

## The Non-Verbal Essay: Between Sensuality and Conceptuality

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### I. Two Examples

First, I would like you to listen to a small sample, a beginning of an essay.<sup>1</sup>

This was the beginning of Samuel Barber's *Essay for Orchestra* (op.12) from the year 1937. It was played by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, directed by David Zinman in 1991.<sup>2</sup> *Essay for Orchestra* begins with a simple theme, or rather a motive of three notes, slow and peaceful. This simple motive is then transposed to different registers and different instruments. These transpositions evoke new ideas, new motives that, again, have their own variations. From a silent beginning we move to a rhetorical brass cadence, which, however, is echoed, as a doubt, by the same motive in a lower register. The same simple motive of three notes is repeated, time after time, sometimes with rhetorical confidence, sometimes overwhelmed by hesitation. It seems in search of something, but what? Sometimes it evokes energetic flute cadences that lead the listener far away from the original motive. But then, just when one is forgetting the starting point, just when one floats in the far-away ocean of strings and woodwinds, the original motive returns, surging back in the end as a crushing cluster of brass and percussion – like a doubt that grows from small hesitations to the final, overwhelming passion.<sup>3</sup>

How can a musical composition for orchestra be an “essay”? What does the name “essay” tell about it? Does the name affect the way we listen to it? And what does the possibility of this naming tell about the kind of writing that we call the essay? What in the literary essay allows Barber to use this term for an orchestral composition?

Let me take a second example. This time I would like to show it to you.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper held at the annual conference of the Nordic Society of Aesthetics, *Aesthetics and Art Research*, University of Helsinki, 16 May 2002. It belongs to a larger project, where I study the role of the essay in modern and post-modern art and theory. The reader is asked to bear in mind that my point of view and my expertise are not those of a professional musicologist or art historian, but those of a literary scholar.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Barber, Adagio, *Symphony no. 1* etc. Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, directed by David Zinman (London: Decca Argo, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Or, as Anthony Burton describes the work in his “Introduction” in more sophisticated terms: “Its main animating idea is the double turning figure heard on the lower strings at the start of the opening Andante sostenuto. This theme recurs as a counter-melody in the extended scherzo (Allegro molto) which follows; and it makes a climactic return at the start of the brief Largamente sostenuto coda.” (“Introduction”, sleeve notes to Barber's *Symphony no. 1*).

The first image is almost white. Sand, few bricks that are perhaps ruins of some industrial site. On the background, few hills. Against the white, banal sky, one can discern electric wire that seems to end in the middle of nowhere. The other page, the one that faces the image, is empty. No verbal commentary, only a number. This is the first image in Gilbert Fastenaekens's *Essai pour une archéologie imaginaire*.<sup>4</sup> The eighteen images that follow this first image are almost black, taken in old, seemingly deserted industrial sites. The machines that no longer seem to have any utilitarian function create an unreal, almost ghostly atmosphere to the images. Some of the objects look like some religious monuments of a culture that has been forgotten long ago, altars for some strange gods or ancestors. Even those pictures that are taken outside create a closed, almost claustrophobic ambiance. The last picture, however, is again almost white, representing some kind of pond or swamp. So, the dark images are framed by two light ones. In the twenty images that form this essay we have first ascended from light to darkness, and then, after a long voyage, we can welcome again the light. After the last image, there is a list of the names and dates of the sites in France and Belgium where the photos were taken, with a small addition: the last shows us a pond of potash from Alsace.

What makes these images an “essay”? How can a series of photographs, with very little verbal information, be an “essay”? One can mention numerous other non-literary essays, representing usually more or less mixed forms of verbal, visual and audible messages. One of these is the “radio essay”, which, of course, can be just a written text that is read aloud in radio, but that in more sophisticated form is a genre of its own, including not only words but also music and sound effects. One might also mention “the cinematic essay” or “essay film”, a term that has been used for a documentary film with more or less personal style.<sup>5</sup> In visual arts, essayistic textuality has found its way not only into exhibition catalogues but into the exhibitions themselves, especially in conceptual art. Often it is a question of adding verbal messages (oral or written) to visual works; although, for example, a Canadian artist Carol Laing has called her installations themselves “essays”. The non-verbal essay has also found its way to the academia: for example, *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger and the workgroup, a classic study in aesthetics, includes not only four essays where images and words are interconnected, but also three essays where there are only images, visual quotations from the history of art and medias that are juxtaposed against each other. As the authors state in their “Note to the reader”:

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<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Fastenaekens, *Essai pour une archéologie imaginaire*, introduction by Alan Buttard (Brussels: Arp, 1994). Pages are not numbered.

<sup>5</sup> The term “essay film” was coined by Alexandre Astruc in his *Du stylo à la caméra — et de la caméra au stylo*, 1948 (Paris: L'Archipel, 1992). See also, for example, Nora M. Alter, “Essay Film”, in *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. by Tracy Chevalier (London & Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), 262-4.

