



The Bauman Institute

Think Pieces

Number 3, August 2014

The Ethical Implications
of the Essayistic

Bartek Dziadosz



The ethical implications of the essayistic

Bartek Dziadosz

Reflections of a filmmaker after the first public screening of *The Trouble with Being Human These Days*, 25th March 2014

Two years into making a film about Zygmunt Bauman and his sociological concepts a worrying thought suddenly jolted my sense of direction in that complex (for many reasons) project. At the outset of the production we had decided that we would not use off-screen commentary when editing the film. I have always thought voiceover narration to be crudely imposing meaning on the flow of images and a slack way of joining disparate scenes. But at a certain moment, when the overall structure of the film was beginning to appear, we realized that the effort to efface the intervention of ourselves as filmmakers was just a false pretence. Clearly someone was putting words and images together with an intention to tell a story and propose an argument. Although the narrator was timidly hiding behind the screen, their presence was felt in the seams of the film's fabric. Not only was it somehow unfair to the audience but simply confusing. This apparent absence of the narrator seemed to raise questions which were crucial for assessing the film. Was the storyteller reliable? Did he or she present a valid interpretation of Baumanian concepts? What was the film's message? I couldn't bring myself to resolve these problems within the narrative. This would be a betrayal of the essayistic form and visual storytelling. The answers to these questions still lurk in the wider context of the film or need to be inferred from it. However, in order to mitigate the possible confusion, we did insert a few shots of the crew listening to and having lunch with Zygmunt

Bauman. Those involved in the production were of the opinion that this was a satisfactory solution. Ostensibly, the viewer can link the faces of the people making the film with the outcome of their work. The emphasis remains on the montage of ideas rather than a narrator's voice clamping down on the uninhibited play of signification.

It seemed like a sensible compromise but looking back now it does strike me that the choice between different levels of the narrator's presence is more problematic than it might first seem. A simple lack of a clear-cut narrating instance in fictional cinema upholds its long-standing illusion of unmediated storytelling. It is the idea of the camera and its human apparatus as an impartial invisible observer that is perhaps the most powerful tool of deception in filmmaking. If one chooses a more radical and honest form of communication, one should arguably abandon the disguise of the invisible narrator and reveal one's identification, credentials and possibly ideological affiliation. But then—it would be a different kind of story. A solid unwavering storyteller imparts the narrative with meanings which might be unwanted or belong to a different aesthetic repertoire.

In this short essay I would like to problematize the question of who narrates in the film.

Using terms established by Gerard Genettes I will be referring to Voice or more broadly narrating instance, that is the situation of telling a story or laying down an argument (caveat: I think every argument is also a story). I would strongly suggest that Voice is not just a narrative device, something which might concern literary critics or film scholars and has little relevance to anyone else. I think this category encapsulates

the relation between narrating and subjectivity, which in itself has wider implications. Paul Ricoeur speaks of 'homo fabulan,' Fredric Jameson calls narrative 'the central function or instance of the human mind.'¹ Stories are a form of cognition.

To be more specific, the particular issue I want to tackle is an observation that Voice is narrating and is the object of narration at the same time. Despite the academic convention of impersonality in writing, this topic makes it very difficult for me to avoid the 'I' without the embarrassment of being disingenuous to the subject matter. It is the fact of making a film essay that gives me some modest grounds to offer my insights on the process of narrating. And whomever's authority I draw upon when making my argument I cannot pretend that the proposed conclusions are in any way more sensible than my individual thought processes allow them to be. Some of the implications I'm going to touch upon have a lot to do with liquid modernity and Baumanian ethics. The former directly refers to the instability of the subject so typical of essayistic modes of narrating. The latter, based on concepts by Emmanuel Levinas, presents itself as an interesting model for discussing ethics in documentary. After all, the medium of film offers unique entry to the private worlds of its subjects, and the mediated proximity to them mimics to some extent that of face-to-face encounters.

The Trouble with Being Human These Days could be described as a film essay, or perhaps that is how I would like to see it. This type of filmmaking is thought to have its origins in the literary essay—a form of writing, which has as its goal to be 'intellectually sensuous, sensually intellectual' according to its most influential pioneer Michel de Montaigne. But since its

origins, the essayistic has broadened its scope and moved into areas of photo-essay, film, drawings, blogs, etc. It was successfully employed to depict industrialised urban spaces in eighteenth-century periodicals like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. It was famously used to say everything that is to be said about the colour blue in the book *On Being Blue* by William Gass (1976).

For Aldous Huxley the essay was a device for saying almost everything about almost anything.² But he also claimed that it can be studied within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and autobiographical, the pole of the objective (in other words the factual, the concrete-particular), and one can also talk about the pole of the abstract-universal. Interestingly, he recommended that the most satisfying essays were those which make the best of not one, not two, but all three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist.³

If we step back for a moment and think more broadly about Huxley's distinctions, don't they simply reflect possible approaches to knowledge and cognition? Although this does not bring us much closer to defining this genre of intellectual expression, the scope that Huxley postulates testifies to close ties between the essayistic and the Western traditions of philosophizing, which draw on introspection (Descartes), empiricism (Locke) and Platonic essentialism.

