this to happen more easily. I suppose we need to start from the awareness that this capture is constant and that we need to mutate. [...] We need to mutate constantly, and so when they come to get you, you are no longer there.’<sup>184</sup> It is precisely this transformative nature, this endless adaptation that Ruido picks up and unravels in *Real Time*. As with life, this type of artwork, must also continue to move. The images, sounds and written texts we see are assemblages of pieces of the world in which we live, statements that help code and present considerations for the future.

Okwui Enwezor has suggested that the ‘biopolitical artwork’, whilst having a concern for its formal qualities, overlaps with a demand for an audience *beyond* the traditional boundaries of art.<sup>185</sup> Two reasons are useful to consider here. First, there is the vernacular of the video camera, as outlined by Martha Rosler in her essay: ‘Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment’. Here, Rosler indicates the importance of video and television: their ‘politics of familiarity’, which results from their presence in home life. This familiarity is central, she continues, for developing the two mediums’ critical potentiality.<sup>186</sup> Lens-based mediums, she argues, are Janus-faced in their ability to exist in two spheres simultaneously: the medium can be both consumer product and political weapon. This familiarity, she suggests, can capture the attention of the widest spectrum of viewers and should therefore be taken up positively: once able to command attention through medium alone, one is able to ‘make strange’ its vernacular. There is also the potential to understand the medium on its own specific terms, not solely through the boundaries of the established and accepted disciplines of sculpture, painting and

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<sup>184</sup> ‘Publio’ speaking in Ruido’s *Real Time*, 2003, 22.11 mins.

<sup>185</sup> Enwezor, ‘Documentary/Vérité: Biopolitics, Human Rights, and the Figure of “Truth” in Contemporary Art’, *The GreenRoom*, (2008), pp. 63-102. See, particularly, his discussion on the role of the documentary in a variety of spheres other than art (‘The Documentary and the Scriptible’, pp. 94-98). Here, one can discern the implicit link between the document’s concern with life itself and the theoretical and extended political paradigm of biopolitics.

<sup>186</sup> Rosler, ‘Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment’, (1985/86) *The Block Reader*, (1996), p. 266-268.

drawing.<sup>187</sup> The application, integration, and at times transparent manipulation, of news footage in both *Amphibious Fictions* and *Performing the Border* triggers a kind of anchoring for the viewer. It provides one with a point of reference in the first instance. These methodological decisions also pay attention to the collective process of viewing; to the common knowledge and recognition we might share.

Secondly, Groys argues that digitalisation, due to its ease of unending circulation, can weaken galleries' control over the reception of the art, therefore weakening institutional control.<sup>188</sup> The role of websites and social networking sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, Ubuweb or file-sharing sites such as Dropbox, provide access to previously less easily attainable works, some carefully curated, others just a mass of material through which one must navigate one's own path. With these possibilities to hand, artists and filmmakers are able to gather audiences without the involvement of established circuits of distribution. Whilst cultural producers have long held exhibitions, events and happenings in spaces of their own choosing, digitalisation and specific web platforms have, without doubt, increased the volume and speed at which a diverse array of work can be seen by an ever larger audience. This type of expansion, Groys notes, has the potential to lessen the hold — in terms of 'style', value and interpretation — that a gallery or museum would otherwise have on our perception of such work.

### **The Digital and the Referent**

Considerations of the relation between the direct social role of the photomechanical image, and its ability, like other forms of knowledge production, to provide a shift in perception of the present status quo, have hinged largely on the relation between the referent and the analogue camera. We can see, for example, this assessment in Mark Hanson's assertion that following its digitalisation 'the image can no longer be understood as a fixed and objective viewpoint on "reality"'. This is because, whether it be theorised as frame, window, or mirror, it is now defined through its almost complete

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<sup>187</sup> Rosler, 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment', *The Block Reader in Visual Culture*, (1996), pp. 258-279.

<sup>188</sup> Groys expands on the altered role of the curator when dealing with digital images. Groys discusses how the curator acts as a 'performer', an interpretator of sorts, rather than just solely as exhibitor of the image. This is due, in part, he suggests, to the act of choosing which technology might be used to make visible the 'invisible' data of the digital image. See his chapter 'From Image to Image-File and Back: Art in the Age of Digitization', *Art Power*, (2008), pp. 85-86.

flexibility and addressability, its numerical basis, and its constitutive “virtuality”.<sup>189</sup> Developments that took place in digital technology in the late 1980s and 1990s forced one to re-consider the relation between the ‘real’ and the photomechanical image.

The photography scholar William J. Mitchell sees the period since 1989 as a post-photographic era precisely because digitalisation deprived images of the real. Mitchell goes as far to say that: ‘Images [...] can no longer be guaranteed as visual truth — or even as signifiers with stable meaning and value’<sup>190</sup> In this period, the digital re-touching of photographs rapidly increased. Mitchell, therefore, argues that the early 1990s will be remembered as ‘the time at which the computer-processed digital image began to supersede the image fixed in silver-based photographic emulsion’.<sup>191</sup> This technological development provides a completely different ontology for the image, argues Mitchell. A secondary aspect of this new ontology is what it might bring with it. For example, Lev Manovich has claimed that the digital transforms the viewer into an active *user* of the image. As a result, he writes, ‘an illusionistic image is no longer something a subject simply looks at, comparing it with memories of represented reality to judge its reality effect’.<sup>192</sup>

However, Angela Dimitrakaki notes that Biemann’s work operates as the antithesis to this usual account of digitalisation. Dimitrakaki contends that digital imagery has ‘consistently been allied to the uncertainty and open-endedness principle of dominant strands of postmodernism’. Nevertheless, despite deploying the tools of digital technology, Biemann runs against this dominant assumption.<sup>193</sup> Dimitrakaki cites Biemann’s use of an implied interactive section at the beginning of *Writing Desire* to make her point. Here, a set of squares and numbers make a grid that sits over a customary image of a ‘tropical beach’. The computer cursor hovers suggestively over the different numbers, hinting at options before it makes the choice for us. This decision to render the artist’s hand transparent is, one could argue, an attempt to avoid obscuring the relations of power: the generic shopping-channel-style music used by Biemann conflates the act of buying the holiday with the individual women ‘hidden’ under each numbered square (see fig. 14). It is clear in this opening shot that manipulation at the

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<sup>189</sup> Mark Hanson, *New Philosophy for New Media*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 8.

<sup>190</sup> William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 57.

<sup>191</sup> William J. Mitchell, (1992), p. 20.

<sup>192</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 183.

<sup>193</sup> Angela Dimitrakaki, ‘Materialist Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann’, *The Oxford Art Journal*, 30/2 (2007), pp. 205-232, (p. 209).

level of post-production allows Biemann to layer a variety of images, developing a visual narrative. The role images play in advertising, marketing and buying, is extended to people and places. A 'slice of life' can be attained through a simple, remote transaction. Human interaction is facilitated at a distance and at the initial stage of introduction: here, all 'purchases' are alike.

Despite going against the grain, the general premise remains that digital images are often spoken of in terms different from those in the case of the analogue image. The preoccupation with the unique relation between the analogue and indexicality suggests the analogue image is akin to a reflection, shadow or trace. Meanwhile the digital image is often understood through the notion of the copy.<sup>194</sup> Manovich's assertion, however, largely disregards the vast body of scholarship on the photomechanical image, taking a simplistic understanding of the image and the role of voyeurism. W.J.T. Mitchell — not to be confused with William J. Mitchell — offers a response to theories that deal with the character of the 'digital' in such a fashion. He notes that the relation between what is 'there in the flesh' and what is photographed cannot be understood as a relation exclusively tethered to the analogue. If we consider the referent as a flexible, rather than inherently stable entity, then the referent is moveable, changeable in light of who is looking and what one is looking for in the image. The relation, therefore, between the referent (index) and the real does not exist on immovable grounds in the first place.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, the digital cannot, by virtue of its technological components, relinquish its connection to the real world.

With this in mind, the social and historical perspectives of the viewer, and the cultural, political and economic circumstances of the period discussed in Snyder and Allen's assessment, cannot be rendered inconsequential by the rise of digital technologies. W.J.T. Mitchell notes that the real object printed on the film or inscribed through digital code is contingent on the social and historical perspectives of the viewer. For instance, one must qualify anew what one is looking at. We must re-orientate the questions in order to think through *which* part of the image denotes our connection to

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<sup>194</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Realism and the Digital Image', *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula's Photography*, (eds.) Jan Baetens and Hilde Van Gelder, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), p. 13.

<sup>195</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell's understanding of the 'real' world and the index in the image that makes a reference to that world is perhaps best understood through considering Ludwig Wittgenstein's work in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). For Wittgenstein, language cannot be removed from its 'proper home' of everyday use. Elevating it to a metaphysical plane renders language useless for telling us anything about society and our place within it.

the 'real'. Which part, moreover, is identifiable as that which tethers the medium to a specific moment in time and place? This identification is made through an assembly of socio-economic and political determinants that give importance to differing components at particular points in history. We order our looking through the choices of what is important to us. These choices are further shaped by the society in which we live. Mitchell explains this through a discussion of a photograph of his aunt where the referent to the real must first be stipulated in order for us to read the image. He asks:

Is a photograph of my Aunt Mary referring to her, her dress, or to her expression on this particular day and the meaning of an occasion? It is realistic she puts on her Sunday best to be photographed, so that the image shows her in a way that was somewhat exceptional?<sup>196</sup>

The photograph may simply show that Aunt Mary was there, framed by that particular camera at a specific time in history. Simply stating that she was there, however, gives one little to go on in terms of comprehension. It does not help us to read the image. Mitchell suggests that digitalisation could help deepen the referent that we want to make most apparent, not remove it. Rather than considering home computer software programmes - such as Adobe Photoshop, GNU image manipulation programme, Pknik, Krita, or Picassa to name only a few - as devices to manipulate and cheat, we can also perceive them as able to offer better optimisation of the 'real' in our photos.

For example, if one wishes to give a closer account of the light, one can brighten the digital image accordingly. Moreover, if one wished to replicate a panoramic view, the digital camera now enables one to take a series of images that match the images in order to create a seamless account of the image-taker's vision. If one remembers colours more vividly than those produced by the technologies of the camera, one can replicate this through altering the saturation of colour in post-production. The possibilities to translate one's 'objective' view and one's 'subjective' experience of that view — and by view I mean the literal image shaped by the camera's lens — become ever more tangled when one considers the implications of Mitchell's proposition.

In addition to the need to always stipulate the referent, Mitchell cites a second example that muddies the waters of a simple, unquestionable connection of the analogue to the real. In discussing the digital photographs taken of the abuse of Iraqi detainees

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<sup>196</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Realism and the Digital Image', (2010), p. 23.

held in Abu Ghraib, Mitchell asks why, if digital images have no faithful relation to the world, questions regarding their veracity were not of key concern? What these photographs did demonstrate, however, was ‘a new role’ for photography’s ‘being in the world’ that is made possible by digitisation.<sup>197</sup> This new technology meant the images could be disseminated quickly: across boundaries, borders and containment, ‘leaked’ in a far easier fashion. This movement of digital images was quite at odds, he argues, with the actual bodies confined in maximum-security military prisons.

For Harun Farocki digitalisation has meant a re-materialisation of the image, precisely because it has allowed the image to become *operative* once more. Farocki contends that at its inception, the photomechanical lens was closely connected to science and technology. The past hundred or so years, however, saw the photomechanical image gain a closer and closer determining relation with entertainment and education. Technological innovation since the late 1980s, however, has revived our understanding of the lens-based image as a technical tool. The image is thus no longer a ‘weekend pleasure’; rather, it has re-claimed a serious ‘working day’.<sup>198</sup> For example, the thermo-chemical imagery and the remote-sensing satellite data both serve to optimise our sense of the real, acting as faithful data. Biemann’s inclusion of certain types of images recodes the ‘useful’ quality latent in the photomechanical image. It is simply not an option, argues Hito Steyerl, to abandon truth. Abandoning the lens-based image to the realm of simulacrum is simply not acceptable.<sup>199</sup>

### **Some Questions on Clarity and Opacity**

In considering these concomitant points of ‘optimisation’, ‘rematerialisation’ and the ‘working’ image, and the ability to deepen the referent, developments in sound recording also have a substantial part to play. Video technology allows Biemann to mimic her perception of the border zone she films. For example, Biemann notes that the

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<sup>197</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, ‘Realism and the Digital Image’, (2010), p. 18. Mitchell makes his point through a discussion of the misunderstanding of the concept of ontology. ‘Being’ must be understood as *being in the world*; we must not, therefore, isolate the object from the how, where and by whom it is apprehended and used, or by whom it is disseminated.’

<sup>198</sup> Harun Farocki attends to this in a brief interview which can be seen here: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuVLOzW3J-k>>, accessed, 13.03.2012

<sup>199</sup> Hito Steyerl, ‘Documentarism as a Politics of Truth’, <[http://www.republicart.net/disc/representations/steyerl103\\_en.pdf](http://www.republicart.net/disc/representations/steyerl103_en.pdf)>, May 2003, p. 4, accessed, 18.05.2012

majority of her video footage is used without its original sound, ‘no Mexican music, no diesel traffic’. By creating an ‘electronic soundscape’, Biemann is able, she argues, to move away from representing the real and move closer to replicating what she considers to be the ‘synthetic area’ of the border.<sup>200</sup> Her choice of sound translates the sterile and enclosed environment inside the factories, a vacuum where real life must not seep in and profitability appears to be the only concern. Here sound works to index the real.<sup>201</sup>

The manner in which the referent is anchored became a point of contention. For example, in order to fix the referent, the photograph — as conceptual artists such as Robert Smithson and Dan Graham wryly explored in the 1970s — the caption was inserted to avoid ambiguity.<sup>202</sup> The voice-over in much uncritical documentary worked in much the same way. As we shall see in Chapter Four, historical precedents for the contemporary video-essay dislocated the synchronicity between text and image in an effort to disrupt flow, dissolve passive viewing and make visible complex power/knowledge formations. When looking at the selected contemporary works in their entirety, particularly Biemann’s and Ruido’s, there are moments where this expected hallmark of political filmmaking is continued. However, a larger effort — akin to a commercial form of documentary filmmaking — is made to provide a degree of anchoring the image to the central thesis. For Biemann, this is often done through her use of intertitles. For example, however seemingly disparate image and text may appear, they are bracketed; in *Performing the Border*, by sub-headings. In addition, Ruido’s *Real Time* and *Amphibious Fictions* work in surprisingly similar ways. Blank screens, used to break the flow of images, disconnect the voice from the image and sever the continuity of narrative, signalling a concern for the politics of form. Biemann and Ruido both adopt this trope, yet use the device to re-instate their own voice through written text. In many ways, this serves to re-engage with the pedagogical remits of the

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<sup>200</sup> Ursula Biemann, ‘Going to the Border: An Essayist Project’, *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, Video Works 1998-2008*, Ursula Biemann, Jan-Erik Lundström (eds.), (Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Sweden, 2008), pp. 13-19, (p. 15).

<sup>201</sup> In addition, on-site recording of sound is used to strong effect in Akerman’s *From the Other Side*. One shot focuses on the single signpost shuddering in the wind whilst the sand whipping against the metal is amplified. Here, the narrative is carried across what would otherwise be a ‘silent’ image.

<sup>202</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss discusses Graham’s and Ruscha’s treatment of the photograph (amongst others) in her essay ‘Reinventing the Medium’, *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1999, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 298-305. See specifically pp. 294-296. We should also note Roland Barthes seminal work in *The Rhetoric of the Image* where he discusses the meaning of images through a number of interrelated signs. For Barthes, text works to anchor, or ‘fix’ the meaning of the image. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (London: Fontana Press, 1993), pp. 32-52.

documentary project. This decision makes clear a desire to ‘make sense’ of a fragmented world that is otherwise increasingly understood (and affirmed) as connected through the processes of globalisation.

Using Groys’ definition, the document in the video essays discussed in this thesis is able to capture the nature of flows: of labour, of capital, and of bodies. For Biemann, the individual body is tracked in *Remote Sensing* through a presentation of the co-ordinates used to detect women working in the sex trade and their subsequent movement across the globe. This objectivist and scientific evaluation is able to follow movement as it occurs. An overt focus on these aspects, however, leaves Biemann’s work open to criticism. If we look at Rosler’s 1977 videotape, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* — where a woman’s body is subject to, and defined by, the norms circumscribed by the discipline of medicine — we are reminded of the pitfalls that haunt the concept of ‘objectivity’ and its depersonalising tendencies. Working in the aftermath of the important critiques of the documentary (discussed further in the next chapter), Biemann chooses to move between the stories of individuals and data that provide a larger assessment of events. Seeing one ‘type’ of data next to the other, we are reminded of the inadequacy of both when examined in isolation.

Moreover, the use of the technological developments in the digital image gives a visibility to movement that might otherwise go unseen due to the limits of our biological vision, or through sheer geographical scale. Biemann uses satellite images to track the global movement of people. In *Europlex*, the flow of capital is registered quite literally at the site of the body. Amidst all this, Biemann stands at quite a distance; her camera records women putting on clothes behind a warehouse building on the border. This image is made strange when one registers that the act is repeated over and over again. The women tie contraband to their bodies, their size growing as each layer is added. From here, they will walk the unofficial trade route, a path carved deeper into the landscape by their feet as well as by the tracing of the camera’s eye.

Or, we might look to Biemann’s ability to translate the ‘time-travelling’ of domesticas living in Morocco but working in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Here, the document is used to best translate the movement. Whilst we have direct footage of women getting on their buses to go to work, post-production enables two separate clocks to appear either corner at the top of the images. Here, the administration, the numerical plotting of the women’s bodies is made acutely visible. At other moments in the video-essay, Biemann and Sanders choose to deploy a background of

unidentifiable pixels. Whilst the background landscape, the women's context, is broken down by the digital squares, the images of the young female workers are cut and pasted across a synthetic landscape; the women's bodies are rendered thoroughly technologised by such a formal decision. In removing them from their material conditions and formations by what appears to be the manipulation of the distinctive characteristics of the digital and the analogue, the women's bodies are 'free' to enter the flows of neoliberal capitalism, joining the supposed 'unbounded' networks of communications, bodies, and high finance. (see fig. 15).

These different mechanisms for heightening, modifying and orchestrating vision, however, may not provide clarity, particularly when approached in isolation, or examined outside of their context. Or, as Steyerl rightly notes, it may be a 'poor' image, in the sense that is unclear, pixilated, compressed. As with the microscope or telephoto lens, we might gain ever-greater proximity to the real and yet lose sight of the 'bigger picture'. As Steyerl notes, it is the blurred images from a CNN reporter's cell phone, taken as part of a direct broadcast on one of the first days of the US invasion of Iraq, which reflect the 'uneasiness of any representation' without a reading of its purpose.<sup>203</sup> This optimisation of the image, which enables us to get closer, makes obvious that the closer we get to reality, and the more faithful the image is, the less we can actually see or find intelligible.

As discussed, Biemann's *Remote Sensing* expresses the diverse ways image technology tracks the movement of women. The work meshes the 'sensing' of actual bodies, moving from nation-state to nation-state, with personal data compiled via the artist's interaction with the women. The interlocking of large-scale global processes with the events of day-to-day life is best imagined by this acutely visible interaction between different types of images, enabled by digitalisation. It is not unlike the art of cartography, which allows us to see some things and yet hides others. If we find these macro-scale images always lacking, always incomplete — once viewed in juxtaposition with, for instance, the curious images taken on the CNN reporter's mobile phone — we attain a position that gets us closest to understanding our own lived reality and those with whom we share it.

Walter Benjamin describes technological reproduction as a way to 'abolish distance' and put the object within reach; arguably, this means one is able to *see* with a

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<sup>203</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'Documentary Uncertainty', <[www.aprior.org/n15\\_content.htm](http://www.aprior.org/n15_content.htm)>, accessed 19.03.2010.

greater degree of accuracy. Of course, his thesis on technological reproduction can be considered even more relevant today. In a digital age we have a heightened ability to gain access to multiple reproductions of the image. What this type of image can do, as Steyerl rightly points out, is bring us closer to things we would not ordinarily have access to. This exists, however, within a paradox, which is clearly understood by Steyerl: the closer one gets to reality, the bigger the loss of perspective.

### **Image as Strategy**

The opening sequence of *Amphibious Fictions* shows images detailing changes that have taken place in the field of work and labour. We begin in the present as we watch bulldozers tear through the walls of an old factory. Construction company logos cite the transformations that will take place. We stand behind Ruido's recording eye. It is a simple translation of the event, devoid of technical refinement and overt consideration of formal techniques. The filming records this process of tearing down the old to make way for the new. Next, Ruido provides an archival image of workers walking to factories on the horizon — smoke billowing from the tall chimneys. Rather than casting us back to the past, this image plants us firmly in the present.

Grainy images of workers going to and from work, as discussed in the previous chapter, have their own currency in the history of the moving image. The inclusion of this image, for Ruido, has a two-fold resonance. The subject of industry maintains her narrative, whilst the equally important role of the camera's picturing of such themes casts the image as an agent in the production of subjectivities.<sup>204</sup> The archival still photographs take us from the journey to work to being inside the factories: the workers and their machines appear efficient and never-endingly productive. These still images show a past life, a previous mode of living; however, the process of converting them to digital files and inserting them into a contemporary discourse does more than create a linear narrative that takes us from 'then' to 'now'.

While Ruido's *Amphibious Fictions* concentrates on the ideological weight images carry, the practice and writing of artist, Angela Melitopoulos, and sociologist, Maurizio Lazzarato, advances our understanding of the physical properties of the video.

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<sup>204</sup> Ruido discussed this notion of images as active agents in her paper, given at the University of Leeds September 2012, for part of the screening programme I organised, *A Thing Like You and Me* <<http://athinglikeyouandme.tumblr.com/>>, accessed 18.02.2013.

This is particularly useful for unpacking the often-perceived notion that memory, or the process of recalling, is a singular, inward-looking and thus individualised action.

Lazzarato and Melitopoulos have argued that we cannot document, or ‘tell’ life as it takes place. Rather, they suggest representation is used to order our experiences, more often than not in a sequential way, *after* they have occurred. This is perhaps most clearly articulated in Ruido’s voice-over in *Amphibious Fictions* when she likens her role to that of the machinists she films: ‘just like an overlock operator with a garment, I start assembling the pieces that form this narration’; the accompanying image shot from behind the machinist’s shoulder allows the viewer to carefully watch the machine’s needle puncture the fabric, pulling the literal and metaphoric fine thread through the garment.<sup>205</sup> However, Lazzarato and Melitopoulos warn us that such a process of ordering can produce clear cause-and-effect plots. These narratives structure our memory and colour our experiences of present events, allowing us to understand our reactions.<sup>206</sup>

Philip Rosen has argued that much conventional documentary film work is undertaken in the shadow of a hegemonic understanding of Western historiography, sharing the same principle in their construction of history. To expand: when archival footage is used to form a sequence, it is ordered in accordance with what history has already told us about a particular set of events. In this way, the documentary image (articulated by its ‘pastness’) is harnessed to an accepted and standardised knowledge-system. Rosen cites a specific cause for this formal choice: ‘not only did the nineteenth century see the invention of photography, phonography, and cinema [...]. Also, as many have noted, it was a period during which the study of history was professionalized.’<sup>207</sup> However, it is Melitopoulos’ video-essay *Passing Drama* (1999) that provides, for both

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<sup>205</sup> María Ruido, *Amphibious Fictions*, 2005, 02.59 mins.

<sup>206</sup> St Augustine’s notion of time is perhaps best served to underpin this conception of duration and remembering, for St. Augustine considered time (duration) as being understood as a tripartite relation between past, present and future (memory, attention, expectation). Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, (London: Penguin Books, 1961), book XI, pp. 253-280. The influence of Gilles Deleuze, however, on Lazzarato’s conceptual framework results in a continuation of the work of Henri Bergson’s theoretical argument and its relevance for the moving image. It is, ultimately, from Bergson that an understanding of the processes of time and memory are developed in relation to the video and digital image.

<sup>207</sup> Philip Rosen, ‘Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts’, *Theorizing Documentary*, (ed.) Michael Renov, (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 58-89, (p. 67).

the artist and her collaborator Lazzarato, a more accurate vehicle for understanding the image as central to proposing new ways of living.<sup>208</sup>

Like Ruido, Melitopoulos is interested in the process of weaving. For Ruido it is a subject-matter (through her focus on textile industries). Ruido also, as we have noted, suggests the links between weaving (or stitching together) and the process of constructing knowledge in order to recount a history. For Melitopoulos, the relation between the images of hands working an industrial loom in *Passing Drama* and the properties of the digital video can be extended further. Lazzarato and Melitopoulos cite weaving as a method of ‘non-linear montage’. They claim that video and digital technologies can provide one with the ability to create non-linear mediations of life as it occurs. The recording of time is used in a distinct manner by Melitopoulos. She shows that the technological capabilities of the digital video can either be compressed or elongated in order to mimic, and indeed make one conscious of, the cerebral processes of remembering.

*Passing Drama* illustrates how the desire to produce a homogeneous narrative purposefully glosses over the qualities of ‘forgetfulness’.<sup>209</sup> Or, perhaps more importantly, how collective recollection enables us to ‘fill in the gaps’. The frustrating procedures of weaving, or stitching — that is of moving forward to developing an ‘account’ of events — is attended to by Melitopoulos. Not only can the medium construct — working transhistorically — we also see how it can, in equal measure ‘unpick’.<sup>210</sup> The removal of the aligned ‘stitches’ is not an act of deconstruction at the level of the ‘text’, rather, such unravelling attests to how our consciousness is formed, moreover how it becomes *ordered*. Understanding these procedures as moveable, as

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<sup>208</sup> *Passing Drama* is just over an hour in length. It examines the forced paths of migration taken by Melitopoulos’ father, taking as its starting point the small city of Drama in Northern Greece, where many refugees from the 1923 deportations from Asia Minor now reside. Melitopoulos attempts to follow the different stages of movement across the European continent throughout the twentieth century.

<sup>209</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato and Angela Melitopoulos, ‘Digital Montage and Weaving: An Ecology of the Brain for Machine Subjectivities’, *Stuff it! The video essay in the digital age*, (ed.) Ursula Biemann, (Zurich: Voldemeer AG Zurich) pp. 116-126 (p. 121). Lazzarato and Melitopoulos argue in this instance how Henri Bergson’s notion of time and memory is afforded the same principles in the camera and montage techniques because they too ‘crystallize time’.

<sup>210</sup> The stitching together and constant unravelling of memory evokes the Greek story of Penelope and Odysseus. In an effort to keep suitors at bay whilst waiting for Odysseus’s return, Penelope delayed the prospect of remarrying by insisting she must weave a shroud for Laertes: only after she had finished the shroud would she consider future proposals. Under the fall of darkness, however, Penelope would unravel the day’s work, successfully prolonging the process for three years, at which time Odysseus made his return.

opposed to tied to only one long-forgotten event or act offers the possibility to reconsider our sense of ourselves and our relationships with others. Here the image actively opens up processes of subjectivation. The image can *generate* situations. This aim transgresses the usual manner in which the camera has been used to ‘capture’ the lives of others, formed within and producing a colonialist gaze, which will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Alberto Toscano has commented on Lazzarato’s approach to video.<sup>211</sup> Video, argues Toscano, enables us to see the effects on subjectivity ‘of a new form of informational, digital capitalism registered with the greatest accuracy’.<sup>212</sup> Through the multiplying of channels of administration, biopolitical capitalism can be understood as colonising the minutiae of everyday life (hence the proliferation of the use of statistics, data and records). Toscano notes that for some New Left thinkers ‘the notion of immaterial labour incorporates the idea [...] that consumption — conceived as the consumption of ideas, affects and feelings — becomes in some sense or another, productive: the consumer is not just a passive terminus but a complicit and creative relay in the reproduction of capitalism.’<sup>213</sup> Immaterial labour, for Lazzarato, is the kind of labour that produces ‘the informational and the cultural content of the commodity’.<sup>214</sup> The results of immaterial labour are connected, at least in principle, to offering the potential for collective enjoyment in the sense that they are ‘beyond the regime of property’ and the ‘spatio-temporal regime’ occupied by material commodities.<sup>215</sup> Lazzarato, therefore, looks emphatically towards the technologies and methods of communication that might foster new ways to develop the constructive power of the general intellect, or, as Toscano calls it, the ‘plural public of brains’.<sup>216</sup> For Lazzarato, colonisation is also the space for invention and resistance.

The digitalisation process of inserting old documents next to present footage, or satellite images next to computer-simulated graphics, weaves images that simultaneously replicate, produce and re-affirm our processing and perception of

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<sup>211</sup> Toscano focuses his discussion around Lazzarato’s book *Videofilosofia* written in 1996, as yet, not translated into English.

<sup>212</sup> Toscano takes this from Lazzarato. Alberto Toscano, ‘Vital Strategies: Maurizio Lazzarato and the Metaphysics of Contemporary Capitalism’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2007, vol. 24, issue 6, pp. 71-91 (p. 81).

<sup>213</sup> Toscano, (2007), p. 74.

<sup>214</sup> Toscano, (2007), p. 73.

<sup>215</sup> Toscano (2007), p. 74.

<sup>216</sup> Toscano (2007), p. 76.

reality. Such images perform unfamiliar tasks when circulating in the discourses of these video-essays. In their more familiar habitats they are used to gain dominance over — whether it be through military reconnaissance or mainstream journalistic reporting — any other readings. Ruido's *Amphibious Fictions* attempts to excavate images from the past to help us understand our future. In this manner Ruido does attempt to move away from cause-effect narrative constructions. However, through considering Lazzarato and Melitopoulos' approach to the video medium, I have been able to illustrate how we might push the active potentialities of the image further. This analysis helps to further extend Ruido's aims, particularly when using archival footage and photographs in an effort to expand temporal and spatial narratives. Ruido's decision to use archival images — that once functioned as documents, older advertisements, others synonymous with popular film culture, such as the lead image from Pudovkin's 1926 film *Mother* — devoid of captions and dates, enables them to be worked free and circulate in new debates. This emphatically notes, yet also aims to undo, the hierarchy of images and the roles they have in defining our collective histories.

## **Conclusion**

We know that power relations are exercised through the production and exchange of signs (within which images play a significant role). The deployment of image and text in the video-essays discussed provides more than an exercise in consciousness-raising. It is more than a counter-image to the images presented through mainstream media channels. Both Ruido and Biemann recognise the performative imperatives of biopolitical neo-liberal capitalism. Their use of documents enables one to not simply to *see* power as an end point, as a notion purely concerned with domination, rather it allows one to see the relationality of biopolitics, to witness the social relations taking place.

This chapter sought to challenge the manner in which the digital image is often thought to lack a dialogue with the real contemporary experiences of capitalism. In contrast, Biemann and Ruido have also considered how representation can explicitly move beyond the simple replication and circulation of existing discourses and images. Instead, I emphasise the crucial and political role of the creative. We should not focus on the way the digital image can simply represent our experiences. Rather, we should emphasise the circumstances under which this technology allows us to perceive, see and

create, asking in what ways it might *create* subjectivities, rather than act as a trace of them. It is my contention, therefore, that the digital image serves well an essayistic approach because the artist/author can manipulate the image with greater ease in post-production, weave different types of images together, and get simultaneously closer to, and create distance from, lived life. These formal attributes enable the visibility of *relations*.<sup>217</sup> Also, the speed at which the digital image can be copied, circulated, and downloaded, means it is able to operate as an active form of representation. The digital image can now reach audiences it may not have otherwise. The relative ease with which one can access the technology and use the image for one's own purposes, releases it from its original intentions.

Lazzarato argues that language, signs and images cannot be restricted to the realm of representation understood in the passive sense precisely because they contribute to making things happen.<sup>218</sup> As Steyerl notes, they can provoke involvement; they are therefore, a constituent part of reality and not simply a copy of that reality.<sup>219</sup> Images, language and signs have thus acquired greater weight in regulating daily life. The incorporeal and the corporeal, therefore — images, signs and statements— ‘contribute to the metamorphoses of subjectivity’ not its mimetic representation.<sup>220</sup> The circulation of images affects our cognition and becomes thoroughly realised by the body. For instance, we are surrounded by images that *suggest* we live a certain way. Products claim to assist us in gaining the life we should aspire to, the body we should have, the clothes we should wear and the foods we should eat. By the same token, ‘radical’/ ‘emancipatory’ images, signs and statements create effects and can help realise what is possible.

The perspectival device built into the camera might be unable to faithfully master the rapid, unbounded movement of natural vision. This limitation, however, should not be our sole concern. Our processes of seeing and knowing are better served

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<sup>217</sup> I shall address what it might mean to act as a type of ‘secondary’ witness to these relations in the next chapter.

<sup>218</sup> Lazzarato, ‘Struggle, Event, Media’, *The GreenRoom*, (2008), p. 216.

<sup>219</sup> Hito Steyerl rightly notes that despite being taught to distrust documentary images they still hold immense power: ‘Documentary reports are able to unleash military interventions, to provoke pogroms, international relief efforts, euphoria as well as mass panic’. See Steyerl’s short essay ‘Documentary Uncertainty’, < <http://re-visiones.imaginarrar.net/spip.php?article37>>, accessed 18.02.2013.

<sup>220</sup> Lazzarato, ‘Struggle, Event, Media’, *The GreenRoom*, (2008), p. 222.

through a method that can clearly note the reciprocity between text and image.<sup>221</sup> The power of the image, and of seeing, is tempered in the video-essay genre. The works discussed highlight the oscillation between image and text. They experiment with the interplay between images that allow us to see a total picture (satellite imagery, for example) and images that allow us to see at ground level (lightweight, attached to clothing), or, for instance, images that allow us to see things our natural vision does not (infra-red imaging). The video-essay under digitalisation can help rupture the supposed cohesion of capitalism in order to gain a closer re-cognition of reality. The works discussed allow us to move from the abstraction of the circulating flows of capital and subjects to a vision of the historical material conditions that enable particular relations. The co-emergence (and intensification) of documentary modalities, biopolitical methods of governance and growing options through which to gather together different types of vision, allows us to ‘see’ capitalist social relations differently. When this co-emergence is examined critically and historically, one is able to see, in a hitherto unprecedented way, the creation of different ways in which human beings become subjects. More accurately, one is able to see the processes of subjectivation at work. The determination of such subjectivities through methods of representation, positions the aesthetic as a successful method for *knowing*, *seeing* and *doing*.

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<sup>221</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell has written of this historical and ideological relation between the role of pictures and their verbal and written articulation. See Mitchell’s section ‘Image and Word’ in his *Iconology: Image, Text and Ideology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 42-46 and 116-119. Rancière writes in his introduction to *The Future of the Image*, that the role of words mean the image is not ‘exclusive to the visible’. This aids his broader discussions around what is ‘sayable’ and what is ‘visible’ and their mutual coherency (or incoherency). See *The Future of the Image*, (London: Verso, 2007), p. 7. For Rancière, the aesthetic’s political potential lies in its ability to move beyond expected, and known, terms in order to learn something new about our histories, our surroundings and ourselves; it is able to disrupt, what he terms, the ‘distribution of the sensible’. See *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), especially pages 12-19.

## Chapter Four – Political Modernism, Critical Realism and the 'Documentary Turn'

The work of the German avant-gardist, Hans Richter and the French filmmaker, Alexander Astruc is often cited as significant for an understanding of the film or video-essay medium. Over seventy years ago, both figures were considered to have made initial (and substantial) contributions, formulating precisely what the film essay might be — what it might mean for the development of a new cinematic language, what it might consist of visually and what it may be capable of achieving. Moreover, Guy Fihman has noted that the first use of the term 'essay' in a cinematographical context can be traced to Sergei Eisenstein, whose own notes on his work stated that the film *October* was a collection of essays 'on the series of themes that form *October*'.<sup>222</sup> Nora Alter notes that since the film essay's inception, its theorists and practitioners have tended to follow examples set by the written essay 'which entail resisting the temptation to situate the essay in stable generic terms'.<sup>223</sup> Prior to looking in more depth at Astruc's 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo' and Richter's 'The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film', an expedition into the literature of the 'essay' in its written form is required.

### **The Essay as Form: the written and the visual**

First, it is interesting to look at the etymology of the word 'essay'. Alter suggests that it is now perceived as an open-ended evaluative search, an exercise in questioning. Essay, however, or 'to essay', developed from the meaning of 'to assay', used to describe apprentices' numerous 'attempts' at producing an eventual masterpiece. It was also used when gold and silver was 'assayed', weighed in order to ascertain its worth.<sup>224</sup> This objectivist slant of 'weighing' something is altered, quite drastically, when we turn to the manner in which the 'essay' has been developed as the subjective opinion piece.

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<sup>222</sup> Fihman's text, 'L'essai cinématographique et ses transformations expérimentables' is published in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, (eds.) Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Murielle Gagnebin. See Laura Rascaroli's article 'The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments', *Framework*, vol. 49, no. 2, Fall 2008, pp. 24-47, (p. 27) where she translates and cites Fihman's text.

<sup>223</sup> Nora Alter, *Projecting History: German Nonfiction Cinema 1967-2000*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>224</sup> M. A. Screech (translator's introduction) in Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. xii.