These purely pictorial essays (on ways of seeing women and on various contradictory aspects of the tradition of the oil painting) are intended to raise as many questions as the verbal essays. Sometimes in the pictorial essays no information at all is given about the images reproduced because it seemed to us that such information might distract from the point being made. [. . .] Our principal aim has been to start a process of questioning.<sup>6</sup>

This expansion of the essay from literary to non-literary use evokes several questions that are fundamental not only to an understanding of the essay but to aesthetics and art research in general. First, what does the possibility to use the same term “essay” for literary texts, musical compositions, series of photographs, radio programs, documentary films and installations tell us about the term itself? What does it tell about the relationship between art research and research in the arts? Or, more generally speaking, what does it tell about the relationship between words, music, and image? Or, a still more fundamental question: what does it tell about the relation between sensuality and conceptuality? Even though these questions are, of course, too large to be covered in one paper, in what follows I will try to trace some possible lines of inquiry to which they might lead us.

The first difficulty in comparing non-verbal essays to literary ones is to decide to which literary essay tradition one should compare them: to the Montaignian self-portraiture, to the periodical essay of Addison and Steele, or, to the philosophical essays of Hume, Adorno or Lyotard (to name only some possible examples)? As we know, the reason why Michel de Montaigne chose the word *essai* (attempt, trial, exercise, sample, etc.) for the title of his book in 1580 was that he wanted to avoid all existing genres, to write a book that did not follow any predetermined rules of literary or philosophical discourse. The book had to be one with its author, a self-portrait in constant motion, without any artificial rhetorical devices that could corrupt the fragile relation between the writer and his future friend, the reader.<sup>7</sup> However, when “the essay” becomes a genre with its own definition and tradition, when Francis Bacon calls his own texts “essays” or when Addison and Steele founds the tradition of the periodical essay, Montaigne’s original gesture is lost. The essay was, for Montaigne, not a genre but the way to avoid genres. Therefore, if one wants to respect the Montaignian essayistic spirit, one should avoid all generic names, including “the essay”. If the essay becomes just a genre amongst all other genres, if one can define “the essence of the essay” or “the art of the essay”, the essay loses its original anti-generic position, which was an ethical choice to avoid artificial forms.

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<sup>6</sup> John Berger et al., *Ways of Seeing*, based on the BBC television series (London: British Broadcasting Corporation & Penguin Books, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, my doctoral thesis: Kaisa Korhonen, *Essaying Friendship: Friendship as a Figure for the Author-Reader Relationship in Essayistic Textuality, from Plato to Derrida* (Helsinki: Yliopistopaino, 1998). Its revised version will be published as *Impossible Encounters: Essaying Textual Friendship from Plato to Derrida* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, forthcoming).

To force the paradox to its limits: if something is called an essay, it cannot be an essay. If there is something like the essay, it cannot be called the essay. If something is even recognized as being an essay, it cannot be an essay, etc. (Perhaps I should stop here. Having received a considerable number of grants for writing a book about the essay, it would not be wise for me to admit that the object of my study disappears the instant I try to name it.)

Through this unbearable paradox we may, however, reach one characteristic of the essay: an essay is an attempt to name something that resists being named. An essay is a project that is defined by its own impossibility, that is, writing that recognizes its own inevitable failure before its task. All an essayist can do is to try, to experiment, to weigh different alternatives with each other, without ever coming to a final conclusion. At the very moment such a conclusion is achieved, there is no longer an essay; there can be a report, an article, a treatise, but not an essay. This makes the essay, already, a kind of poetry, in the sense that Blanchot gave to the word: like Orpheus, the poet tries to bring Eurydice back from Hades (the creative night of dead ancestors), but as soon as he looks at her, thus breaking the promise that he had given to the powers of the night, she disappears.<sup>8</sup> The essayist is someone who knows that his reflective gaze will drive the object of his desire back into the shadows, but cannot help looking at it, continuing his vain efforts to negotiate between night and day. Or, as Georg Lukács described the essayist: “Any gesture with which such a man might wish to express something of his experience would falsify that experience, unless it ironically emphasized its own inadequacy and thus cancelled itself out.”<sup>9</sup> So we are talking about search, about self-cancellation, about re-search, about search that must begin always anew, time after time. Art research, research in art. But what does the essayist try to save from the night?

## II. *The Essay for Orchestra*

Can we ask: what is Barber’s *Essay for Orchestra* about? Does this question make any sense? Is Barber’s work not pure music, without the kind of referentiality to the outside world that would allow us to talk about “aboutness”? Still, even though we do not have the exact terms for what the musical development is leading towards, perhaps we should trust our intuition and admit that these wandering melodies seem to be searching for something. But what is the object of their research?

If the *Essay for Orchestra* is research in art, then it is research that studies certain musical

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<sup>8</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “Le regard d’Orphée” in *L’espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 225-232.

<sup>9</sup> “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” in *Soul and Form*, 1910, trans. Anna Bostok (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), 7.

elements using music not only as its object, but also as its method and medium. We have, then, various possibilities of interpretation: perhaps it is an essay on orchestration, not only an essay *for* orchestra but an essay *on* orchestra. Or, as the opening theme returns so hauntingly throughout the work, perhaps it is an essay about theme and its variation.