Timothy Corrigan, author of the groundbreaking monograph on film essay, is working precisely within the parameters of the mentioned Platonic model which looks for the essence, the core of the essayistic. Perhaps inadvertently, he becomes very limiting in comparison with Huxley. For him the cornerstone of the

essayistic is presence of a shifting, unstable and fragmented enunciator. He concludes that:

Essayistic thinking becomes a conceptual, figural, phenomenological and representational remaking of a self as it encounters, tests, and experiences some version of the real as a public elsewhere. Film essays have troubled and complicated subjectivity and its relation to public experience.⁴

And of course, when we look at the works of many notable essayistic filmmakers like Chris Marker, Jean Luc Godard or Patrick Keiller we begin to understand his point. These films feature montages of disrupted scenes, seemingly random images and often a prominent role for voiceover commentary, which at times is not very helpful in understanding the story.

It is, therefore, not difficult to notice a certain affinity between the essayistic and postmodernity, quite literally expressed by Lyotard who claimed that the essay is the quintessential form of postmodern thought in the second half of the twentieth century.⁵

However, these explanations strike me as overly individualistic and rather incongruent with the experience of making or editing a film. The narrator in a film can be presented as shifting, but the process of making this impression is anything but unstable. It is rather a highly organised effort: both in the practical sense and conceptually. Essays are sometimes characterized as encounters which preserve something of the process of thinking, or as

Godard says, they are 'form that thinks.'⁶ With film it is editing that resembles very much the process of thinking. But that part of the production is invisible for anyone but those involved. It happens behind the closed door of the cutting room. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that editing is in fact a process of erasing, effacing the previous stages of thinking and leaving only the final polished thought, which – and this is more important – can never be quite as idiosyncratic as one would perhaps want.

The final form of the film needs to be based on the shared experience of the filmmakers and their audiences, if one wants to make it comprehensible, allowing it to exist in a social context. After all, filmmaking is a social exchange. That self Corrigan speaks about is a social self. It encounters not just an abstract public sphere but a very concrete social milieu.

Therefore, it is a valid question to ask why this modern, and postmodern alike social self (and we can be even more precise with that – middle class liberal self) is so unstable and fragmented?

I would risk to speculate, and this speculation is largely inspired by Baumanian concepts, that it is so because of the steady, remorseless progress of modernity in the last two centuries. It has turned not only the public sphere but also the visual, the world of objects and places, into something alien and frightening. And I would suggest cinema played a large part in this process. The history of cinema in its mainstream, classical form is inseparable from the onslaught of modernity. Films have taught us how and what to desire, ingrained in us particular concepts of beauty and success. Their production practices were being developed in parallel with Fordism and the conveyor belt.

But I think the most far-reaching consequences stem from the fact that mainstream cinema and television are primarily visual and narrative-based media. First, if they are visual, then they can tell us a lot about actions, objects and overt expressions of emotion. These things can be dealt with directly and quite spectacularly. Everything else, such as ideas, social relations and emotions need to be inferred from visual or verbal cues. That in itself is not a very efficient form of communication, let alone entertainment. The message might be too demanding for the audience, might lack that kind of universal appeal that action-led stories usually enjoy. A film focused on ideas is likely to be judged uncinematic because it is bound to divert from the conventional associations of what cinematic is. It is a rather odd phenomenon that most cinema is somehow concerned with expressions of love, but few films dare to address the idea of love. Still, I cannot exclude the possibility that I am falling into the trap of naïve Platonism here, dismissing too easily shadows on the wall without any guarantee that there is anything beyond them.

The connection between the visual and capitalism is quite clear. It was well captured in Virginia Woolf's essay "Street Haunting" (1927) when she marvels at the stores on Oxford Street:

'With no thought of buying, the eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances. Standing out in the street, one may build up all the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet.'⁷

Entertainment cinema quite often seems like an extension of the shopping mall, and this is where it has finally found its place. As early as in 1922 the U.S. Department of Commerce had

coined the slogan 'trade follows the motion pictures.'⁸ Later Hollywood studio executives lobbying in Washington claimed somewhat arbitrarily that every foot of film brings one dollar to the wider economy by promoting the American way of life in other countries.⁹ Whatever arguments they used, there is clear evidence that throughout that period American ambassadors in all European countries were busy fighting restrictions imposed on importing cultural goods from the States.¹⁰ The distribution network of early Hollywood cinema paved the way for advances in the global economy in the second half of the twentieth century. It is as if the need had been created before the supply caught up.