Michel de Montaigne, the sixteenth-century French philosopher, coined the term ‘essay’ when titling his collection of prose *Essais* in 1580. It is Montaigne who explicitly identifies the importance of the subjective in the process of ‘assaying’ something. He wrote ‘I am the subject of my book’, a sentiment Chris Marker would later echo in relation to his film work.<sup>225</sup> Montaigne’s essays sought to test his ideas and those of society through his reflections on the fundamental questions of life. Even at such a formative stage for the genre, Montaigne sought to highlight tensions and overlaps between fact and fiction. Despite claiming himself the subject of his books, Montaigne aimed to avoid the strict separation between himself (the subjective ‘I’) and world (externalised object). In order, he wrote, to avoid the ‘perils of pure introspection’, he chose to turn his gaze outward on events, people or books that surrounded him. It is this dialectic that is still carefully mediated in critical contemporary treatments of the video-essay mode.<sup>226</sup>

Since this early inception, the essay has become established as a legitimate and crucial form for critical thought. Writing in 1910, Lukács reflected on the form of the written essay. In his letter to Leo Popper, ‘On the Nature and Form of the Essay’, he indicated concern about the difficult path he envisaged for the essay: ‘the essay form has not yet, today, travelled the road to independence which its sister, poetry, covered long ago’.<sup>227</sup> Lukács’ letter displays a clear intention to validate the written essay, insisting that this mode of criticism be thought of as a form of art.

Adorno’s 1958 ‘Essay as Form’ quotes Lukács and goes on to present insights that are helpful for exploring the structural form of the film and/or video-essay and the confluence of the medium with the written essay. Adorno, too, sees the essay as the core of critical, questioning thought. As Lukács, he notes the element of play, which should constitute its form.<sup>228</sup> The objective note that appears inherent to the origin of the word ‘essay’ appears to have been altered for good when one looks to Montaigne’s *Essais*

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<sup>225</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. ix. Marker: ‘Contrary to what people say, using the first person in films tends to be a sign of humility: All I have to offer is myself.’ Interview with Chris Marker by Dolores Walfisch, *Vertigo*, no: 7 (Autumn 1997), p. 38.

<sup>226</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection*, (1993), p. xiii

<sup>227</sup> George Lukács, ‘On the Nature and Form of the Essay’, *Soul and Form*, (London: Merlin Press, 1974), p. 1.

<sup>228</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘The Essay as Form’, *New German Critique*, No. 32 (Spring – Summer, 1984), p. 152. Benjamin to a greater extent allows this element of play to work more freely. Eugene Lunn discusses Benjamin’s playful renouncing of direct argumentation in *Marxism & Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: California Press, 1982), pp. 175-176.

and Marker's re-appropriation of 'only' having 'oneself to offer'. Here, the essay is seemingly reduced to individual subjectivity. To quote Lukács: 'the essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging'. Here one can see that it is not a matter of 'what I think', rather a concern with 'why I think a particular way'.<sup>229</sup> This ultimately enforces an outwards movement. For Montaigne, Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno and, ultimately, Marker, the essay is purposeful wandering. They also remind us, however, that it would be a mistake to perceive the essay as un-logical; rather, its 'ultra-violet rays' refracted through a literary prism (to use Lukács' metaphor) must coherently reach a totality.<sup>230</sup>

Okwui Enwezor has intimated that the 'documentary turn' of the late 1990s and early 2000s developed because of historical instability. This suggestion returns us to Alter's observation that the 'essay film' was first formally articulated in a period of historical crisis.<sup>231</sup> It is pertinent to ask why this genre might be perceived as useful for tumultuous times. A return to the evidential force of the lens-based image can be seen as a direct engagement with, and re-cognition of, the social world, signalling, arguably, a degree of urgency in being alert to *how* images shape our consciousness and *what* documents — whether they be the documents of Benjamin's 'victors of history' or not — regulate it.

Moreover, Richter writes that a handful of important films and filmmakers — Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922); the French film group, connected to Jacques Brunius, who made *Violons d'Ingres* (1939); and the British documentarists, John Grierson, Basil Wright and (British-based Brazilian) Alberto Calvacanti — demonstrated that ideas can be shaped on screen, making visible invisible thoughts and theoretical ideas. The Griersonian method was later seen to problematically dominate the limits of what the documentary could do. However, at this early moment, Richter concludes that these types of films, of which Grierson's work was certainly part, were

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<sup>229</sup> Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', *Soul and Form*, (1974), p. 18.

<sup>230</sup> Adorno, (1984), p. 169.

<sup>231</sup> Nora Alter (2003), pp. 12-24. For Okwui Enwezor see 'Documentary/Vérité: Biopolitics, Human Rights, and the Figure of "Truth" in Contemporary Art', *The GreenRoom*, (2008), pp. 81-85.

able to supersede the ‘tired’ form of the documentary. This ‘tired’ form, he noted, was unsuccessful when attempting to speak about topics such as the stock exchange.<sup>232</sup> Richter states that he finds the designation of ‘essay’ appropriate for this form of film as it attempts to assemble many strands of thought, forming a larger picture of the argument, rendering difficult thoughts visible. Richter writes, ‘even in the realm of literature the “essay” refers to the treatment of difficult topics in a generally accessible form’.<sup>233</sup> Richter, however, still questions the extent to which one might be able to ‘push’ the genre. For instance, he asks if these types of films are capable of ‘representing’ complex topics such as ‘The United States of Europe’ or ‘Freedom as A Goal of Social Development’. However, Richter wrote of cinema’s propensity for capturing events unfolding with time: ‘nature [was] not just as a view, but also as an element, the village not as an idyll, but as a social entity’.<sup>234</sup> Nonetheless Richter did have concerns about whether or not the general viewing public were capable of apprehending these new types of image when they had been used to seeing the moving image as one fit only for entertainment. These new images, he argued, required one to ‘come along, think along, and feel with it’.<sup>235</sup> Such a demand from the audience was at odds with previous models of cinema that had been presented for passive consumption.

‘The Birth of a new Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo’, originally published in *L’Écran Français* in 1948, was Alexander Astruc’s succinct and defining essay which called for the filmmaker to use his camera in the same manner as a writer uses his pen. Astruc situates his polemic at a point where he considers, as Richter, the ‘tired and conventional faces’ of ‘everyday films’ to be stunting the creative and critical capacity of the viewing public. Films such as Jean Renoir’s *La Règle du Jeu* (1939) and Robert Bresson’s *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945) — films, he notes, ignored by the critics of the day — were, for Astruc, the new avant-garde, attaining the same level of

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<sup>232</sup> *The Stock Market* (1938) was a film essay that emphasised the economic and social reasons for the changing market forms. Here, stills of paintings, old prints, engravings, and other historical documents were used as an integral part of the film, functioning as ‘arguments’.

<sup>233</sup> Excerpts from Hans Richter’s essay ‘The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film’ *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, (eds.) Christa Blümlinger and Constatin Wuldd, (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1992), pp. 195-198. Translation by Richard Langston <<http://www.unc.edu/courses/2007spring/germ/060/001/readings.html>>, accessed 22.02.2010.

<sup>234</sup> Hans Richter, *The Struggle for Film: Towards A Socially Responsible Cinema*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Palgrave, 1986), p. 47.

<sup>235</sup> Excerpts from Hans Richter’s essay ‘The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film’ *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, (eds.) Christa Blümlinger and Constatin Wuldd, (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1992), pp. 195-198. Translation by Richard Langston <<http://www.unc.edu/courses/2007spring/germ/060/001/readings.html>>, accessed 22.02.2010.

expression already accomplished by the novel or painting. Astruc writes that the film was no longer resigned to a passive mimetic function that solidified the image of an era; rather, it was now capable of developing its own language.<sup>236</sup>

At a later date, Edward Small's 'direct theory' implicitly draws from this point when he explains how written film theory is fundamentally flawed. He states that written texts cannot be adequate, by their very nature, in theorising a medium that is audio-visual, declaring that 'certain kinds of film and video works constitute a mode of theory, theory direct, without the mediation of a separate semiotic system'.<sup>237</sup> Astruc's early call for a new language means a move away from the 'tyranny' of what is visual: 'it becomes a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language'.<sup>238</sup> For Small, we can identify the call to avoid 'reducing' the filmed image to terms structured by a different mode of knowledge making. Over forty years earlier, however, Astruc appears to covet the flexibility and complexity of the written word. There are two different, but convergent points to consider here. First, to understand Astruc's conception of writing and the visual as two separate systems is inaccurate. Theoretically, both paradigms should be understood as having the potential to deal with complex and changing topics. Inscribing limitations to each medium results, as Astruc complains, in curtailing the medium's critical and innovative potentiality. Small, on the other hand, was writing at a time when the technologies of the moving-image had expanded and become understood in such a way that borrowing the terms of one medium in order to understand another, was no longer necessary in the same way. Whilst keeping Small's point in mind, we should be careful to not extend such a premise further. One system of knowledge-making is, of course, not superior to the another. Moreover, it is futile to insinuate that we are able to understand a medium in isolation from the multifarious systems we use to apprehend and discuss the world in which we live. Despite the historical distance between the two figures and the development in technology, both make a case for focusing on *how* the medium is *used* by the filmmaker or writer, for it is clear here that the two mediums *share* a methodology. As this chapter aims to show, this shared aim has been separated at

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<sup>236</sup> Alexander Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Style', *The New Wave*, (ed.) Peter Graham (London: Secker and Warburg) 1968, pp. 17-23.

<sup>237</sup> Edward Small, *Direct Theory: Experimental Film/Video as Major Genre*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994). It should be noted that Small is discussing this in relation to experimental film and not the documentary or film essay.

<sup>238</sup> Alexander Astruc, (1968), pp. 17-23.

certain historical moments. For example, certain fields require certain qualities of the medium, such as its propensity for evidence; it is through this process that the medium is determined solely by the purpose it serves. It was this over-determination that became central to the ‘politics of representation’ debates of the 1970s.

Therefore, two distinct, yet interrelated lines of enquiry, are required in order to consider the ways we might approach the contemporary video-essay and its treatment over the past fifteen to twenty years. First, as outlined above, is the history of the *essay* as *form*. The second track — and the one that operates across this genealogy — attends to a broader problematic and cannot be confined to any one moment, specific film or, indeed any one technology. The question, ‘How does representation engage with the social-political real?’, sits within what the film theorist Sylvia Harvey has called, the ‘aesthetic quarrel of the century: that of Modernism and Realism’, or what is often referred to as the Brecht-Lukács debates. In addition, writing in 1977, Fredric Jameson noted how the ‘aesthetic conflict between Realism and Modernism’ had become relevant once more.<sup>239</sup> It is also clear that when analysing artworks such as Biemann’s and Ruido’s, these earlier debates are once again of great significance and unavoidable when considering the relation between politics and aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This chapter, therefore, must chart the two trajectories. In order to think through the vagaries of Modernism and Realism, I will consider how different genres, or figures, claim the political ‘real’. Those claims — from documentary transparency to a focus on the constructed ‘texts’ or pictures as discursive formations — produce a tension for the video-essay. The history of the form and the history of the debates (which the form should be understood within) provide the two central orientations from which I draw a history of the video-essay. In addition is a need to consider the effects of technological innovation and adaptation of the photomechanical image over the last two centuries. In particular one must look to the manner in which the video camera’s insertion into everyday life helped change our understandings of its role. On the one hand, we can look to the split between commercial and non-commercial usage. Artists such as Nam June Paik subjected the TV and video to formalist play in a thoroughly modernist sense. Others, in the politically charged moments of the 1960s, sought to reclaim and ‘teach’ the democratic capacities of the video camera, removing it from the hands of the

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<sup>239</sup> Sylvia Harvey, ‘Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties: A Critical Recovery’, *Screen*, vol. 23, no. 1, May/June 1982, pp. 45-49, (p. 48). See Fredric Jameson’s afterword in *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 2007 third edition), p. 196.

commercial circuits of production and distribution.<sup>240</sup> In this process, the vernacular of the video (and television) became split, ‘making strange’ its assumed properties. My chapter avoids assigning the contemporary use of the video-essay to a ‘rightful place’ in a teleological lineage. Whilst the video-essay is related, for example, to photo-journalism, photo-documentary, cinematic documentary, essayism, avant-garde filmmaking, and their relevant debates, it is neither reducible, nor neatly comparable, to them.

### **Critical Realism and Political Modernism**

The contemporary relevance of the terms ‘critical realism’ and ‘political modernism’ can be traced to the approaches taken to realism by Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács. These exchanges took place in the immensely charged years of the 1930s, an historical moment that saw the rise of Nazi power in Germany and, subsequently, throughout the rest of Europe.<sup>241</sup> Divisions arose between the two writers around the essence of realism: should it be seen as a question of style (Brecht’s understanding of Lukács’s thought) or understood as a political commitment (Brecht’s contention)?<sup>242</sup> Brecht advocated that style cannot, and must not, remain the same across different epochs because each new epoch would demand new forms through which to express and translate social reality. Lukács’s favouring of the nineteenth century novel was understood, by Brecht, as a problematic and mechanistic approach that strictly adhered to realism as a style. The German theatre and literary scholar, Werner Mittenzwei, has warned against the will to perpetuate such a strict split between Brecht and Lukács. If we fall into this well-worn trap, notes Mittenzwei, we will be unable to recognise their considerations of realism as a methodological problem.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Chris Hill, *Attention! Production! Audience! Performing Video in its First Decade, 1968-1980*, (1996) <<http://www.vdb.org/content/surveying-first-decade-video-art-and-alternative-media-us-1968-1980-attention-production-aud>>, accessed 19.2.13.

<sup>241</sup> These exchanges sought to debate fundamental issues such as aesthetic effect, definitions of form and content, subjectivity and objectivity, and art’s social mission. These concerns were couched in the terms of socialist realism, critical realism and modernism. See Bela Kiralyfalvi’s ‘Georg Lukács or Bertolt Brecht’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 25, no. 4, Autumn 1984, pp. 340-348 (p. 340) for a useful discussion of the two figure’s theoretical and political similarities (rather than, as is usual, a focus on their differences).

<sup>242</sup> Bertolt Brecht, ‘Against George Lukács’, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 2007) pp. 68-85.

<sup>243</sup> Werner Mittenzwei, ‘The Brecht- Lukács Debate’, in Gaylord C. LeRoy and Ursula Beitz, *Preserve and Create*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), pp. 199-230.

One can see a distinction in Lukács and Brecht's thought when one looks to their understandings of the effects of continuity and discontinuity in thought processes. Lukács distrusted what he perceived to be Brecht's positive and uncritical acceptance of 'discontinuity' as a method for understanding the social world in which we live.<sup>244</sup> Lukács's valuing of the notion of totality has often been perceived as passive mimesis, an inability to critically dismantle the parts that construct the whole. For Lukács, however, endless focus on discontinuity, fissures and fractions, only served to mimic the defining characteristic of the capitalist system, isolation.<sup>245</sup> In only paying attention to fragmentation, one neglects, argues Lukács, the dialectical unity between appearance (how it *seems*) and essence (what it actually *is*). Moreover, the thread is severed between the social reality and the product that speaks of it. In favouring un-mediated thought as providing us with a truer insight to our social reality (for which, for example, James Joyce is championed), we neglect an analysis of *how* this materiality of thought develops in the social world and instead fetishise 'immediacy' and 'spontaneity', in turn inducing an over-extended interest in form and style.<sup>246</sup>

A preference for formal innovation, through devices such as Brecht's distanciation (distancing) techniques, estrangement effect and breaks in the continuity of the text (the artwork, the cultural product), together with political commitment, became of interest to cultural producers of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>247</sup> This period marked the 'neo-Brechtian' turn; interest in these debates was re-ignited once more by the translation into English and subsequent publishing of texts such as Brecht's 'Against George Lukács' (which appeared in *New Left Review* 1974).<sup>248</sup>

Sylvia Harvey, writing in the 1980s, noted that it was within this period that the term 'political modernism' emerged, heavily influenced by the reclaiming of Brecht's

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<sup>244</sup> George Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 28-59 (p. 31). Lukács at this section in the essay is also in dialogue with the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, a debate that I shall return to in my final chapter.

<sup>245</sup> George Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', (2007), p. 40.

<sup>246</sup> Lukács understood Expressionism as a clear example of this preoccupation with an inner un-mediated spontaneity that ultimately rests alone on subjectivity and not on 'man in his whole range of relations to the world'. See pp. 40-48 in the above-cited essay.

<sup>247</sup> Jameson writes that Brecht's estrangement effect (a key device of political modernism), presents phenomena in such a way as to show what once seemed 'natural and immutable' is actually historical, and thus 'the object of revolutionary change'. Fredric Jameson, 'Reflections in Conclusion', *Aesthetics and Politics*, (2007) pp. 196-213. (p. 206).

<sup>248</sup> Griselda Pollock, 'Screening the 70s: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice – A Brechtian Perspective', *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, (ed.) Amelia Jones, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 76-94 (p.79).

work and writings. This renewed interest was initially due to the French Nouvelle Vague filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group (spearheaded by Godard alongside another French filmmaker, Jean-Pierre Gorin). Harvey writes that this interest was due to a focus on not only realism, but also signification and subjectivity. The latter two aspects, for Harvey, saw Brecht's wider theorisations diluted or, rather, pushed to one side, in favour of a focus on the text and individualised, rather than collective, subjectivity.<sup>249</sup> Moreover, Harvey adds, the modernist interest in formalist concerns and innovation (devised to undo accepted and naturalised orthodoxies) meant a disregard for the arena of mass entertainment. This, neglect, notes Harvey, could have dire consequences. Moreover, for Brecht, the most important social group was the working class. Brecht argued that it was the working class who were the social group most likely to strive for betterment as a result of its dissatisfaction with an allocated 'lot' in life.<sup>250</sup> Harvey asserts, therefore, that ignoring central channels for communication meant — if one is to take Brecht's line of argument — an inability and missed opportunity to work with a flexible and receptive audience. It was the working class audience, argued Brecht, that was open, flexible and interested to learn, and thus the social group most likely to foster revolutionary ideas. It was this desire to foreground, and take hold of, production, from both the audience and artist's perspective, which saw Brecht's line of argument subordinate Lukács's thirty years earlier.

Harvey makes a convincing case in re-addressing how Brecht might be 'reclaimed'; she demands we consider, not only Brecht the modernist, and anti-illusionist, but also Brecht 'the entertainer, the socialist with an interest in populist culture' and collective subjectivity.<sup>251</sup> This is a particularly pertinent point for examining contemporary developments in filmmaking and the visual-essay in contemporary art. Perhaps the Brecht Harvey wishes to remind us of is better suited to an understanding of recent works, such as Biemann's and Ruido's, where there is less focus on discontinuity and fragmentation. However, we must be mindful of adopting what appear to be the central 'essentials' of political filmmaking. The changes brought by the development of neoliberal capitalism necessitate a different set of analytics; a broader reading of figures such as Brecht and Lukács is therefore needed if their

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<sup>249</sup> Harvey, (1982, pp. 55-56.

<sup>250</sup> Harvey, (1982), p. 56.

<sup>251</sup> Harvey, (1982), pp. 57-59.

theoretical and political insights are to be relevant for our present times, particularly so if we are to avoid producing mannerist work.<sup>252</sup>

### **Documentary Inadequacies**

In the overarching sections that follow, ‘Documentary Inadequacies’ and ‘Political Urgency’, I aim to consider the varied (and distinctive) elements that, when compiled, work to offer an account of the history of the video-essay. Of course this composition is not exhaustive.<sup>253</sup> It does, however, aim to pull apart such ‘styles’, periods and mediums in an effort to understand the priorities that were sought by both artists and filmmakers at specific moments in the twentieth century.

### ***The Anglo-American photo-text***

Artists such as Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler and Fred Lonidier, are now established as some of the most important critical investigators of the documentary project. Taught by artists such as John Baldessari and Allan Kaprow in 1960s California, these younger figures, disillusioned with what they considered to be an apathetic neutrality prevalent in much photo-Conceptualism of the time took their lead from both photomontage and political documentary. They sought to examine Russian film figures such as Sergei Eisenstein and the social documentary form. This interest was fostered through an engagement with the New York Film and Photo League of the 1930s. Alongside an interest in Soviet filmmaking was a re-discovery of the legacies of the American documentary tradition of the Depression era.<sup>254</sup> These interests produced a form (the photo-text) coupled explicitly with the potential for activist intervention. The 1960s saw an increasing politicisation of the population due to the growing discontent felt towards the dominant authoritarian uses of state power, from dictatorships to the violations of

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<sup>252</sup> Here I use the term ‘mannerist’ in its broadest sense. By ‘mannerist’ works I am referring to the artist simply replicating well-worn formalist devices.

<sup>253</sup> For example, this history would be complemented (and complicated) by an extensive examination of Third Cinema.

<sup>254</sup> See Anne W. Tucker’s essay ‘Strand as Mentor’ in Maren Stange, (ed.), *Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work*, (New York: Aperture, 1990), pp. 122-35. Tucker writes about the myriad of figures that came into professional and personal interaction with one another through their involvement in the New York Film and Photography League. The League cultivated a space in which one could critically produce ‘social documents’ that dealt with inequality and poverty. The effects of the Great Depression in the first half of the twentieth century sparked a need to record. Amateur’s work was considered alongside those such as Walker Evans who worked for a short, but pivotal period of time with the US Farm Security Administration.

Civil Rights (hence the formation of the Black Panthers) and the rise across the globe of US imperialism, particularly its involvement in the Vietnam war. Progressive discourses on college campuses were fed by writers such as Herbert Marcuse, whose *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) focused on the relation between the consciousness of the individual and the political. For Marcuse, this relation meant the formation of a new subject, a subject less influenced by ‘technical solutions’ offering ‘happy consciousness’: personal agency for social change thus ensued.<sup>255</sup>

The theoretically imbued photo-text form, which explicitly investigated the relation between images and texts, became a privileged vehicle for advancing truth claims. Artists such as Victor Burgin, Adrian Piper, Fred Lonidier, Sekula and Rosler, explored this specific form and extended its boundaries. Sekula’s and Rosler’s practices explored how photography might act as an agitprop device. They simultaneously questioned the extent to which photographic images might be beholden to discursive conventions and institutional frameworks, examining how these structures might curtail the photographic image from ever reaching its potential political efficacy. Moreover, essays written by Rosler and Sekula in the early 1980s demonstrate their unwillingness to contribute to a blind continuation of the documentary project that sought an objective truth.<sup>256</sup> Their work was to be imbued with a clear knowingness of the ideological function of images, taking precedence over and above a portrayal or continuation of ‘supposed’ neutrality. How one might avoid reproducing exploitation through the documentary image yet still obtain knowledge of societies? These artists of the New Left asked how one might escape representation that did not simply and reductively consign capitalism’s victims to what Rosler called a ‘safari of images’.<sup>257</sup> It appeared clear to artists such as those discussed here, that lens-based images not only could critique and challenge the accepted vernacular of the documentary image, but also were capable of challenging established definitions of art. Varied formal devices were sought to display the subject matter critically, undoubtedly making significant headway in the consideration of the politics of representation. This remains an issue of contestation and vulnerability for artists working in lens-based media. The earlier advances of Rosler and

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<sup>255</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 251.

<sup>256</sup> Rosler’s ‘In, Around and Afterthoughts on Documentary Photography’ (1981) and Sekula’s ‘Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary’ (1984)

<sup>257</sup> Martha Rosler, ‘In, around, and afterthoughts (documentary photography)’ in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 151-206, p. 191.

Sekula are therefore important for the ethical dimensions that surround picturing the ‘other’ in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I shall return to this in Chapter Five.

The artist Victor Burgin sought to advance this thesis. As in the cases of Sekula and Rosler, Burgin’s practice emerged within the orthodoxies of late-1960s Anglo-American Conceptual Art. Whilst initially adhering to such Conceptual Art, specifically the challenges posed by Art & Language, Burgin argued that:

No art activity [...] is to be understood apart from the codes and practices of the society which contains it; art in use is bracketed ineluctably within ideology... we must accept the responsibility of producing an art which has more than just Art as its content.<sup>258</sup>

Burgin’s, now canonical, work *Possession* (1976) was a reproduction of a standard advertising image depicting a couple embracing, juxtaposed with a quotation. Taken from *The Economist* the text read, ‘7% of our population own 84% of our wealth’. This prompted Burgin to say: ‘at the time I had the feeling the world was saturated with images, and there was no point in manufacturing more. I felt that an artist’s job was to take already existing images and rearrange them so that new meanings appeared.’<sup>259</sup> These types of strategies, such as the re-cycling of images, developed by practices such as Burgin’s, can be understood as parallel to the *détournement* strategy of the Situationist International. In *UK 76* (1976), Burgin, again, appropriated imagery from advertising sources and inserted psychoanalytical and feminist perspectives into the sign structure of late capitalist culture. The text emblazoned on these images, written in a journalistic fashion by Burgin, sees ironic contradictions arise between the world depicted visually and the world of fetishisation and commodification subsequently conveyed by the text.

In addition, Burgin’s writing traced the left-wing interest in visual forms of the mass media back to the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s. His 1976 text in *Studio International*, entitled ‘Socialist Formalism’, states that Conceptual Art is only ever discussed from a modernist perspective or, rather, from within the modernist trajectory. A need to read Conceptual Art from within a socialist art practice was thus required.

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<sup>258</sup> Victor Burgin, ‘yes, difference again: what history plays the first time around as tragedy, it repeats as farce’, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (eds.) Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 1999, p. 429.

<sup>259</sup> Victor Burgin, ‘Socialist Formalism’, *Studio International*, 191:980, March/April, 1976, pp. 148-52.

Burgin goes on to explain that the Soviet strand of formalism was absolutely bound to a 'real historical context'. Burgin saw its assimilation (and thus complete distortion) into the Western brand as partially linked to the prominent role Kasimir Malevich's work had begun to play. Malevich's interest in the 'spiritual in art' advantageously tallied with the Western tradition of Romantic Formalism. Because of this assessment, Burgin appealed to an alternative tradition and called for the concerns of Russian Formalism to be addressed in the modern Western art problematic:

the first requirement of a Socialist art practice is that it should engage those codes and contents which are existent in the public domain. These present themselves, and thus ideology as natural and whole; a Socialist art practice aims to deconstruct these codes to unpick the apparently seamless ideological surface they present.<sup>260</sup>

A central concern for Burgin, therefore, was to examine why images of advertising were not the subject of intense critical exploration and debate in the manner in which we have come to expect of cinema. Advertising, argued Burgin, is, arguably, the most mass-consumed art form and, for this precise reason, should be treated critically. The privilege that a genre such as the documentary enjoys in terms of broad dissemination, should, following Burgin's line of thought, also be subject to rigorous analysis.<sup>261</sup>

### ***Seeing and not seeing: a few remarks on Harun Farocki***

The film scholar, Nora Alter has suggested that in the period between the late 1960s and early 1990s, much critical filmmaking in Germany sought to move beyond solipsistic practices whilst, perhaps paradoxically, aiming to develop methods of reflexivity. Alter cites the East German film collective Heynowski and Scheumann, Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Harun Farocki, Wim Wenders, Ulrike Ottinger, Max Ophüls, and Winfred and Barbara Junge, as different examples of a larger group of authors that held common concerns.<sup>262</sup> For Alter, it is between the two poles of supposed objectivity and

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<sup>260</sup> Burgin, (1976), pp. 148-52.

<sup>261</sup> Burgin very briefly sketches a response to his query. He writes that it can be partly attributed to British intellectuals' cultural and academic background in 'English Lit' translating comfortably into '(what they take to be) animated books [cinema]'.

<sup>262</sup> This paradox is played out, perhaps most interestingly for Alter, in Wenders approach. Alter sees Wenders as unable to forego the role of the modernist figure of 'the mighty creator', despite marking a clearer interest in social reality in films such as *Tokyo-Ga* (1985) and

subjectivity that the film/video essay rests. It is important, however, to note that alongside this conceptual paradigm and its molding of a form are the effects and implications of funding structures, access to equipment, and the regulations surrounding dissemination — in short, the means of production. Alter positions Farocki as the clearest example of a film and video essayist. His slight distance from West German funding structures at the formative stages of his practice cannot, argues Alter, be underplayed when considering the level of experimentation required to produce the film works. This statement from Farocki neatly attests to the need to be ‘inventive’:

When one doesn't have money for cars, shooting, nice clothes; when one doesn't have money to make images in which film time and film life flow interruptedly/independently, then one has to put one's effort into intelligently putting together separate elements: a montage of ideas.<sup>263</sup>

Here we can see that the montage of ideas is shaped through circumstance, through material conditions. In such a practice, writing and gaps are given space to expand and allow contemplation, as opposed to being filled in and smothered by the impenetrable, smooth surface of the camera's image, an image otherwise refined through the complementary imbrication of the two distinct but intimately related paradigms of ‘word’ and ‘image’. In a way not unlike Farocki's, the Soviet filmmaker, Esfir Shub reminds us that restrictions do not result in lack of control. Shub's term ‘non-played’ — for the parts of the footage rejected in the editing process — pertains to the ‘mastery’ one can wield over such previously expendable material: what is rejected speaks its own story.<sup>264</sup>

Farocki, particularly as demonstrated in *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988-89), analyses the broader implications of seeing and not seeing, vision and visuality, or, as Alter puts it, ‘im/perceptibility’ and the construction of ‘truths’.<sup>265</sup>

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*Notebooks on Cities and Clothes* (1989). The blatant contradictions that were revealed and allowed to ‘breath’ in his works become a topic of interest for Alter, and, as she argues, at specific moments for Wenders too. See Alter (2002), p.141.

<sup>263</sup> See Farocki quoted and translated in Alter, (2002), p. 79.

<sup>264</sup> See Shub's ‘We Do Not Deny the Element of Mastery’ published originally in *Novyi Lef*, 1927 and republished in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, (eds.) Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1994), pp. 185-187.

<sup>265</sup> See Hal Foster's Preface in *Vision and Visuality*, (New York: The New Press, 1988), pp. ix-xiv. Vision and visuality can be understood as interwoven scopic regimes. ‘Vision’, whilst

His interest in the political implications of filmmaking and formal experimentation reclaims, in part, the Brecht that Sylvia Harvey called for in the 1980s. For example, Brecht's influence on Farocki's filmmaking appears to be, primarily, concerned with instigating political action and speaking to a collective, engaged, and active body. Alter notes that 'film [for Farocki] is political only to the extent that it has a political effect on the audience'.<sup>266</sup> His essay films ask questions of the social world in a fashion that is only possible through an engagement with the question of, and movement between, visibility and vision. In orchestrating this mediation, Farocki highlights how one can look, as Alter puts it, without 'really seeing'. Farocki is interested, moreover, in whether, or indeed *when*, this process is a conscious or unconscious one, natural or cultural, physical or psychological.

Given that Farocki wished for the essay film to be thought of as a form of intelligence, the expectations of the viewer are high and un-compromising. In developing a filmic text that aims to instigate political effect, and in moving outside, or beyond, the standard determinants of immediately recognisable modes of representation, the onus lies firmly on the viewer to decode and process meaning. The manipulation of form here appears to avoid the perils of self-reflexivity's pure introspection by firmly orienting the viewer to the ideological imperatives of seeing/knowledge, thus indicating both one's proactive and determined role in this process.

### ***The essay film in France and the documentary in Britain?***

As a result of the renewed appreciation of Chris Marker's work in the last ten years, and its relevance to new critical realisms, it is pertinent to consider his influence on the contemporary video-essay.<sup>267</sup> Biemann has noted Marker's practice as a precedent for her work. Other filmmakers, such as those interviewed in Ruido's *Real Time*, also

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perhaps most easily described and understood as a physical operation, is social and historical too. Likewise, 'visibility' for Foster involves the body and psyche, and cannot be fully grasped, however, without a grasp on the social, historical and physiological dimensions.

<sup>266</sup> Alter, (2002), p. 81.

<sup>267</sup> Steve Edwards notes Marker's relevance to critical realism in his article 'Commons and Crowds: Figuring Photography from Above and Below', *Third Text*, vol. 23, issue 4, July 2009, p. 457.

acknowledge the effect Marker's body of work has had on their own practices.<sup>268</sup> We must also, however, take into account his treatment of narrative structure, his use of 'writing' the lens-based image. Notably, André Bazin, who considered Marker a pioneer of the essay-film, commented that Marker's *Lettre de Sibérie* (1958) departed decisively from the familiar forms of documentary reportage to establish an entirely new form, 'the essay documented by film'. Bazin argued that the intelligence present in Marker's voice-over and commentaries was akin to the literary or critical essay.<sup>269</sup> This initial articulation of 'essayist' became commonplace in future discourse in and on Marker's work.<sup>270</sup>

In understanding this renewed attention to Marker, we must first consider why his practice has been overlooked, or left in the shadow of other French new wave figures, such as Jean-Luc Godard (who is associated more directly with the politics of representation debates).<sup>271</sup> To understand Marker's position next to his contemporaries, it is important to note the film critic Richard Roud's characterisation of a 'Left Bank' group, in which he placed Marker, alongside others such as Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda. A 'Right Bank' Group, however, was associated more closely with the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* and French New Wave cinema, synonymous with the work of Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut and Jacques Rivette amongst others.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Ursula Biemann, (2003), p. 8, notes that Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* marked the emergence of a post-structuralist cinematographic practice defined as film essays.

<sup>269</sup> André Bazin, *Lettre de Sibérie*, in *Le Cinéma Français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague 1945-1958* (Paris 1983), pp. 179-81. This review was first published in *France-Observateur*, 30<sup>th</sup> October 1958 (English translation in *Film Comment*, XXXIX/4<sup>th</sup> July-August 2003, pp. 44-5).

<sup>270</sup> Marker's body of work cannot be considered as wholly coherent. His treatment of the documentary, or wider non-fiction genre, moves from politically censored shorts (*Les statues meurent aussi*, 1953), earlier travelogues (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1958), experimentation with voice-over and subsequently the removal of it all together (*Le Jolie Mai*, 1962) and *Le Fond de l'air est rouge*, 1977) to experimentations with science fiction (*La Jetée*, 1962). One can, state, however, that Marker's work is routinely referred to as 'essayistic'.

<sup>271</sup> William F. v Wert notes that the mere mention of political filmmaking in France after the turmoil of May 1968 is synonymous, for most part, with the name of Godard and the Dziga-Vertov Group (spearheaded by Jean-Pierre Gorin alongside Godard). He continues: 'few people know that French collective filmmaking derives from Chris Marker, who formed a film co-operative SLON (Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles)'. See his article: 'Chris Marker and the SLON Films', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Spring, 1979), pp. 38-46.

<sup>272</sup> Sarah Cooper, *Chris Marker*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 4. Cooper notes that although the Right Bank garnered more financial success and notoriety than the Left Bank, for the most part, there was reciprocal encouragement between the two groups.

The film scholar Catherine Lupton has described the 1950s and early 1960s in France as a period in which documentary filmmakers of the Left flourished. The period initially threatened short filmmaking due to the re-instatement of two-feature cinema programmes in picture houses. French short filmmakers — of which Marker, Alexander Astruc and Agnès Varda were three — protested by signing the petition ‘Declaration of the Group of Thirty’ (1953).<sup>273</sup> The preceding decade in France had seen the grip of the Vichy government, whose ideological imperatives (in close alliance with the Nazi regime) were fostered through a framework that demanded documentary shorts precede all feature films and extol the virtues of national identity and patriotism.<sup>274</sup> Lupton notes that, to un-intended ends, structures enforced by the Vichy government formed a platform for young directors to gain experience.

In order to circumvent the dominant discourses, ideas and values of the Vichy regime, however, radical artists’ and filmmakers’ shorts needed to be inventive and experimental. This specific treatment of truth and fact can be said to have imbued a different focus on much resulting documentary film work in France. Here, image and narrative broke apart in order to conceal tracts that may be considered too progressive, or indeed anti-government in tone and ideas. Moreover, Lupton has written that documentary in France came to be regarded as most close to the authored literary essay. The boundaries between documentary fact and fiction were always perceived as having a substantial degree of fluidity.<sup>275</sup> Revealingly, Marker’s early work as a writer, prior to entering filmmaking, goes a long way towards understanding the deployment of the essayistic mode in his film work.<sup>276</sup> Whilst narrative voice-over is perhaps considered as the easiest device through which to alter and blur the boundaries of fact and fiction, Marker and Alain Resnais’ seminal film essay *Les Statues meurent aussi* (Statues also

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<sup>273</sup> Concomitant to the fight against the re-instatement of a two-feature cinema programme, was a new government-ran grant that came to fruition in 1955. This, along with the support of sympathetic producers such as Anatole Dauman and Pierre Braunberger, enabled a great deal of experimentation to take place in French filmmaking at the time. Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*, London: Reaktion Books, 2005), pp. 46-47.

<sup>274</sup> Lupton, (2005), p. 47

<sup>275</sup> Lupton, (2005), p. 49. For example, Marker’s indifference to historical accuracy and its role in the documentary genre in his *Letter From Siberia* is demonstrated here: ‘being a little bit short on footage and thinking that all forest fires are pretty much alike, I didn’t think I was betraying documentary reality by inserting a few frames furnished by Pathé-Journal Newsreel. But since these frames are of Montana, maybe I should point out that this is the first film ever made to show Russian fire-planes putting out an American fire.’ See Van Wert, (1979), pp. 38-46 (p. 39).

<sup>276</sup> Sarah Cooper accounts for Marker’s work as a writer for travel guides in her assessment of his early career. Cooper, (2008), p.11.