Of course, to study theme and its variation is certainly not Barber's invention: in a way, what the Western classical music is about *is* theme and its variation. What defines composition from romanticism onwards is the kind of organic form that avoids structures of too rigid a variation, whereas the theme and its variation still remains the basic figurative principle in composition. In fact, it is difficult to see how Barber's *Essay for Orchestra* could be more essayistic than many other orchestral works from the same period. It is easier to see, however, what makes the connection between the essay and Western classical music possible in the first place: the formal principles of the literary essay are often closer to the classical tradition in music than to traditional rhetorical rules of *partitio* and *dispositio*. As Douglas Hesse notes in his article "Essay Form and *Auscomponierung*", one can find in the essay form a certain dialectic between vertical and horizontal structures that is very close to what Heinrich Schenker has called *Auscomponierung*, "compositional unfolding" in music. In music, at least in the Western tradition of tonal harmony, each work has an *Urlinie*, a primordial line, that determines the vertical dimension of that work, a kind of tonal space which sets the limits and possibilities for chords and melody, that is then unfolded in the horizontal line, in the linear musical time. In a parallel way, in the literary essay the theme or the thesis form the *Urlinie*, the vertical dimension: the conceptual space that is unfolded in the linear, horizontal line of essayistic discourse or narrative. Hesse then makes the distinction within the essay between vertical essays, where some conceptual theme dominates, and horizontal ones, where narrativity is more central than any theme or thesis.<sup>10</sup>

Then, if we want to define the "aboutness" of Barber's essay, we should not look for some exact reference to its musical text; rather, the object of study in his musical essay is narrativity itself, or the relationship between the space of possibilities (opened by first notes) and the unfolding of those possibilities in musical time. Or, we may follow Thomas Gray and see in the romantic "theme and variation" form a rhetorical figure of *prolepsis*, that is, anticipation of future events.<sup>11</sup>

Barber's *Essay for Orchestra* is not the only musical essay. In fact, there are enough examples to define "the essay for orchestra" as a genre of its own. A short Internet search

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Hesse, "Essay Form and *Auscomponierung*", in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), 292-95.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Gray, "Metaphorical Modes in Nineteenth-Century Music Criticism: Image, Narrative and Idea", in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 93-117.

revealed over ten orchestral essays in North America, three in Finland, one in Sweden, one in Columbia. The term “essay for orchestra” is also sometimes used by musicologists as a generic term to describe compositions that the composers themselves have not called essays.<sup>12</sup>

Barber himself also composed a *Second* and a *Third Essay for Orchestra*. In the *Second Essay for Orchestra* (1942, op. 17) the opening theme is more complicated. But again it is first given in silent, plain form before it is modified into different registers and instruments that give birth to new associations. Again we move between different atmospheres, which are contrasted with each other. Just when one begins to feel comforted by gentle flutes and violins, one is suddenly shocked by the blast of percussions, or by surprising attacks of brass, or one is left wondering as the melody starts meandering off, far from its original ideas. In the end, however, the original theme returns, triumphant and passionate. The *Third Essay for Orchestra* (1978) was composed much later, near the end of Barber’s life.<sup>13</sup>

Another American icon of classical music, Leonard Bernstein, also used the term in the subtitle of his *Facsimile: Choreographic Essay for Orchestra* (1949). In the sixties and seventies there are numerous essays for orchestra, not only in the USA; the subtitle of Finnish composer Leif Segerstam’s *Pandora* (1966), for example, is *Essay for Orchestra or One Act Ballet*. From the middle of the sixties to the middle of the eighties one can find at least ten pieces entitled “essay for orchestra”, this being the main title or the subtitle of works by composers like T. J. Anderson, Gary Kulesha, Gwyneth Walker, Jouko Linjama.<sup>14</sup> From these works we can already derive some formal characters of the sub-genre: “the essay for orchestra” seems to be a mid-length orchestral piece (normally not much longer than ten minutes), usually not for full symphony orchestra — strikingly often piano (or celeste), percussions and strings are used. These composers have also composed a lot of vocal music and used more or less literary references in their works.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most recent composers who have used the term is Paavo Heininen, who

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Nancy Woo’s article “Witold Lutoslawski’s *Mi-Parti*: A Musical Essay in Sound Textures”, ([http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish\\_music/harley/nancy.html](http://www.usc.edu/dept/polish_music/harley/nancy.html))

<sup>13</sup> Paul Moon describes the work as follows: “A highly chromatic work, it is something of a study in rhythm. The first twenty-seven bars are filled with percussion only, and the work continues with more motivic rhythms than harmonies. Barber himself described this *Third Essay*, in contrast to his earlier two, as ‘absolutely abstract music’. It does achieve a level of chaos and yet order, and while it bears some of Barber’s least characteristic material, it does sound confident, for certain” (<http://www.musik-gymn.de/barber/final.htm>).