But secondly, going back to more theoretical considerations, if there is a narration, there must also be a narrator, a Voice to use Genette's term. In Woolf's essay the unreliable narrator rambling the streets of London is a figure produced by a rather stable point of view, which we can easily assign to the modernist writer who likes to *focalize* the narrative by disguising herself in other characters. In fictional films it will usually be an invisible narrator, as invisible as possible. A voice which does not speak but presents the images, the grand manipulator, or as some claim, the sinister ventriloquist.

This Voice in the mainstream media is neither fragmented nor at all unstable. It has been seen and heard it for the hundred or so years of cinema and television. We have grown to trust this voice. It represents the globally accepted values of market economy, belief in democratic institutions and progress. It promotes a generally positive outlook with a preference for social consensus but is actually firmly based on Christian values and the ideology of liberal



Think Pieces

Number 3, August 2014

Page 1

The Bauman Institute

School of Sociology and Social Policy
University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK

0113 343 4008

baumaninstitute@leeds.ac.uk

baumaninstitute.leeds.ac.uk

@BaumanInstitute



individualism. What is perhaps more disconcerting, is that it is based on the assumption that public sphere is visible and transparent, that it can be narrated. Zygmunt Bauman tells us that this is largely an illusion.¹¹

I would suggest that one of the difficulties with narrating in a way that breaks away from the mainstream view comes from the fact that the space of the visual is already occupied. *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) is a good example of a film in which what is shown is at odds with what the film is trying to tell us. Because on the one hand, the narrative is a satirical anti-capitalist tale. Long, laborious and, unfortunately, based on a true story. On the other hand, the impact of the spectacle, its glamour and the sheer enjoyment of watching it undermine the first message. The film has the same Voice which we know from commercial cinema. Doubled, actually. The visual story is told by a standard invisible narrator, detached from the narrative, who does not assume any responsibility for what is being shown. At the same time the voiceover narration comes from Leonardo di Caprio playing Jordan Belfort, a real-life crook who wrote the autobiography on which the film is based. We might not agree with all his judgments and values, but by dint of being a storyteller he is granted an opportunity to narrate, that is to put order into the raw material of reality. And we are simply entertained by how well he does it. Without second thoughts, hesitation or pangs of guilt.

This is the paradox to which I want to draw your attention. The impulse towards the essayistic and the postmodern fragmentation of the subject might seem a more sensible and honest way of making an account of the world. For me, films that challenge the conventional modes of representation and my own way of thinking

realise the true potential of the cinematic medium. But I am fully aware that they somehow exist on the fringes of cultural exchange. I cannot help feeling that it is perhaps a retreat. It is a failure not of representation, but of action. Liberal subjectivity is pushed aside by the apparent objectivity of the mainstream viewpoint. What is my response? Probably another film essay.



Think Pieces

Number 3, August 2014

Page 1

The Bauman Institute

School of Sociology and Social Policy
University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK

0113 343 4008

baumaninstitute@leeds.ac.uk

baumaninstitute.leeds.ac.uk

[@BaumanInstitute](https://twitter.com/BaumanInstitute)



Endnotes / Bibliography

¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), xiii.

² A. Huxley, *Collected Essays* (Harper & Row, 1971), v.

³ Ibid.

⁴ T. Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 35.

⁵ J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

⁶ Jean-Luc. Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 54-57.

⁷ V. Woolf, *Street Haunting* (Penguin Group (Canada), 2005), 7.

⁸ Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (University of Exeter Press, 1997), 42.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Wiley, 2013).

“I happen to believe that questions are hardly ever wrong; it is the answers that might be so. I also believe, though, that refraining from questioning is the worst answer of all”

Zygmunt Bauman

Founded in September 2010 in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds, the Bauman Institute is an international research and teaching centre dedicated to analyzing major social change around the world at a time of social, economic and environmental crises.

Inspired by the sociological imagination of Leeds' Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Zygmunt Bauman, our primary aim is to conduct world-leading research and teaching in the areas of consumerism and money, power and ethics, new technologies, and social sustainability within what Bauman has termed the age of 'liquid modernity'.

We are also concerned with the on-going interpretation of Bauman's writing and the importance of his sociology for driving innovative ways of understanding and potentially transforming contemporary social life in order to create fairer and more sustainable societies for all.

Our research is committed to influencing key-opinion leaders inside and outside UK Government, in global business and the financial sector, in policy think tanks, NGOs and within civil society more widely.

We are also committed to offering inspiring research-led teaching for our students through postgraduate tuition and associated events that contribute to the already vibrant academic community here at Leeds.

Think Pieces

These publications by the Bauman Institute are intended to communicate our research and teaching output in an interesting and accessible format. The hope is that each Think Piece will help to stimulate debate in our main areas of interest, mindful of Professor Bauman's advice never to refrain from questioning the ostensibly unquestionable premises of our everyday life.

Think Pieces

Number 3, August 2014

Page 1

The Bauman Institute

School of Sociology and Social Policy
University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK

0113 343 4008

baumaninstitute@leeds.ac.uk

baumaninstitute.leeds.ac.uk

[@BaumanInstitute](https://twitter.com/BaumanInstitute)