Die) (1950-53) used fades, zooms and steady pans to lend static objects a dynamic narrative force. It is precisely the tension created by the space between the images and words that enables *Les Statues* to explore and expand upon a film form that can be traced to 1920s Soviet film culture.<sup>277</sup>

One can trace the present treatment of the video-essay to the development of the documentary in France throughout the twentieth century, and, in turn, to the influences that Soviet filmmaking had on French filmmakers. The video-essay does, however, have a contested relation to the documentary genre, which is perhaps best understood when one situates the European and American contemporary video-essay within the history of the British use and understanding of the term.<sup>278</sup> It is within this context that opposition is more easily seen. My thesis argues, however, that a total rejection of the 1920s Anglo-American paradigm and some of its key devices — particularly when considering the deployment of the authorial voice — cannot be sustained when analysing recent engagements with the documentary and the purposes it is expected to serve.

In Britain, the term documentary had become somewhat synonymous with the filmmaker John Grierson. He first coined the term in 1926 and his work still heavily influences present conceptions of the documentary genre.<sup>279</sup> The documentary-style work that was taking place in France was quite different to that delineated by Grierson. He subscribed to presenting the real as hard objective fact aligned with a transparent message that aimed for social change. Grierson's innovative techniques and formal inventiveness can be seen in films such as *Song of Ceylon* (1934) and *Coal Face* (1935). However, despite such innovation, his infamous statement proclaiming that 'art' should be the 'by-product of a job well done' is indicative of his priorities.<sup>280</sup> Grierson believed

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<sup>277</sup> Alongside the influence of early Soviet cinema, Lupton notes the effects of the Russian filmmaker, Esfir Shub, and French filmmaker, Nicole Védres. Both filmmakers relied heavily on the re-animation and integration of archival, found and disregarded footage. See Catherine Lupton (2005), p. 8. As I have previously stated, the work of both these filmmakers is vastly undervalued and underplayed in the literature on political filmmaking. For example, the history of political filmmaking follows a lineage through the 'great fathers' of the genre. From Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein and Joris Ivens to Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin and even the fairly recent revival of (and insertion) of Chris Marker into the official history.

<sup>278</sup> The British use of the documentary is also understood as being closer to the development of the medium in North America and Canada.

<sup>279</sup> See Ian Aitken's *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>280</sup> Basil Wright directed *Song of Ceylon* for John Grierson Productions. John Grierson, 'First Principles of Documentary', in *Grierson on Documentary*, (ed.) Forsyth Hardy (London and

that the film medium should be deployed to ‘speak to the masses’ and affect social opinion. It was this aspect that he considered as the priority of the medium and not its position as an art form.<sup>281</sup> Grierson’s coinage of the term ‘documentary’, however, derives from the French term *documentaire*.<sup>282</sup> Quite aptly, for some of the contemporary video-essays my thesis examines, *documentaire* was the term the French applied to their travel films. It is perhaps Chris Marker’s most well-known work, *Sans Soleil* (1983), which is most faithful to this earlier meaning. It does, however, complicate one’s expectation if the documentary image is solely concerned with actuality. Taken more carefully, however, one can see that the need to observe has, historically, tallied closely with Western colonialist vision. With this association in mind, the French use of the term *documentaire* and Grierson’s adoption of it are more closely linked than one might first consider.

The preoccupation with the constructed nature of the text and the innovations developed to deconstruct it became important in the 1960s and 70s. For instance, in 1969 Jean Narboni and Jean Comolli published their influential article ‘Cinéma/Idéologie/Critique’ in *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The journal’s editorial position between the years 1968 and 1972 was outlined in this article, which argued that bourgeois cinema needed to be attacked on a level of form as much as (and if not more than) that of content. To expand, Costa-Gavras’s film *Z* is positioned as one of these ‘films that have an explicitly political content [...] but which do not effectively criticise the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestionably adopt its language and its imagery’.<sup>283</sup> It was precisely this type of filmmaking that had become ubiquitous at their time of writing and thus presented the greatest concern.<sup>284</sup>

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Boston, MA, 1979), p. 41. Grierson’s experimentation with film form was not the only innovation in his works, the inclusion of Benjamin Britten and W.H Auden in documentaries such as *Coal Face* has secured long-term appreciation of the films. Despite this Grierson has been criticised by film scholars such as Claire Johnston and Paul Willeman for failing to make clear that his drive for social reform was contradicted by his work being funded by the state. Claire Johnston and Paul Willeman, ‘Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on *The Nightcleaners*)’, *Screen*, Winter 1975-76, vol. 16, no 4, p. 112.

<sup>281</sup> Forsyth Harvey (ed), in John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1966), p. 15.

<sup>282</sup> Forsyth Harvey (ed), in John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, (1966), p. 13.

<sup>283</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni ‘Cinema/Ideologie/Criticism’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 216, October 1969, republished in *Cahiers du Cinéma Volume 3 1969-1972 The Politics of Representation*, (ed.) Nick Browne, (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 62.

<sup>284</sup> Comolli and Narboni, (1990), p. 62.

Some forty years later, these ‘politics of representation’ debates still resonate in discussions of the documentary and its aim to reproduce social reality in cultural production. Steyerl raises these concerns when discussing the documentary *Showdown in Seattle* (1999):

Their demands and positions are articulated across broad segments of the film - in the form of ‘talking heads’. Because the form of the shots is the same, the positions are standardized and thus made comparable. At the level of the standardized conventional language of form, the different statements are thus transformed into a chain of formal equivalencies, which adds the political demands together in the same way that pictures and sounds are strung together in the conventional chain of montage in the media chain of production. In this way, the form is completely analogous to the language of form used by the criticized corporate media, only the content is different, namely an additive compilation of voices resulting in the *voice of the people* when taken together.<sup>285</sup>

These concerns indicate that merely implanting ‘radical’ or ‘political’ subject matter cannot be enough if one is aiming to criticise the status quo. Whilst the importance of a ‘politics of familiarity’ should not be neglected, working in the exact mould of established film shots, framings, and interviewing techniques, runs the risk of reinforcing expected patterns of response from viewers. This tension articulates the problems faced by those wishing to make either political films, or films about political subject matter.

For Ruido, different periods in history demand different types of representation. This implies that older methods should face enquiry. For instance, she argues that post-Fordism requires a type of representation altogether different from that of industrial capitalism. Developments in technology make it easier now to incorporate older modes of representation into our present, as discussed in the last chapter. Ruido argues, therefore, that one must acknowledge the previous stage of capitalism without returning to the same modes of representation. Writing in relation to her most recent work, *ElectroClass* (2011), she describes a methodology that is capable of displaying a:

generation of distancing, attempting a subtle, delicate  
dismembering of the production logic of the real that naturalises

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<sup>285</sup> Hito Steyerl, ‘The Articulation of Protest’, date accessed 22.12.09.  
<<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0303/steyerl/en>> Translated by Aileen Derieg 09. 2002.

the televisual imaginary (just like the simplest and most reactionary documentary imaginary), revealing within it its [sic] frameworks of material construction and, in short, its fictional quality.<sup>286</sup>

Ruido writes that the quality of the images in *ElectroClass* and her choice to create multiple layers, articulate the ‘ghosts’ of earlier stages of capitalism. She states that images demonstrate a deeper homology with capitalist social relations and the bodies these relations produce. The role of the television set in the home, or access to news channels via one’s computers, creates an increased relation with images. The prominent position that images now have in forming one’s sense of self and, therefore, one’s relation to others, means the visual can aid capitalism in eroding the boundaries between work and leisure time.<sup>287</sup> In this period, more than ever before, we work to cultivate the correct body and we are proactive in our self-refinement; newly developed labour patterns both produce and benefit immensely from this shift. The artist’s body, or that of the flexible, freelance worker, in many ways serves as a shining example. It is self-motivating, agile, industrious, eager to please, creative, and able to ‘work’ just about anywhere.

Whilst *ElectroClass* deals with the specific locality of Bilbao, Ruido’s *Amphibious Fictions*, and her interview with Laura Mulvey in 2010, locate the United Kingdom context as central for understanding not only the history of capitalism but also the debates around political filmmaking. Some of the key figures, histories, and journals, and the earlier effects of, for instance, John Grierson, have a formative role in the production of recent works such as Ruido’s. Moreover, they have a certain purchase in the revival of an earlier moment before the outbreak of World War II: a return to the ‘neo-Brechtian turn’ in filmmaking in Britain is therefore required.

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<sup>286</sup> María Ruido on *ElectroClass* <<http://www.workandwords.net/en/projects/view/584>>, accessed 05.04.12.

<sup>287</sup> The role images have in forming subjectivity is not unique to the last forty years. However, developments in technology and the increased accessibility to equipment that produces such images elevate the lens-based image to new levels. For this reason alone we must take the image seriously as opposed to conceiving of it as a reflection on ‘serious’ politics; considering it as some sort of auxiliary aid.

*For Whom? Tensions within the neo-Brechtian turn of 'political' filmmaking in 1970s Britain*

Embedded in the discourse surrounding realism, Brecht is, historically and contemporaneously, a central figure.<sup>288</sup> Essential to the fostering of the neo-Brechtian turn in filmmaking in the UK was the film journal *Screen*, which published a plethora of essays on realism and the cinema.<sup>289</sup> The question at stake for many filmmakers and theorists throughout this period was a desire to unite semiotic and ideological analyses with a radical aesthetic practice that had concrete social effect. Moreover, the debates between the filmmaker and theorist, Peter Wollen and art historian, T.J. Clark, as noted by Griselda Pollock, re-ignited the famous exchanges between Brecht and Lukács on the political merits of realism versus modernism.

The generation of post-1968 filmmakers intensified interest in the aesthetic Brecht developed in the 20s and 30s ('the text is changed so that the nature of its relationship with the audience may also [...] be changed').<sup>290</sup> The relation between cultural production and social change, and its search for radically new forms espoused by Brecht, became a focal point. The republishing of the seminal essay 'Against Georg Lukács' in the late 60s and the critical attacks on Stalinism and 'Socialist Realism', along with an interest in Russian Formalism, culminated in a recalling of Brecht's work.<sup>291</sup>

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of political documentaries and the forming of collective film groups in Britain.<sup>292</sup> Among these groups were: *Cinema Action* (of which the British-based avant-garde political filmmaker Marc Karlin was part); *Liberation Films* (which concentrated on grass-roots issues in a local context);

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<sup>288</sup> For example, we might look to the 2009 Istanbul Biennial which took its name, 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?', from the song 'Denn wovon lebt der Mensch?', the song which closed the second half of Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928).

<sup>289</sup> In the summer of 1974, *Screen* published a special issue 'Brecht and a Revolutionary Cinema'. The editors of the journal at the time also provided a distributing service for Brecht's work (both to be hired and sold). At the request of the organisers of the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1975, the Editorial Board of *Screen* programmed a series of screenings and discussions on the topic 'Brecht and Cinema/Film and Politics' (the discussions and papers from this event formed the basis for their Winter 1975/6 issue).

<sup>290</sup> Harvey, (1982), p. 49. Brecht wrote: 'the episodes must not succeed each other indistinguishably, but must give us a chance to interpose our judgment'. Brecht's insistence on gaps can be traced to the use of the repeated break in flow as one 'of the most essential aspects of political filmmaking'. See Harvey, (1982), p. 49, for her discussions of Brecht and engagement with Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen's work from the *Screen* 1975/6 issue.

<sup>291</sup> Harvey, (1982), p. 50.

<sup>292</sup> Pollock, (2003), p. 81.

Newcastle-based *Amber Films*; and *Newsreel Collective*. All sought to document workers' struggles, and grass-roots community contexts, some armed with a more articulated ultra-leftist politics than others.<sup>293</sup> Many of the films made by these groups, however, were subject to criticism from writers who contributed to the film journal *Screen*, due, in part, to the influence of the *cinéma vérité* mode of filmmaking on these works.<sup>294</sup> The perceived problem of *cinéma vérité* style was its aim to capture the world as it 'really is'. For the documentary theorist, Bill Nichols, this style aligns itself most closely with the observational mode of documentary. It suggests a seamless impression of continuity and coherence, avoiding the problems presented by what it means to picture something.<sup>295</sup> There are some noted works from this period, however, that were considered to move beyond the problems of *cinéma vérité*: *Nightcleaners* and *The Song of the Shirt* sought to explore, and influence the politics of form debates.<sup>296</sup> Notably, it has, in part, become expected, in 'political filmmaking' to include a repetitive breaking of flow. Such curtailment prevents the illusion of life recorded as if it exists 'out there' waiting to be captured, or avoids, as Claire Johnston and Paul Willeman note, the falsity of the 'coherent, homogeneous whole'.<sup>297</sup> Works such as *Nightcleaners* and *The Song of the Shirt* continue to show their influence in more recent film and video works. We can, however, note how Biemann, while borrowing techniques such as breaking up the flow of images with blank orange screens, uses, in addition, typed text, which inscribes this 'breaking' device in a far more direct way, asserting its purpose in a clear, directive fashion.

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<sup>293</sup> Johnston and Willeman, (1975-76), p. 103. In addition, the feminist and women collective filmmaking co-ops, which sprung up around the late 70s and early 80s, can be seen as products of the wider interest in the collectivity fostered by the possibilities of lens-based media.

<sup>294</sup> The criticism developed by the writers, and fostered in the journal, had a particular set of influences. Griselda Pollock cites Althusserian notions of ideology, Saussurian semiotics and Lacan's work on the Subject as leading debates. Pollock also argues that the strong interest in Brecht's work is often overlooked in more recent analyses of this period. See Pollock, (2003), pp. 76-94, (p. 81).

<sup>295</sup> Nichols' typology of the different 'documentary modes' arises in a variety of his writings; it is perhaps covered most clearly in his *Introduction to Documentary*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010). In this short book he lists six modes: expository (most closely associated, for Nichols, with the 'voice of God'); poetic (closely aligned to subjective accounts); observational (window on the world); participatory; reflexive (which appears close to Nichols' 'poetic' category); and lastly, the performative mode.

<sup>296</sup> Because of the unique approach to narrative in *The Song of the Shirt*, and the relation between and 'self' and filmed 'other', a more detailed account is provided in Chapter five.

<sup>297</sup> Johnston and Willeman, (1975/6), pp. 101-119, (p. 106).

*Nightcleaners*, made in 1976 by the Berwick Street Film Collective, spearheaded, at the time, by Marc Karlin, explored the conditions of women working the nightshift cleaning London office blocks.<sup>298</sup> Conceived initially as a film to document and aid the unionisation of the cleaners, the film's long gestation period resulted in it taking a different direction. Claire Johnston and Paul Willeman describe these tensions:

On the whole it's been badly received in the women's movement, especially perhaps by women who were very much involved in the campaign and saw the film originally as a campaign film. It was initially intended to be made in a cinema-verité manner [...] there was a very close involvement between the film-makers and women's liberation, and there were expectations that it would be a useful campaign film for the nightcleaners' struggle, but in terms of conventional notions of agit-prop, of course, the film didn't fulfil those needs at all.<sup>299</sup>

The tension between a campaign film, with direct and quick effect, and the larger contribution the film can make to remembering the nightcleaners' struggle, can be considered further. There is, however, a rather more complicated set of reasons as to why the film was considered to lose some of its impact. Shelia Rowbotham, one of the key figures of the Women's Liberation Movement and of the campaign Cleaners' Action Group, accepts that, by the end of 1972, momentum had begun to wane. For instance, the effort to sustain such committed campaigning, and the relative success of gaining support of the Civil Service Union, meant key figures (such as the working women, Jean Mormont and Jean Wright) saw less of a role for themselves. In addition, one of the groups' public figureheads, May Hobbs, was moved away from involvement in this specific case in order to fulfil the demand for her to speak around the UK. As Johnston and Willeman attest, Rowbotham alludes to the different set of expectations May Hobbs had for the film and those priorities of the filmmakers themselves.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, 'Jolting Memory: *Nightcleaners* Recalled', (2008), Maria Ruido (ed.), *Plan Rosebud: On Images, Sites and Politics of Memory*, (Santiago de Compostela: CGAC, 2008). It is perhaps important here to note Karlin's encounter and subsequent working relationship with Chris Marker around the period of May '68.

<sup>299</sup> Johnston and Willeman, (1975-76), pp. 101- 119 (pp. 113-114).

<sup>300</sup> Women's roles in the home (social reproduction) meant a need for flexible employment. This predicament could be manipulated by employers, who saw benefits for themselves in their staff's need for flexibility: casual contracts meant women saw little of official employment law and representation. Sheila Rowbotham, (2008), pp. 1-19.

Shot in black and white, *Nightcleaners* successfully avoids dramatising the tedious, repetitive and often, isolated task of cleaning. As Shelia Rowbotham has stated, the film not only positions the working-class cleaners at the centre of the work, but also acts as a portrayal of the formation of the Women's Liberation Movement as members sought to aid May Hobbs recruit the cleaners into unions. The challenges of assisting women to develop a voice, reaches further levels of complexity when multiple oppressions are intersecting. Rowbotham has written that many of the night cleaners preferred to remain anonymous throughout the making of the film as some were claiming social security. Moreover, recalls Rowbotham, 'a sizable minority were immigrants from the Caribbean and exceedingly nervous. They needed the money, little as it was, most desperately.' Rowbotham acknowledges how these women's particular situation was very complicated; many were faced daily with racism in working class communities as well as in the job market.<sup>301</sup> The women's lack of time to plan and attend meetings, and to sustain the campaign, also requires emphasis. Many of these women, after finishing their night shift, would wearily make their way home, only to begin their jobs as mothers and wives in the space of social reproduction. The challenges between the problems of aiming to 'present' a fair picture of experience and events, and the role such images could play in soliciting change, are painfully articulated in *Nightcleaners*, particularly so when there is a desire to work beyond the existing codes of practice and ways of seeing.

### **Political Urgency**

#### ***Video: social engagement, collectivism and formal experimentation***

The videotape entered the mass market in 1956 and the Sony Portapak (the first handheld video camera) became available as early as 1965. Chris Hill has described how the videotape began to be perceived as a medium for radical praxis by artists and social activists.<sup>302</sup> The marketing of the videotape was not the first time artists took note of the medium of the televisual. Artists such as Nam June Paik had subjected television to varying degrees of deformation and mockery (influenced by his involvement with the

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<sup>301</sup> Shelia Rowbotham (2008), p. 8.

<sup>302</sup> Chris Hill, 'Attention! Production! Audience!— Performing Video in the First Decade, 1968-1980', <<http://www.vdb.org/content/surveying-first-decade-video-art-and-alternative-media-us-1968-1980-attention-production-aud>>, pp. 1- 28, originally published in 1996, accessed, 21.02.2010.

Fluxus movement).<sup>303</sup> This period, however, could be differentiated from such practices as Paik's through the interest artists and activists had on video's 'democratic' potentials. They sought to transform its existing configuration as a passive instrument of spectatorship into a medium of creative interaction.<sup>304</sup> David Antin wrote that many video art exhibitions of this period were haunted by corporate usage of television; thus, a long period of critique was sustained. We might consider here exhibitions such as *Image Scavenges* and *The Stolen Image and its Uses*, both US-based exhibitions staged in 1982 and 1983 respectively, as an indication of a sustained interest in what Griselda Pollock encompasses under the term 'media critique'.<sup>305</sup> This suspicion was quite so for the New German cinema director Wim Wenders, who stated dramatically that: 'Television is poison ivy of the eyes'.<sup>306</sup> Indeed, it was around this period that the American artist, Richard Serra produced his didactic video work *Television Delivers People* (1973).<sup>307</sup>

This turn towards the utopian aspects of the video camera was furthered by the aim to de-mystify its technology in order to deconstruct the end product. In a way similar to the writings of Jean Comolli and Jean Narboni in *Cahiers du Cinema*, the first issue of *Radical Software* (1970), published by the New York media collective, Raindance Corporation, asserted that 'unless we design and implement alternate information structures which transcend and reconfigure the existing ones, our alternate

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<sup>303</sup> Martha Rosler's essay, 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment', takes issue with a simple 'either/or' approach in citing an 'origin' for the genre that would become 'video art'. In fact, she argues that 'video's past is the ground not so much of history as of myth'. She argues that some take the 'sudden availability of the Sony Portapak', others return to Nam June Paik's acts of 'mutilation' and 'fetishisation' of the TV set as the place from which to write video's history. The pull between the seemingly disparate, but often purposefully enforced, spheres of video as a social and public history, and video as having an *art* history requires a far more nuanced account of such intersections. See Rosler, 'Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment', *The Block Reader in Visual Culture*, (1996), pp. 258-279, (pp. 269-273).

<sup>304</sup> The influential media theorist Marshall McLuhan's writings also had an impact on the post-war generation that grew up alongside the technological development of the television.

<sup>305</sup> Pollock, (2003), pp. 76-94, (p. 89). Running alongside the tract of 'media critique' is, of course, the role the camera played for recording artist's performances. Additional qualities, such as the ability for duplication and the relatively quick decline of the quality of the medium, meant an inability to retain value over a longer period. This was appealing for those wishing to sully the boundaries of the status of the art as 'object'.

<sup>306</sup> Alter, (2002), p. 124.

<sup>307</sup> Interestingly, this work by Serra is referred to by Hal Foster as a video-essay in the survey book *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism and Postmodernism*, (ed.) Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), p. 561. It would seem that for Foster the use of text scrolling across a blank blue background literally shows a written essay applied to the screen. This appears a rather cursory use of the term and perhaps goes some way in highlighting the lack of theoretical engagement with the genre.

systems and life styles will be no more than products of the existing process'.<sup>308</sup> A shared desire to form alternatives to mainstream media, along with a need to pool equipment, saw many important collectives emerge throughout the US.<sup>309</sup> This period of fairly free, yet intense, experimental praxis, recalls Brecht's thoughts on the nature of production, which he so vehemently accused Lukács of being an enemy of.<sup>310</sup> In line with Brecht, a demand to pay greater attention to those who owned the means of production and dissemination, was heeded. For example, in addition to making, publishing or screening work, many were involved in instigating tape libraries, tape exchanges and mobile services.<sup>311</sup>

The disseminating of information to all who were interested, and the demystifying of technology through the publication of practical user information, are reminiscent of, as we shall see, Willi Münzenberg's *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (*The Workers Pictorial Newspaper*), British film co-ops like *Cinema Action*, and Chris Marker's work with factory occupations throughout France. With groups like Videofreex, People's Video Theatre and Raindance, it was usual that no one person was specifically credited with having produced a tape.<sup>312</sup> The role of the *auteur*, therefore, was to be avoided.

### ***Chris Marker, the Factory and its Workers***

The question of whose truth is spoken, and in what ways it might, or could be represented, is central to our understanding of collective filmmaking in France in the 1960s. Jean-Luc Godard famously critiqued the idea of 'giving the people a voice'. In simply turning the camera on the subject, he argued, we do not automatically avoid the

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<sup>308</sup> Chris Hill, (1996), p. 1. <<http://www.vdb.org/content/surveying-first-decade-video-art-and-alternative-media-us-1968-1980-attention-production-aud>>, accessed 24.02.2013. In addition, writers, practitioners and theorists writing in magazines such as *Radical Software* displayed a keen interest in Brecht's work on the corporate structure of the radio and the possibilities for it to act as a platform for a more democratic voice.

<sup>309</sup> Chris Hill, (1996), p. 5. <<http://www.vdb.org/content/surveying-first-decade-video-art-and-alternative-media-us-1968-1980-attention-production-aud>>, accessed 24.02.2013.

<sup>310</sup> In a letter to Benjamin, Brecht accused Lukács and others of their aversion to production, stating that it was precisely the unpredictable, unforeseeable nature of production (which he encouraged) that made them nervous and thus enemies of new forms. See Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, (London: Verso, 1998), p. 118.

<sup>311</sup> For example, in the US, Philip Mallory Jones, co-founder and Director of Ithaca Video Projects, and others initiated the first touring video festival. It ran from 1974-1984.

<sup>312</sup> Hill, (1996), pp. 5-7 on 'Early video collectives'.

codes and established systems of representations that enable the viewer to ‘view’ how they have been conditioned to see. There is, in addition, an un-critical treatment of the role of the ‘giver’, normally (and historically) the Western man who bestows the gift of speech. Chris Marker, however, notes that this sentiment of ‘giving the people a voice’ cannot be avoided entirely. Marker asserted that he wished ‘to give the power of speech to people who don’t have it, and, when it’s possible to help them find their own means of expression’.<sup>313</sup> This aim fell closer in line with the protests of students and workers in the 1960s when Marker took to working alongside them, training and teaching the basics in filmmaking. Marker’s involvement in this process meant that social groups could construct their own stories, values, beliefs, experiences and ideas, avoiding the mainstream (mis)representations by media professionals. Marker’s conviction that one ‘expresses’ oneself ‘much better through the texts of others’ forces one to imagine the documentary as a genre formed through a kind of image-salvaging.<sup>314</sup> The false split between ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘subject’ and ‘object’ is carefully rendered by Marker’s statement, detailing a nuance that could easily go unnoticed.

Marker, for instance, fundamentally encouraged those who wished to make their own images and became committed to the role and use of cultural production in everyday life. His relation with, and involvement in, the strikes and occupations by workers at the Rhodiaceta textile factory in Besançon in Eastern France earlier in the year meant that connections were in place for him to screen *Loi de Viêt-nam*.<sup>315</sup> Marker was invited to document the strike by René Berchoud, a member of a local, popular cultural organisation, and admirer of Marker’s previous work *Cuba si* (1961). The strike was unique, in that, for the first time, workers were not simply asking for higher wages. They were also questioning the root of the oppression of industrial workers in a capitalist economy, discussing the reduction or, simply, non-existence of the potential for their own cultural development within the confines of the working

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<sup>313</sup> Lupton, (2005) p. 111.

<sup>314</sup> Catherine Lupton notes that we can see Marker in this way (see p. 26). I would add that a figure such as Agnès Varda, and in particular her 2002 work *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*), could also be thought of ‘gleaning’ others’ images for her own use.

<sup>315</sup> Lupton, (2005) p. 115. In the late 1960s through to the 1970s the screening of radical films at factories or dockyards were staged, aimed to awaken political consciousness and strive for commonality and solidarity (Sekula has also done this in recent years). Moreover, *Cinema Action*, a 1970s British-based film co-op, also selected factories, such as a Ford automobile plant to show a film on the May Events. The collective protest film *Loi de Viêt-nam* (*Far From Vietnam*) (1967) was made by Marker (alongside Godard, Resnais, Agnès Varda, Joris Ivens and William Klein) in reaction to the US involvement in Vietnam.

day.<sup>316</sup> Subsequently, a second wave of strikes occurring at another Rhodia factory in Lyon convinced Marker (alongside Mario Marret) to make a film about the strikes entitled: *À Bientôt, j'espère* (1968).

Marker's involvement with the strikes did not pass without criticism from the workers themselves; a number of problematic issues, recounted by Lupton, were identified by the workers. These ranged from the absence of an acknowledgement of women as both waged factory workers and unpaid carers for, and spouses of, the male workers (recalling some of the same issues faced by those involved in *Nightcleaners*), to focusing too much on victimisation, and a tendency to romanticise the nature of protest by not recording the tedious day-to-day tasks needed to keep trade unionism active.<sup>317</sup> In response to these criticisms, Marker suggested that the workers make their own film. It was at this point that Marker and the camera assistants taught the workers the basics of operating a camera and specific filmic techniques; the workers named themselves the Medvedkin group after the Soviet filmmaker.<sup>318</sup>

We can trace this interest in the demystification of technology to a period in history most closely associated with Soviet Russia and Weimer Germany.<sup>319</sup> Here, radicals became involved in distributing equipment and skills to those otherwise

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<sup>316</sup> Trevor Stark, '“Cinema in the Hands of the People”: Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film', *October* 139, Winter 2012, pp. 117-150, p. 120. Stark details an important point when he writes that the strikes at Rhodiaceta were initiated by those that worked the '4/8' shift. This was a seven-day schedule that involved four teams of workers who undertook staggered eight-hour morning, afternoon and night shifts. Workers were expected to do two morning shifts, two afternoon shifts, followed by three night shifts: after two days rest, the cycle would begin over again. The sheer debilitating effects of such long hours clearly shows the encroachment of work life onto 'free' time and, most importantly, the subsequent draining of workers' energy.

<sup>317</sup> Lupton, (2005) p. 117.

<sup>318</sup> Lupton notes that the Medvedkin group made a body of work that was 'a fluent, energetic and wide-ranging study of grassroots trade union activism that responds directly and on a number of levels to the limitations of *À Bientôt, j'espère*' p. 177. The workers' struggle in Besançon was also heavily influenced by the local cultural centre, Centre culturel populaire de Palente-les-Orchamps, which had an ambitious cultural programme. The investment in the factory library was also central to the self-education of the workers. See Stark (2012), pp. 119-122. Medvedkin's premise of taking the image to the people also influenced the British filmmaker John Maltby and his 'kino van'. John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: realism, photography, and the everyday*, (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 67-71.

<sup>319</sup> Jorge Ribalta's exhibition, *A Hard, Merciless Light. The Worker Photography Movement 1926-1939*, at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 2011 provides an exceptional account of the peripheral movements in the Mediterranean and Central Europe, without undermining the undeniable role of the German and Soviet factions of the worker photography movements and their roles in shaping an account of modernity through a photography that combines avant-garde art and political thought.

considered to be stripped of the powers of production. It is here that the worker-press and photography movements developed — the blooming of the *AIZ* (*The Workers Pictorial Newspaper* 1924-38) and, later, its involvement with artists such as John Heartfield and Hannah Höch.<sup>320</sup> Willi Münzenberg (founder of *AIZ* and a leading member of the German Communist Party), and those who worked alongside him, highlighted the social function of photography. They saw the worker-photographer as the eye and the conscience of the proletariat, defining the camera as a weapon in the class struggle. As Jorge Ribalta has neatly summarised it, the call for the worker-photography movements was ‘to portray the revolutionary movements of workers, their social conditions, their everyday lives, their workplaces, and new industrial and technological labour environments’. Ribalta continues, ‘lastly, as a final request’, and here is where we can see the romanticised and heroised worker gathering currency, contributors were asked to “capture the beauty of labour itself and also the horrors of social misery”’.<sup>321</sup> The too-often assumed notion that ‘enlightened’ radical thought is one-directional (from ‘artist’ to ‘worker’) rather than reciprocal is contested in accounts such as Ribalta’s, just as it is alluded to in Marker’s experiences of working alongside his collaborators in French factories in the 1960s.

Publicly, films such as *Loin de Viêt-nam* bridged the gap between the ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ bank groups in France by bringing together filmmakers from both divisions in an effort to criticise the war. The figures involved in making this protest film, however, quickly went their separate ways after it was released in 1967. It was this separation that determined the landscape for collective filmmaking in France thereafter. Godard, alongside Jean-Pierre Gorin, headed the Dziga Vertov Group, a collective focused on political filmmaking that assured the dissolution of authorship. It has, however, been noted by the film scholar William F. Van Wert, that despite making films about workers that were critical of oppressive elitist social orders, the collective directors (and here we can already see a contradiction) did not include the subjects of the films in the

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<sup>320</sup> Two issues need to be noted here. First is the fact that whilst Heartfield has become synonymous with the worker-photography history, his initial inclusion in the organisation was somewhat thwarted by the majority of members who considered photomontage as ‘bourgeois and antagonistic to the principles of reportage’. See Jorge Ribalta’s introduction to the above-cited catalogue (p. 14). Secondly, another tension was that Höch’s contribution was somewhat complicated due to the gendered bias of many of the images printed by *AIZ*. John Roberts, ‘Technique, Technology and the Everyday: German Photographic Culture in the 1920s and 1930s’ in *The Art of Interruption: realism, photography, and the everyday*, (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press), 1998. pp. 40-58.

<sup>321</sup> Ribalta, (2011), p. 12.

production of the works. No training for non-professionals was initiated. In addition, Van Wert asserts that the Dziga Vertov Group (1968-72) appeared ever reluctant to raise the profile of other political filmmaking co-ops in France at the time.<sup>322</sup>

Those that remained in the SLON (Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles) collective after the release of *Loin de Viêt-nam*, a small but dedicated team that consisted of Marker and technical personal, sought to bypass the film industry and its privileging of the auteur. They were frustrated with the divide between the superior role of the 'star' filmmaker and the humble anonymity of the technicians and industry personnel. Lupton notes that even *Loin de Viêt-nam* was seen by SLON as a futile attempt to dissolve these assumptions. It is telling that Marker's name (even though he conceived, wrote commentary and edited the work) occupies a position in the credits amongst the contributing technicians. At the top of the credits were the names of six well-known directors, of which Joris Ivens, Godard and Resnais were three. This is particularly interesting when one considers the salient role Ivens played in the workers-photography movements of Europe before the Spanish Civil War.<sup>323</sup>

Marker's desire to think through the 'possibility of organizing film production along cooperative and non-hierarchical lines, and of using film as a tool within political struggles rather than as simply a medium of entertainment' gave birth to many political film collectives in France. Many are still active today.<sup>324</sup> The SLON films attempted to insert another history, emphasising Medvedkin's role and that of the cine-trains alongside the existing 'history' of Eisenstein, Pudovkin and the increasing role that Dziga Vertov played for Godard and Gorin. In this period, Marker is said to have given up 'personal' filmmaking (a term often used to describe the self-reflexivity of the film-essay). This was due, argued Marker, to the fallacy it implied: 'the authors of the film are not just the filmmakers or cameraman but the people who figure in the film';

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<sup>322</sup> Van Wert, (1979), p. 45. This note contradicts Lupton's assertion that both 'Right' and 'Left' bank groups sought to encourage the other.

<sup>323</sup> Ribalta, (2011), p. 17.

<sup>324</sup> Lupton, (2005) p. 118. Although perhaps unique to this specific moment, Marker's desire to foreground collectivity and collaboration can be linked to another French filmmaker, George Franju, also appreciated for his experimentation with the documentary form. Franju is noted to have always referred to film personnel as 'mes collaborateurs' rather than 'mes assistants'. See Kate Ince, *Georges Franju*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 4. This is especially relevant when considering the role of the 'documentary' in the period 1947-1951.

moreover Marker forces one to feel that by embracing individual characters and their political convictions, we see their integration into the human whole.<sup>325</sup>

***Women: self-determination, representation and real lives***

For women artists (as for any other marginalised social groups), the appeal of using a medium that departed from the established notion of the art object ran alongside the desire to determine one's own image. The limitations of being historically represented through the masculine eye, both in the mass media and art historical canon, and the invisibility of accounts of real women's lives, drove the practices of artists such as Rosler, Michelle Citron, Joan Jonas, Jo-Anne Elam, Hermine Freed and Linda Montano.<sup>326</sup> Julia Lesage has noted that the direct recording capacity of the video camera in the early 1970s presented immediate appeal for detailing real lives and experiences in the US. Feminist documentary making emerged, she argued, from an ethos formed in the women's movement of the antiwar New Left. Little time, she continues, was afforded to formal reflexivity as a need to enter mainstream distributors in order to raise issues was of key concern.<sup>327</sup> However, it was not long before a more critical set of practices developed. Alongside this clearly articulated urgency emerged an affirmation that certain image and narrative structures were drawn through a particular social and political lens.<sup>328</sup> This culminated, by the end of the decade, in debates surrounding the construction, or the ideological representation, of the real. Works such as Hermine Freed's *Art Herstory* (1974) attended directly to these pressing issues. The 22-minute video takes an amusing journey throughout the last few centuries by inhabiting the depictions of women in painting. The video moves between the past and present in its mediation on the way the female body and persona has been perceived and its effects for current times. Here omissions, inclusions and the effects of censorship proved to be ripe for formal innovation.

The technology of the portable video camera meant that people could record the experiences and histories that formed their own identities. Alongside this particular use

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<sup>325</sup> Van Wert, (1979), pp. 38-46.

<sup>326</sup> Hill, (1996), p. 16.

<sup>327</sup> Julia LeSage, 'The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film', in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, (ed.) Patricia Erens (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 222-237, (p. 223).

<sup>328</sup> See Martha Gevers, 'Video Politics: Early Feminist Projects', *Afterimage*, 11:1-2, Summer 1983, p. 27.

of the camera was, as I have detailed, an interest in the social documentary adopted by the same newly radicalised society. Christine Tamblyn lists a group of diverse practices that did not consign the video camera to the role of self-reflexive mirror; a device prominent in much performance work throughout the 1970s, as can be seen in both male (Vito Acconci and Richard Serra, a simple device to record and reflect) and female work (used more as a vehicle to accord women a space to readjust their enforced linguistic inequality). Artists such as Cecilia Condit, Sherry Millner and Helen DeMichiel posited a trend against Rosalind Krauss' claim for video as inherently narcissistic.<sup>329</sup>

Krauss argued in her 1976 article 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism' that the medium of video was that of a 'psychological' one.<sup>330</sup> The recording lens was a 'mirror' through which a deeper reflection of the self was able to unfold. Tamblyn argues that this assessment risked being confined to an 'entropic cul-de-sac'.<sup>331</sup> Tamblyn also notes that Krauss is partially attentive to this aspect, for Krauss lists works by Joan Jonas, for example, whose video, *Vertical Roll* (1972), shattered the illusion of the silent reflection of the camera lens. Tamblyn also accounts for Krauss's inability to foresee certain technological developments: the increased portability of cameras, alongside manipulations of sound through post-production for example, resulted in the ability to create complex layering. As a result, artists, such as those selected for discussion by Tamblyn, were able to take advantage of the developments in technology. For instance, Tamblyn notes how 'elaborate postproduction equipment' meant that artists could formally experiment with the 'point and shoot material' already generated. Where the medium of film had long since been refined and its properties manipulated by its authors, the technology of video had only just begun such a process. We can see this legacy present in both Biemann's and Ruido's body of work, where material collected in the field is combined with archival and found footage. Tamblyn argues that the technological developments, coupled with dissatisfaction with the video medium as mirror, meant that these earlier works examined 'the personal implications of political

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<sup>329</sup> Tamblyn's essay cites six artists that present a body of work against Krauss' dominant thesis. Christine Tamblyn, 'Social Documentary as Personal Portraiture in Women's Video of the 1980s', *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, (eds.) Dough Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1990), pp. 405-417, (p. 405).