<sup>14</sup> T. J. Anderson, *Squares: An Essay for Orchestra* (1965); Gary Kulesha, *Essay for Orchestra* (1977) and *Second Essay for Orchestra* (1984); Gwyneth Walker, *Essay for Orchestra* (1985); Jouko Linjama, *La migration d’oiseaux sauvages: an essay for orchestra* (1977).

<sup>15</sup> There are also other kinds of musical essays: in Columbia, the first piece of electronic music was Fabio Gonzáles-Zuleta’s *Ensayo electrónico* (1965); in Sweden, one can find Stefan Forssén’s *Historien och jag — a chamber musical essay for stringquartett and one actor* (1993).

composed *Two Essays* (Op. 66b, 1994-1996) for string orchestra with the subtitles *1. Towards gaining speed*, *2. Towards getting there*. In his presentation of the work, Jouni Kaipainen suggests that the reason for their title “essay” is their relatively short length, but also their accessible nature. He describes *Two Essays* as follows:

The first piece is looking for the possibilities of gaining speed in several waves. What is especially striking is the characterization of small formal units; sometimes we are in the situation where almost every bar has its own character. The main role is played by a forwards and upwards running quintolet motive and harmony that is [ . . . ] surprisingly rich in quints. Those intervals, seemingly empty as such, are piled on each other and led forward in a parallel movement [ . . . ]. The second piece starts from a situation where the speed has already been achieved. As the title suggests, the piece is a strongly decisive, firmly textured, powerfully moving journey, whose post-expressionist, bold melodic turns are both joyful and defiant. Towards the end the texture of the work is getting still clearer and brighter. On the final accord there are plenty of quints to create the atmosphere of the goal reached.<sup>16</sup>

Here the “essayistic” character of the composition seems to concentrate on purely “musical” elements in the modernist fashion. There are, however, cases where composers relate the use of the word “essay” to the “programmatic” tradition, pre- or post-modern, as in the case of Brian K. Shepard’s *The Explorer: A Symphonic Essay for Orchestra* (1991), which was composed in celebration of Columbus’s journeys to the New World, and which is, according to the composer, “divided into several sections depicting various aspects of the voyage of exploration”.<sup>17</sup> More interesting, and perhaps more post-modern is, however, Daniel Bernard Roumain’s *Harlem Essay for Orchestra and Digital Audio Tape* (2000). In the program, the composer himself describes his musical essay in self-consciously anti-modernist terms:

The best way to explain what Harlem Essay is about is to simply tell you what it’s not about. Well, it’s not about the orchestra, nor is it about music, per se. It’s not about themes, developments, and recapitulations; it’s not about major/minor tonality, atonality, pandiatonicism, serialism, or dodecaphonic procedures; it attempts neither to be eclectic, nor to be some form of “fusion” – and certainly not to be “neo” this-or-that. Harlem Essay is about Harlem and its people; it’s about everyday conversations and Hip-Hop music. It’s about reality and relevancy, the relevancy of what we hear and see to what we think and do.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jouni Kaipainen, Paavo Heininen, “Two Essays”, Op. 66b, on the Web pages of the Finnish Music Information Centre (<http://www.fimic.fi>), visited 5 January 2003 (my translation).

<sup>17</sup> In the composer’s home page (<http://music.ou.edu/faculty/shepard/classical.html>), visited 6 January 2003.

<sup>18</sup> The program and texts should be available at <http://americacomposers.org/notes20000109.htm>, visited 5 January 2003.

Here one can no longer find any modernist agony about the possibility of musical reference: the music is about Harlem and its people, about everyday conversations and Hip-Hop music because the composer says so — and, as a part of the program, this statement is not radically “outside” the work but an integral part of it, a performative act that not only describes but also defines the “aboutness” of the work. One can compare this definitional freedom to the post-modern novel, which, according to the famous definition of Brian McHale, is not so much about epistemological questions that literary modernism struggled with (who am I? How can I know reality? Is there any reality?) but about ontological ones (what kind of worlds are there? How are these worlds constructed?).<sup>19</sup> Realities are constructions, and there is no reason why music could (or should) not be used in order to construct them. This new, more relaxed relation to reality and its representation is, of course, achieved this time not only by musical means but by the use of digital audio tape where one can hear fragments of conversations. The listener hears the inhabitants of Harlem making their own statements about how it is to live in the neighborhood: “everything that’s out there in the world basically came through Harlem . . . that’s the difference between Harlem world and Downtown world . . . Harlem is the greatest place to be . . . live different experiences of life, live in Harlem, it don’t take long to grow to it. Don’t take much. (Kenny)”.<sup>20</sup>

### III. *The Photographic Essay*

Perhaps we may use this claim for reality as a way to move our attention to the photographic essay. As a genre it is far better known than the essay for orchestra: the “photographic essay” (or “photo-essay”) has been, since the days of Walker Evans and W. Eugene Smith, one of the main expressive modes of creative documentary photography, especially in the USA.

Usually photographic essays combine photographs and verbal text. However, as the perhaps most acknowledged master of the genre, W. Eugene Smith, has stressed, also a series or sequence of photographs without any text can be called a photo-essay.<sup>21</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell mentions in his article “The Photographic Essay” one classic case, Robert Frank’s *The Americans*, but adds that even in these cases there are usually some minimal verbal information like the title, the names and dates of the sites where pictures were taken, etc.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> <http://americancomposers.org/notes20000109.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Tom Moran, *The Photo Essay: Paul Fusco and Will McBride* (Los Angeles, CA: Alskog, 1974), 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Photographic Essay”, in *Picture Theory* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1994), 286.



What seems to be the connecting factor in different photographic essays, whether they are accompanied by text or not, is, first of all, that they are a *series* of pictures. They are not random collections: the images are arranged to form links and continuities between each other. What seems to separate photo-essay from photo-narrative, however, is that images do not form any strong story line, or that the presence of a story line is undermined by larger, thematic logics. In the American tradition of Evans and Smith, photographic essays usually address such social problems and questions that either are addressed or could be addressed also by verbal means. The issue might be an actuality — in the case of Smith's *Minimata*, for example, the photo-essay documents the consequences of large-scale pollution in the everyday life of a Japanese village.<sup>23</sup> The logic of the essay is based on causality: we do not need to know whether the images of industrial pollution were in fact taken before or after the images of handicapped children; what matters is that these images suggest a causal relation between pollution and handicaps. However, *Minimata* seems also to rise above the immediate journalistic need; the images do not show only the ecological catastrophe, but they also address larger questions such as: What is the meaning of that event for people's lives?, How do people react in catastrophic situations in general?, What is our relation to nature? and, on a more general level, what is our relation to nature in general. And, as Smith's style is highly rhetorical and has many references to art history, it also highlights the "artistic" nature of photography.

However, as photo-essays are made of separate photographs — framed, frozen and manipulated fragments of visual information — they cannot be continuous in the same way as a verbal discourse can, especially in the rhetorical tradition.<sup>24</sup> Rather, the form of separate images seems to refer to the essayistic fragmentation that we find already in Montaigne, a fragmentation, which since German romanticism has marked the modernist essay, from Mallarmé to Barthes. The fragmentary essay defies traditional narrative or logical organization of rhetorical tradition by introducing a new element to the text: the deliberate use of white space between the fragments. One can see, in fact, a parallel

<sup>23</sup> W. Eugene Smith & Alleen Smith, *Minimata* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975).

<sup>24</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, who concentrates on "hybrid" forms of text and images, gives three main reasons why such works as W. Eugene Smith's photo-essays are called essays: "The first is the presumption of a common referential reality: not 'realism' but 'reality,' nonfictionality, even 'scientificity' are the generic connotations that link the essay with the photograph. [Here Mitchell refers to the use of the photographic essay in geography, sociology or art research] The second is the intimate fellowship between the informal or personal essay, with its emphasis on a private 'point of view,' memory, and autobiography, and photography's mythic status as a kind of materialized memory trace imbedded in the context of personal associations and private 'perspectives.' Third, there is the root sense of the essay as a partial, incomplete 'attempt,' an effort to get as much of the truth about something into its brief compass as the limits of space and writerly ingenuity will allow. Photographs, similarly, seem necessarily incomplete in their imposition of a frame that can never include everything that was there to be, as we say, 'taken.'" ("The Photographic Essay", 289)

between the care that, for example, Mallarmé showed in organizing the fragments and the “whites” of different size between them in his “critical poems”, and the care that W. Eugene Smith showed in trying out different layouts in organizing his pictorial essays. The signification of these essays often arises rather from the juxtaposition of their fragments with each other, than from the meanings created by individual fragments as such.

The main tradition of photo-essay was born in the USA around the thirties, and its birth has often been linked to the rise of such photojournalistic magazines as *Life*. It has also been associated with the kind of socially and ethically committed journalism that tries to avoid the exploitation of the subject matter and respects the human subject, even in misery. At the same time, the personal point of view reveals the presence of the photographer: the essay is his or her personal creation, not a randomly chosen part of “reality”. There is no claim for totality or definitive analysis: the series is only a personal attempt to address certain questions. These convictions are still behind many photographic essays as the American photographer Sheldon Potter recently reports on his Web site:

This Web site is about the documentary photographic essay – the telling of a story in the language of pictures [ . . . ] looking into the life of the relatively “ordinary”, unknown person. It is about concentrating on the exploration of the relatively unnewsworthy, and less scrutinized, little moments (even during occasional “newsworthy events” — what Howard Chapnick has dubbed the “indecisive moments of life”. When I photograph, I’m like the hungry tiger — I lie low in the grass waiting to catch “my” person (or people) in these moments. As I hunt, I’m *emphatically* subjective: beneath the surface I try to find some specific feeling in service of a more general understanding. Like hunger, this understanding is more acutely sensed in the gut than logically articulated in the brain.<sup>25</sup>

Potter’s reference to “guts” may hint that all the ethical problems involved in documentary photography cannot be swept away just with the slogan “emphatically subjective”: much of the discussion about the photographic essay is, in fact, about how the photographer can combine the ethical concern for others with the personal hunting drive for a perfect shot.