<sup>330</sup> In fact, Krauss surmises that video 'detail[s] the routines of narcissism which form both its content and its structure'. Rosalind Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October*, vol. 1 (Spring, 1976), pp. 50-64.

<sup>331</sup> Tamblyn, (1990), pp. 405-417 (p. 406-407).

issues’ as opposed to the previously favoured ‘personal experience as political template’.<sup>332</sup>

This understanding of the personal implication of political issues can be seen in both Biemann’s and Ruido’s work, both for those they film, and, especially in Ruido’s case, for herself as image producer. As both Biemann and Ruido indicate, the economy favours a certain type of body for a specific kind of work. It is the body, therefore, that becomes the battleground for social, economic and political factors. These bodies then serve to determine spaces. As the artist and theorist, Berta Jottar argues in *Performing the Border*, the type of body crossing the border determines and constantly alters the geopolitics of the space. Jottar asks: ‘where are you crossing from? Are you crossing in English, in Spanish, in Spanglish, with a US passport, jumping as a tourist, as a migrant, as a middle class woman, as a domestica? There are all these different ways of crossing; that’s how the border gets re-articulated.’<sup>333</sup> The identities that Jottar lists only find their formation in the articulations of the other categories listed; once more a consideration of the broader whole is contemplated.

#### **‘Video Art’: Dissemination and platforms of display**

By the 1980s, writes Rosler, video had developed into the category of ‘video art’ and become understood and determined by, and thus, accepted into, the art historical canon.<sup>334</sup> Outside the gallery and museum’s walls, video had led to a fruitful co-existence of explicit political and aesthetic use and experimentation between artists and filmmakers. The role of the lens-based image, previously made prominent through feminist and other minority concerns, aimed to re-instate the importance of representation, an element that had been otherwise disregarded by filmmakers and artists interested in ‘active’ components of the structuralist moving-image.<sup>335</sup> In addition to this rejection of dominant representations, installation art had begun to occupy a central role in the art institutions of the 1990s. The screen — or what has become thought of as the ‘image-space’ due, in part, to the technological advancements in projectors and sound — became subject to a different set of conventions and modes for

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<sup>332</sup> Tamblyn, (1990), pp. 405-417 (p. 410).

<sup>333</sup> Berta Jottar, *Performing the Border*, Ursula Biemann, 1999.

<sup>334</sup> Rosler ‘Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment’, (1996), pp. 258-279.

<sup>335</sup> Tamara Trodd, *Screen/Space: the projected image in contemporary art*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 11.

understanding. Film work made by artists attentive to the characteristics of the gallery space as a viewing place, developed a distinctive approach from other types of film works.

For these types of filmic installations, viewers were predominately drawn into dark rooms containing large-scale projections. Such installation is perhaps most often associated with the work of Bill Viola (considered to explore notions of the sublime and processes of redemption) but can also be instanced by the works of an artist like Pipilotti Rist.<sup>336</sup> Tamara Trodd has suggested that the focus of much projected-image work is to deal directly with notions of embodiment, with an aim to ‘solicit’, as she puts it, from the viewer ‘sensuous and fantasmatic responses’.<sup>337</sup> One of the most infamous works from this period — Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) — also demonstrates this preoccupation of engulfing bodily senses. Moreover, the use of suture in much narrative cinema — the device deployed to weave the viewer into the fabric of the film — became a strategy adopted by much installation video work of this period. Rather than creating this effect through narrative and plot, however, many artists sought to engulf the viewer through the sheer size of the projected moving-image or through the positioning of multiple screens and amplification of sound.

The increasing presence of the ‘moving-image’ or ‘artist’s film’ in the gallery has ushered in concerns about how to show the work, particularly work such as Biemann’s and Ruido’s, for example, that might have a linear structure but eschew the illusions this structure may otherwise bring. As noted, film, once in the gallery, is often read under the key concerns of the more established genres of sculpture and painting. Very recent debates, however, have aimed to address such problems. Devices such as the opening up of parallel viewing ‘platforms’ and programmes, as instigated by Mark Nash and Roger M. Buergel at Documenta 12 (2007), can be seen as an attempt to take film back out of the gallery. This demonstrates an effort to re-instate a viewing experience that is perhaps closer to that of the cinema. The intensification of what Zanny Begg calls ‘artists’ films’ in the gallery and museum space has re-shaped the

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<sup>336</sup> See Chris Keith, for a critical treatment of the appliance of the term ‘sublime’ to Viola’s body of work. Chris Keith, ‘Image after Image: The Video Art of Bill Viola’, *A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 20, no.2, (May 1998) pp. 1-16. See Eleanor Hartley’s essay in John Ravenal’s edited catalogue *Outer and Inner Space: Pipilotti Rist, Shirin Neshat, Jane and Louise Wilson and the History of Video Art*, (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2002) for a discussion on the affinity the installed, or projected image-space has with the gallery environment.

<sup>337</sup> See Trodd, (2011), p. 5.

allotted time one allows for viewing.<sup>338</sup> Video installations, as previously discussed, often have a structure that denies the need to watch from beginning to end; one does not necessarily lose meaning if one only experiences a segment of the work. Films that build a horizontal progression, and require one to stay and watch, have, therefore, presented screening complexities. As Hito Steyerl writes:

[...] the time-based mode of many cinematic installation works precludes a truly shared discourse around them; if works are too long, spectators will simply desert them. What would be seen as an act of betrayal in a cinema [...] becomes standard behaviour in any spatial installation situation.<sup>339</sup>

Peter Osborne provides a useful account of how our viewing expectations are forced to alter when we watch film or the moving-image inside the gallery space. The axis of time and space, in his account, is made to interact in ways that have pertinent ramifications for the contemporary video-essay.<sup>340</sup> He begins by noting the influence that Henri Bergson's work on time (duration) has had on our understandings of cinema throughout the latter part of the twentieth century (due mainly to Deleuze's revival of his work).<sup>341</sup> In favouring Bergson's theorisations on time, however, we lose (as Bergson indeed wished us to do so) the spatial and relative components of duration.<sup>342</sup> If we were to examine, for example, St. Augustine's earlier understandings of time, we could perceive time as inherently spatial and not as absolute. It was St. Augustine, notes Osborne, who stated that time (duration) should be understood as made up of a three-fold relation between past, present and future (memory, attention, expectation).<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Begg uses the term 'artists' films' to make a distinction from 'video art' which she perceives politically mute, or more specifically, film work not made politically. See Zanny Begg's interview with Hito Steyerl 'Making Films Politically', June 2007, Berlin. <<http://www.zannybegg.com/hito.htm>> date accessed 19.03.2010.

<sup>339</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'Is a Museum a Factory?' *e-flux*, journal no. 7, 06/2009, <[www.e-flux.com/journal](http://www.e-flux.com/journal)>, accessed 18.03.2010.

<sup>340</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Distracted Reception: Time, Art and Technology', *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), pp. 66-75.

<sup>341</sup> Osborne cites Henri Bergson's work on the duration concept in the latter's 'Cinematographical Mechanism of Thought' in *Creative Evolution* (1907). See Peter Osborne, 'Distracted Reception: Time, Art and Technology', (2004), (pp. 66-75), p. 72.

<sup>342</sup> Bergson wished to distinguish the metaphysical differences between time and (its primacy over) space. Cinema, for Bergson, is able precisely to privilege time over space. See Osborne, (2004), p. 72.

<sup>343</sup> Osborne, (2004), p. 70.

It is the display, screening and installation of the moving-image (analogue, video, televisual and digital) in the gallery which directly problematises Bergson's preference for the isolation of the temporal. When screening in the 'black box' of the cinema, all other spatial elements were sufficiently 'blocked' out and the viewer, s/he too in isolation, could focus on the filmic image. For Osborne, the locking out of space (or rather the disavowal of it) also locks out the collective viewing experience which should be, according to Benjamin's notion of 'distracted reception', central to the act of attention, to seeing.<sup>344</sup> In adopting Benjamin's work on apperception and seeing in a state of distraction, the moving image, like architecture, is for a group experience.<sup>345</sup> The spatial play is thus extended and emphasised in the gallery, as is the manner in which we view.

However, Biemann and Ruido's works — although departing from linear narrative structures and working on assimilation and construction trajectories — require, one could argue, continuous attention. Spatial narrativity over linear narrative structures does not necessarily mean one can, or should, avoid seeing the works from start to finish. It is clear that tensions arise here. For instance, half of Biemann's video essays are multi-channel works. Others are single-channel. The former lend themselves well to exhibition expectations as they are shown via a mixture of large-scale projections, monitors, texts and photographs. The latter, perhaps defined by singularity, tend to be aligned with an audience experience more akin to cinema viewing, one that is, despite attempting to defy linear narrative through form, in fact, closely guided by time. One could argue, adopting Osborne's thesis, that because film work is screened on multiple channels, requiring a variety of installed screens (or live feeds), the various parallel narratives, which intertwine with one another at certain moments and pull away at others, are served better by such a physical spatial arrangement. We might ask, therefore, when work by Biemann is screened — as it often is — at activist meetings, film festivals, or in small communities and conferences, whether it is able to retain political impact without losing its politics of display and thus reception. Whilst the

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<sup>344</sup> Benjamin saw architecture as the prototype for his theorisations on apperception. The development of film, however, presented a contemporary 'training ground'. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility (Third Version 1936-9)', in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, (Cambridge, MA and London, 2003), pp. 268-9.

<sup>345</sup> Apperception takes into account self-awareness in the person who does the looking (the perceiving subject) whereas the term perception merely infers the 'object-orientated process' and not one's role in forming knowledge of the object. See Osborne, (2004), p. 74.

gallery environment may have the potential to curtail, intentionally or not, the political imperatives of works such as these, it can allow form to intensify content.

### **The ‘Documentary Turn’**

It has often been argued that recent art has made a ‘documentary turn’. Okwui Enwezor and his curatorial team, particularly Mark Nash, for Documenta 11, are often noted as consolidating a body of work in which artists became, once more, preoccupied with society and its relation to history.<sup>346</sup> Reviews in the art press at the time stressed the political implications of a Documenta that moved away from the Eurocentrism of previous large-scale exhibitions. The luxury, as one arts commentator, Michael Gibbs put it, of a ‘disinterested aesthetics’ was no longer an option when artists selected from across the globe, spoke of equality, revolution, visibility, representation: in short, of a need for change.<sup>347</sup> The year of 2002, therefore, aggregated diverse uses of the document; a device formed in the notion of *truth* and *telling* history, became the privileged currency of socially engaged contemporary art and, more pertinently, captured the concerns of artists working and leading up to that point.<sup>348</sup> It also instigated further exploration into this field of concern. Moreover, Irit Rogoff, writing in light of this ‘rise’ of the document, stated that a whole host of large-scale exhibitions (Documenta 11, Manifesta 2004 and Istanbul Biennial 2003) presented platforms for artworks that inform in a ‘seemingly factual way’, but at a ‘slight remove from reportage’.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> We should perhaps note here how the French curator, Catherine David’s previous Documenta X demarcated the terrain for some of the theoretical questions and curatorial strategies for Documenta 11. David focused on the specific dates of political and social upheaval, asking viewers to consider how the aesthetic device might aid one in recognising the ‘state of the world’. David also instigated discussion forums such as the ‘100 days – 100 nights’ which included speakers from far beyond the ‘art world’ and can be seen as a precursor to the diversification of ‘platforms’ which populated the 2002 exhibition.

<sup>347</sup> Michael Gibbs, ‘Documenta 11/1’, *Art Monthly*, issue 258, July/August 2002, pp. 1-5.

<sup>348</sup> I emphasise the word ‘telling’ to bring attention to the blurring of the operative lines of fact and fiction, and their simultaneous roles in aiding our understanding and translation of events. Moreover, to note this complication, Dieter Roelstraete has written that the ‘documentary turn’ in contemporary art is not only concerned with just story telling, but giving equal, if not more importance to ‘history telling’. See Dieter Roelstraete’s ‘The Repeat Function: Deimantas Narkevicius and Memory’, in *The Unanimous Life*, (Madrid: Reina Sofia, 2008), pp. 69–80. Chapter Five provides an in-depth account of the relation between fact and fiction.

<sup>349</sup> Irit Rogoff, ‘The Where of Now’, *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2004) pp. 84-87, (p. 85).

Moreover, exhibitions such as these have sought to interrogate the oppositional dichotomy set in place by much orthodox history between the positioning of avant-garde art film and documentary, and the importance of history and its documents in exploring narrative.<sup>350</sup> The role of lens-based media as a prime medium for ‘translating’ the archive operates implicitly within much of this body of work. Much of the work included in these exhibitions can be understood as seeking to adopt and/or isolate certain aesthetic formal devices of the mainstream documentary genre, problematising it anew whilst attending to its discourses and histories. Other exhibitions, such as ‘The Need to Document’ in 2005 — a cooperation between Kunsthhaus Baselland, MuttENZ and Basel, Halle für Kunst — curated by Vit Havránek, privileged the need to know an actuality over an exclusive focus on the politics of knowing. However, the crucial issues at stake for much of the work included sat with the curators’ definition of the documentary as ‘something which expresses itself in an ontologically immutable form’ and which examines the prominent features of the ‘documentary attitude’.<sup>351</sup> This definition, however, is suggestive of an a-historicity that risks ultimately homogenising the fractured and rich genealogy which I have aimed to plot throughout this chapter.

No consideration of the recent interest in the document is complete without exploring the artist filmmaker, Hito Steyerl’s work and writings. Steyerl’s contribution to essayistic practice in contemporary art requires particular attention if we are to think

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<sup>350</sup> To name only a few exhibitions: Mark Nash went on to be instrumental in ‘Experiments with Truth’ at The Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia 2004-05; he provided a more localised contribution in his affiliation with the ‘Making History: Art & Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now’ at the Tate Liverpool in 2006. Moreover, we should note the exhibitions ‘[based upon] TRUE STORIES’, curated by the French documentary film scholar Jean Pierre Rehm and Catherine David at the Witte de With in Rotterdam in 2003 and ‘It’s Hard to Touch the Real’, an exhibition by Kunstverein München in 2002-04, brought to the UK via the Site Gallery, Sheffield in 2004. The latter part of the decade, 2008, saw Enwezor’s ‘Archive Fever’ at the International Center of Photography and the exhibition ‘The Greenroom’, part of a broader field of material directed by Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl at CCS Bard Galleries New York State. Nash himself notes the exhibitions ‘Come and Go: Fiction and Reality’ at the Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, 2007, and ‘The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image, Part 1: Dreams; Part 2: Realisms’ in 2008 at the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C. as evidence of the renewed, and continued, interest in the aesthetics of the real in contemporary artist film and video. Mark Nash, ‘Reality in the Age of Aesthetics’, *Frieze*, issue 114, ‘Artists and the framing of Social Reality’, April 2008, <[http://www.frieze.com/issue/category/issue\\_114/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/category/issue_114/)>, accessed 25.02.13. Recently, the touring exhibition: ‘More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness’, at SITE (Sante Fe, New Mexico) shows a continued interest in the category of truth and fact. This exhibition does mark a move back, however, to a preoccupation for an over-determined notion of artifice and fiction.

<sup>351</sup> See the exhibition abstract on the Kunst Haus website page <<http://www.kunsthhausbaselland.ch/enUS/exhibitions/archive/2005/-/exhibition/the-need-to-document.htm>>, accessed 21.08.11.

through, once more, binaries that pertain to documentary objectivity on the one hand, or to self-reflexive constructed ‘pictures’ on the other. Her works, such as: *November* (2004), *Journal No.1 An Artist’s Impression* (2007) and *Lovely Andrea* (2007), have become forerunners in debates on social and politically engaged practices which face the assumed impasse of the documentary genre: that is, its commitment to reveal or conceal. Steyerl’s writing on the documentary and essayistic film practice in contemporary art provide some of the most lucid and theoretically developed contributions. Not only has she analysed and re-animated debates on the politics of form, she has also sought to consider the display and reception of film and video in galleries and museums in recent years. Steyerl’s commentary and practice has gained significant interest despite what she rightly gages as a ‘tremendous, conservative backlash in parts of the art world’ aimed towards socially engaged art, where the ‘derogatory identifier’ of the ‘documentary’ (as opposed to ‘art’) is used to temper the fear of a re-orientation of the boundaries of art and social reality.<sup>352</sup>

According to Steyerl’s account, the documentary per se cannot be discussed under the critical rubric of ‘art’ unless it accosts our preconceptions of what a documentary should do, and therefore *is*. It is here we can read the Godardian influence on her practice. Her own work attempts this critique by exploring the relation between fiction and truth, viewer, subject and filmmaker. She writes that terms such as ‘truth’, ‘reality’ and ‘objectivity’, are typified by an absence of coherent definition. Rather than worrying about this lack, she argues that this should be understood as a positive aspect: it creates a paradox, waiting to be exploited. The documentary form (which we associate with the authenticity of knowledge presented in a transparent fashion) requires, she states, an investigation at an abstract level.<sup>353</sup> One misses the point, writes Steyerl, if one positions one’s practical and theoretical framework firmly in either the ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’ camps. Social reality, she argues, must be *expressed* rather than represented.<sup>354</sup> In addition, an understanding of the documentary genre as a

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<sup>352</sup> Hito Steyerl interviewed by Zanny Begg in June 2007, Berlin. See Begg’s website for the full transcript, <<http://www.zannybegg.com/hito.htm>>, accessed 13.01.2009.

<sup>353</sup> Hito Steyerl, ‘Documentary Uncertainty’ <[http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=778%3Athe-uncertainty-of-documentarism&catid=213%3A4-28-make-film-politically&Itemid=452&lang=en](http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=778%3Athe-uncertainty-of-documentarism&catid=213%3A4-28-make-film-politically&Itemid=452&lang=en)>, accessed 25.02.2013.

<sup>354</sup> Hito Steyerl, ‘Documentary Uncertainty’ <[http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=778%3Athe-](http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=778%3Athe-)

continuum, and a more nuanced account of what Adorno termed the ‘force-field’ between subject and object, are required if one is to make a meaningful and critical intervention to this body of work.<sup>355</sup> Importantly, however, social reality for Steyerl is not solely the actuality of day-to-day life. Rather, social reality expresses itself through form, and form itself is the ‘totality of social relations around a certain production as well as the material and aesthetic choices’.<sup>356</sup> The difficulties arise, however, when we fail to take note of how such ‘expressions’ are formed, the manner in which they connect to and are produced from the social world, and we posit that ‘expression’ as enough.

### **Conclusion: Assaying the balance**

This chapter has identified some clear moments at which the otherwise simple dichotomy of the objectivist ‘document’ on the one hand, and the subjective essayistic ‘picture’ on the other, has been placed in tension. Even if we trace the etymology of ‘essay’, we find an internal contradiction. I have hoped to demonstrate how art works that heighten this dialectic are operating within a long, fractured and contentious history.

The influence of Brecht on what became understood as ‘political modernism’ in Western Europe was guided by post-1968 French cultural theory. This influence was in keeping with the politics of form debates that saw film production as politically effective only if it was linked with a dismantling of the traditional ways one depicts reality. In addition, Sylvia Harvey argues that this period saw a focus on subjectivity, specifically audience subjectivity. This interest in subjectivity at this time, she argues, was largely directed by the parameters of psychoanalysis. In an effort to break the stronghold of political modernism as the only option from which to develop, Harvey argues for a consideration of ‘Brecht the socialist with an interest in *mass politics* and the forms of *popular art*’, not only Brecht the modernist, or the ‘Brechtianisms’ of

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[uncertainty-of-documentarism&catid=213%3A4-28-make-film-politically&Itemid=452&lang=en](#) >, accessed 25.02.2013.

<sup>355</sup> I return to this point in more depth towards the end of Chapter Five. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), p. 185.

<sup>356</sup> Hito Steyerl interviewed by Zanny Begg in June 2007, Berlin. See Begg’s website for the full transcript, <<http://www.zannybegg.com/hito.htm>>, accessed 25.02.2013.

distanciation and deconstruction.<sup>357</sup> Readdressing this balance, then, is a project for emergent political film work being made within, or annexed to, the histories of ‘political modernism’ and ‘critical realisms’.

Works made throughout the last fifteen to twenty years scrutinise the documentary genre with emphases that differ from those of previous periods. Long meditations on the question of how to represent have been partly curtailed by the urgent need to re-connect with an ever-increasingly fractured world enforced by the neoliberal mode of capitalist re/production. A socio-economic system that requires us to not *see* one another is summoned to account in different ways by works such as those produced by Biemann and Ruido. This demand, although placed within a genealogy that includes one of the most famous figures of the politics of representation debates (Jean-Luc Godard), can be considered as extending this now well-accepted paradigm. This extension seems particularly true when one takes into account the detailed history and the variety of figures that make up the debates around the non-fiction film and its politics of form. Moments of historical crisis require re-engagement, a need for facts more than ever; this urgency marks a clear necessity to make sense of the present. Secondly, we must see, and examine older archival ‘facts’ once again to understand how the present came to be. Lastly, we need fictive elements to ‘imagine’ an altered future, different from the one currently set to unfold. The contemporary examples chosen for my study provide material that teases apart these three intermingled strands in their assessments of our current conditions.

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<sup>357</sup> Harvey, (1982), pp. 57-59. My emphasis.

## Chapter Five - Images of Alterity: Thinking the Ethical Politically

In recognising some of the problems that have come to plague the documentary genre, this chapter aims to re-assess in what ways the contemporary video-essay deals with the politics of the gaze and the issues at stake when ‘examining’ images of alterity. This chapter re-engages the debates about what it means to transform subjects into something to look at and the resulting effects of the conditioning processes of observation.

The previous chapters have examined what is both most often taken to be and openly critiqued as the lens-based medium’s most widely accepted automatism, its indexicality to the real. In addition to this notion of automatism is, what Susan Sontag has argued to be, the camera’s propensity to beautify.<sup>358</sup> If one apprehends the image in terms of purely formal elements, such as the effects of framing, the use of colour, and aspects of composition, one is in danger of reading the image in isolation, losing sight of its entwinement with social reality. This chapter, therefore, attends to the political implication of works such as Biemann’s and Ruido’s (and not only when conceived as documentary-esque) and their role within the ‘aesthetic’.

Further, this chapter interrogates what affect, for the author, the viewer, and those recorded in the image, takes place when images of alterity are presented and understood as having a strict demarcation between looker as subject and subject matter as object. For Norman Bryson, this conceptualisation of the gaze is specifically Western. For example, the de-centering of the subject afforded by the gaze is welcomed, rather than treated with suspicion, in certain Eastern philosophies. Rather, the gaze, or *le regard*, is conceived as a challenge to *look back*. Under this agreement, there is a refusal to conceive of subject and object as distinct static entities.<sup>359</sup> The manner in which vision and the gaze is constructed in relation to power and powerlessness cannot be ignored. I would, however, like to keep in mind such Western perspectives when trying to critically examine the habitual manner in which we look *to* and *at* one another in the twenty-first century. My analysis shall explore how the politics of representing the ‘so-called’ Other (and thus speaking for the Other) have been replaced with an uncritical, emancipatory desire to provide a platform from which

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<sup>358</sup> Susan Sontag notes ‘beautifying’ as one ‘classic operation of the camera’ in her *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 72.

<sup>359</sup> Norman Bryson, ‘The Gaze in the Expanded Field’, *Vision and Visuality*, (ed.) Hal Foster, (New York: The New Press, 1988), pp. 87-115, (p. 96).

unheard voices can speak or be spoken for (a premise which, as previously discussed, Marker and Godard had to negotiate). Providing a platform from which the Other can be seen and heard is considered a moral obligation for both critical and journalistic reporting and artworks that adopt the ‘documentary turn’.<sup>360</sup> This chapter, therefore, aims to consider whether the video-essay is particularly vulnerable to certain ethical considerations because of its close alignment to the histories and consumption patterns of the documentary.

In short, the selected works have prompted the question: What are the ethical implications of representing exploitation at the turn of the millennium? Moreover, how might we begin to consider the relations generated by the camera as ones of an exploitative, yet necessary action? For example, is Ruido’s strategy for aiming the camera at an empty chair as the voice of the ‘illegal’ female immigrant, still implied as within the room, recounts her experiences of work in sweetshops in Northern Spain enough?<sup>361</sup> Is filming a television screen which presents distorted (due to the re-filming) pictures of murdered women found on the desert plains of the US-Mexico border necessary? There is, as Hito Steyerl notes, an ‘ethical necessity’, grounded in the capabilities of the lens-based image, to *testify* to exploitation. Steyerl admits that the move to testify is open to new forms of governmentality, or what I shall call (in accordance with the previous chapter) administration, and a ‘humanitarian politics of truth’ which codes ‘victims’.<sup>362</sup> The analysis of the chosen works in this chapter will be considered in light of the ‘misery-voyeuristic’ image that has held, and continues to hold, a premium in much documentary work.

These concerns have been generated through a comparative analysis of Biemann’s *Performing the Border* with Akerman’s *From the Other Side* (2002). Both works — made three years apart — take the same geographical area of the US-Mexico border but adopt different approaches that engage, in varying ways, with the documentary paradigm. While I set out to expand how Akerman approaches the documentary through a less critical register than Biemann, some of Akerman’s techniques reveal certain problems present in *Performing the Border*. I will return to

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<sup>360</sup> Here I am referring to the different institutions (or spheres) in which media and art exist, with particular emphasis on the timeframes, utility and funding aspects of mainstream documentary work.

<sup>361</sup> María Ruido, *Amphibious Fictions*, 2005, 22.30 mins.

<sup>362</sup> Hito Steyerl, ‘Documentarism as a Politics of Truth’, <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en>> accessed 04.03.2013.

Ruido's work later in this chapter, specifically to explore the expectations and responsibilities of the voice due to her use of narrative structures.

Biemann's and Ruido's use of images should be understood within the history of the documentary image. For instance, I analyse in what ways the works discussed in this chapter deal with Martha Rosler's critique on documentary photography. As discussed earlier, Rosler famously accused the documentary image of becoming increasingly (politically) mute, as if *seeing* is enough; or rather if the lone image could ever encapsulate the complexity of problems registered, for that single moment, on one person's face. Such liberal politics, produced and fostered by the documentary image, worked only, argued Rosler to ease the guilty conscience of the viewer, in much the same way as a scratch relieves an itch.<sup>363</sup> This ameliorative act can be understood as an isolated, singular act, typically achieved through framing and lighting, as in the 'victim frame'. This understanding of the *affect* the image creates in the viewer can be traced to a reading present in the Barthesian concept of the photograph. Ariella Azoulay's 2008 book *The Civil Contract of Photography* challenges Roland Barthes' notion of affect.<sup>364</sup> Whilst Azoulay's focus is on the photographic image I understand her proposition as having wider implications for the lens-based image. In moving away from affect working on an individualised level Azoulay asks us to consider the photographic act as encounter between a number of invested subjects (image-taker, those photographed and the viewer of the image).

I shall argue that Azoulay's re-engagement with the notion of the photographic 'event' provides a number of insights that allow me to reconsider the relation between 'self' and the 'other'. A careful examination of such a bifurcation allows me to address the moral obligation we have to one another. This is pertinent for a reading of both Biemann's and Ruido's work. For their works explicitly demand that the viewer notes their connection to larger social processes. In addition, this configuration, seeded in the realisation of our inherent connections with one another, points to a Marxian apprehension of ethics and the conception of the individual. In addition, Azoulay's argument allows us to think of the outward-opening directives of the lens-based image, as opposed to the 'unlocking' of a hidden truth (exemplified by, as will be discussed,

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<sup>363</sup> Martha Rosler, 'In, around, and afterthoughts (documentary photography)', *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, (Cambridge, Mass, London: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 151-206.

<sup>364</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

Barthes notion of the punctum). This reconsideration works to strengthen my argument on the processes of subjectivation in the twenty-first century, as laid out in Chapters Two and Three of my thesis.

### **Spheres of Production**

Contemporary treatments of documentary techniques in art practice parasitically use different, but established spheres, of production and dissemination: the first we can look to is the discursive institution of Western journalism. One can chart a number of exhibitions and published work that have sought to critically engage with convergences and tensions between art photography and film/video, on the one hand, and photojournalism and documentary, on the other. Of course, this is not the first moment of this convergence: we have already considered how the 1970s and early 1980s were key points for artists such as Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula to investigate photojournalism and documentary critically. The feminist treatment of the documentary (discussed in detail below) offered a different, but equally considered attack on the genre for equally important reasons, some that tallied with Rosler and Sekula's critique, others that developed a different line of inquiry. Exhibitions, such as Thomas Keenan and Carles Guerra's co-curated 2010 *Antiphotjournalism* at the La Virreina Centre de l'Imatge in Barcelona, and publications, such as Alfredo Cramerotti's book: *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing* (2009), display some indication of the preoccupation with this field in recent years.

Noel Burch notes in his 1969 *Theory of Film Practice* that, from the earliest days, film has served for some as a means to inform — 'perhaps even propagandize' — and educate — 'perhaps even indoctrinate'.<sup>365</sup> In considering Burch's contention, one must expand on the tensions that are still latent in the overlapping areas of documentary, social documents, video-essays and 'art' documentaries. The demands of pedagogy seem especially central to documentary because of the role facticity has had in developing the medium and our apprehension of it. Alongside these pedagogical concerns, expectations regarding responsibility of the maker, or author, and renewed discussions around truth-claims and objectivity, have characterised debates.

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<sup>365</sup> Noel Burch, *The Theory of Film Practice*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973), p. 156.

Critically engaged contemporary art throughout the 1990s to the mid-2000s has been identified as operating under paradigms such as ‘relational art’ and characterised as enacting an ‘ethnographic turn’. Whilst one paradigm sought, as we shall see, to strengthen social bonds through collaboration, the other aimed to turn to alterity for ‘subject matter’. Reading these two methods separately, however, is not my intention because of the role the document has come to play in both types of practice. The engagement with ethnographic methodology in art production, as Hal Foster has argued, is largely a pursuit for a closer account of ‘realness’.<sup>366</sup> The interest, therefore, in alterity is thoroughly interfaced with the documentary project’s propensity for the real. Closer allegiance with alterity, whether with the proletariat, the post-colonial subject, or, indeed, the ‘multitude’, has been said to result in a truer sense of social reality.<sup>367</sup> This somewhat fetishistic approach builds on the assumption that those not part of the governing elites possess a clearer sense of the fissures in ruling ideologies. Being equipped with such vision — and reminiscent of Hardt and Negri’s conception of the ‘migrant’ figure — means the potential for revolutionary change is a virtue intrinsic to alterity.

Historically — particularly so when used in its ethnographic mode — documentation has become a resource to aid the administration of life: it can take stock, record, or act as a means of intelligibility through which to understand the body of the population. Perceived as the colonialist’s tool, the recording eye of the camera has been routinely applied to images of both home and overseas alike, implying that Foster’s conception of a broader sense of the ‘other’ must be maintained.<sup>368</sup> The role of the filmmaker in taking part in these types of social science experiments, or as we shall see, expeditions, has a rich critical and cross-disciplinary history.<sup>369</sup> The historian James Clifford coined the term ‘ethnographic surrealism’ in order to note the intermeshing of

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<sup>366</sup> Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’, *The Return of the Real: the Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 174

<sup>367</sup> Foster uses Walter Benjamin’s ‘Author as Producer’, given as a lecture at The Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris, 1934, to form his proposition. The use of Benjamin’s argument aids Foster in his critique of artists who un-problematically ‘utilise’ alterity and forego sameness between self and other.

<sup>368</sup> By which I mean the very act of recording separates the one possessing the camera from the one *being* possessed by its gaze.

<sup>369</sup> For example, the ‘father’ of British social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski stated that the anthropologist’s needed to ‘grasp the native’s point of view...to realise his vision of the world’. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: an Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea*, (London: G. Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1922), p. 25.

the hitherto separately conceived disciplines of art and anthropology.<sup>370</sup> In fact, Penny Dedman's satirical video, *Documentary Rape* (1980), succinctly refers to the fetishisation of the 'unknown' to be found in the documentary when used for anthropological purposes. The dialogue of this short five minute film begins with the main character demanding that one of the production crew 'find a black, Jewish, lesbian, anarchist to present — I have an English video crew coming in to town — and you know what they're like'.<sup>371</sup>

The theorisations of relational aesthetics can also be thought of as bound to the conception of the 'other', trespassing on the terrain of community-based art and working with non-artists in collaborations where method and research are as central as, if not more important than, end products. This utopian drive to resist the autonomy of art and its commodification, puts emphasis on art's capacity to intensify social bonds. Moreover, the premise asks us to consider art's ability to stop relations between objects replacing relations between subjects. In this sense, it is important to note here that artists who consider their practices to be relational or a comment on 'post-relationality' often reject the notion of 'representation' altogether, perceiving it as outmoded and deeply problematic. As we shall see, this rejection is somewhat contradicted by the prevalence of the 'documentary turn'.

These different spheres — journalism, activism, visual anthropology, pedagogy, and community endeavours for social cohesion — and art's heteronomous relation to them will be discussed below. Each of these points, however, prompts one to consider the utility of the documentary project in the twenty-first century. For instance, the video-essays of Biemann and Ruido mimic the conditions that they aim to subvert. As Ruido herself notes: 'The main problem is how to differentiate our images from the images generated by the media, when they are using the same technology as us.'<sup>372</sup> In addition, if — as Biemann asks, in reference to her video-essay *Contained Mobility* (2004) — the work comes to have unexpected utility, does it impact on its status as an

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<sup>370</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 145

<sup>371</sup> Penny Dedman, *Documentary Rape*, (1980) VIDA Triple Vision Ignition Films. This short piece also chooses to foreground all aspects of film production otherwise hidden. Rather than attending to the politics of form debates through visuals, Dedman's video does so via voice-over. The film crew and editors relay, seconds before the action takes place, every detail. It is purposeful in its revealing of how a natural documentary shot — something as rudimentary as the preamble as the presenter walks to camera — is tightly choreographed.

<sup>372</sup> María Ruido, personal email correspondence, 23.09.12.

artwork? We must, therefore, take up the merging of expectations for works such as these, artworks, that is, which seek to locate themselves in the social fabric of everyday life with a degree of urgency.<sup>373</sup> Miwon Kwon has suggested that we tease out the differences between ethnographic authority and artistic authorship.<sup>374</sup> One can extend this suggestion to think more carefully about the subtle convergences between authority and authorship that play out across the different spheres presented here. Analysing why and how we come to value artistic authorship over scientific authority (subjectivity over objectivity) enables us to consider the political in the aesthetic act and how it might unfold in discussions of the video-essay and the documentary. If Biemann and Ruido aim to seriously take-on the conditions they wish to subvert they must answer to a whole host of problematics that deal with the heterogeneity of the aesthetic. First, it is analytically useful to examine a third film work as a point of comparison.

### **Questions on spatiality and temporality in *Performing the Border* and *From the Other Side***

#### *Absence/Presence*

There is an acceptance, as there is in much of Akerman's work, that some things cannot be represented.<sup>375</sup> The motif of absence is latent in *From the Other Side*, a quality that

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<sup>373</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, Video Works 1998-2008*, (eds.) Ursula Biemann and Jan-Erik Lundström, (Umeå, Sweden Bildmuseet, Umeå University, 2008), p. 59.

<sup>374</sup> Miwon Kwon, 'Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee', *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, (ed.) Alex Coles, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2001), pp. 74-94 (p.76).

<sup>375</sup> Bruce Jenkins attends to the use of absence, silence and alternative strategies for dealing with one's own and collectively produced memory of the Holocaust. Bruce Jenkins, 'Border Crossings: Two Installations by Chantal Akerman', *Images*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp. 80-89. It is also necessary to consider how memory-inflicted images transform to film images for Akerman. For instance, the motif of the camps is, whether intentional or not, redolent in her practice. This describes, for her, how all work is autobiographical and deeply subjective. Moreover, Akerman notes that the repeated shots of the wall filmed along the border, whilst they may initially appear to have no direct relevance to the rest of her work, remind her directly of images she has seen of the Nazi concentration camps of the Second World War. Chantal Akerman, lecture 'Moving Through Time and Space' at MIT Visual Art Center, 2008. This development of lacuna, for example, should be noted, as far more characteristic of discussions of her work as a whole. Some scholars note that Akerman's use of silence and ambient sound 'draw the viewer into a subjective state of understanding' and others note its potential to explore a feminist aesthetics using silence as a material for the politics of resistance. See, for example, Gwendolyn

could be said to acknowledge the almost sublime task of attempting to speak for, and thus risk homogenising, the many lost lives. Here, absence is used as a strategy for focusing on what is left unsaid and un-represented: a way to undo a never-ending search for adequately telling such a story and representing the people whose lives are violently reordered by the geopolitics of the border.<sup>376</sup>

Akerman's approach to filming the complexities at the US-Mexico border uses oneiric-like qualities that linger on the washed-out colours of the places and faces of people who have lost loved ones to the desert and its illegal paths of migration; the physical conditions of the blistering heat and freezing nights find articulation in the sun-bleached colour of the recorded material.<sup>377</sup> The melancholic low notes of stringed instruments precede much of the dialogue, at times fading under it, and singular isolated frames, notably, pinpoint the grief etched onto peoples' faces. The music is used to foreboding effect as it builds tension when accompanying the images produced by Akerman's camera when out, in the field, tracking the searching (and locating) of 'illegal' immigrants with border patrol police.