If we return now to Fastenaekens’s *Essai pour une archéologie imaginaire*, we notice that here, too, there is no immediate journalistic urgency, no news value. However, there is no humanistic pathos either: there are no humans, or the humans are present only by their absence, by few traces of their existence in the past.

Although the book includes also a wonderful, essayistic introduction by Alain Buttard, Fastenaekens’s photographic essay itself contains very little verbal information: only the title, the names and the dates of the sites photographed. However, even the small verbal information is quite significant. The title already evokes certain associations. Here we must

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<sup>25</sup> [http://www.essential-connect.com/essential\\_image/gallery/abste.html](http://www.essential-connect.com/essential_image/gallery/abste.html), visited 6 January 2003.

remember, of course, that the word “essai” means in everyday French “an attempt”, so that we could translate the title also as “an attempt for an imaginary archaeology”. Perhaps the archaeology is imaginary because it takes place in the future; perhaps it is imaginary because the site is too young to be an object for archaeological study. Or then the “imaginary” power comes from the photographic act itself: when a visual sight has been transformed into a photographic image it necessarily distances itself from its referent; the gloomy industrial objects form, when they are photographed and no longer serve any instrumental purpose, a new, imaginary universe.<sup>26</sup> However, the word “archaeology” can be read, in this case, also as a direct reference to another photo essay, Sebastião Salgado’s monumental *Workers: an archaeology of the industrial age*, published only a year before Fastenaekens’s book.<sup>27</sup> In his short preface, Salgado describes his work as an homage to workers, as “a farewell to a world of manual labor that is slowly disappearing”.

Also Fastenaekens’s essay can be read as a farewell to the industrial age. The twenty photographs in the essay are taken in more or less abandoned industrial sites, on the dark side of modern society. The order of the pictures leads us from the banal day of the first image to a dark night of an imaginary hell and back. But unlike in Salgado’s essay, where the human subject, the heroic worker, is always at the center of attention, in Fastenaekens’s hell there are no longer human beings, although one can perhaps sense the presence of evil spirits in that dark light that always seems to be waiting around the corner. The essay seems to share the romantic vision of the post-industrial sublime with the aesthetics of the 1980s post-punk-neo-romantic industrial rock, which was especially keen on empty factory halls and the sounds that echoed as though they were recorded in some deserted loft.<sup>28</sup>

As the information at the end tells us, all sites photographed belong to old industrial towns in Northern France and Belgium — mainly mining and steel industry — that have seen their days of prosperity but that now have to face severe structural change with heavy unemployment and social problems. Only in the case of the last image is there more information than just the plain name of the site: we learn that the swamp is, in fact, a pond of potash from Alsace. After this small piece of information, even the darkness of the old factory halls seems preferable to that desert where all forms of culture have finally melted into waste. In the cult movie *Mad Max* there were at least some people — in the world of Fastenaekens’s imaginary archaeology all marks of human presence are fading away.

The photographic techniques used by both Salgado and Fastenaekens — black and

<sup>26</sup> As Buttard puts it: “When photography becomes the place of this world’s invention, the visible is no more than the photographer’s daydream. The referent becomes photography’s imaginary basis rather than its foundation of truth.”; (Alain Buttard, “Introduction”, in Fastenaekens, *Essai pour une archéologie imaginaire*, trans. by Nina Bogin. Pages are not numbered).

<sup>27</sup> Sebastião Salgado, *Workers: an archaeology of the industrial age* (New York: Aperture, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> An effect that one can hear, for example, on the records of British pop groups Joy Division and Bauhaus.

white silver emulsion film, large negative size, carefully finished prints — originate from the early days of photography, the golden age of industrialization, and thus highlight the archeological dimension of the essays. At the historical moment when the digital manipulation of photographic images on the computer screen is about to replace the long hours spent in the dark room, the use of traditional techniques is not only “a farewell to a world of manual labor that is slowly disappearing”, but a farewell to the manual labor of photography itself.<sup>29</sup>

We could perhaps draw a line, starting from the first images of optimistic industrial romanticism in the 19th century (images where the oily glow of iron machines cast their light into the darkness of the factory hall), continued first by the socially active photo-essays of the working class and their working conditions by Evans, W. Eugene Smith’s *Pittsburg* and Salgado’s *Workers*, then by the criticism of industrial pollution in W. Eugene Smith’s *Minimata*, and ending with Fastenaekens’s imaginary archaeology of a post-industrial desert. Those essays would tell, then, the rise and fall of industrialization, in the language of traditional photography that in itself evokes a certain nostalgia for the age of industrialization.

However, the possibility of this kind of referential or thematic “narrative” is only one aspect of the essay. There is another, mythical level, where we compare this imaginary archaeology to the archaeology as we know it, and find more similarities than differences: the imaginary archaeologist is perhaps just as baffled by these images as we are in our efforts to find explanations for the monuments of lost cultures. Our attempts to reconstruct a lost culture are always just attempts — perhaps not vain attempts, but essays, thought experiments that are more likely to fail than to succeed.

#### IV. “Conceptuality as Sensed Experience”

We may now note at least one common factor in these traditions of essays for orchestra and the photographic essay. In both traditions, there are strong tensions between “pure art” and the claim for realistic representation. There are essayists who create essays about art (about tonality or atonality, about light or composition), others who create essays about social reality, and still others who are continuously struggling between these two poles and find this relation problematic.

Both the literary and the non-verbal essay share, therefore, the same tension. On the

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<sup>29</sup> “Like a negative counterpart to the era in which the birth of photography was both a product and a factor of industrial development, the present moment is one of upheaval, brought about by numerical technologies, industrial production, and photographic images. Computers accompany the destruction of the major regions of mining and heavy industry, and simultaneously transform the status of photography and the modes of representation” (Buttard, “Introduction”).

other hand, the essay presents itself as “non-fiction” and claims to speak as truthfully as possible, without any artificial forms, about the social reality; at the same time, the essay questions the very possibility of any pure reflection of that reality and uses, often highly consciously, the very techniques of art and fiction. The essay takes place in-between fiction and non-fiction, philosophy and art, argumentative logic and poetic freedom, the abstract and the concrete.

According to the young Georg Lukács in his essay “On the Nature and Form of the Essay”, written in his pre-Marxist period, the essay is an art form. The material of the essay does not, however, consist of images or destinies but “intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as spontaneous principle of existence; the worldview in its undisguised purity as an event of the soul, as the motive force of life”.<sup>30</sup> The essay is, then, about “conceptuality as sensed experience” or, in the language of young Lukács, about “forms”. As he describes the experience of the essayist (or the “critic”):

Form is his great experience, form — as immediate reality — is the image-element, the really living content of his writings. [ . . . ] The critic’s moment of destiny, therefore, is that moment at which things become forms — the moment when all feelings and experiences on the near or the far side of form receive form, are melted down and condensed into form.<sup>31</sup>

According to Lukács, then, for the essayistic subject the conceptual, form-giving experience that the essay uses as its material does not come after existence; it is not any meta-reflection, but the very constitution of existence, thinking as being. For the essayist, being is constituted in a process where “things become forms”.

Of course, even though Lukács calls the essay an art form, he takes for granted that the essay is a literary form of expression, connected to written language. However, nothing prevents us from taking his view as the starting point for our own approach: perhaps it is “intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as spontaneous principle or existence” that is the material both for Barber and Fastenaekens, as well as other essayists, whatever their expressive medium.

For the essayist needs form only as lived experience and he needs only its life, only the living soul-reality it contains. But this reality is to be found in every immediate sensual expression of life, it can be read out of and read into every such experience; life itself can be lived and given form through such a scheme of lived experience.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lukács, “On the Nature and Form of the Essay”, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Lukács, “On the Nature and Form of the Essay”, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Lukács, “On the Nature and Form of the Essay”, 8.

So, if the essay is about “conceptuality as sensed experience”, then what is “conceptuality”? In the Western metaphysical tradition, intellectual activity is directed towards contemplation of concepts. In the Platonic tradition, these concepts are seen as representing some kind of original forms that pre-exist language and the sensible world in general; in the Aristotelian tradition they are seen as abstract, immanent structures of cognition. We use words and other signs in order to express those structures, but words and concepts are kept apart. (The classic example comes from mathematics: the words “two”, “deux”, and the graphic signs 2 and II refer all to the same mathematical concept, which is not reducible to any word or sign.) Now, if the essay is about conceptuality, and if it is possible to use a term like “the essay” for a literary text, musical composition and a series of photographs, then one could perhaps take for granted that what makes Barber’s composition or Fastenaekens’ series of photos “essays” is that one can discern certain “original” or “immanent” conceptual structures in them apart from the materials they use. In this case, it should be possible to translate the “conceptuality” in Barber’s and Fastenaekens’s essays also into a verbal medium and thus turn them into literary essays. What is, of course, something I tried to do in the beginning of this paper. But is it possible?

From a post-structuralist point of view, signs owe their ideality to what Derrida has called “iterability” (*itérabilité*), that is, to the possibility of repetition (repetition in any number of contexts) and alteration (the difference that every repetition necessarily carries within itself).<sup>33</sup> From this point of view, concepts cannot be thought any longer without some more or less material signs, because it is the repetition of them that makes the ideal structure of conceptuality possible in the first place. The logic of conceptual thought depends therefore upon the nature of the material basis of that sign system where those concepts have been articulated. From this we could deduce that musical or photographic concepts cannot be reduced to some “non-material” origin: it is the repetition of certain material signs (both in individual works and in tradition as a whole) that has created certain “musical” and “photographic” concepts that allow artists to study them within their artworks. The concepts that Barber has studied in his essays for orchestra would be, then, such repeatable elements in Western musical tradition as motive, transposition, movement, variation, etc.; while the concepts that Fastenaekens studies in his photographic essay are photographic elements like light, contrast, forms, etc.