Akerman punctures periods of silent inactivity with highly emotive dialogue from the interviews she solicits, quickly returning us to a 'reality', as our imagination attempts to construct parts of the story that surround the absent subject(s). Or Akerman's camera remains still for much longer than would usually be deemed necessary. Through such a decision the viewer is made to note the details, to become engaged by the colours, the amplified sounds or the insignificant movements within the

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Audrey Foster (ed.), *Identity and Memory: the Films of Chantal Akerman*, (Wiltshire, England: Flicks Books, 1999), pp. 1-8.

<sup>376</sup> The immigration laws between the US and Mexico have long been in place (with people arriving predominantly in San Diego). The US INS (Immigration and Naturalisation Service) uses technologies developed by the US military to stop the flow of immigrants into California by redirecting them to the desert and mountain regions of Arizona. This decision assumed that the treacherous conditions of hot days and freezing nights, with no close townships with amenities, would abate the flow. The Clinton administration in 1996 brought further laws to pass. Doris Messiner, INS commissioner, played a large part in advocating greater control of this border throughout the 1990s. After reports citing the increase in people dying when crossing this particularly inhospitable part of the border Messiner was quoted as saying that 'we did believe that geography would be an ally to us [...]. It was our sense that the number of people crossing the border through Arizona would go down to a trickle once people realized what it's like.' <[http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg\\_id=003dmv](http://www.greenspun.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg.tcl?msg_id=003dmv)> accessed 27.07.13.

<sup>377</sup> *From the Other Side* was shot in both 16mm and video and transferred to DVD, installed on eighteen monitors and two screens and included, when shown at Documenta 11, a live video feed from the border to the gallery space.

frame. This technique presents different methods for dealing with the too often illusionary elements of narrative frameworks.

In many ways, then, the focus on absence can be read as a decision to dislodge the recording eye of the camera from its usual central position as the medium's ability to record the truth and make visible the concealed. Perhaps to illustrate this statement better, we can look to the formative years of war photography in relation to the politics of absence. The British photographer, Roger Fenton, was tasked by Prince Albert to record the Crimean war.<sup>378</sup> Fenton's images were directed through a need to produce a document for those at home, to mobilise commitment to, in the face of dwindling support for, an increasingly unpopular war. Susan Sontag states how his photographs, under this direction from the War Office, rendered the war as 'a dignified all-male group outing', obscuring direct images of the dead, maimed or ill, ultimately leaving the events of war out of frame.<sup>379</sup> When it came to having to speak directly of the dead without being able to actually photograph them, Fenton's memorial photograph was a portrait of absence, 'of death without the dead'.<sup>380</sup>

While Akerman may develop the motif of absence to deal critically with the politics of *representing* violence Biemann adopts quite a different tactic, one which appears to join the process of over-determining such a space. Biemann selects an all-female 'cast' who are closely involved with the geopolitics of the border and the lives of many of these women. Accounts provided by the New York-based Mexican artist Berta Jottar, to whether the mother of a missing girl thought to be a victim of the 'femicides', or to journalists and activists committed to forcing tangible social change, provide credible, thoughtful, politically and emotionally engaged information.<sup>381</sup>

In *Performing the Border* the viewer is forced to consider how the work in the *maquiladoras*, as depicted in the clinical images, joins a much larger constellation of images that contribute to the subjectivity of these women. In asking us to examine the

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<sup>378</sup> Sontag notes that Fenton is often considered by many to be the first official photographer of war. Sontag, (2003), pp. 44-46.

<sup>379</sup> Sontag, (2003), p. 44.

<sup>380</sup> Sontag, (2003), p. 45.

<sup>381</sup> Jottar, it should be noted here, was a former member of the collective Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (also known as BAW/TAF). A nebulous group of artists/activists based in the neighbouring cities of Tijuana and San Diego who sought to engage with the politics of the border, migration, exile and identity. This period of cultural work, which lasted from around 1984 to 1989, marked a period of interest in what often became known as 'border art'. Jo-Anne Berelowitz's 'Conflict Over 'Border Art' Whose subject, whose border, whose show?', *Third Text*, vol. 11, issue 40, 2007, pp. 69-83.

unofficial, but no less real, array of images, Biemann invites a consideration of counter-images. She asks how these young girls must navigate the ‘cultural ruptures’ brought by economic changes that demand that their bodies switch from being defined by reproduction, to being defined by production. How far, however, does Biemann acknowledge that her own images join a vast system of control that vies for the ownership of these women’s image? The journalist Isabel Velazquez states the lack of control these women have of their own image, even in death. Velazquez contends:

It is if the victims have no rights, they’re dead, so they have no rights; they’re a number. When the women have been workers, the name of the [*maquila*] plant they worked at is seldom used in the newspaper because the company does not want to be associated, that is their right, but the name of the abused victim is used. It’s speculated that she was a drug user, or promiscuous, or that she was wearing a miniskirt, and her family’s names are used, and her children — if she has children — her children’s pictures are used, she has no right, and that is very offensive. The media coverage for example, if you are watching the evening news, it is not very difficult to see the corpse of a girl, right there. Even if she’s dead, she has rights, her image is her right, even if she’s not here.<sup>382</sup>

In addition to these questions that arise around the active role of ‘image’ or ‘representation’, as accounted by Velazquez, is the reality of Biemann being prohibited from entering the factories to film. This in part directs her attention to how identities are formed through labour, these individual and collective identities clearly annexed to the complex formations of the gendered, classed and racialised character of the exploitation present in the labour undertaken on the Mexican side of the border. The absence of the women workers’ voices — apart from one lone worker fired by her employer for suggesting the women organise to vote for a canteen for lunch breaks — goes further in suggesting, in a clear way, the control ‘white, male, middle-management’ has on their employees.<sup>383</sup> The final section reminds the viewer, however, that once these women leave the factories after their shift, they are no longer a concern for the factory management. Whilst protected and silenced on duty, the hostile, unlit, and unmarked landscape of the desert provides the perfect cover for the most conventional of violent crimes against women. Biemann’s analogy between the replacement of female workers with the continual flow of new workers, marking their exchangeability and

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<sup>382</sup> Isabel Velazquez, journalist and labour activist, speaking in *Performing the Border*, 1999, 41.41 mins.

<sup>383</sup> Ursula Biemann speaking in *Performing the Border*, 1999, 12.17 mins.

disposability, manifests in the serial killer's (or killers') psyche. This is all too viscerally demonstrated when the women's dead bodies are often found by the authorities to be wearing another nameless victims' clothes (often the uniforms of the *maquila* workers). The violation for these women is always on the sites of their bodies: from the interference they face through forced birth control and pregnancy tests by their employers, and the traditional roles they must retain in the home, to the sexual violence and murder which takes place in isolated areas of the desert.<sup>384</sup>

Biemann could quite easily be accused of joining those that silence the subjects of the work. I suggest, however, that Biemann makes a knowing choice in order to allow the silencing of these women to resonate with the viewer. It would seem that, for Biemann, like many others, simply providing a platform for 'giving a voice to the people' is an equally inadequate strategy. Making clear, rather than dismissing, the array of images (which are produced from a variety of spheres and institutions) that work to determine the *maquila* employees, however, alerts the viewer to two important aspects. First, how thoroughly over-determined such a geopolitical space and its inhabitants are. Secondly, the sovereignty of the image in late capitalism: to ignore its power (and its prominent role in, for example journalism and advertising) is to risk ignoring how subjectivities are formed.

### *Temporality and the image*

Akerman contends that her manipulation and extension of time in her work allows her to perform violence, in a bodily manner, on the viewer.<sup>385</sup> It is this need to assimilate the viewer to the work that is of interest, particularly so as we consider how this might occur on a formal level or on the level of subject matter, or indeed, both. This aim to enact bodily violence means that, for the most part, *From the Other Side* sits in

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<sup>384</sup> Biemann writes that: 'time, productivity and the body of the female workers are all strictly controlled by the white male managers. Forced birth control and pregnancy tests are the order of the day and, needless to say, pregnancy means immediate dismissal.' See Biemann, (2008), p. 24.

<sup>385</sup> Akerman attempts a manipulation of the 'normal' properties of the medium of film when she selects time as her primary material. She states that: 'Most people go to the movies and the ultimate compliment is "We didn't notice the time pass!" With me, you see time pass. And feel it pass. You also sense that this is the time that leads to death [...] And that's why there is so much resistance. I took two hours of someone's life.' Chantal Akerman interviewed by Miriam Rosen in 'In her own time', *ArtForum*, April 2004. Akerman's use of time in *From the Other Side* can be traced to her interest in filmmakers such as Michel Snow and, in addition, some of Andy Warhol's film work.

opposition to the fast-moving pace of much mainstream news and documentary work, a sphere that both Ruido and Biemann aim to incorporate, manipulate and compete with in some instances. Much mainstream material (in which the systems of distribution of broadcasting networks determine time frames and formal limitations) leads to works reaching an accepted completion; a notion problematised to different ends in the principle works considered throughout my thesis. Akerman's long focuses on empty desert space or the un-ending border fence, and the recording of insignificant day-to-day occurrences — all devoid of post-production sound (which might otherwise aid in the building of narrative) — for example, forces our interest to drift towards the subtleties of the image. These images do not overtly manipulate the recording capacity of the camera's apparatus. Yet, it is these images that, paradoxically, enforce a consideration of something else, something other than the faithful 'trueness' of the image. Or, rather, we might consider them as expanding our notion of indexicality. Arguably, through their cyclical re-occurrence throughout the film, they act to remind the viewer of the materiality of the space, of its reality. Through the extended duration of these shots and their immediate emptiness, *From the Other Side* does — more than one might initially consider — develop devices to think through the politics of documentary methods.

We must also examine the clear limits reached in a work such as *From the Other Side*. These limits can be explored when considering the construction of the video-essay as form. The images Akerman selects for interviews 'fit' the stories told, musical scores demand pathos, and both 'sides of the story' are recounted, rendering the filmmaker an impartial observer. For the most part it is clearly identifiable as a *cinéma vérité* style documentary. Biemann's choice is to layer, compress and interlock the variety of images that come to determine such a space. Akerman, in her more reflexive moments, as discussed, focuses on absence, which continually re-iterates that something was once 'there'.<sup>386</sup> This strategy enables a gap in the narrative to exist without recourse to the supposed forever-partial 'inadequate' representation.

Akerman's conceptual, political and formal critique lies in this refusal to re-instate the image as indelible truth-bearer. It is clear that both artists feel a need to distance themselves from the idea of a single defining image. Both choose to operate within the paradigm of negation in different ways. One over-saturates our knowledge of the space, commenting on how different image regimes structure our perceptions, whilst

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<sup>386</sup> This can be considered in a Barthesian sense, in that there is something that once existed that we are unable to ever gain access to.

a dissatisfaction with representation is used as the material in *From the Other Side*. The different strategies speak to two distinctive aspects. We might then ask in what ways *Performing the Border* adopts an investigative track whilst *From the Other Side* loses a degree of subtlety through nostalgic dimensions formed by an over-reliance on ‘absence’. The use of narrative and sound, for instance, in Akerman’s film do not tend to deviate far from uncritical documentary methods.

Whilst *Performing the Border* invites critique about the determination of the subjecthoods filmed by Biemann, the video-essay, as a whole, comments on the production of images, which indicates an awareness of this problematic, even if it is never resolved. *Performing the Border* illustrates the movement of images, and thus their changeability: hence the processes of subjectivation and the ability to claim one’s image and re-orientate it is arguably more visible. *From the Other Side* shows an already compromised study of those filmed, of stories already told and subjecthoods already determined. The curtailment of the processual nature of subjectivation is further intensified by certain formal aspects such as the static and linear aspects of Akerman’s filmed segments, the standardisation of shots detailing interviewees’ stories, and the application of a very particular musical score used to evoke pathos in the viewer. Such a focus on fragmentation ends up neglecting factors that shape subjectivity; Akerman strives for partiality. However, a direction such as this becomes easily sentimentalised by and through the history of a ‘genre’ such as the documentary. These modes limit and assign the viewer’s understanding solely to individual sympathy, as opposed to a focus on our connectedness to this specific locality. I shall return to the notions of connectedness and relationality, particularly in relation to Azoulay’s work.

### **Adjusting the Author-Subject-Spectator Trichotomy**

Questions that circulate in works such as those discussed throughout this thesis — and particularly those that explore the notion of the ‘minority subject’ — gravitate around the assertion that the work does nothing ‘useful’, that it only serves, for example, to further exploit the lives of the people living and working in Juárez. Abigail Solomon-Godeau writes of the double process of exploitation potentially present in the lens-based image: first, in the social world; secondly, in the regime of image production formed by

the same system it re-presents.<sup>387</sup> What, therefore, distinguishes Biemann from the roving reporter or photojournalist transplanted into the lives of others? What might be the politics of intervening in the lives of those filmed, and do these artists need to explicitly concern themselves with the responsibilities of reportage and measurability via the yardarm of objectivity? Whilst these artworks propose a more complex set of truth disclaimers, or a critical engagement with the business of news and its limitations, we can, nonetheless, still see them as vulnerable to the same traps as those ingrained in mainstream discourse.

The subjects of *Performing the Border*, predominantly a young female workforce, are talked *about* (with one exception) throughout Biemann's video-essay, as opposed to being talked *to*, or entered into a discussion *with*. As previously noted, those that speak of these women's lives are an all-female set of contributors, artists, journalists, activists and campaigners; many with direct experience of living in Juárez. This differential is more often than not considered as problematic due to the silencing of multiple voices, particularly those voices at the kernel of Biemann's study: the question of agency therefore haunts the work. This 'silence' mirrors the absence of Biemann's images of women working in the *maquiladoras*. An outstretched hand pushed in front of Biemann's camera marks the refusal of her entry in one particular scene; the selections of factory images are those officially exported by the corporations themselves. Refined, sterile images can, therefore, only be interrogated by manipulations and montage set in place through post-production methods (fig. 16). These adjustments do not mean however that these authoritative images are any less real, or, should we say, formative in constructing an image of the border space. This formal structure in *Performing the Border* means the varied constituent parts of life on the border coalesce to form a specific image of work, as discussed in Chapter Two.

Biemann, whilst selecting and including ready-made images, also incorporates unpredictable recordings that do not always coherently align with Biemann as confidant to those she interacts with. These moments characterise Biemann, in many ways, as an outsider. The inclusion of ambiguous, or at times accusatory, glances directed towards Biemann's conspicuous handheld video camera by the women — travelling to the factories or frequenting the cantinas in the evening, coupled with the matter-of-fact

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<sup>387</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Who is Speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography', in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 176.

voice-over — plays distinctly on the ambition to sympathise with those filmed, on that rhetoric present in charity, government and many NGO films in their aim to raise both awareness and aid. The importance of these glances, however, might be better served if we remember that these recorded glances are un-planned. Can we, therefore, read them as a product of the women's own subjecthood? Whilst the author has ultimately decided to include these images, should one read the glances as a political gesture and resistance, an act that retains its autonomy long after the fleeting encounter with the handheld video camera? In an effort to elucidate the above point, I would like to consider an argument put forth by Ariella Azoulay, who discusses a photograph of a Palestinian shopkeeper who has had his property vandalised by Israeli military raids. In this discussion she comments:

The consent of most photographed subjects to have their picture taken, or indeed their own initiation of a photographic act, even when suffering in extremely difficult circumstances, presumes the existence of a civil space in which photographers, photographed subjects, and spectators share a recognition that what they are witnessing is intolerable.<sup>388</sup>

The prominent argument that images exploit a second time round through the process of representation raises the question of whether or not we *should* look. However, Azoulay proposes that dormant in the photograph is its truer quality, that is, its configuration as an *act*. The act, or event of photography, is, as a result, understood as a political act (that takes place across a tripartite relation). Despite the lens-based medium possessing such a politics, Biemann's concern about confronting the problem of when to set aside the camera and offer a more immediate form of assistance, still demarcates problems for this ontological realignment. In relation to her work *Contained Mobility*, Biemann notes: 'As dedicated as I am to symbolic production, I am nevertheless sensitive to the ethical question of when to put down the camera and assist the protagonist – in other words, whether direct intervention in social and political injustice is sometimes more justified than the aesthetic representation of it'.<sup>389</sup> As a reaction to this Biemann offered to buy Anatol Zimmerman, the protagonist of her video-essay, a Polish passport in order to alleviate him from his forced status of perpetually travelling from nation state to nation state.

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<sup>388</sup> Azoulay, (2008), p. 18

<sup>389</sup> Biemann, (2008), pp. 57-59.

The question that arises from an intervention such as Biemann's is perhaps most viscerally clear, and complexly articulated, in Renzo Marten's work, *Episode III Enjoy Poverty* (2008-9). The film charts Marten's journey around the Democratic Republic of the Congo and his efforts to inform the Congolese that their most valuable resource is not gold or coltan, but poverty. Accordingly, he sets out to see if local photographers (who earn a very modest amount of money from taking pictures of celebrations and formal portraits) would be better placed 'learning' the ways of the UN-sanctioned journalists who sell images of poverty to international news agencies for a far greater profit. This seemingly simple, yet satirical gesture, parodies the Western image-maker, explicitly cross-referencing Christian morality, the role of the 'civilised' rescuer and the archetypal modernist (read 'male') artist. Martens's film lambasts, in its broadest sense, the hypocrisy present in much international 'neo-colonial' humanitarian aid work, and its formulations in conservative philanthropy. One particular scene in the film, however, indicates the complexity and ethical implications of exporting such a politically violent statement. The scene details Martens outwardly utilising his relative wealth to prepare a meal for a family living in abject poverty. This gesture, he concedes, is the only manner in which he can help directly and immediately. This single gesture — as Martens notes, that this may be the only plentiful meal the family will receive for weeks, or months to come — whilst immediate in effect and directly reaching those in need, is just that, a singular act. In many ways, what appears to be immediately political, it could be argued, is, in fact, symbolic.

This film has un-surprisingly solicited a great deal of criticism in the broader art press. For instance, Dan Fox's review in the art journal *Frieze* argued that the film does nothing but re-inscribe the aspects it is attempting to critique, taking part in further exploitation.<sup>390</sup> Whilst Marten's work is certainly problematic Fox's criticisms seem levied more at Martens's adopted objectionable persona. Fox's focus on truth-claims and his dismissive that the film is 'elementary stuff for anyone with half an interest in media studies' also rather misses the broader point around the tense combination of the image, philanthropy, colonialism, liberal humanism, journalism and their current interactions.

Such works require situating in a larger framework, one that necessitates an investigation into their capacity for responsibility and usefulness. These notions are

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<sup>390</sup> Dan Fox, 'Renzo Martens', issue 122, April 2009, <[http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/renzo\\_martens/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/renzo_martens/)>, accessed 6.08.13.

more difficult to disentangle precisely because of the remnants and expectations present in the state-endorsed (or sponsored) orthodox documentary. It is important to consider the debates within the cultural discourse of the time in which these works emerged. Chapter Four has expanded upon the ways the documentary, historically, has, as one of its mainstays, an aim to uncover, or ‘find out’. My analysis of biopolitics and administration detailed in Chapters Two and Three provides a different theoretical, social and economic landscape for an exploration into the colonialist notion of ‘uncovering’. This requirement of trying to ‘find out’ suggests a need to talk to, and collaborate with, those people who can provide first-hand experience and expertise (whether that is made explicit or obscured). Relationality, therefore, underpins works such as these, paralleling central tenets of the prevailing aesthetic discourse.<sup>391</sup>

### **Making visible social bonds: relationality and relational aesthetics**

It has been argued that what has become known as the ‘social turn’ in art has the ability to circumnavigate the otherwise prevalent focus on object-based practices.<sup>392</sup> We might also add, that there has been a general desire to move away from identifiable single authors towards (perhaps idealistically) groups devoid of hierarchical structure and consisting of a variety of interdisciplinary inputs. How might this explicitly utopian turn to the value of social relations and bonds, be understood, however, when artists exploit those social bonds to explore the increased objectification of the human body and its relation to other bodies? Moreover, this objectification, or reification, it has been noted, has further intensified under neoliberalism. Stewart Martin’s incisive critique of Nicolas Bourriaud’s 1998 ‘manifesto’, *Relational Aesthetics* (translated into English in 2002), identifies some of most significant problems in these theorisations.<sup>393</sup> Before addressing Martin’s criticisms, we must first trace the main lines of argument running through the debates on the social turn.

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<sup>391</sup> Stewart Martin, ‘Critique of Relational Aesthetics’, *Third Text*, vol. 21, issue 4, 2007 pp. 369-386.

<sup>392</sup> See Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’, *ArtForum*, February 2006, pp. 178-183. As part of this ‘turn’ it is important to note, as Bishop does, Miwon Kwon’s book, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art & Locational Identity* (2002). Although not arguing in strict alliance with Bourriaud’s thesis, this work does seek to examine the broader shift from what Kwon calls ‘heavy metal’ public art, to a public art that deals primarily with the site as concerned fundamentally with the social and no longer a question of the formal.

<sup>393</sup> Martin, (2007), pp. 369-386

Under the rubric of the ‘social turn’ are practices that involve working with communities, collaboration, research-based artwork, workshops, dialogic art, participatory, or interventionist art.<sup>394</sup> If an artist chooses to position his/her interest in the ways we might relate to one another, he/she is considered to be either altering or strengthening these social bonds. Bourriaud has noted an inherent good in this act. For Bourriaud, relational practices in art define art as ‘the place that produces a specific sociability’ because they aim to bind the space of social relations closer together.<sup>395</sup> Therefore, artworks discussed in Bourriaud’s thesis take as their theoretical and practical departure, human relations and their social contexts. He contends that these works are continually driven further apart in everyday life by telecommunications and associated technologies.<sup>396</sup> Artists, in laying claim for the process of relationality, can be seen to move beyond the perils of the object-based artwork, which, Bourriaud argues, is always at a greater risk of commodification.<sup>397</sup>

Responses to Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics theorem, such as Claire Bishop’s, aimed to re-set the terms of the debate. In short, Bishop asserts that the social turn in art making has brought forth an ethical turn in the art criticism engaged with this body of practices. Bishop contends that we are ultimately unable to engage with these practices on any other terms other than the ethical.<sup>398</sup> Moreover, our questions follow one line of enquiry: whether what is offered is ‘true’ collaboration between the artists and the communities that are the subject, or site, of their work. Claims of egocentrism are levelled at the artist; and for work such as Santiago Sierra and Artur Zmijewski (two of the most scandalising figures), the question of payment and the ‘price’ of the human are discussed.<sup>399</sup> Such a focus, argues Bishop, means that we neglect the category of the

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<sup>394</sup> Bishop (2006), p.1. Whilst the works examined in this thesis are both made within this period and raise questions about how the camera mediates the relation between those filmed and the filmmaker, they do not work to dissolve authorship. The importance of ‘collaboration’ for the ‘social turn’, however, is crucial to Bishop’s argument.

<sup>395</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, English edition trans. by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 44.

<sup>396</sup> Bourriaud, (2002), p. 14 and pp. 65-78.

<sup>397</sup> Bourriaud (2002), pp. 41-42.

<sup>398</sup> Bishop, (2006), pp. 178-183.

<sup>399</sup> Angela Dimitrakaki perhaps un-intentionally sheds light on the different uses of bodies by male and female artists. Dimitrakaki’s article demonstrates how artists, Tanja Ostojic and Andrea Fraser, explicitly manipulate and exploit their own bodies, therefore, registering the site of exchange at the place of the gendered body. Zimijewski and Sierra, on the other hand, procure the bodies of others in order to re-enact a violent commodification of the human body. Angela Dimitrakaki, ‘Labour, Ethics, Sex and Capital: On Biopolitical Production in Contemporary Art’, *n.paradoxa international feminist art journal*, vol. 28, July 2011, p. 5-15.

aesthetic and its specificity for knowledge production; accordingly, we become too interested in judging the ethical quality of collaborative practices. It is fair to note that the larger questions of the ‘usefulness’ and ‘uselessness’ of the aesthetic category mediate these polarisations.<sup>400</sup>

Bishop is correct to note the problems latent in a one-sided focus on whether the work is ‘ethical’ or not. There is an unhelpful divide set in place by ‘the aesthetes’ and ‘the activists’ (and strict demarcations between the ethical, political and aesthetic). These demarcations also demonstrate the effects of over-determining specific paradigms.<sup>401</sup> However, more crucially, Martin notes that Bishop’s critique is mis-directed and lacks attention to Bourriaud’s understanding of use value and exchange value. Martin argues that Bourriaud himself neglects to acknowledge that value, for Marx, is not attributed to the object but rather to the necessary, socially invested labour-time it takes to make the object. Thus, the extreme reification, and thus fetishisation, of the social exchange becomes the commodified object. Therefore, Bourriaud’s conception of relational aesthetics is subject to commodification in much the same way as any ‘object-based’ artwork might be.<sup>402</sup>

As I indicated above, Biemann’s and Ruido’s work may face criticism for reproducing the notion of victimhood for a second time in the process of representation. In short, at best, they do nothing useful; at worst they intensify the problem. It is certainly apparent that they are at risk of failure on two different levels. First, they do not fit neatly into the category of art because, to varying degrees, they privilege the political and the ethical over the aesthetic. Secondly, they are not considered political or ethical because they fail in their usefulness. But, if we are to understand the artwork correctly (and Martin deploys Adorno’s conception of autonomy here alongside Marx’s writings on use and exchange value), we must accept that the artwork is both

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<sup>400</sup> Bishop turns to Rancière here to avoid this split. Her argument favours Rancière’s theorisation of the autonomy of art as not tied to the art-object, but rather the aesthetic experience more broadly. The de-coupling of aesthetics and politics is not, therefore, possible in Rancière’s work. For a critique of Rancière’s notion of heteronomy and autonomy and its relation to Adorno’s understanding of this dialectic, see Gail Day’s ‘The Fear of Heteronomy’, *Third Text*, vol. 23, issue 4, July 2009, pp. 393-406.

<sup>401</sup> Anthony Downey rightly observes that Bishop takes issue with the manner in which these debates ‘elide simplistic distinctions between art and life’. See Downey’s ‘An Ethics of Engagement: Collaborative Art Practices and the Return of the Ethnographer’, *Third Text*, vol. 23, issue 5, 2009, pp. 593-603 (p. 595).

<sup>402</sup> Martin, (2007), p. 378.

autonomous (as it seeks to be valuable on its own terms) and heteronomous (a form born of the society in which it is made).<sup>403</sup>

To expand, Adorno notes that although art is not separate from the social, it generates an illusion that it is.<sup>404</sup> It is this illusion that (in a capitalist society) depicts nothing as valuable without exchange-value. This is the foundational element of art's critique: a self-awareness of its own illusion (an acceptance that whilst it appears in a separate sphere it does not exist within one).<sup>405</sup> Art's political gesture reminds us that a 'thing' can be valuable in and on its own terms. Value does not have to be beholden to exchange, that is, a conception of exchange predicated on the imperatives of a capitalist mode of social relations.

The practices of Biemann and Rudio, in their efforts to both cultivate social relations through research and subsequently render networks of relations visible on video are relevant to the above outlined debates in a number of ways. Perhaps most simply it is necessary to consider the main terms and issues for making and analysing art practices throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. However, both these artists aim to take seriously what Bourriaud casts aside as telecommunications, advertising and associated newly developed technologies. Bishop argues that we have become preoccupied with judging a work on its ethical merits and in the process ignore the category of the aesthetic. Martin notes that Bourriaud neglects to acknowledge that social relations are as easily reified as any object-based artistic practise: Bourriaud, for Martin, thus greatly misunderstands Marx. Notwithstanding Martin's critique of Bishop's argument we could add that Bishop assigns a somewhat 'special' identifier to the category of the aesthetic, one that has a tendency to elevate it above and beyond everyday life. In much the same way, so does Bourriaud, for he appears to suggest that the development of new technologies only serve to isolate us from one another rather than considering in what ways they might serve to connect and mobilise us. If we develop this assumption it is clear that such changes in communication and mediation — changes which structure everyday life — should be the terrain from which art must operate. Alongside Biemann's and Rudio's interest in images produced from other 'spheres', both artists do not shy away from making us acutely aware that they 'control'

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<sup>403</sup> Martin, (2007), pp. 374-375.

<sup>404</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), pp. 1-11.

<sup>405</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (1997), see specifically Chapter One 'Art, Society, Aesthetics', pp. 1-21.

for the most part, their works. Whilst it is not their aim to intensify such unequal power relations, they do not strive for an ultimately false egalitarian participatory activity between one and all. Their works do not conceal the power relations that structure interview based shots for example. Moreover using a lens-based medium, when applied in such a way as Biemann and Ruidio do, aims to provide greater light on such relations of power; for both practises, the medium and the subject matter hopes to sharpen the inequalities that reside in both. Whilst both practices were formed within the high period of ‘relational aesthetics’ it is evident how they deviate from what have become understood as key identifiers of this period.

### **Utility: expectations and responsibilities**

Carles Guerra, in his writing on the video-essay, discusses what he considers to be its pedagogical remit.<sup>406</sup> The role of informing the viewer — a point Jan Verwoert also raises — has become expected of much socially-engaged, ‘political’ artwork.<sup>407</sup> Can a surviving fragment of the Griersonian-style documentary still strongly influence contemporary treatments of the documentary, despite seeking to display a distance from an older documentary project? Work such as Biemann’s is, in some ways, in closer alliance with the Griersonian tradition because it rejects ‘objectivist’, or *cinema vérité* filmmaking, in preference for re-instating an authorial voice, which ranges from clear judgment to reflexive ruminations.<sup>408</sup>

The drive to inform the viewer leads the artist to experiment with images and/or soundtracks that have historically elicited affect within the viewer. Devices such as close-ups of faces — aggrieved, despondent, accepting or angered — appeal to our sense of humanity, humanising, for instance, the daily implications free trade and the NAFTA agreement have for the people of Mexico and the US. In fact, Okwui Enwezor

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<sup>406</sup> Carles Guerra, ‘Video Essays and Collective Pedagogies’, *The GreenRoom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, (2008), pp. 144-166. In fact he goes as far as to say that ‘the new research modes that these two authors [Ursula Biemann and Angela Melitopoulos] embody with their videos pave the way to legitimising a documentary practice that *seeks* pedagogical functions’, p. 154, my emphasis.

<sup>407</sup> Jan Verwoert, ‘Research and Display: Transformations of the Documentary Practice in Recent Art’, *The GreenRoom*, (2008), p. 195.

<sup>408</sup> Bill Nichols notes that this ‘direct-address’ is a formation of the Griersonian tradition and became one of the first thoroughly worked-out modes of documentary voice. Bill Nichols, ‘The Voice of the Documentary’, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3 (Spring, 1983), pp. 17-30.

has even argued that the ‘category of the human’ is at stake in much contemporary treatments of the documentary.<sup>409</sup>

Although adopting similar devices, such as interviews (to bolster argument) and intertitles (to carve up the text), Ruido’s voice exists more in the capacity of ‘learner’; it seems in discourse with, as opposed to assuming the authorial ‘voice’ of, history. In *Amphibious Fictions*, Ruido never allows us to become attached to any one person. Although speaking of the strikes and introducing personal stories of the women involved at the time — or of the clothes producer who appears powerless in the face of ‘fast’, big-business fashion — the voice-over never deploys devices which move it beyond matter-of-fact. We are stopped from, before we begin, developing emotional attachments to the stories. This is in stark opposition to *From the Other Side* where Akerman, although off-screen, makes her voice, in its questioning, occasionally audible. She does not obscure the intent of her questions in order to develop the stories she wishes to solicit from the interviewees.

For instance, an elderly woman takes centre frame; she sits looking straight back at the camera and Akerman (see fig. 17 and 17.1). This opening scene sees the woman recount her experience of losing family and friends in their crossing of the border. When the pain the woman clearly feels in recounting these experiences renders her silent, Akerman affords a space, but it is only fleeting. The camera and its persuasive ability to induce a confessional-like testimony are, quite surprisingly, aided by Akerman re-wording her question until she gathers the material she wishes to hear. Throughout the work, the weaving of Akerman’s voice in and out of the dialogue of the interviewees, gives the viewers the feeling that they are not ‘being told’ in an authoritative fashion.<sup>410</sup> This voice does, however, when considered more carefully,

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<sup>409</sup> Okwui Enwezor, ‘Documentary/Verité: Bio-politics, human rights, and the figure of “truth” in contemporary art’, *The GreenRoom*, (2008), p. 70.

<sup>410</sup> The use of a second prominent voice contributes to this further. Akerman’s meditative voice-over rolls over the same moving image, shot at night. From the inside of a car, our gaze follows the blurry highway lights and road signs, which stay in focus just long enough to inform us of the US towns and cities that will be imminently upon us. This story is set to the same emotive music that runs throughout the film. The lack of images to match the narrative in this last scene, alongside Akerman’s role as storyteller, aids the poetic force of the tale. Akerman recounts a story of a female Mexican migrant worker. Akerman does not name her, or picture her; this absence allows the account to be emblematic for the millions who have left family and lives behind in pursuit of a more financially stable life devoid, ultimately, of social and political fulfilment. This closing scene deals with the notion of the archetypal figure that comes to stand in for economic migrants. It is here that Akerman is most successful at speaking to something beyond the fragments.

clearly direct the flow of the narrative. It remains complicit with the controlling voice of the broader textual system of the orthodox documentary, but does not, I would argue, develop it in a critical manner. Biemann's and Ruido's work is perhaps easier to criticise because it appears closer, textually, to our desire for facts, for 'a balanced account' which would otherwise be understood, more often than not, as a responsibility of reportage. Works as diverse as Biemann's and Ruido's do share ground. Both their works raise questions about art's social responsibility. This produces a tension with art's autonomous position which is not handled as critically in *From the Other Side*.

The prominent role of the documentary genre in spheres such as journalism means the analysis of the works in my thesis should not disregard the problematics set by another discipline (namely: journalism and anthropology), especially if they explicitly borrow from it or traverse its pathways. In treading on the toes of the profession of journalism, video-essays such as *Performing the Border* also cross the boundaries of education in their drive to inform. For Biemann, this transgression does not solely take place through voice alone. Images such as computer graphics, simulate the physical geography of the border, and recall, due to their appearance as scientifically generated data, the standard classroom education video (see fig. 18). These images contribute to the overall sense of pedagogy present in the work. Such an example of this can be seen in Biemann and Sanders' *Europlex*. In an opening scene, we learn of a fallen meteorite on the border between Morocco and Algeria. Biemann and Sanders describe the different ways in which this alien object is perceived, classified and used with the voice-over and images tracing these trajectories. For the nomadic Berbers living and working in the area, Biemann's camera follows local bartering and trading of the meteorite's pieces, entered into the market to be sold to tourists. For the archeologists', the isolated meteorite is shot on a plain and sterile background, ascribed with the appropriate classification number, thus presenting the meteorite as it exists in another system of meaning and value.

When providing space for the social actors to speak, the artist, in foregoing (explicit) authorship, is understood as affording a greater agency to those with direct experiences to speak their own stories. We can identify broadly, therefore, three different 'types' of voices present in such works, though none of these is fully adopted in each of the examples discussed here. We can place Biemann's voice as closer to a

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judgement, Ruido's as direct yet unequivocally questioning, and Akerman's as combining 'objectivism' and storytelling. These different approaches point to the subtleties required of speaking for another. All three directives take some element of the distrusted and problematic voice we associate with the documentary.

### **The feminist critique of the documentary model**

Feminist treatments of film and video throughout the 1970s marked a politics of urgency. There was a need for consciousness-raising films in which the camera was turned on real women's lives as a way to garner solidarity. Work that developed this method, however, was not without its critics. Charlotte Brunson, for example, has referred to the ossification of a feminist 'we' which, in many instances, saw working-class women's experiences gathered, assimilated and then represented by white, Western middle-class women.<sup>411</sup> In response to these concerns, and in a climate that was hostile to realism, formal devices — such as presenting fictive accounts from interviewees as real — were critically deployed in order to think through the ideological effects of representation. Specific devices were called upon to disentangle truth from the documentary project and dissolve what had become termed 'the reality effect'. The homogenous portrayal of women's diverse experiences and histories occasioned the emergence of a new space that openly fostered the multiplicity of voices. This 'opening-up' sought to dislodge centre-margin structures through the re-telling of personal experiences.<sup>412</sup> This re-telling, understandably, meant that the purpose and effects of the voice-over was regarded with suspicion.

In an effort to make sense of the images for the viewer, the voice-over simultaneously allowed the filmmaker to provide a meta-commentary that, Annette Kuhn has since argued, subjugated those filmed. This dominance, she argued, ascribed to them the condition of the 'other'.<sup>413</sup> The hierarchy, therefore, located the filmmaker as owner, not only of the images captured but also of knowledge created. This was a way in which maligned voices gained increased visibility and force. In recent years, however, scholars such as Miwon Kwon have begun to problematise the over-valuing of

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<sup>411</sup> Charlotte Brunson, *Films for Women*, (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 1-13.

<sup>412</sup> Brunson, (1986), pp. 9-13.

<sup>413</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 127-150.

the politics of experience. Her criticisms are not intended to undermine the importance of work undertaken in this earlier period, yet it is noteworthy that she considers the focus on singular experience results in a tendency to avoid exploring how experience is socially, historically, psychically and culturally determined.<sup>414</sup>

Clayton and Curling's *The Song of the Shirt* (1979) is both formative and symptomatic of the period in which singular narratives break and make way for a plurality of histories and 'truths'.<sup>415</sup> Clayton and Curling's work — alongside works such as Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978), Lorraine Gray's *With Babies and Banners* (1978), Jim Klein, Miles Mogulescu and Julia Reichert's *Union Maids* (1976), Connie Field's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980), and JoAnn Elam's *RAPE* (1975) — sought to undo the flattening out of experience and the relation of that experience to a singular truth through explicit formal play.<sup>416</sup> However, what is of particular relevance to my argument here is that *The Song of the Shirt*, whilst weaving multiple narrative strands, avoided privileging personal experiences as truth, just as Kwon later suggests.

To return to Annette Kuhn for a moment, we can note her concerns with the uncomfortable partnership between realism and the documentary, or, perhaps more accurately, with the manner in which this partnership had become unchallenged. Kuhn, writing in the early 1980s, argues that the realism of documentary placed emphasis on the 'dealing with issues'.<sup>417</sup> Whilst I have, throughout this thesis, argued that an exclusive focus on form and 'text' severs connections to the conditions in which the cultural product is made, Kuhn illuminates the opposing sides of such an assertion. A recurring problem that emerges for Kuhn is the detrimental effect that prioritising subject matter can have in our acknowledgement of naturalised cinematic codes. Kuhn adds that the apparent naturalness of the camera is most at risk in not recognising its own 'cinematic codes'. For example, Kuhn reminds us that many older documentaries deployed the Griersonian voice-over to construct a narrative that produced a syntagmatic flow of events, a 'discourse of continuity'. This 'discourse of continuity' is understood as aiding an uncritical development of the viewer's knowledge of the subject matter. The notion of continuity meant that viewers could already predict the

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<sup>414</sup> Kwon (2001), pp. 74-94 (p. 87).

<sup>415</sup> Brunson (1986), p. 5.

<sup>416</sup> Brunson (1986), p. 10.

<sup>417</sup> Kuhn, (1982), pp. 129-130.

conclusion through the structure of the film; no subversion of expectations is courted.<sup>418</sup> For many artists, particularly at this period in history, these textual, formal aspects became as much the subject matter of the work as the direct filming. For many, a discourse of discontinuity became central to the making of the film text.

*The Song of the Shirt* is an example of one of these works. Clayton and Curling manipulated narrative through an explicit decision to interweave different accounts of a story *and* document they wished to tell. Re-using newspaper articles, song, dramatisation of individual's diaries, parliamentary reports, and contemporary cartoons of nineteenth century needlewomen, the film asks the viewer to consider the ever-shifting line that keeps fact from traversing the terrain of the fictive. The film shifts between the present day and nineteenth century London, examining women's role in the rag trade. Carefully selected devices, such as including copies of newspaper articles from the time, direct filming of women from the 1970s, layering singular, and confessional voices over archival photographs on nineteenth century London, produce a cacophony of narratives and representations. No one narrative gains ascendancy and the work maintains a steadfast distrust of the monolithic 'voice of God'. The valuing of the plurality of voices cannot be mistaken. The act of storytelling, whether through song, playwriting or prose, is set against newspaper reports and legal documents. The use of varied devices means that as viewers, we are made acutely aware of the fact that when we recount and aim to understand the past and its effects on our future, we deploy the strategy of *telling*.

Made in the era of globalised neoliberal capitalism, *Amphibious Fictions* experiments less with the entanglement of fact and fiction, despite its title. In much the same way as in the orthodox documentary, those interviewed are coded for the viewer as witnesses. Both Biemann and Ruido mix their own authorship — conceived as 'participant-witness' — with observational accounts that employ voice-over and intertitles to different ends. However unintentionally, this choice makes a closer allegiance with the established documentary style than it does with the current history of the European feminist treatment of the document. The role of the voice has been a foundational concern for feminism and post-colonialist theory throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. The political project of finding, sustaining and developing a voice, entirely reconfigured our conceptions of history. One cannot simply 'add' another voice

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<sup>418</sup> Kuhn (1982), p. 132.

without further strengthening the centre/margin dictum; rather, the uncovering of the diverse voices of history means that history must be re-written from within: the terms by which we wrote history had to be re-positioned.

The call, some forty years ago, for plurality, alongside the distrust of ossified narratives meant that the documentary underwent significant deconstruction. The ‘death of the author’, as perhaps most famously extolled by Foucault and Barthes, is in some ways undone, or rather reconfigured, by Biemann’s use of voice in *Performing the Border*, not to mention by her use of intertitles in many of her video-essays. The intertitles largely re-instate both ‘an’ and her authorial voice. The indelibility and visibility of the written, as it is laid across the image, elucidates the complexities of the *authorial* (‘an’) and the *author* (‘her’). Miwon Kwon is helpful here, for she has noted the ‘suspicion’ held for works that redeem the authoritative ‘I’, especially so for artists that acknowledge the complex mediations around the construction of an ‘I’. This suspicion is at odds with the general ascendancy, between the 1970s and early 1990s, of subjective experience as the only truly reliable knowledge. Kwon notes that ‘speaking authoritatively’ is too often aligned with ‘authoritarian power’.<sup>419</sup> Kwon also argues that this alignment has particular resonance for the renewed interest in the ‘ethnographic mode’, not only for artists taking up ethnography as a mode of enquiry but more generally for artists reinvesting in the politics of representation debates.

Works such as Biemann’s and Ruido’s demonstrate an interest in the construction of knowledge and the varied ways by which such knowledge(s) are exported and defined. Practices such as Biemann’s enable us to envisage how we might tease apart ‘speaking authoritatively’ from ‘authoritarian power’ in an effort to make material personal perspectives. This assumption cannot be made, however, without taking in to account the criticisms the documentary ‘tool’ has faced throughout the twentieth century, particularly from the late 1960s.

*Amphibious Fictions* develops the mode of self-reflexivity, a mode seen by Nora Alter as a clear indicator of the essayistic model. (Some of Biemann’s later works do so too). Ruido does not always seek out images and/or interviewees that will respect her voice, and her voice aims to ‘stitch’, to use her metaphor, or reflect on, the material that she generates, assimilates and orders. One might think that presenting a range of voices alongside one another works to ‘cancel out’ such diversity. In an effort to move away

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<sup>419</sup> Kwon, (2001), pp. 74-91, (p. 77).

from a false sense of egalitarianism, Ruido does not ignore the hierarchical position of the filmmaker. Rather she avoids concealing the constructive act of assimilating and ordering perspectives and historical understandings. The dialectic of self and other is made visible, prompting an ethical dimension which attempts to refigure the split between ‘I’ and ‘you’, or the possession implied by a subject (‘I’) consuming an object (‘you’). Ruido’s chosen shots, like her narrative, demonstrate an externalised process of learning. This is an investigation which develops an authorial voice that decouples authority from didacticism; or rather develops a voice that works to expand impoverished notions of these two terms.

### **Narration: favouring ambiguity and telling stories**

Biemann has noted her desire to move beyond the mainstream ideas of ‘objective’ documentary work. She contends that, after 1989, a new form of representation is required to speak of the mutations in social relations. She writes: ‘Intermingling fictional and factual locations significantly challenges the “documentary” aspect of my work. But, beyond a simple critique of documentary realism, this implies that such global phenomena require new conceptual means to help us grasp their immense totality.’<sup>420</sup> It is clear, however, in the latter section of this passage that Biemann is aware of how imagined fictions become as much a part of our visual data bank as more official images. Simulated scenes, imagined landscapes and company images can be as ideologically coded as the science of cartography. Each kind of image works to present a version of the truth, of how things ‘really are’. Changes in vision — instigated by technological developments — have multiplied the ways in which we see and know the world around us.

A consideration of the ‘Epilogue’ in Biemann and Sanders’ video-essay *Europlex* is particularly pertinent. This final scene purposefully undermines an otherwise general, explanatory set of ‘logs’ which systematically order the video-essay. The voiceover, this time not Biemann’s own, informs us that whilst making a documentary about clandestine migration, a Moroccan filmmaker hired locals to take part in a scene that would show them leaving the shores of the town in the small boat provided for the ‘set’. The filmmaker arrived the next day only to find that his attempt

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<sup>420</sup> Biemann, (2008), p. 39.

to fabricate the 'real' had been taken as a very real opportunity for the selected locals: they had left, under the cover of night, without giving the filmmaker the all-important final scene. The choice to include this event in *Europlex* is a comment by Biemann and Sanders on their role as documentarians. The scene accepts the presence of the fictive in the non-fictive.

Bill Nichols writes that the documentary has the means to operate in the creases between life as lived and life as narrativised.<sup>421</sup> This is not to dispel one sense of life in favour of the other but to acknowledge how the characteristics of each can be found in its opposite. Hayden White reminds us how we must acknowledge the writing of history as a type of fiction. Once one begins the writing of history, the telling of events, one cannot escape the rhetoric of writing itself. One employs, therefore, fictive techniques in its re-telling. White writes: 'fictive techniques are going to occur in the representation of real events and we should be aware of this'.<sup>422</sup> The shift from actuality to transcription, in works such as *Amphibious Fictions*, does not undermine fact but, rather, un-couples fiction from complete, over-determined fallacy. Concomitantly, narrative aids one in 'stringing' together the fragments that constitute the filmed image, into a coherent story or line of argument.

As explored in Chapter Three, developments in the technology of the handheld camera led to increased mobility. Developments in the synchronicity between on-location filming and sound gave rise to genres such as *cinéma vérité*, and the illusion of a closer account of reality. The handheld camera is able to respond with some immediacy, transposing the act of being 'on site' onto the recording. This effect is exaggerated by the documentarist's use of quick 'swish' pans and the jumpy quality of the image (made so by the camera-movement). Pier Paolo Pasolini has stated that narration immediately transforms the feeling of being in the present into one of being consigned to the past.<sup>423</sup> It is this aspect of the omniscient voice-over that conveys a sense of the subject's destiny.

Pasolini's statement on narration consigning something to the past brings our attention back to a pre-occupation with linearity. This linearity is retrospectively

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<sup>421</sup> Bill Nichols, 'Questions of Magnitude', *Documentary and Mass Media*, (ed.) John Corner, (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), p. 111.

<sup>422</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*, (London: John Hopkins, 1978), p. 123.

<sup>423</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini notes this transformation in 'Observations on the Sequence Shot', *Heretical Empiricism*, (ed.) Louise K. Barnett, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 235.

constructed, as we look back to order our own memory for our comprehension. Video may be a time-based medium, but both *Amphibious Fictions* and *Performing the Border* re-instate the primacy of space, examining the geographies of capitalism. Despite the supposed inherent linearity of the medium, the mosaic-like manner in which the works are constructed counters the hierarchical ordering of time and space. The focus on space seeks to translate the spaces of contemporary capitalism. The video-essay often works against this verticality of recounting events, through its exploration of spatiality. For instance, the geographies of the border are mimicked by the layering and compression of image files, through their multiplicity and juxtaposition with one another.<sup>424</sup>

### **The ethnographic encounter, the ‘Other’ and the politics of looking**

As we have seen, much video-essay work raises questions about their relation to, and difference from, the travelling photojournalist or ethnographic fieldworker. For example, the selected title of Biemann’s monograph *Mission Reports* attests to notions such as searching; adventure; danger; research and expedition, it is also the title of one of her video works.<sup>425</sup> Both Biemann and Ruido are Europeans, either travelling to a geopolitically contested space, or ‘exploring’ their own ‘back-yard’ to produce work. Ruido operates from within her locality of Northern Spain and steadily unravels the threads outwards, noting the relations of locality and globality. Considering these different approaches, from traveller to embedded citizen, poses a range of questions for the politics of looking.

Let us turn to some examples that allow us to consider the damage that can be enacted through certain techniques that frame our way of ‘looking’. Martha Rosler confronted the discomfort she felt prevalent within photographs such as those taken by Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange. She writes: ‘The liberal documentary assuages any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch and

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<sup>424</sup> Angela Dimitrakaki notes that ‘Biemann’s choice of video acquires almost a symbolic significance, since it registers, and works with, simultaneity, compression, inter-layering and opacity, all key attributes of the geographies of global capital’. Angela Dimitrakaki, ‘Materialist Feminism for the Twenty-first Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann’, *Oxford Art Journal*, 30.2 2007, pp. 205-232, (p. 211). *From the Other Side*, in contrast, seeks to intensify linearity, time and memory. Akerman draws time out in order to make the viewer cognisant of an endpoint, making us feel that we can only experience a story, a re-told, secondary witnessing of this time rather than an experience of space and our interconnectedness.

<sup>425</sup> Ursula Biemann’s video-essay, *X-Mission*, 2008.

simultaneously reassures them about their relative wealth and social position.’<sup>426</sup> This acerbic remark is articulated to great effect in her seminal work *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-75).<sup>427</sup> The work consists of photographs of empty storefronts and text panels that list descriptions for alcoholism. Rather than highlight the plight of the ‘down-and-outs’ through portraiture, Rosler refused to picture the homeless men and women who inhabited the doorways of dilapidated shops. As the title suggests, both the image and the text fall short of adequately conveying the reality of these people’s lives. The work successfully avoids adopting the ‘concerned’ position of the traditional format of the documentary photographer searching for objective historical fact.

*Nightcleaners* — despite its formal innovation and intervention into the politics of representation debates of the 1970s — was subject to the criticism that it did not wholly move beyond ingrained devices that ‘framed’ and thus codified ‘victims’, in turn, homogenising the ‘oppressed’.<sup>428</sup> For instance, debates took place around the decision by The Berwick Street Film Collective to include, and attempt to dismantle, the close-up, freeze-frames and slow motion. It has been argued that one specific shot, a high-angle close-up of a cleaner’s face ‘in which her eyes gradually close in resignation’ is so thoroughly sentimentalised that it fails to undercut the very problems it aimed to criticise.<sup>429</sup> As much critical work was trying to break documentary out of a mould developed throughout the previous forty- to fifty-year period, critics, scholars and makers were adamant that heroising the worker to propagandist-like affect should be avoided. The affects elicited by particular devices were seen to enforce a type of standardisation that worked to close down the otherwise polysemic nature of the image.

Such ‘sympathy’ framing continues to hold a great deal of value for the filmmaker, as seen in Hito Steyerl’s video-essay *November* (2004). This work parodies

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<sup>426</sup> Martha Rosler, ‘In, around, and afterthoughts (documentary photography)’ in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*, (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 151 - 206, p. 178. As noted earlier, these concerns were shared and developed alongside other artists, such as Allan Sekula.

<sup>427</sup> See Steve Edwards’ *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, (London: Afterall, 2012) for a detailed account of the existing scholarship on Rosler’s work. Edwards’ also argues for a consideration of *The Bowery* in relation to the broader components of ‘political modernism’.

<sup>428</sup> Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, ‘Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on *The Nightcleaners*)’, *Screen*, vol. 16, number 4, winter 1975/6, pp. 101-119, pp. 114-115.

<sup>429</sup> Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen wrote that such a shot, for instance, could be seen as close to the ‘German New Objectivity of the 1920s or the Dorothea Lange/Eugene Smith photography of poverty’. Johnston and Willemen, (1975/6), pp. 101-119, pp. 114-115.

the manipulation of emotion in mainstream, un-critical documentary reporting. When asked to take part in a pro-Kurdish demonstration against the suspected killing of a woman called Andrea — now a martyr for Kurdish independence, and Steyerl's old friend, Steyerl is told to 'look sad' and 'meditative' by another filmmaker there to record the rally. Steyerl does what is asked of her, and re-incorporates this exercise of overblown, fabricated sympathy into her own work, which, unbeknownst to the filmmaker who shot the footage, also takes the story of Andrea as its central focus.<sup>430</sup>

As we can see, the construction of what is termed the 'victim frame' has a significant place in the history of the documentary: one that still relentlessly plagues the medium. To photograph is to frame someone, to utilise the frame to create a small selection from its much broader surroundings (both materially and theoretically). Selection creates coherency, enabling the image to be comprehensibly 'read'. Particular choices for filming — the chosen distance of shots, angles, lighting and choice of audio, amongst other elements — can be made to cue the viewer, provoking a set of expectations, those of pity in the case of the 'victim frame'. One can, therefore, quickly predict and codify specific stories prior to their unfolding. The curator, Inge Henneman, has written that 'the victim frame is constructed around the archetype of the vulnerable person in need of help and protection. This kind of victim evokes sympathy, but is also passive, weak, useless and not in a position to help himself. So, taking care of him involves some costs.'<sup>431</sup>

However, Wendy S. Hesford has noted how Biemann's treatment of the images of women working in the sex trade re-writes traditional or mainstream narratives of victimisation.<sup>432</sup> Hesford argues that representations of the female sex worker have historically, in both Western art and media of the last three centuries, been predicated on the narrative of the 'fallen' women, codified as either deviant or helpless. This either/or dichotomy of deviancy or helplessness has become ingrained as normal and,

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<sup>430</sup> Hito Steyerl, *November*, 2004.

<sup>431</sup> Inge Henneman, 'Beyond Compassion: How to Escape the Victim Frame in Social Documentary Photography Today', *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula's Photography*, (ed.) Jan Baetens and Hilde Van Gelder, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), pp. 100-113, (p. 109).

<sup>432</sup> The focus of Hesford's essay is Biemann's *Remote Sensing*, and *Writing Desire* (2000). Her broader thesis, however, can be taken to include, for the purpose of my argument, *Performing the Border*. Hesford considers the reasons why, in a climate of fear, appropriations and co-options of images of the 'other' serve a particular purpose in strengthening a person's, or indeed, nation-state's identity. See Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol, *Just Advocacy? Women's Human Rights, Transnational Feminisms, and the Politics of Representation*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

thus, establishes a great deal of distance between the ‘other’ woman and oneself. This has a two-fold effect. The process of removal from oneself allows the image to be consumed comfortably. Moreover, ‘othering’ results in further intensification of ideas of victimhood.<sup>433</sup> Our comprehension of ‘victimhood’ is, of course, a carefully mediated cultural, political and economic process and does not always serve those who urgently require the money that might be generated, for example, by a charity campaign film.<sup>434</sup> Biemann sees her work differently. As for Rosler and Sekula before her, our reaction has to go beyond compassion.

Our conception of victim is tested at a point in Biemann’s *Remote Sensing*. Hesford draws our attention to the particular scene where Biemann asks a woman, Naomi, if she has ever had a ‘boyfriend... someone you loved’. Naomi indicates that she has never had sex without receiving payment for it, and she says, ‘I never say to a customer... I love you.’ Naomi is perplexed by the question, which, as Hesford notes, holds for Biemann a ‘radically different set of values’. This confusion, Hesford argues, ‘show[s] the limit of [Biemann’s] own comprehension and identification’.<sup>435</sup> Naomi asserts, ‘No boyfriend. But customer, yes. But free, no. Why?’

In order to explore the ‘radically different set of values’ between filmed person and filmmaker, Shelia Rowbotham recalls Marc Karlin’s observation that *Nightcleaners* ‘was about distances’.<sup>436</sup> Rowbotham transcribes the dialogue between the filmmaker and the cleaners he interviews. She notes the pain provoked by ‘the effort to communicate across the gulf of class and political aspiration appears in the relation between the cleaners and the leafletters and between the women and the film-

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<sup>433</sup> Hesford continues to state that the victimisation narrative runs deep; so deep in fact that many legal and cultural representations rely heavily on it for providing the grounds on which to incite awareness and action. Here we can see why Hito Steyerl’s insistence on the active power of images is pertinent. More often than not, trafficked and enslaved persons are only able to gain access to justice and related services if they are able to prove their status as victims through the act of confessional testimonials. Wendy Hesford, ‘Global Sex Work and Video Advocacy: The Geopolitics of Rhetorical Identification’, (eds.) Ursula Biemann and Jan-Erik Lundström, *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, Video Works 1998-2008*, (Umeå, Sweden: Bildmuseet, Umeå University, 2008), pp. 128-142.

<sup>434</sup> Sontag (2003) notes that images of postcolonial Africa exist in the consciousness of the general Western world as photographs of ‘large-eyed victims’, p. 63.

<sup>435</sup> Hesford, (2009), p. 137

<sup>436</sup> Marc Karlin interviewed by Patrick Wright, ‘A Passion for Images’, *Vertigo*, Volume 1, Number 9, Summer 1999, p. 5.

makers'.<sup>437</sup> In order for a comparison between Biemann and Karlin to be made, it is worth presenting the dialogue from this scene of *Nightcleaners*:

Marc: Let's say there's a factory. The factory is controlled by the people who work in it. The man does half a week and the wife does half a week, how would you feel about that?  
Women: (together) Yeh, yeh  
Jean: ...very good...  
Ann: ... definitely...  
Marc: Now I'm asking you again, what would then Socialism mean to you?  
Ann: Oh that, definitely. (laughs)  
Marc: What, what?  
Ann: Better life for the...  
Jean: ... for the people...  
Ann: ...yeh, better life for the working class people, if that was possible, but that couldn't be, could it? That couldn't be...  
Marc: ... why not?  
Ann: Oh, it's like asking for the moon isn't it?  
Jean: If people were strong enough. This is the thing, isn't it... you've got to be strong enough.<sup>438</sup>

The conversational exchange detailed above is complemented by visual techniques in *Nightcleaners*. These techniques — out-of-sync sound recordings, slowed-down images, black blank screens and abstracted close-ups, devices that generally pull the narrative and visual apart, breaking the assumption that text illustrates image — instil an over-emphasis on the deconstruction of the filmic text. Arguably, however, such an overt focus on distances between the filmmaker and the filmed subject allows interest to settle on the 'text' of the work; getting caught in mimicking or producing such a 'difference' results in a loss of attention to the social, economic and political climate which produced the work. Gail Day's warning that 'once every entity is treated as "text", or "discourse", then the relation of text to context - the central concern for the social history of art - is rendered obsolete as an intellectual and methodological problem' indicates how this position operates within the broader debates over the

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<sup>437</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, 'Jolting Memory: *Nightcleaners* Recalled', (2008), Maria Ruido (ed.), *Plan Rosebud: On Images, Sites and Politics of Memory*, (Santiago de Compostela: CGAC, 2008).

<sup>438</sup> Kate Hepburn and Marc Karlin, 'The *Nightcleaners* Book', (Unpublished Manuscript) in *Vertigo*, vol. 1, no.9, Summer, 1999, p. 5. Cited in Rowbotham's 'Jolting Memory: *Nightcleaners* Recalled', (1999).

relation of text and context.<sup>439</sup> The intended use of *Nightcleaners* as a campaign film for the cleaners is important to address. Whilst it could not be used in the immediate manner that a usual campaign film might have been, its place in the history of British political filmmaking is the reason it still demands attention. Had it only served the purpose of the campaign, the cleaners' struggle and efforts to unionise may have fallen into historical obscurity.

To further consider this focus on the 'text' of the work we might also look to the deployment of sound as a tool to instigate and set in motion the 'differing' or 'othering' process. Musical scores can be visceral in their emotional charge; before we see or hear any dialogue, music plugs the viewer into a serious, dysphoric and, thus, emotional state of anticipation. We may come to know prior to hearing any dialogue that the experiences relayed to us will be sad ones. As a result our emotional register is set to sympathy. This effect in itself is not inherently a bad thing, but it does require critical attention. Much earlier, the use of musical scores in preparing the viewer for what is to come was satirised and inverted by Luis Buñuel in *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan (Land Without Bread)*.<sup>440</sup> Throughout the short film the music moves from the melancholic sound of languid stringed instruments to abrupt crashing symbols. The inappropriateness of score to image is thoroughly exploited by Buñuel and serves to make the film increasingly satirical. Slow-paced and calm music marks the treacherous journey the Hurdanos must face when searching the mountains for sustenance. The next scene is filled with the blasting of horns that accompany the image of a Hurdanos villager, or what the voice-over defines as 'another type of idiot'.<sup>441</sup> The satire is carried to ridiculous ends by Buñuel when parts of the score appear to mimic the 'creeping' camera and its search for subjects, as typified in one scene where the voice-over states, 'This sick woman on a balcony is unaware of our presence'. Buñuel's parody of the

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<sup>439</sup> Gail Day, 'Persisting and Mediating: T.J. Clark and 'the Pain of the "Unattainable Beyond"', *Art History*, vol. 23, no. 1, March 2000, pp. 1-18 (p. 2).

<sup>440</sup> Buñuel was invited to take part in, and make a film about, France's first large-scale anthropological fieldtrip *Mission Dakar-Djibouti* led by Marcel Griaule in 1932. Instead, he turned his attention closer to home and made *Las Hurdes*, which is understood as a polemic against the widely publicised anthropological project. Jeffrey Ruoff, 'An Ethnographic Surrealist Film: Luis Buñuel, *Land Without Bread*', *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 14, issue 1, Spring-Summer 1998, pp. 45-57. Ruoff does, however, take note of the work's reception as a serious documentary. For instance, it is un-problematically categorised in The American Anthropological Association guidebook, *Films for Anthropological Teaching*, as 'a social and anthropological document on the unique district of Las Hurdes near the Portuguese border of Spain', p. 48.

<sup>441</sup> Luis Buñuel, *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan (Land Without Bread)*, 1932.

documentary project satirises, largely through the use of musical score and narrative, the colonial drive to uncover, know and ultimately possess those it films. That is to differentiate, code and consume that which is marked as ‘other’. This parody explicitly re-addresses the viewer’s position and the powerful role enabled by the narrative of victimisation. For both Biemann and Ruido sound is crucial. For both, at times, the background noise caught on video is untreated. At other moments sound is used to construct a digital ‘soundscape’ (as discussed in Chapter Three) and heighten our senses to the materiality of the space. At no moment throughout *Performing the Border*, *Real Time* or *Amphibious Fictions* does the musical score act to induce pity prior to the monologues of individual interviewees. Sound used, is, at times aggressive or foreboding to a degree, rousing one from a passive mode of viewing. The choices and selections of sound utilised by Biemann and Ruido in their respective works aid them in navigating — in more ways than through *just* direct filming, framing and editing — the ‘victim-frame’.

### **Re-inscribing the Political: the event of the image**

Azoulay’s conception of the photograph as an event, or encounter, has the potential to help us move beyond the impasse of consuming the ‘other’ through what is often perceived as its inevitable objectification on screen. Let us first discuss how Azoulay arrives at such a notion. Barthes’ notion of the punctum in the image is the point at which it ‘pricks’ the viewer’s conscious and generates unplanned feeling.<sup>442</sup> To expand, Barthes’ ascribes two aspects to the photograph: the studium and the punctum. The studium is the organisation of what is seen in the photograph, however, there is always, as he understands, an element that escapes this organisation; it is this element that is designated as the punctum. The author of the photograph, for Barthes, has no control over the punctum; rather it is elusive and un-planned. In an effort to think through Barthes’ notion of punctum and studium, Azoulay cites Barthes’ account of how we view an image of violence. Barthes writes that in viewing images of horror, the photographer steals the viewer of his/her judgement: the photographer has looked and shuddered in horror prior to the viewer being able to do so. In understanding ‘a photo as

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<sup>442</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), pp. 25-27.

the product of an author who has signed his name to it', Barthes, Azoulay argues, renders the image forever closed.<sup>443</sup>

Barthes' conception of the analogue image has a strong purchase over our understanding of affectivity. The assignment of ideologically normative values to the 'studium' of the image (the messages that the critic can decode), and of the un-known to the 'punctum' (shrouded in mystery, pre-reflective and pre-ideological) has a tendency to bind affectivity to the individual experience. In addition, the gulf created between the 'looker' and the 'viewed' separates 'self' from 'other'. When discussed in these formal terms of punctum and studium (as Barthes does), one aspect is explainable and subject to decoding, the other forever locked in the individual psyche. Jacques Rancière has termed this as the 'second phase' of Barthes's writing. Rancière writes combatively: 'the sin of the former mythologist: the sin of having wished to strip the visible world of its glories, of having transformed its spectacles and pleasures into a great web of symptoms and a seedy exchange of signs' is a guilt through which the punctum provides theoretical refuge. Rancière, however, notes the tensile relation that Barthes puts in play between the studium as a vehicle for decoding and the punctum for soliciting speech in us. Both readings see 'the image', notes Rancière, as 'raw, material presence and the image as discourse encoding a history'.<sup>444</sup>

By not understanding the punctum as something which can remain open and 'make an ethics of the spectator possible', Barthes is preoccupied with deciding on whether the punctum is there or not. Azoulay argues that Barthes turns the punctum into a stable characteristic of the photograph. In contrast, Azoulay sees the punctum as having the capacity to turn outwards towards social relations. This conception adopts the preferred term 'watching' over 'looking' when apprehending lens-based images. The distinction Azoulay makes for watching a photograph presents a different experience when looking at the lives of others. This distinction, while comparable to the debates on index and the real in 1990s photography theory, does offer the potential to let meaning proliferate, removing its bind to the over-extended one-directional gaze that transforms subject into an immovable object.<sup>445</sup> A particular section within *Performing*

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<sup>443</sup> Azoulay, (2008), p. 61.

<sup>444</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 9-11.

<sup>445</sup> Azoulay does not make any attempt to deny the relation the image has to truth and to what was once there. She concedes that the photographic image is an indicator of the real, no matter how much the photographer alters the lens, frames the image and thus manipulates it; it still holds its denotative force. Her focus of this evidence as not operating in any final determined

*the Border* can help us to both understand and further complicate Azoulay's premise. Along with Biemann, we confront, and hold the gaze, of an older, white man. Biemann's edits assess, infer and accuse. In flitting between the gaze of the man and the gaze of the young Mexican women, our understanding of the man's visit to the border town of Ciudad Juárez is made clear.<sup>446</sup> We assume the position of judgemental filmmaker, of owner of the image and its meaning. However, at the same moment, these shifts in artist's, viewer's and subjects' positioning highlight the networks that link us to one another.

It might be helpful here to consider Azoulay's theoretical position in the wider body of photography theory that proceeds, and surrounds it. John Roberts, in his review of James Elkins's *Photography Theory* (2007) and Blake Stimson's *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (2006), provides a good account of the 'coming of age' of photography theory. Roberts argues that photography theory has now gained stability not only because its internal contradictions have been accepted and made available to criticise, but also because the medium has become fully 'integrated into the relations of production'.<sup>447</sup> Photography simultaneously exists in two different spheres: perception and deployment. It is thus able to reify and commodify things (the subject of the image and the object-ness of the photograph itself), and produce knowledge, visibility and representation, and thus enables us to gain some purchase of the world we live in. This realisation of the medium's two-fold character (discussed at length in Chapter Three) meant that scholars — which Roberts's argues make up the 'first-wave' of photography theory — de-aestheticised the photographic image through a desire to understand the institutions from which it emerged.<sup>448</sup> This focus on *how* the photograph reifies, argues Roberts, resulted in the photograph's relation to knowledge becoming overlooked.<sup>449</sup>

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way is very different in emphasis from Barthes' inclusion of the punctum. Azoulay, (2008), p. 158.

<sup>446</sup> Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999, 27.56 mins.

<sup>447</sup> John Roberts' 'Photography as Truth-Event', *Oxford Art Journal*, 31.3 2008, pp. 463-468, (p. 464).

<sup>448</sup> Roberts cites Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Victor Burgin, John Tagg, Vilém Flusser and Henri Van Lier as the writers that made up this 'first-wave'.

<sup>449</sup> Roberts states that this assessment could be read as being suggestive of the above listed theorists being conservative in their analysis when in fact they were far from it. Rather, this 'first-wave' of theory should be understood as addressing broader concerns about truth: concerns that centered on *whose* truth, and what truth-claims the photographic image could legitimately make. Roberts, (2008), pp. 463-468, (p. 464).

For Roberts, this is where the paradox arises: through pinpointing the photographic image as a vehicle of power — showing what can only ever be a partial truth of those who structured the image, or those that use the image for their own means — photography theory productively revealed how close, ‘under the logic of commodity exchange’, the photograph is to the ‘figural and metaphorical operations of art’.<sup>450</sup> To this end, the photograph underwent de-aestheticisation due to its ‘embeddedness in the relations of production’. Through this process emerged the medium’s ‘figural character’. Interest (generated through modernist semiotics) in the photograph as ‘picture’ over ‘window on the world’ promoted a second wave of theorists to emerge in the 1990s, a group of scholars that Azoulay’s work might be best understood within. Theorists such as Sekula, Richard Shiff, Steve Edwards, Molly Nesbit and Blake Stimpson, managed, attests Roberts, to re-invigorate debates around the photograph’s indexical relation with the world without losing site of the earlier theoretical advancements. Here, the photograph’s relation with realism and the real was strengthened once more. Challengingly, this second wave argued that what distinguishes ‘photography in its specificity is that it is more – or less – than art, it is this that defines its epistemological, cultural and historical status’.<sup>451</sup> Roberts also explains that an important aim for these writers was to dissolve the notion of the artist on one hand, and that of the documenter on the other.

Azoulay acknowledges the displacing of the photograph’s relation with the real through the understanding of lens-based images as constructed pictures (over and above the metaphor of ‘window on the world’). Azoulay goes some way to re-think this strict bifurcation and its problematic weighting, a preoccupation of the scholars mentioned, whose re-investments in the 1990s in ‘indexes’, ‘indices’ and ‘traces’ may be closer to Azoulay’s theoretical underpinnings.<sup>452</sup> In this way, Azoulay’s work sits against the grain of much new media theory (discussed earlier), which emphasises digitalisation and, at times, unquestioningly assumes that the photograph has lost all referent to the

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<sup>450</sup> Roberts, (2008), pp. 463-468, (p. 464).

<sup>451</sup> Roberts’ (2008), pp. 463-468, (p. 464).

<sup>452</sup> Henri Van Lier’s critique of the philosopher and mathematician, Charles Sanders Peirce’s work on the index is useful here. For Van Lier, the ‘index’ must be distinguished from ‘indices’. The index is *directive* and points or selects an element from the photographic image that demonstrates the image’s relation with the place in which it is taken. In contrast, ‘indices’ *unintentionally* signal, or carry information. This is alluded to in the footnotes of John Robert’s text cited above, and taken up once more in Martin Lefebvre’s essay ‘The Art of Pointing. On Peirce, Indexicality, and Photographic Images’, (ed.) James Elkins, *Photography Theory* (Routledge: New York and London, 2007).

world. However, it should be noted that whilst we can situate Azoulay's thesis as close to the 1990s photography theory debates Azoulay herself chooses to center her primary argument around Benjamin's and Barthes' analyses of the history and theory of photography. That is, an in-depth account of how the index has been theorised in more recent times does not take place. This is where her argument differs from many of the 'second wave' theorists writing in the 1990s. Her treatment of the photographic index is based on the acceptance that the camera captures something, or someone, 'having been there'. There is little mention of the debates on photographic theory of the 1990s. We can take two interrelated lines of critique here. Whilst Azoulay's argument deals with a very specific geopolitics, it does not overtly advance claims made about the medium made fifteen to twenty years earlier. Secondly, it has been noted that Azoulay's methodology still drifts towards a liberal politics of victimhood. This, argues Steve Edwards, encourages a 'position of benevolence in the viewer' despite Azoulay's aim to re-instate a political ontology for the photograph.<sup>453</sup>

However, it is my contention that despite such criticisms Azoulay's preference to 'watch' over 'look' still provides three important contributions when considering practices such as Biemann's and Ruido's. First, her focus on those photographed (who co-opt the camera lens to demand recognition) gives room to forging agency. Secondly, she demands that we be vigilant in considering the image in isolation. Watching is preferred by Azoulay because it acknowledges the dimensions of both time and movement, which, she asserts, are crucial in re-inscribing the photographic image as one 'event' among many. Lastly, although Azoulay inscribes the photographic image as a tripartite, egalitarian event — between photographer, the photographed and the viewer — she favours examples of practices that re-introduce the author into the image.<sup>454</sup> Authorship does not, however, translate to ownership (the image-taker owning the image). It is this split between ownership and authorship that is problematised in Biemann's and Ruido's practices. Both artists consider how we might re-introduce the author without stemming the proliferation of meaning.

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<sup>453</sup> Steve Edwards, 'Focus on life in unhappy lands: The Civil Contract of Photography', *Times Higher Education*, 18<sup>th</sup> December 2008, <<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=404775&sectioncode=26>>, accessed 15.11.2011.

<sup>454</sup> For example, Azoulay selects work by artists such as Michal Heiman, who re-insert the presence of the image-taker through the montage technique of adding 'photographer unknown' to found photographic images.

## Conclusion

This chapter (and the one preceding) have sought to indicate how lens-based representation should not be conceived as passive mimesis. It is clear, however, how the lens-based image can be ideologically illusionistic, enforce unbridled escapism and, thus, have the potential to be deeply problematic for the political. Devices to explore what cannot be represented — devices that strive to make visible social relations and solidarity, but also trauma and loss — give rise to un-escapable questions that have ethical dimensions. As Hito Steyerl has noted, the ‘urgency’ imbued in the documentary is tethered to ‘the ethical dilemma of having to give testimony to an event that cannot be conveyed as such, but instead contains necessary elements of truth as well as of “darkness”’.<sup>455</sup> The problems of indexicality in the lens-based image, of the relation to the real, are re-thought in contemporary engagements with the genealogy of the documentary, as it is the index that demands that we face up to the world as it is.

This chapter has analysed how we might avoid defining those filmed as passive, thus consigning another’s image to pre-existing representations, curtailing, in the process, political agency. It has sought to explore how the artist faces significant challenges when selecting a form that exists in the fluid documentary paradigm. In considering a medium that has, since its inception, straddled multiple disciplines and their codes of practice, this chapter has sought to examine what is at stake. Disciplines, such as photojournalism, have to answer to certain demands. Thought must be paid to the expectations of those demands. For instance, we must take into account the principles around ambiguity and transparency, particularly when considering a document’s purpose and its relation and responsibility to those featured in the picture. Making a strict opposition between social documenter and artist risks, as we have seen, assigning the document to the real world and the artwork to a kind of special transcendental category. For Allan Sekula, the aesthetic is to be primarily considered as a tool through which to interrogate the world. Sekula’s conception of the aesthetic, therefore, demonstrates an expectation for its active capabilities.<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> Hito Steyerl, ‘Documentarism as a Politics of Truth’, <[http://www.republicart.net/disc/representations/steyerl03\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/representations/steyerl03_en.htm)>, May 2005, translated by Aileen Derieg, p. 5.

<sup>456</sup> Allan Sekula, *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula’s Photography*, (eds.) Jan Baetens and Hilde Van Gelder, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), p. 136.

In considering the role of the border between two nation-states, we initially understand and perceive it as the line that marks one country from the other, the North from the South. Biemann, however, understands and shows us that, this is not the case. Rather, it is akin to a series of circles that overlap and produce one another. The subjectivation of people determines, and is determined by, these very aspects of the space. In contrast, Akerman selects the line of the border, through long static-shots, perhaps as a method to reflect on the segregation and ‘marking-out’ of people, most pointedly seen in the violent rhetoric of the signs that punctuate the desert on which her camera tellingly lingers. This aesthetic decision, alongside the story of a missing female Mexican worker in Los Angeles, recounted as we drive from the border toward the US, results in the assimilation of a series of linear structures. These vertical structures of narrative and image cannot speak adequately to, or aid us in understanding, the messiness of contemporary global capitalism.

There is a tension present in the video-essay that speaks to the representation of a struggle at the US-Mexico border. This specific locale is tied, through an authorial voice that blends the ‘authority’ of other disciplines into artistic experimentation, to a larger totality. The tension can be considered as partially instigated through the opposing manner in which filmed images of the space — both ‘transparent’ on-site filming and explicitly manipulated, hybrid images — are positioned alongside the temporal components of narrative structure. The moving image works, in part, to cover the surface of things, working outwards. The essayistic structure, again, in part, moves inwardly through narrative, devised through and by the authorial voice.<sup>457</sup>

The works aim to re-instate the authorial voice. They accomplish this aim in a manner that must transgress: first, its monolithic presence in more established documentary modes; secondly, its dissolution and imposed obscurity in *cinéma vérité*-style work; and thirdly, its fracturing and multiplication through the political praxis of much feminist and post-colonial concerns and crucial demands. Devices such as contradiction and multiple narratives highlight the discursive determinations of the essay. These devices run parallel to established voices of authority — theoretical

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<sup>457</sup> The practice of writing in all the artists’ works is important for this point. From Marker’s early position as a writer for a travel journal, to Akerman’s interest in writing when encountering Godard’s *Pierrot Le Fou*. See the interview with Akerman by Sam Adams, (28.01.2010), <<http://www.avclub.com/articles/chantal-akerman,37600/>>, accessed 21.03.2012. Biemann, Steyerl, Ruido and Melitopoulos all have developed strong theoretically complex accounts of their own work and the wider histories and debates their practices operate within.

analysis, images of military reconnaissance, cartography, or the power of the contained and established archival image. The medium of the video-essay allows for two strategies — essayistic and lens-based — to visualise different kinds of subjectivisation for the viewer and the viewed. The form, therefore, plays with an aesthetic paradigm (that is concerned with artifice and speaks to a degree of autonomy) and the documentary paradigm (charged with a dominance of political truthful representation and a degree of responsibility).

This confluence of responsibility and distance in order to develop criticality, enables one to maintain a more reflective position on the politics of the gaze and its neo-colonial configuration. This chapter has sought to approach how artworks that interact with the documentary paradigm ‘approach speaking in the name of an other’. To differing degrees, Biemann’s and Ruido’s treatment of the voice(s), on-site captured visuals and montage techniques in post-production, registers an Adornian understanding of the subject/object divide. Adorno noted that in our discussions of the ‘I’ (the subject), we enforce its separation from ourselves. This exclusion transforms the subject into a ‘thing’, which, he writes, ‘assumes the dimensions of objectivity’.<sup>458</sup> Adorno, therefore, makes clear that the subject, in order to be expressed as such, must, in the first instance, be removed from the self. This dialectic helps one to avoid strict binaries of self and other, and has the potential to advance to a Marxian ethics, an ethics that ultimately attends to our inherent collectivity, our role in the social above and beyond our desire for self-preservation.<sup>459</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> Adorno writes: ‘Absolute subjectivity is also subjectless. The self lives solely through transformation into otherness; as the secure residue of the subject which cuts itself off from everything alien it becomes the blind residue of the world. The more the I of expressionism is thrown back upon itself, the more like the excluded world of things it becomes.’ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), p. 262.

<sup>459</sup> Paul Blackledge has pointed to the misunderstandings that have developed in relation to Marx and ethics. Marx, in breaking with much previous understandings of the character of man, sought to dispel Hobbes’s account that, at the core of the human, was a need for self-preservation and thus an inherent and aggressive individualism. He also sought to dispel the idealism present in Kant’s reconfiguration (using the act of rational reasoning) of the Hobbesian theorem. Marx, notes Blackledge, sought to re-address the ways man/woman could only flourish in society with others and that this configuration was in existence in pre-capitalist societies. He writes: ‘The starting point for Marx’s alternative ethics is the collective struggles of workers against their exploitation. He argued that these struggles expose the limitations of freedom in a capitalist society while simultaneously engendering virtues of solidarity that point beyond the limits of liberal conceptions of morality’. See Paul Blackledge, ‘Marxism and Ethics’, *International Socialism*, issue 120, October 2008, <<http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=486>>, accessed 16.08.12.

## Chapter Six – Shifts in Emphasis, the Documentary, the ‘Video-Essay’ and Its Futures

Nora Alter sees the 1990s as the period in which essay films really proliferated. She writes that whilst the ‘essay film’ has been produced ‘sporadically’ for the last seventy years or so, ‘today, it seems that essay films are everywhere’.<sup>460</sup> By and large, there has been a tendency to equate the essay with personal reflection, and in turn, a leaning towards the notion of the ‘subjective’. My thesis has aimed to unpick this tendency and demonstrate that at particular historical moments, and within specific public spheres, a consideration of the dialectic between ‘subjectivity’ and ‘objectivity’, between ‘self’ and ‘other’ and between ‘fragment’ and ‘whole’ has been lacking. I have tried to explore lineages that recognise these dialectics. Whilst the genre of the essay, in its initial literary incarnation, may have appeared to be preoccupied with unmediated personal reflection on a subject, explorations by Montaigne, Lukács and Adorno (detailed in Chapter Four) indicate a careful consideration of the continual shift and movement between how one’s thoughts and perceptions connect to a wider system of social, economic, cultural and historical processes. I have aimed to show how, and indeed why, the supposed universalist and immutable categories of ‘The Subject’ or ‘The Object’, for example, are mobilised by practices such as Biemann’s and Ruido’s. Works such as these are crucial for understanding the political role of the aesthetic at the turn of the twenty-first century. They enable discussion of the debates that are at stake, their tensions and the outer limits of such terms: in short, they allow for a reading of the dynamism of subject-object relations.

If one unpicks this notion of a ‘documentary turn’, works such as Biemann’s and Ruido’s sit at a slight remove from the ‘personal’ conception of the essayistic; or, they at least attempt unapologetically to use some of the more problematic and most criticised aspects of the documentary medium. For example, Laura Rascaroli, following Paul Arthur, asserts that an essay is a personal reflection ‘that does not propose itself anonymous or collective, but as originating from a single authorial voice’.<sup>461</sup> This statement highlights the important difference, however slight, between the general perception of the essay film and the video essays of artists such as Biemann and Ruido.

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<sup>460</sup> Alter (2003), p. 21.

<sup>461</sup> Laura Rascaroli’s précis of Paul Arthur’s argument. See her text ‘The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments’, *Framework* 49, no. 2, Fall 2008, pp. 24-47, (p. 35).

Biemann, for example, appears to acknowledge her inquisitive role in *Performing the Border*, but it is clear that she is but one voice among many in determining the vicissitudes of such a space. Her voice is directive, disembodied, pedagogic and questioning. It is not often that she contemplates her role as image-maker through the voice over or that she fixates on what it means for her to travel and experience a place ‘first hand’ bringing her own ‘ways of seeing’ with her.<sup>462</sup> There is an obvious dissatisfaction with what the ‘documentary’ and its ‘real’ can do; as Biemann herself states, ‘the idea was not so much to document the reality of a border town’. She continues, ‘performing the border is put together in a way that slowly but steadily unravels the many layers of global processes that are inscribed in this place [Ciudad Juarez]’.<sup>463</sup> However, it is, I would argue, precisely the form of the document that is capable of producing such a ‘report’ — report of a space that is made real not only through on-site filming which transcribes the space for those that have not travelled there, but just as importantly, through the array of visuals in which it is translated and constituted for a variety of people and institutions.

My thesis has privileged a deployment of the theoretical advancements gained through scholars of the photographic image. Chapter Three charts the debates which argued for and against an altered perception of the index and of the photograph’s commitment to the real from 1989 through into the 1990s. I ultimately conclude that whilst new technologies open up new possibilities, the material use and value of the photographic machine is not altered beyond recognition because of the shift from analogue to digital. My analysis demonstrates how, since the early 1990s, the documentary has steadily moved back to the centre of socially and politically engaged art production both in the guise and through the specificity of the film and video-essay. Whilst photography may have become part and parcel of the accepted mediums of the artist, shedding a need to continually be presented with the prefix ‘art’, or indeed separated from art, I hope this study has shown how documentary (in its expanded and historicised sense) must now be read in a similar fashion.

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<sup>462</sup> In 2008 Biemann made *X-Mission*. There is a short segment in this video-essay that, through her voice-over, explicitly reveals her role as director of the images she deploys. This also occurs visually when a camera records Biemann at work in her post-production editing suite in *Black Sea Files* (2005).

<sup>463</sup> Ursula Biemann, ‘Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann’, *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, issue 1-2, 2002, pp. 91-109, (p. 92).

This final chapter shall identify the limitations of my research, and finally argues for the importance of closer excavations in the history of the documentary. Rather than posit a ‘coming of age’ within contemporary art production, I hope to have shown how the documentary’s interpellation, and constant role, in the formation of the moving image, has taken place and continues to do so. No less importantly, I hope to have provided an account of precisely *why* this contested and fractured form has gained particular prominence under neoliberal capitalism. I shall now identify three areas that I consider important when examining the ‘documentary turn’ in contemporary art discourse.

### **Definition through Negation**

In my introductory chapter, I observe a variety of terms used to describe the genre of the ‘essay film’ or ‘film essay’: they range from ‘experimental documentary’ to ‘art documentary’, ‘theory films’ to ‘docu-essay’ to ‘documentary fiction’ and the ‘personal documentary’. My aim was not to secure a proper definition. I do not wish to deny, however, the importance of the ‘classification’ process in producing a detailed analytical account. The majority of artists who adopt the term ‘video-essay’, ‘film essay’ or ‘visual essay’, and the scholars across art and film history, stress the problems of the descriptor. Mostly, there is, I would argue, an overt resignation to the medium’s ‘hybrid’ nature. For some, it is enough to focus on the medium’s propensity for straddling different genres and for muddying the waters between fiction and non-fiction. Moreover, herein lies the strength of this ‘neither/nor’ product: its inclusivity and penchant for incompleteness have, I would argue, become one of its central characteristics, but certainly not *the* main identifier. For Nora Alter, the essay film is ‘*not a genre*’ precisely because its very purpose is to move beyond ‘formal, conceptual, and social constraint’.<sup>464</sup> Similarly, Rascaroli observes that ‘heresy’, in the Adornian literary essay sense, is a particularly important term when examining the thinking around the ‘essay film’.<sup>465</sup> ‘Heresy’ is here used in Adorno’s sense: that is, as with the

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<sup>464</sup> Nora Alter, ‘The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki’s “Images of the World and the Inscription of War”’, *New German Critique*, no. 68 (Spring/Summer 1996), p. 171.

<sup>465</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 23. Quoted in Laura Rascaroli, (2008), pp. 24-47.

written essay, the 'essay film' is praised and enjoyed for its 'protean' form, for its ability to digress, fragment and repeat.

There is, however, quite a paradox present when looking through the lens of either the film or the art historian and theoretician. With the film scholars, a closer attention is paid to the theorisation of the essay film and its relation, and explicit connection to, the documentary. However, the characteristics of the film essay, its hybridity and inconclusiveness, are often those favoured by the artist and thus aspects which the art historian and/or theoretician must attend to when analysing such work. These characteristics make it easier, perhaps, to be inventive, to examine the construction of knowledge and the varied manner in which power is orchestrated on and through the body, both individual and collective.

There is, however, a problem with uncritically adopting a supposed 'open' form if this 'open' form is not historicised, and it is here that works such as Biemann's and Ruido's make their intervention. For example, the art historian and critic, T.J. Demos argues that video essays such as *Nervus Rerum* by the London-based Otolith Group 're-invent' the documentary mode.<sup>466</sup> This observation elides a thorough analysis of the history of the documentary and a prioritising of fiction, fragmentation and fabrication, without giving enough importance to what are frequently considered the negative aspects of the documentary lens: its fidelity to truth (single, multiple and varied); its aspirations towards a drive for totality (mindful to not obscure and collapse what appear as contradictions); and its considered understanding of the role of the viewer. These key aspects are haunted by a deeply troublesome past. They can work to homogenise; they can work to 'own' those filmed (as discussed at length in the previous chapter); and they can work to shut down the processes of subjectivation and provide simple cause-effect narratives which consign the lens-based image to simple reflection theory. One can only begin to readdress these problematised traits once more in the knowledge (and celebration) that loosening such apparently harmonious aesthetic forms made a space

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<sup>466</sup> I am referring to Demos' article 'The Right to Opacity: On the Otolith Group's *Nervus Rerum*, *October* 129, Summer 2009, pp. 113-128. In this article, Demos' quotes Anjalika Sagar (one half of the Otolith Group) in her call to 'place documentary images on trial' (p. 122). This appears reminiscent of Hito Steyerl's contention that the documentary image is a partial fragment of the truth. However, the Otolith Group's *Nervus Rerum* is at risk of privileging fiction and the politics of representation above all else. It actively avoids any capacity it might have as a document for instrumentalisation. Whilst this is not surprising, I would argue that an engagement with other fields of inquiry, such as journalism, that use the medium of the documentary, is best acknowledged and carefully considered, rather than ignored and dismissed.

for an emphasis on the first person. Without doubt, that this focus on the first person was driven by women directors and artists of colour as early adopters and shapers of the formation of the essay film after 1970. It is crucial to never overlook the reason why oral storytelling and narrative is so important politically. These very narratives are the counter-narratives that add, subtract, unpick and rewrite history's hegemonic tale. They are, more often than not, the stories of the oppressed, the subordinated, hidden and silenced. Oral traditions have been, more often than not, the only way in which one could historicise oneself.

To return to the question of 'naming': alongside the underdeveloped appropriation of the term 'documentary' runs the appropriation of another genre, that of the literary essay. I am mindful that in borrowing its terms we continually show our inability to provide the video-essay with new terms and definitions for analysis. Whilst it is clear that there are many benefits to avoiding classification (and the ossification that can bring), we must also be vigilant in respect of the problems presented by under-theorising because of a fear of doing so. Resorting to the terms of another genre — for example, seeing the literary 'essay' as the antecedent to works such as Ruido's and Biemann's — can cause many problems when one crosses to the visual text without accounting for the specificity of the video medium.<sup>467</sup>

We have identified figures (Alexander Astruc, for example) who called for the acceptance of the camera as a tool that could be just as flexible, subtle and nuanced an apparatus as the writer's pen. Astruc could not have imagined how the technological advancements in film would produce ever smaller and more portable machines through which to record and reconstruct the world around us. The adeptness and flexibility of the pen has become ever more closely matched by the video camera. Whilst these claims are important, they orient analysis too firmly in one direction, making meaning and analysis flow from one source. The images produced by lens-based technologies must be read alongside, and with attention to, the other spheres in which the medium is received. Because lens-based images are at once both artistic and commercial, any

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<sup>467</sup> This movement is eloquently considered in Lazzarato and Melitopoulos' understanding of the capacity of the digital video medium. They discuss how experimentation with the formal qualities of the video medium and its ability to mimic, produce, expand and contract temporal experiences — processes that form our understanding of history; ours and its connections to that of others. Maurizio Lazzarato and Angela Melitopoulos, 'Digital Montage and Weaving: An Ecology of the Brian for Machine Subjectivities', *Stuff it! The video essay in the digital age*, (ed.) Ursula Biemann, (Zurich: Voldemeer AG Zurich, 2003), pp. 116-126.

attempts to theorise their role should not ignore such interrelated material conditions and systems of production, dissemination and reception. In the same fashion that careful readings of the still photographic image avoid rendering a false split between art photography and social documentary, or the photojournalist documenter and the ‘investigative’ artist, we too must avoid such readings when historicising, analysing and conceptualising how the video or film essay is understood alongside the documentary.

What then do we gain from compiling the varied terms to describe such a genre? Attempts to define are productive in the sense that they allow us to gather some key identifiers in order to begin serious analytical work. Alongside an engagement with the subjective and the reflexive are other areas for concern. The compulsion to produce an account, the experimentation with the author’s voice, the use of archival images and images from other related, but independent sources, all contribute to the modern video-essay.

What follows will work through these aspects. In holding on to these intermeshed elements, we must not neglect the mutable nature of such classifications. To simply say that any explicitly non-fiction artist film or video ‘reconfigures’ or ‘reinvents’ the documentary, is, in my view, both inattentive and insufficient. More important here is the need to read these varied terms as both symptoms of their specific historic moment, and as *generating* specific moments themselves. Indeed, not only are these terms merely formal indicators of a set of particular historical, economic, political and social determinants, rather, they are agents for contributing to change.

### **Authorship, the voice, and the boundaries of self and other**

In the penultimate chapter of this thesis, I drew out in what ways I considered the use of the voice, and the manner in which narrative was deployed, in *Performing the Border* and Ruido’s two works. Akerman’s *From the Other Side* aided the discussion and acted as a point of comparison. Akerman’s work, I argued, interacts with ‘traditional’ and uncritical perceptions of the documentary in a fashion different from that of Biemann’s *Performing the Border*. As the analysis showed, however, there can be no straight and finalised readings of these two works. The readings operate here to demarcate the lines of the debates and are used to ask productive questions of one another. In the scholarship on ‘non-fiction’ cinema much has been written about the use of the voice. The voice has had — and continues to have — a powerful role in the history of the

documentary. It can work as the caption does, in an explanatory fashion, and serve to make the meaning of the image clear, through either a ‘voice off’, ‘voice-over’ or through intertitles. Or, it can translate an overt and specific ideological message: the voice here can incite through propagandist intentions. It can also be a tool through which to teach and enlighten.

The voice, as noted in my analysis of Biemann’s and Rudio’s videos, can be split: tending towards either the author ‘teaching’ or the author ‘learning’. It is honed through the manner in which the rhetoric is delivered: through a delivery characterised by either questions or statements. The statements (a preference shown by Biemann in *Performing the Border*) can be seen as being closer to the much-criticised ‘voice of God’, a disembodied, overarching narrative that appears to ‘tell the truth’. This type of command and structured ownership of the filmed material has typically afforded no space for alternative approaches, purporting to transcribe history with a capital ‘H’. It stands accused of defining, limiting, and obliterating complexities. How to handle the tool of the voice, it would seem, is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of expanded documentary. On the other hand, the questioning voice is perhaps closer to the essayistic mode. It begins, it could be said, from the interior, from the individual subjective position. It opens outwards, rather than sits atop. It does not tend to make grand claims. It aims — and in some examples in quite a humble fashion — to speak from a singular perspective, from the modesty of the singular ‘I’ rather than the grandiose ‘I’.

However, works that have an unashamedly political intent — either through form, subject matter, or, in the most careful accounts, through both — have a desire to connect together disparate voices. Recent attempts to reclaim authorship, to examine the particular whilst understanding its inescapable links to the global, must, rather than just circumnavigate, actually traverse the colonial past of the camera. Closer, detailed and nuanced accounts of the act of taking the photographic image can help us to alter and create new ways to read the documentary image, which avoid having to siphon off the genre of the video-essay as something entirely separate or, indeed, as some maturation of the form. Alongside such accounts are the possibilities that are opened up through post-production devices, and the expediency presented by continually developing distribution systems.

The ‘video-essays’ of Biemann and Rudio are of particular relevance because they demonstrate a commitment to the text, to the word, to the narrative, in a way that

more uncritical treatments of the documentary may not necessarily do. The text in these works — the use of the intertitles to segment, to organise and present — works in a similar way to Montaigne’s sentiment regarding the ability of the essay to open up a problem, rather than discover an answer. The texts do however, aim for an account, a knowing of some sorts, just as an essay aims to ‘assay’ or weigh up. In using ‘accounts’ generated from other fields of knowledge — journalism, military, personal stories, industry produced and owned images, for example — they stitch together a horizontal picture that they are unafraid to commit their voice to. Quite pertinently, the deployment of different tenses in the pivotal works discussed, particularly Ruido’s, via archival images or through images from other disciplines or public spheres, aims to unpick other known and received narratives. The black and white photographs of smoke billowing from tall chimneys on the looming hillside in *Amphibious Fictions* could quite easily frame a nostalgic approach. The manner in which Ruido mobilises these archival images, works instead to illuminate the movement of history and fluidity, and, thus, to shine a spotlight on the capacity for change and agency. Here the past is used to fuel inquisitiveness and agency over and above aimless reminiscence.

Biemann’s voice-over, whether spoken or inserted into the image itself, implicates the viewer. This implication can be seen when space appears to be claimed by the women filmed on the border, or on the back of a motorcycle in *Remote Sensing*; here they return the gaze of the on-looker (see fig. 19 and fig. 19.1). For Ruido, the viewer is interpellated in a different way: here we join the conversation, quite literally in some scenes (as detailed in my discussion of *Real Time* in Chapter Two); at other moments we are comforted by Ruido’s inquiry and her interest, and we are thereby assimilated into the research process. Ruido does not claim to have a full grasp of the array of complexities at play; as she runs a thread through these complexities, however, we are compelled to think for ourselves. We are made aware of the necessity of mapping the field of concern, of letting singular stories, histories and perspectives speak, whilst all the while connecting to narratives, images and perceptions that stretch, for example, way beyond the towns of Mataró and Terrassa.

### **Towards a critique of fragmentation**

As discussed in Chapter Four, Lukács is noted for his distrust of uncritical and celebratory approaches to discontinuity. For him, such approaches broke the

connections between how things *appear* and how things *are*. Having explored the encounter between Lukács and the playwright Brecht, I would like to pay attention here, to the exchange between Lukács and the philosopher, Ernst Bloch, which took place around the same time. In Lukács' retort to Bloch's attack on his favouring of 'bourgeois' realism, Lukács cites the problems he sees as inherent to montage, beginning, primarily, with a discussion of James Joyce's work. Bloch is recounted as thoroughly enamoured with Joyce's capabilities in exploiting the crevices, discontinuities and disintegration of life — so much so that the claimed 'unmediated' 'babble' that flows unhindered from the mouths of characters in Joyce's novels reveals a greater truth.<sup>468</sup>

Bloch writes of Joyce's writing, 'The words have become unemployed, they have been expelled from their context of meaning.'<sup>469</sup> Bloch continues to assert that the stitching together of fragments, the montage of narrative, can 'work wonders'; he continues, 'in the old days it was only thoughts that could dwell side by side. But now things can do the same.'<sup>470</sup> This exchange operates as an important backdrop from which to examine the differences and similarities between critical realism and political modernism, and the historical role played by the documentary in these terms. My reading of *Performing the Border*, *Amphibious Fictions* and *Real Time* should also be understood in light of this theoretical and material altercation.

Let us take, for example, a set of images in Ruido's *Amphibious Fictions*, a work that aims to 'tell the tale of two cities'.<sup>471</sup> We begin, as discussed earlier, with the archival black and white footage of outside and inside the factories, of the backs of women, men and children walking up the hill to their place of work on the horizon. Ruido then chooses to place us firmly back with the contemporary: the textile machines of the 2000s are now computerised. The direct filming hovers on close-ups of the abstract shapes of the weaving components and the rich dyes of the cottons. The post-production cut shunts us to an older painting of a lone female weaver, her loom handheld and sitting across her knee. Whilst the camera depicts her as singular in this act, she is not alone; she is part of the history of the area that the painting hopes to tell,

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<sup>468</sup> Lukács chooses to directly quote Bloch for this description of Joyce's work to avoid 'his hostile assessment' putting 'the matter in false light'. Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 28-59, (p. 34).

<sup>469</sup> Ernst Bloch cited in Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', (2007), pp. 28-59, (p. 34).

<sup>470</sup> Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', (2007), pp. 28-59, (p. 35).

<sup>471</sup> María Ruido, *Amphibious Fictions*, 2005, see from 29.15 mins for this sequence.

and she fits into a larger process which celebrates the industries of the area as central to the collective identity developed in such a place. We are then cast back to the late 1960s and early 1970s. We see photographs of the union strikes, what appears to be white male workers stay on the screen for a moment, only for them to be replaced by a more recent image of workers sitting behind rows of sewing machines: as viewers we link this sequence to the discussion of economic migrants from as far afield as Senegal, Morocco, Gambia, south-east China, Guinea and central and south America coming to work in the relatively small Spanish town of Terrassa.

Alongside these discussions and considerations of Terrassa, the ‘textile city’, is an account of the new industries that have sprung up. Bolstered in her assertions by those she interviews, Ruido contends, here, that what is valuable in the twenty-first century is knowledge, that, as an interviewee states, we no longer have ‘workers’, we have only those that control the machines that produce. Now we are inside a laboratory. Here, Ruido uses post-produced sound to index the real; as if to reinforce the sterility of such an environment, a high-pitched synthetic drone mimics the humming of unidentifiable technologies ticking over. A voice-over tells us that they ‘imagine very ambitiously’ that Terrassa ‘can become something like Hollywood, not only for movies, but for media and audiovisual activities, a reference point in Europe where people develop projects and productions, research media-related topics’. This is the imagined future for such an area, moving forward well into the twenty-first century and increasingly further away from the once prosperous textile industry. But, Ruido will not leave us here, in the time in which we live. Rather, the final scenes, as discussed in Chapter Two of my thesis, record the machines of the industrial age, now behind cordons in the museum. As with the interpretation panels surrounding these enormous steel wheels of industry, *Amphibious Fictions* seeks to make visible processes, changes and developments. Contrasting with such neat explanations, however, is the array of information, opinions and knowledge(s) that Rudio gathers throughout; as the video unfolds, we are made aware of how old problems are still with us today, made mindful that aspects such as economic migration and exploitation, however much they have been accelerated to unseen ends in the era of globalisation, were already present in the first half of the twentieth century. Ruido produces a type of montage that prioritises, to a degree, a type of continuity, one that is coherent but resists simple cause-and-effect linkages. Whilst the economic and social landscape of this town may have changed, Ruido’s use of montage techniques works against fragmentation and aims to allude to a

type of narrative that, whilst mindful of trite assumptions, works to construct a product that is visibly linked to that from which it has been formed.

Focusing on subjectivity without considering its connection to the objective social world results in unmediated introspection. This introspection, argues Lukács, neglects an analysis of the materiality of *how* thought develops. If we lose sight of what connects us — and cultural products and re-presentation are central proponents of that — we risk ignoring the driving force of history and our role in changing and diverting what might otherwise appear as its inevitable course. Put quite simply, Lukács' work on the problems presented by not thinking through the interrelations of (what appear) as discrete phenomena, provides an important point for our consideration of Biemann's and Ruido's work. As Gail Day states, 'Essentially, Lukács's sense of the modern world is one of a permanently open totality, yet one that is not conceived as some free-flowing vitalistic flux, but as subject to specific determinations, resistances, concretizations and actions.'<sup>472</sup> This assertion is pertinent for mapping the broader terms of the debates that circulate around the 'documentary turn'.

In addition, as this thesis has shown, another primary line of enquiry centres on levels of clarity that the lens-based image — still or moving — can afford. T.J. Demos argues that however much the 'standard' documentary may begin from a place of ambiguity, from an uncertainty, it ultimately works to steadily 'make sense' of the situation or subject matter, producing a narrative that is causal and offers an authoritative explanation, an end point equipped with an answer of some sort.<sup>473</sup> In short, rendering the unclear, clear. *Performing the Border*, *Amphibious Fictions*, and *Real Time* do something different. These works, whilst all varied in their own ways, hold particular aspects in common. One such element is the fashion in which they reignite the role of the author, and in many instances, in quite a clear and directive manner. They engage with the many images that come to 'represent' a space. There is, nonetheless, a greater focus on transparency. This is not, however, to be accomplished through a blind faith in a single defining truth produced by the recording capacity of the image. Rather, the transparency develops through the piecing together of such images.

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<sup>472</sup> Gail Day 'Realism, Totality and the Militant *Citizen*: Or, What Does Lukács Have to Do with Contemporary Art', *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: Aesthetics, Politics*, (eds.) Timothy Hall and Timothy Bewes, (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 203-221, (p. 209).

<sup>473</sup> Demos, (2009), pp. 113-128.

The works I have selected surely demonstrate attempts not to efface history by over-relying on the conceptual and formal facets of ambiguity. They seek to examine the different ways in which situations are understood. Images are juxtaposed alongside one another to produce accounts, accounts that, whilst noting the fragment, work to ‘image’ the whole, or *a whole* at a specific moment in time.

### **Conclusion: Art and Life**

When the avant-gardists demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content.<sup>474</sup>

Here, Peter Bürger lays out the challenge. Works such as Biemann’s and Ruido’s, sit so close to a standard ‘traditional’ documentary, they aim to suppress the strict and false distinctions between art and the real world. This thesis has necessitated a willing acceptance of the difficulties of ascribing stylistic aspects to a work in order to define the contours of a genre. On the one hand, we could state that the inclusion of the ‘essayistic’ somehow navigates the otherwise scarred past of the documentary. A preference, as noted in Chapter Five, for ambiguity and the experimentation and innovation this can engender, is, for many perceptions, not an obvious characteristic of the documentary medium. However, as I have hoped to explain, other periods throughout the twentieth century conceive documentary as precisely a form that is both formally inventive (leaning precisely on experimentation) *and* socially useful.

It is important to state that whilst Biemann has committed almost all her works as essayistic — always stating them as so on her website and producing and engaging with debates and writings on the essayistic mode — Ruido’s practice appears to use the term and concept more loosely. Whilst I am concerned more with how works such as these are treated in contemporary debates and the questions they provoke, it is of course important to acknowledge how the artists themselves position their works. Catherine Lupton has written that, for her, the experience of watching an essay film:

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<sup>474</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 49.

is that of being as if inside a reflective consciousness in the very process of thinking, with all that that entails in the way of digression, revision, provisionality, uncertainty, free association, free lapse into memory; as well as the constant reflexive instability of a subjectivity that knows itself to be perpetually altered by the act of thinking.<sup>475</sup>

There are two ways in which we can better read works such as Biemann's and Ruido's in relation to the notion of a 'documentary turn' in contemporary practice. One is that we spend time, as my thesis has intended to do so, examining why and how the history of non-fiction films has been understood through a split, by an overextended emphasis on realism on the one side (with the documentary taking part in a kind of strict reflection theory) and modernism on the other (with formally experimental films aiming to sever our expectation through disjunction). Secondly, we must celebrate the power of the documentary under *both* these guises, that is, how it can speak to a broader audience and how it can exist comfortably in a variety of settings. It is no surprise that in moments of protest and unrest people reach for the camera to provide evidence that, in its turn, might provoke action, as in the case of The Art Workers' Coalition's appropriation of the war photojournalist, Ronald Haeberle's image of the massacre of My-Lai in Vietnam. This re-appropriation enabled the group to put pressure on the forms of both more established genres and the documentary (as used in news reportage) in order to speak out against the interlocking of the cultural and political elite.<sup>476</sup> Works such as Biemann's and Ruido's have the element of inquisitiveness as their marker, a tactic they share, for better or worse, with reportage. However tricky the reading, as we have seen, we must retain our critical faculties when considering these works in the tradition of the colonist's 'un-covering' and penetrating vision. Nevertheless, these works are part of a wider array of politically motivated artists' works, which play a role in the documentary medium, reclaiming its polemical status, bringing the documentary image back to life as a meaningful political tool. After all, this is not a new marriage,

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<sup>475</sup> Catherine Lupton, 'Who in the World: Essay Film, Transculture and Globality' in Jane Tormey and Gillian Whiteley (eds.), *Telling Stories: Countering Narrative in Art, Theory and Film*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 234-241 (p. 235).

<sup>476</sup> We can look here to the Guerrilla Art Action Group, formed in 1969. The collective protested against the war in Vietnam by targeting the museum. Their letter — handed out as part of a performance, which became known in *Newsweek* in 1970 as 'Blood Bath' — listed the ways in which the Rockefeller family, who formed part of the trustee board at Museum of Modern Art, would be set for financial gain if the conflict in Vietnam continued to escalate. See Chris Balaschak's 'Planet of the Apes: John Szarkowski, My Lai, and *The Animals*', *Art Journal*, vol. 71, no. 3, Fall 2012, pp. 7-25.

we need only look to the combination of reporter and artist in the histories of the various worker photography movements throughout Europe and Russia in the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>477</sup>

One of the central aims of this thesis has been to show how the steady resurgence of interest in the video-essay, the film essay, the document and the documentary, over the past fifteen to twenty years, can only be understood in relation to a far longer history. The plotting of this genealogy has also sought to explain how essential it is to read the terms of classification in relation to broader social, cultural, political and economic determinants. My aim has been to track the debates around representation, realism and modernist formal innovation, and in doing so, to apply pressure to such well-worn classificatory terms. The moments at which the political avant-garde co-emerge and cross-pollinate with the formalist avant-garde are essential to examine. The moments, however — and the spheres in which these flourishing forms split apart — must also be taken into account if we are to carefully reconstruct the terms of the debates. These debates, of course, obtain old and recurrent problems and concepts. Nonetheless, I have proposed why and how these problems require new investigations, particularly when one takes into account the continued colonisation of everyday life by the capitalist mode of social production, the changes in technology which permit new modes of vision to take place, and the processes, experiences and effects of globalisation. Through such an exploration, we can assess the strategic role that representation can have, when it animates the past in order to imagine the future.

Alongside this aim, my thesis, in selecting three core works, *Performing the Border*, *Real Time* and *Amphibious Fictions*, was guided by the overwhelming assertion that gender matters to capital. Biemann — like many of the theorists and writers discussed in Chapter Two — has proclaimed that to attempt to gain an understanding of capitalism in the era of neoliberalism without taking into account the preference for female workers (many in low-wage paying and deregulated factories), provides an

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<sup>477</sup> Franz Höllering, writing for the *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf 5* in 1928, argued that reporter and artist join forces. See Ribalta (2011), pp. 104-106. However, one should be careful here in appropriating the same subsidiary notion of ‘art’ that Höllering’s argument appears to articulate. Whilst it is crucial to note these earlier accounts, considering ‘art’ as an afterthought because of its perceived ‘bourgeois’ status is not a sentiment I am keen to unquestionably adopt, particularly as Höllering, and other members of various European worker-photography groups, were taking photographs and writing at a time before ‘photojournalism’ had become professionalised.

impoverished and partial account of globalised capitalism.<sup>478</sup> As I argued in Chapter Two, this layer of analysis only goes part way; we must also consider the role of social reproduction, for without this ‘subsistence’ level all ‘production’ grinds to a halt. Both Ruido and Biemann explore the complexities that are introduced when older models of waged and unwaged labour patterns are required to ‘keep up’ with changes in the global economy, changes that clash violently with previous expectations.

From this notion develop questions: how best to make visible the abstract flows of high-finance capital; how to render clear the connections between the soldering of components on an assembly line and the trading of company shares on the stock market north of the border; or, how to remind us of the intricacies of the ‘caring industries’, of the necessity of ‘valueless’ work, and of the ordering of life under capitalist social relations?

The chosen form, adopted and developed by Biemann and Ruido, holds an uneasy relation to the critique that much earlier feminist practice levelled towards the documentary, as discussed in Chapters Two and Four. It is necessary to consider what questions might arise when adopting a form forged from the documentary when that form that has previously (and understandably) stood accused of erasing difference, but when it has, once more, been invested in as a mode for understanding women’s labour and experiences. Perceiving this as solely a *problem*, however, means we reach a deadlock and risk ignoring critical and political art production of the last fifteen to twenty years. My intention, however, has been to read these complexities alongside the changes that have taken place in the economy since 1970. In arguing for an account of capitalism as increasingly biopolitical — through an understanding of capitalism as co-emerging with a shift in governing from sovereign rule to biopolitical rule at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century — I have sought to read the increased interest in documentation methods as concomitant with biopolitical modes, with their governing of the micro-procedures that structure everyday life. I consider this relation to be one of the reasons why the documentary (in its widest expanded sense and within which I locate my case studies) has undergone such an ascendancy, resulting also in the literature on the a ‘documentary turn’. The subject matter at the kernel of the principal works discussed, and the form through which it is articulated, can be analysed through the histories

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<sup>478</sup> Ursula Biemann, ‘Remote Sensing: An Interview with Ursula Biemann’, (2002), pp. 91-109, (p. 93).

plotted here; it cannot, however, be beholden to those histories if we take enough care in mapping the cartographies of the present.

In plotting the history of and articulating a set of concerns for the video-essay — specifically as a device for exploring the vagaries of political, economic and social elements — I have been able to draw on new insights and approaches to theorise the medium. However, I am at pains to emphasise that changed conditions in the way life is now organised, governed, administered and resisted — whilst displaying similar concerns — ushers in new priorities. Certain material devices (artistic and cultural), therefore, despite the sustained critiques they have faced in the past, can become important vehicles once more. The challenge is to work both knowingly and inventively within these mediums in order to avoid dissolving into partiality or simply falling into a mannerist trap. Otherwise, the debates over ‘politics of representation’ and the questions of representation progress as, so to speak, text without context. Such a movement ultimately shears the tie that keeps aesthetic production connected to the conditions through which it is produced, and sets cultural production as ‘a thing apart’, rendering mute its transformational capacities. A re-engagement with the highly contested, and, as we have seen, problematic notion of ‘truth’ and ‘facts’ is adopted by artists such as Biemann and Ruido, not in order to give a real account of the world, but more to provide a starting point from which to change it.

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## Filmography

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Chantal Akerman *Jeanne Dielman 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* 1975, 201 minutes, 35 mm

Ursula Biemann *Performing the Border* 1999, 42 minutes, DVD, Argos video library and Women Make Movies

Ursula Biemann *Writing Desire* 2000, 23 minutes, DVD, Argos video library and Women Make Movies

Ursula Biemann *Contained Mobility* 2004, 21 minutes, DVD, Argos video library and Video Data Bank

Ursula Biemann *Remote Sensing* 2001, 53 minutes, DVD, Argos video library and Women Make Movies

Ursula Biemann and Angela Sanders *Europlex* 2003, 20 minutes, DVD, Argos video library and Women Make Movies

Ursula Biemann *Black Sea Files* 2005, 43 minutes DVD, Argos video library and Video Data Bank

Ursula Biemann *X-Mission* 2008, 35 mins, DVD, Argos video library and Video Data Bank

Robert Bresson *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* 1945, 86 minutes, Pathé Cinéma

Jacques Brunius *Violons d'Ingres* 1939, 28 minutes 35 mm

Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan /Land Without Bread* 1932, 30 minutes, 35 mm, Ramón Acín

Alberto Cavalcanti *Coal Face* 1935 12 minutes, 35 mm, GPO Film Unit

Clayton and Curling *The Song of the Shirt* 1979, 135 minutes, 16mm, BFI Production board

Michelle Citron *Daughter Rite* 1978, 53 minutes, 16 mm

Penny Dedman *Documentary Rape* 1980, 5 minutes, VIDA Triple Vision Ignition Films

JoAnn Elam *RAPE* 1975, 35 minutes, Super 8, Chicago Film Archives

Harun Farocki *I Thought I was Seeing Convicts* 2000, 25 minutes, Video Data Bank

Harun Farocki *War at a Distance* 2003, 54 minutes, Video, Video Data Bank

Harun Farocki *Serious Games* 2009/10 (four-part video installation)

Harun Farocki *Workers Leaving the Factory* 1995, 36 minutes, Video Data Bank

Harun Farocki *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* 1988-89, 73 minutes, 16mm, Video Data bank

Connie Field *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* 1980, 65 minutes, Clarity Films

Robert J. Flaherty *Nanook of the North* 1922, 79 minutes, Pathé Exchange

Georges Franju *Le Sang des Bêtes* 1948

Georges Franju *Hôtel des Invalides* 1951

Hermine Freed *Art Herstory* 1974, 22 minutes, Video, Video Data Bank

Douglas Gordon *24 hr Psycho* 1993, 35 mm

Lorraine Gray *With Babies and Banners* 1978 National Primetime PBS Broadcast

Costa-Gavras *Z* 1969, 127 mins, 35 mm

Joan Jonas *Vertical Roll* 1972 19 minutes, open reel video, Video Data Bank

Jim Klein, Miles Mogulescu and Julia Reichert *Union Maids* 1976 50 minutes, New Day Distribution Co-op

Patrick Keiller *Robinson in Space* 1997 81 minutes, 35 mm, BBC Films

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Louis and Auguste Lumière *Leaving The Lumière Factory In Lyon (La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon* 1895

Chris Marker *Lettre de Sibérie* 1958, Argos Films

Chris Marker *Le Joli mai* 1962, 165 mins

Chris Marker *Le Fond de l'air est rouge* 16 mm, blown up to 35mm, 1977, 180 mins

Chris Marker *La Jetée* 1962, 28 mins, Argos Films

Chris Marker *Dimanche à Peking* 1956, 22 mins, Argos Films

Renzo Martens *Episode III Enjoy Poverty* 2008-9, 90 minutes

Angela Melitopoulos *Passing DRAMA*, 1999 66, minutes, PAL Video

The Otolith Group *Nervus Rerum* 2008, 32 minutes, Video, distributed by LUX: artists' moving image

Jean Renoir *La Règle du Jeu* 1939 110 minutes, 35 mm, Nouvelles Éditions de Films

Hans Richter *The Stock Market* 1938

María Ruido *Real Time* 2003, 43 minutes, DVD, Hamaca: media and video art distribution from Spain

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Richard Serra *Television Delivers People* 1973, 5 mins, Video

Esfir Shub *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* 1927; *The Great Road* 1927; *Lev Tolstoy and the Russia of Nicolai II* 1928

Ann-Sofi Sidén *Warte Mal! Prostitution after the Velvet Revolution* 1999, video installation

Hito Steyerl *November* 2004, 25 mins, DVD; A/G

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Nicole Védres *Paris 1900* 1947 90 minutes, 35 mm, Panthéon Productions

Dziga Vertov *Man with a Movie Camera* 1929, 68 minutes, 35 mm, VUFKU

Basil Wright *Song of Ceylon* 1934 37 minutes, 35 mm, GPO Film Unit

### **Collectives and co-directed**

SLON collective *Loin de Viêt-nam* 35mm, 16mm and 35mm components, 1967, 115 mins

Chris Marker and Alain Resnais *Les Statues meurent aussi* 1950-53, 30 mins, 35 mm, distributed by Présence Africaine

Chris Marker and Mario Marret *À Bientôt, j'espère* 1968, 43 mins, 16mm

Berwick Street Film Collective *Nightcleaners* 1970-5, 90 mins, 16mm and Video,

distributed by LUX: Artists' Moving Image

*Showdown in Seattle: five days that shook the WTO* 1999. Produced by: Big Noise Films, Changing America, Headwaters Action Video Collective, JustAct, Paper Tiger TV, Sleeping Giant Productions, VideoActive and Whispered Media, and Wholesome Goodness in conjunction with the Independent Media Center (IMC), with support from Deep Dish TV.

Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alf Brustellin, Heinrich Boll, Hans Peter Cloos, Katja Rupe, Maximiline Mainka *Germany in Autumn* 1978

## Plates

### Chapter One

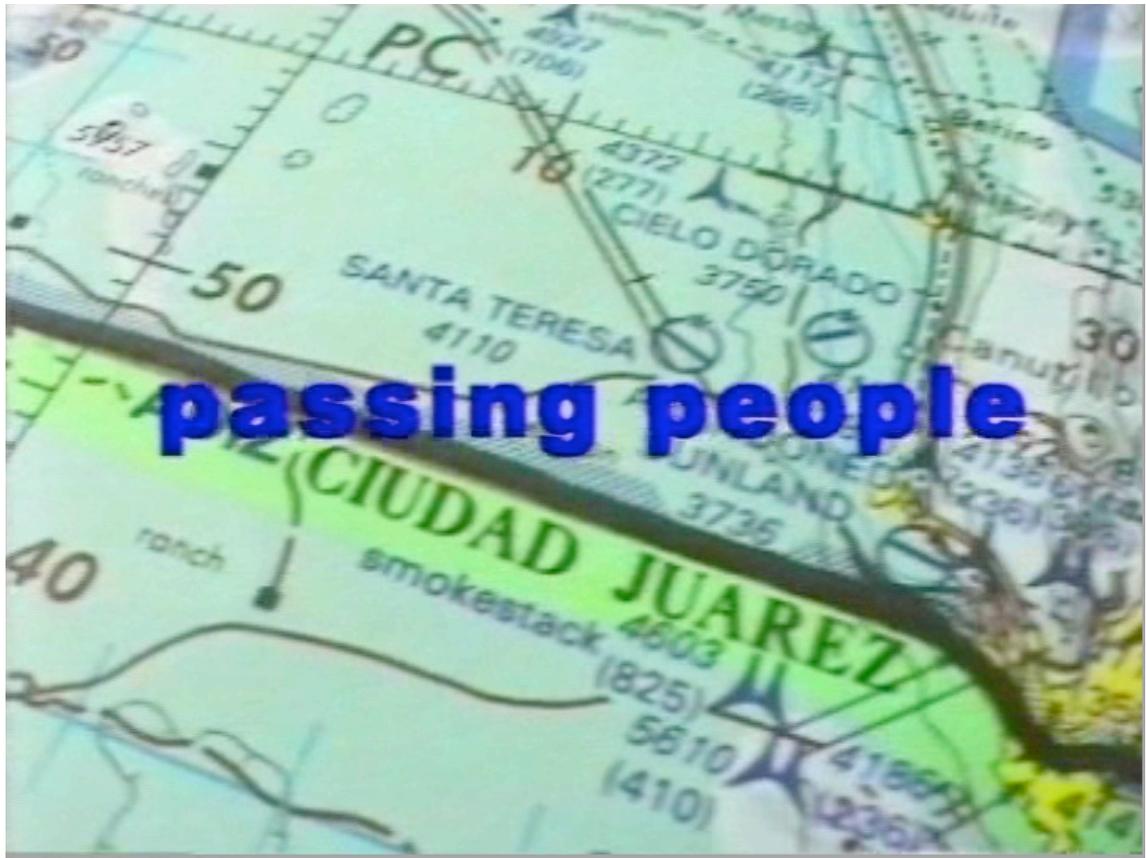


fig. 1., *Performing the Border*, © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins



fig. 2., *Performing the Border*, © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins



fig. 3., *Amphibious Fictions*, © María Ruido, 2005, 33 mins



fig. 4., *Amphibious Fictions*, © María Ruido, 2005, 33 mins

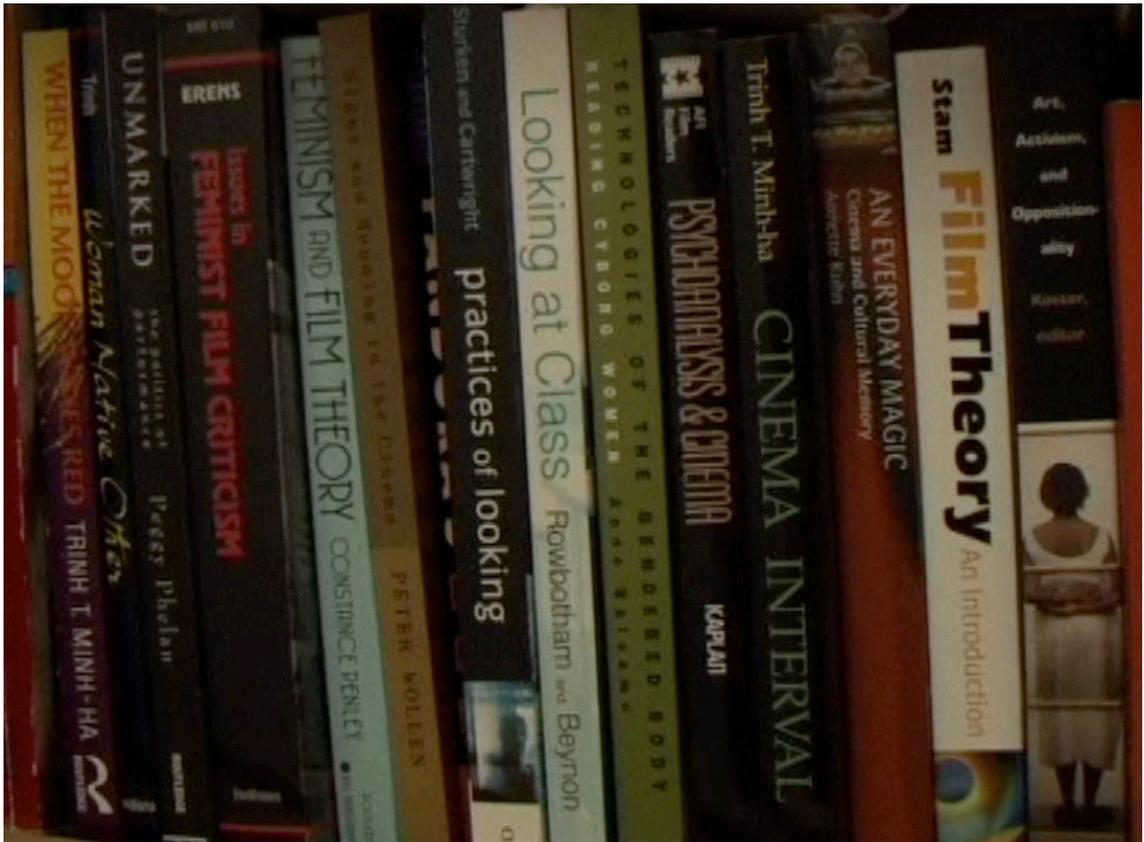
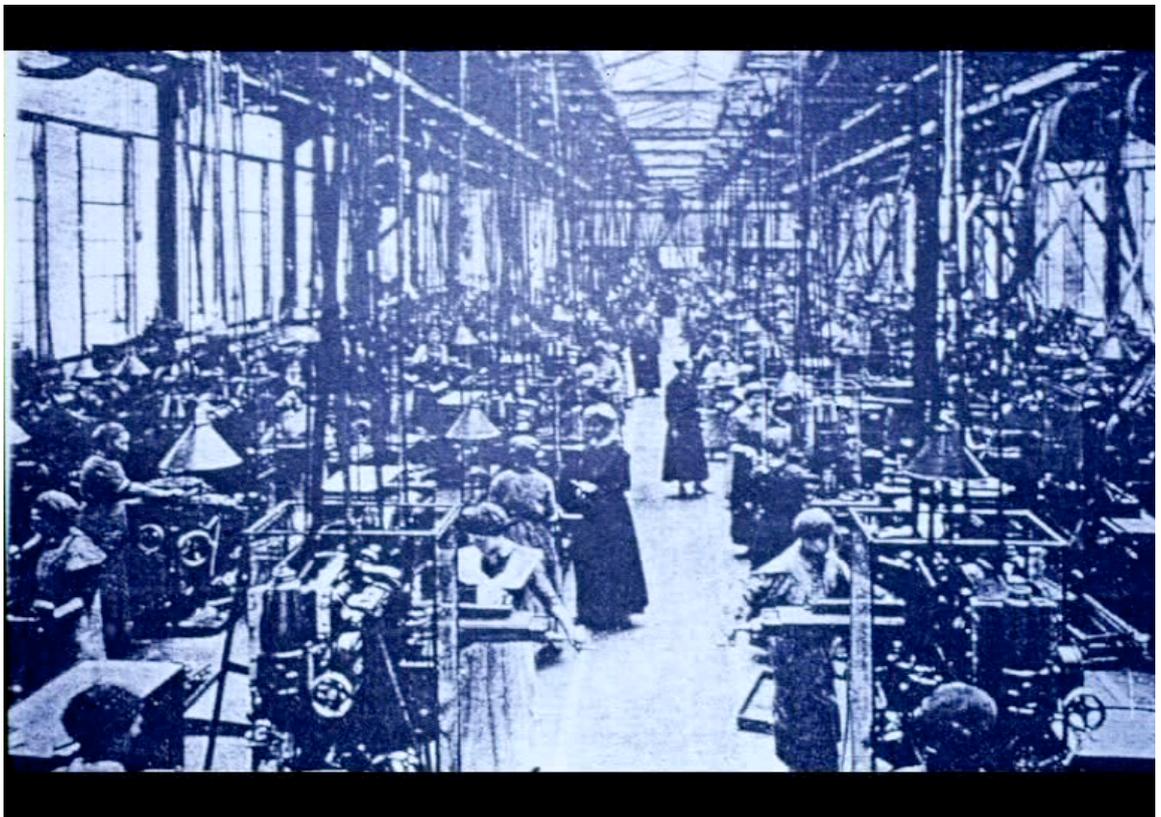


fig. 5., video still, *Real Time*, © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins



fig. 6., video still, *Real Time*, © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins



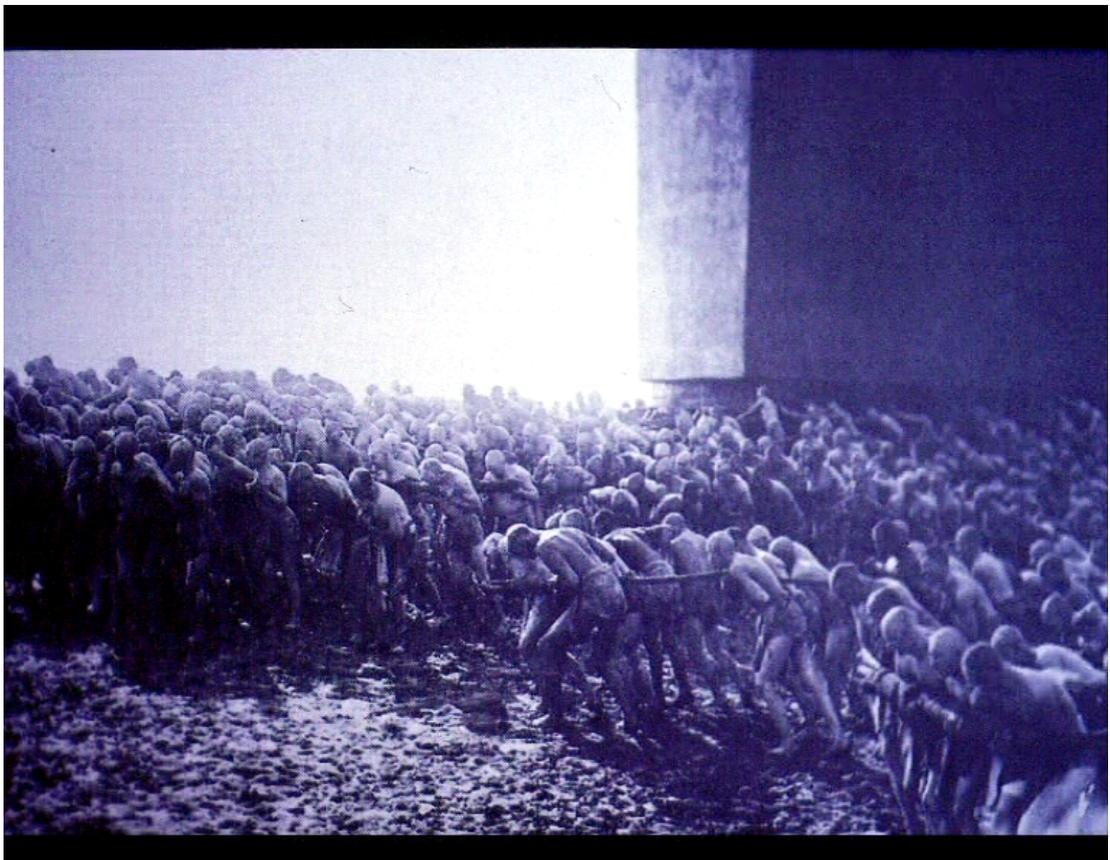


fig. 7, 7.1 and 7.2., video stills, *Real Time*, © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins

## Chapter Two

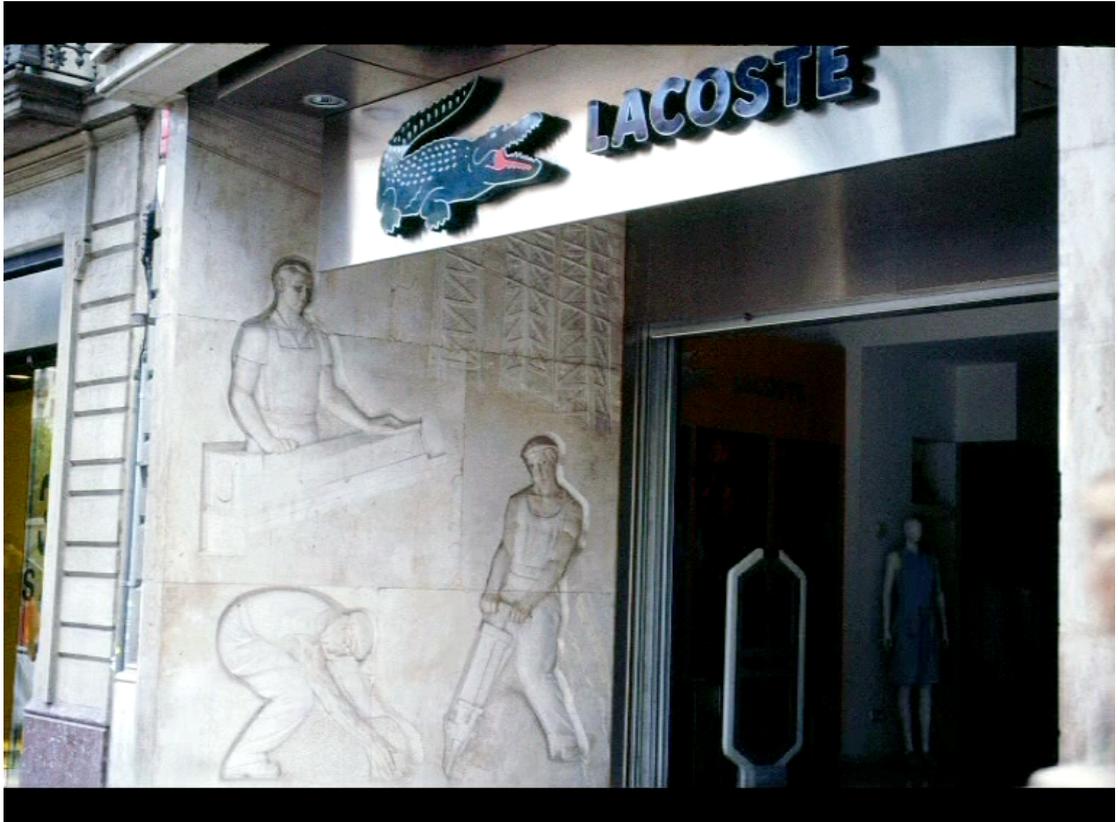


fig. 8., video still, *Real Time*, © María Ruido, 2003, 43 mins

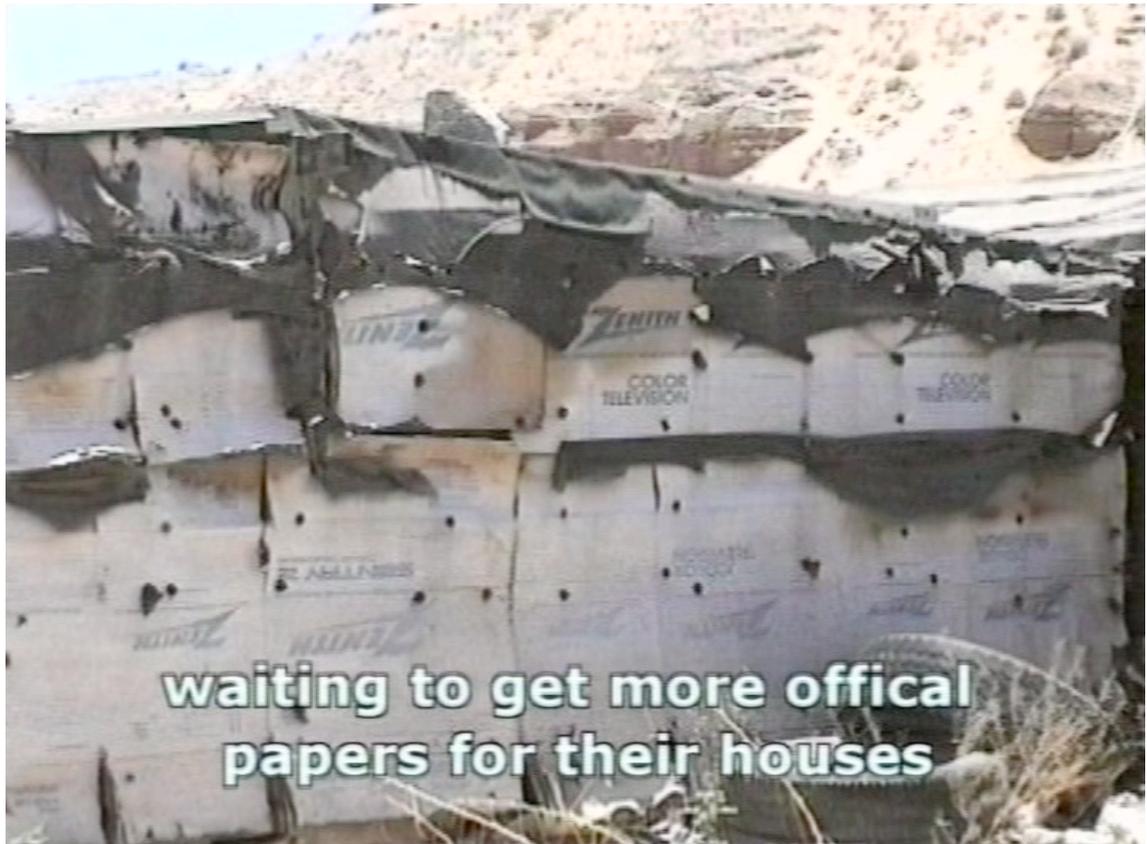


fig. 9., video still, *Performing the Border*, © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins



fig. 10 and fig 10.1., video stills, *Performing the Border*, © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins



fig. 11 and fig. 11.1., video stills, *Performing the Border*, © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins

A photograph of two women in traditional Mexican attire, including braided hair with colorful ribbons and a red and white patterned shawl. They are holding up two printed circuit boards (PCBs) and looking at them intently. The background is a solid blue color.

**If you're trying to cut your production costs, Mexico beats the Far East by 10,000 miles.**

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Phone: 915 593-5066

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The Contract Manufacturing Company.

fig. 12.

### Chapter Three

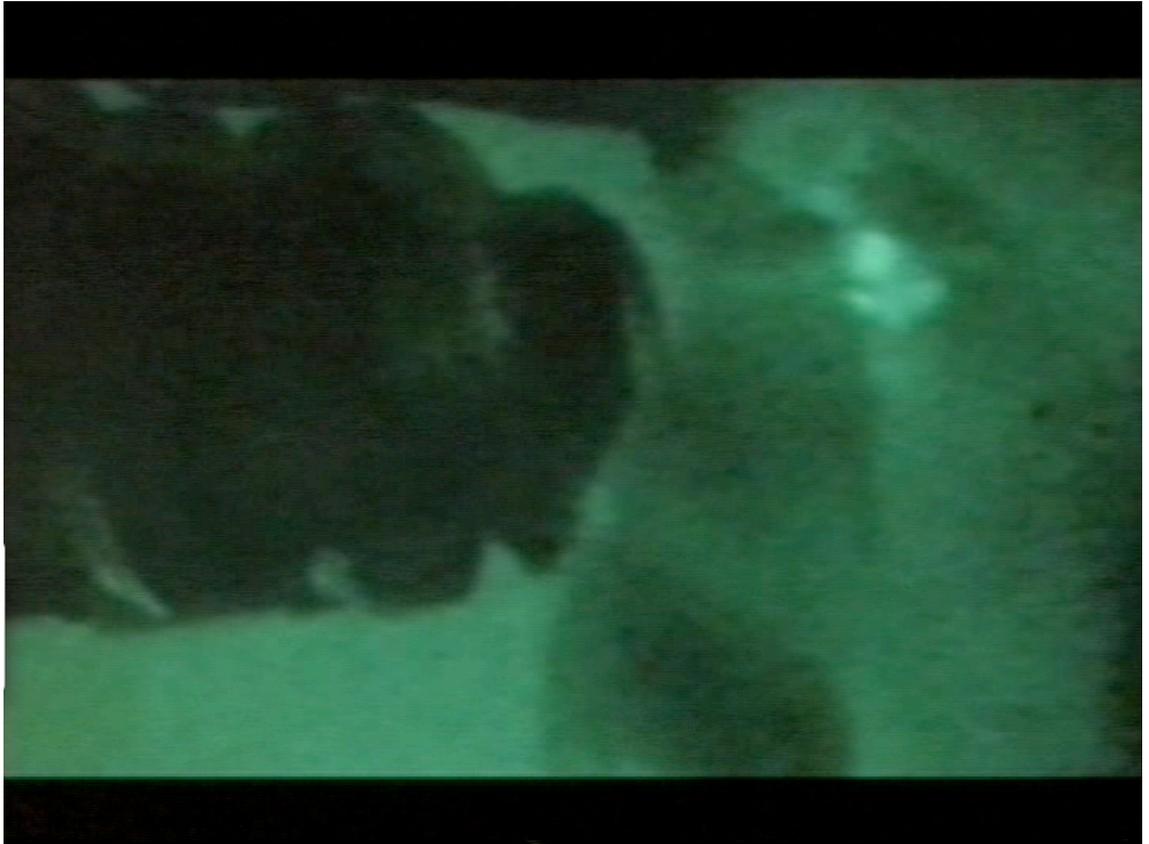


fig. 13., video still, *Performing the Border*, © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 min



fig. 14., video still, *Writing Desire*, ©2011 Ursula Biemann. Some Rights Reserved (by-sa), 2000, 25 mins

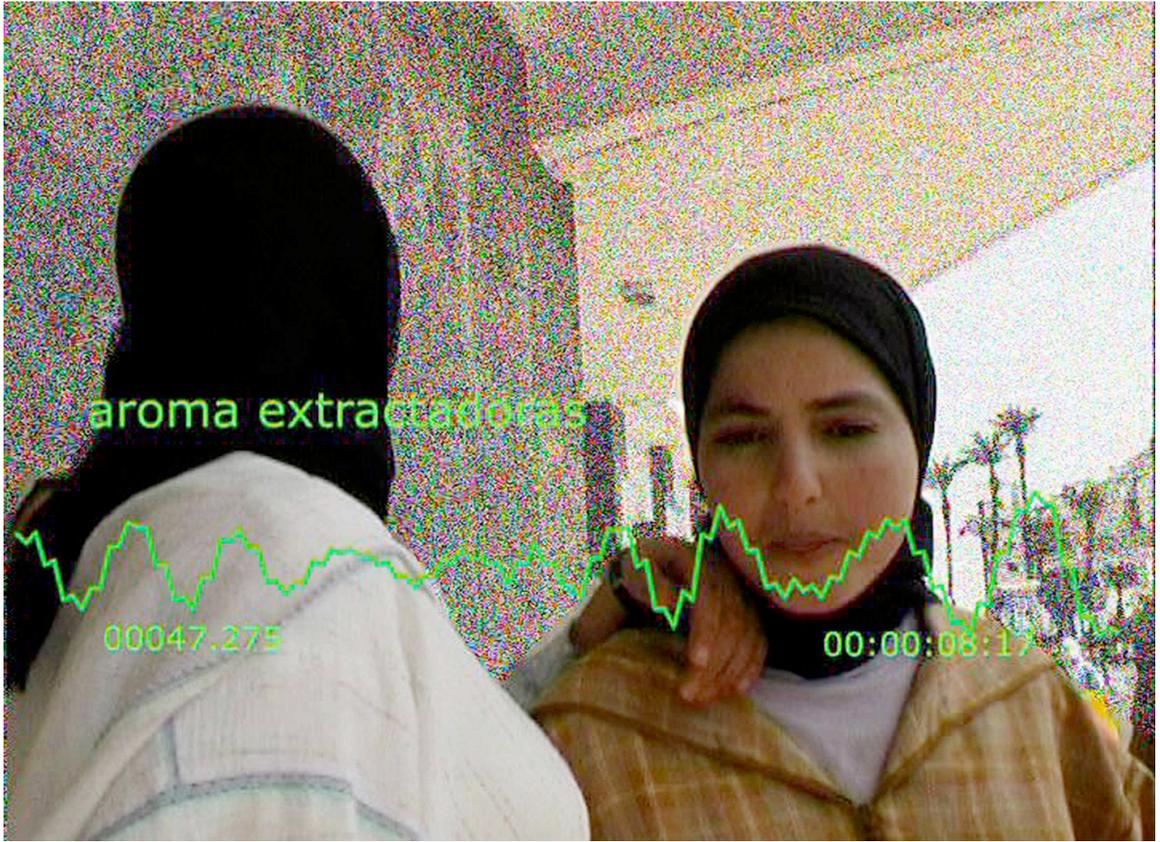


fig. 15., video still, *Europlex*, © 2011 Ursula Biemann and Angela Sanders, 2003, 20 min.

Chapter Five



fig. 16., video still, *Performing the Border*, © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 min



fig. 17 and 17.1., video stills, *From the Other Side (De l'autre côté)* © Chantal Akerman, 2002, 99 mins



fig. 18., video still, *Performing the Border* © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins

## Chapter Six



fig. 19., video still, *Remote Sensing*, © Ursula Biemann, 2001, 53 mins

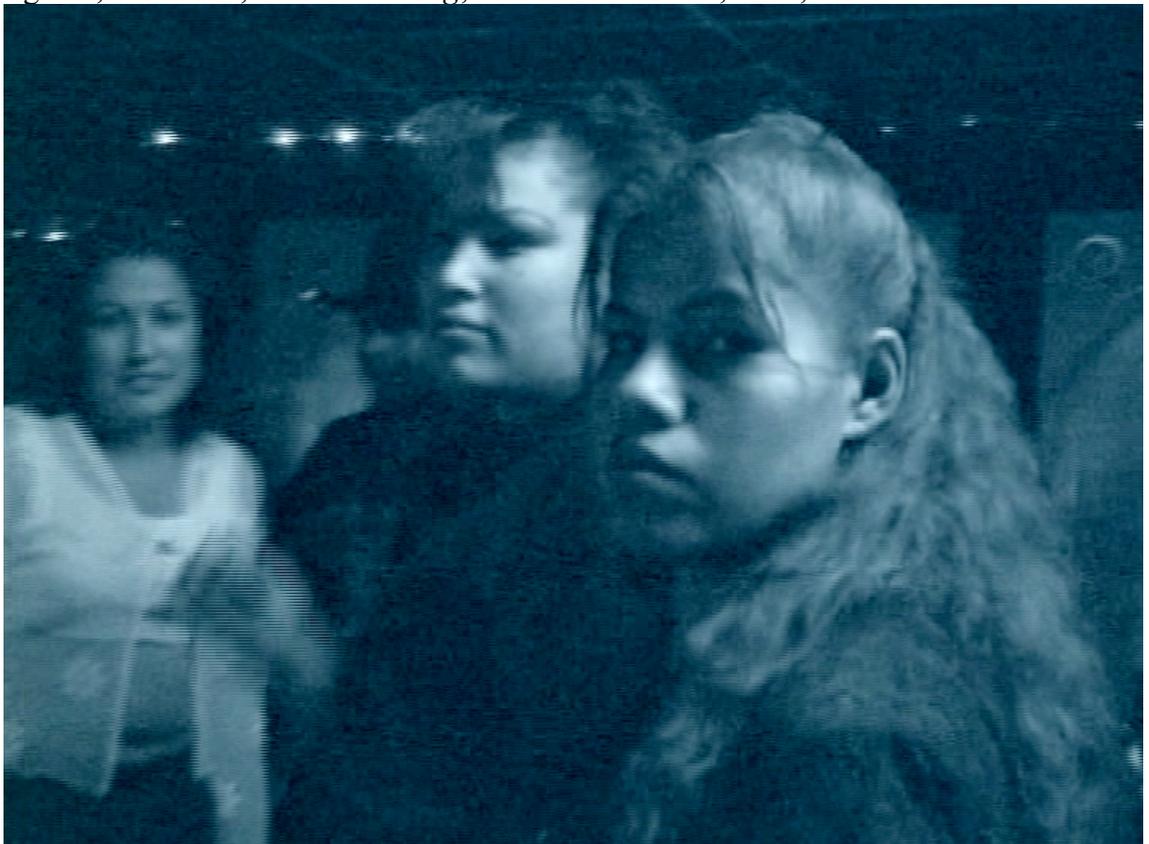


fig. 19.1., video still, *Performing the Border* © Ursula Biemann, 1999, 45 mins