And still, translations or transpositions from one medium to another do take place, all the time. Not perfect translations, of course, but translations that are successful enough to

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. S. Weber, in *Glyph 7* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 190; see also Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 212-217.

be recognized and understood. As we can see in the case of Fastenaekens's photographic essay, for example, it is evident that the spectator is strongly tempted to see also other "essayistic" elements in these images than purely "photographic" ones, elements that are related to the representational nature of documentary photography and, as representational, can therefore be more immediately expressed in verbal language than purely visual or auditive elements. *Essai pour une archéologie imaginaire* is not only an essay of such purely photographic elements as light, contrast and forms; it can be read also as an essay about such "verbal" concepts as industrialization, post-industrialization, decay, memory, etc. And if it is read as a commentary upon the previous photographic essays on the same themes as I have done, then it is foremost an essay about the representation of industrialization, post-industrialization, decay, memory, etc., in the visual language of photography and its tradition.

In the case of Barber's *Essay for Orchestra*, too, it is not impossible to hear some kind of representational elements that are close to verbal expression, as the language I used in the beginning of my paper witness ("just when one floats in the far-away ocean of strings and woodwinds, the original motive returns, surging back in the end as a crushing cluster of brass and percussion — like a doubt that grows from small hesitations to the final, overwhelming passion"). In fact, it is difficult to describe music without referring to some extra-musical metaphors, to different types of narratives where different elements are more or less personified. We do not have to refer here to any kind of naïve programmatic illustration ("Sibelius equals Finnish lakes"); it is the structure of language that treats music as a subject with some kind of intentionality of its own, not necessarily as a subject in any specific narrative, but as a subject of narrativity in general.

The difference between poetry and the essay is, for Lukács, the same as that between landscape and portrait. As regards the landscape we do not ask about its likeness, but when considering the portrait the question of likeness is immediately posed, even in the case when we do not know the original. The relation of the essay to reality, then, does not consist in comparisons that can be made between reality and the essay, but within the essay itself: it is a certain moment of "likeness" that creates the "truth" of the essay.<sup>34</sup>

The opposition between the "realist" and "idealist" essay is, then, an illusory one: the attempt to convince the audience about the relevance of a certain essay to our real life, reveals, in fact, that the essayist is never sure what his/her essay is finally "about". In order to make his orchestral essay "about" Harlem, Roumain has to make use of some musical forms, so he cannot, after all, prevent his essay from also being about "themes, developments, and recapitulations". Those abstractions are in no way irrelevant to his

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<sup>34</sup> Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay", 110-11.

effort to share the Harlem experience; they tell how he gives form to his experience (for it is clear that without some form he could not share his vision with his audience). Or the other way round: no matter how “pure” some music or painting is; it can become, someday, an expression of life — who knows, perhaps someday Barber’s essay or some other “pure” essay for orchestra finds its way to the heart of Harlem. There is no pure representation, no pure presentation, no pure and uncontested “aboutness”.

At this point, then, we may conclude that what connects the different uses of the word “essay” in different media with each other is a certain conceptual experience, but it is that experience itself that also marks their difference. Conceptuality is not tied to any one medium, although it is not independent of them either.

#### *V. In-between Sensuality and Conceptuality*

In his classic text “The Essay as Form”, Theodor Adorno describes the essayistic experience as follows:

Not less but more than a definitional procedure, the essay presses for the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience. In such experience, concepts do not form a continuum of operations; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture.<sup>35</sup>

In Adorno’s image, intellectual experience becomes spatialized. Concepts that the essay uses are not defined or fixed. Moreover, they do not follow each other in a series of definitions where later concepts would be founded on some basic ones. Instead, in the process of the essayistic intellectual experience the linear form of linguistic expression becomes less important as words are interwoven with each other just as individual threads so that together they form a kind of “carpet”: a conceptual, spatialized structure of thought. From the texture, more or less dense, one can discern new patterns arising that are no longer reducible only to the original “threads” (the already existing concepts), but rather to the way in which this material has been used (the weaving technique of syntactical relations between these concepts). To turn this image into Saussurean language: it is rather the difference between the signs than any positive signified as such that creates significations in essayistic sentences.

What are, then, those “fruits” that the Adornoan “fruitful” thinking produces? Are they new concepts? Or, as the image of (and the possible images in) the carpet hints us, are they rather spatialities or, more generally speaking, sensualities that cannot yet be defined as concepts but that still mark the space where new concepts can emerge? The essay

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<sup>35</sup> Theodor Adorno, “The Essay as Form”, in *Notes to Literature I*, 1958, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 13.



represents or, rather, tries to produce an intellectual experience where different sensualities are juxtaposed, and it is the possibility of this juxtaposition itself that could be called conceptuality.

So we arrive at a provisional conclusion: essayistic conceptuality is negotiation between different sensualities. Conceptuality is nothing in itself: it is the difference, the in-between the audible, the visible, the spatial, etc. Non-verbal essays are products of the negotiation between different sensualities and reveal, thus, conceptuality in its becoming.

It is from here that we should continue — from a theory of conceptuality and sensuality — but this must wait for another time.

