

Cinema's Alchemist

The Films of Péter Forgács



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[14] *Reorchestrating History* Transforming *The Danube Exodus* into a Database Documentary

▶ Overture

In 2000, the Labyrinth Project (an art collective and research initiative on interactive narrative)¹ embarked on a collaboration with Hungarian media artist Péter Forgács to turn his sixty-minute, single-channel film, *The Danube Exodus*, into a large scale, multiscreen immersive installation. Forgács's film (which was aired on European television in 1997) provided intriguing narrative material: a network of compelling stories, a mysterious river captain whose motives remain unknown, a Central European setting full of rich historical associations, and a hypnotic musical score that created a mesmerizing tone.

Although our expanded adaptation drew on forty hours of footage, both the film and installation still present the same transnational narrative that interweaves three stories: those of Jewish refugees, German farmers, and a Hungarian river captain. As an amateur filmmaker, the captain documented both the journeys of the Jews fleeing Hitler and the German farmers leaving Bessarabia on film, footage that was remixed by Forgács with other archival material in his sixty-minute film and then reorchestrated by Forgács and Labyrinth with more additional material in the installation. Titled *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River*, our installation premiered at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, from August 17 through September 29, 2002, and has been traveling ever since—with exhibitions thus far in Karlsruhe, Barcelona, Helsinki, Ulm, Budapest, Berlin, Berkeley, and New York.

The adaptation called for a reorchestration of history—in some ways analogous to the one Forgács had earlier performed on the original found footage of the captain. We were now using Forgács's own film as found



Figure 14.1 *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River*. The main installation features five screens that can each project the same or different scenes from *Danube Exodus*. Viewers can select images from a computer installed in front of the screens, in a similar position to the bridge of a ship.

footage, just as our interactive installation would later function as found footage for museum visitors who would bring their own associations, memories, and desires to these historic images—a chain of appropriations that raises interesting questions about agency and authorship.

As the user mode in the museum became increasingly immersive (with its multiple rooms, large multiple screens, and immersive 5.2 sound system) and the scale of the montage dramatically enlarged, we hoped to retain or even intensify the emotional power of the original film. Yet we also wanted to make the user experience interactive, a dimension that could possibly undermine the emotional impact. If we were correct in assuming that the emotional power of Forgács's works was largely dependent on their stunning rhythms of editing and music, then we could not let museum users freely control the pacing of the images in this interactive version, for we would then risk having the tone become playful as in an electronic game or merely informative as in a hypertext. Although an educational goal might help contextualize the captain's primary footage, mere pedagogy would fail to achieve the unique mesmerizing quality of Forgács's sixty-minute film, with its shadowy figures, its historical



Figure 14.2 *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River*. In addition to the main installation, a set of computers allows viewers to search a rich database of additional, contextual information that goes beyond the material included in the original film.

ironies, and its melancholy rhythms provided by Tibor Szemző's original minimalist score. That is why we turned to the musical term *orchestration* (a concept suggested by Labyrinth's interface designer Rosemary Comella) and to the poetics of rippling currents to control the pacing. Or, to put it another way, we turned to Sergei Eisenstein's ever-expanding notion of musical montage and to Heraclitus's trope of the river to evoke the constant fluctuations in subjectivity and history: "Everything is in constant flux and movement. . . . Nothing is abiding. Therefore, we cannot step twice into the same river. When I step into the river for the second time, neither I nor the river is the same."²

Given the number of versions through which this story of the Danube exodus has been retold, we believed that, despite any limits imposed on interactors, this ongoing process of reorchestration would still confirm that narrative is like the Danube: you can never step into the same river or the same history twice.

This collaboration on *The Danube Exodus* installation represented three important firsts for Labyrinth, as an art collective–research initiative working at the pressure point between theory and practice. For the first

time a joint project was being proposed to us by an independent artist we admired. In fall 2000, my University of Southern California (USC) colleague Professor Michael Renov organized a retrospective of Forgács's films and introduced us to the filmmaker, who was a visiting scholar in the Getty Research Institute's academic year on "Reproductions and Originals," working on a project titled "Rereading Home Movies: Cinematography and Private History." As soon as he saw our interactive DVD-ROM project, *Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film* by Pat O'Neill, which enables users to navigate O'Neill's magisterial camera moves through a rich collection of archival materials on the Hotel Ambassador, Forgács was eager to collaborate with us on an interactive version of *The Danube Exodus*. And as soon as I saw his film *Maelstrom*, I wanted to work with Forgács. I was fascinated with the way he positioned his spectators—to be emotionally engaged with the vibrant Jewish family who would eventually be exterminated in the death camps (a violence committed offscreen) yet simultaneously distanced by our historical knowledge of their fate. Ironically, this hindsight was always made palpable in Szemző's melancholy minimalist music and in the rhythms of Forgács's reediting of the material, with its slow-motion gestures and periodic pauses.

This *Danube Exodus* project was also the first time that Labyrinth was setting out to build a large-scale museum installation rather than first making a DVD-ROM or website that eventually would be adapted to an exhibition. Forgács chose the Getty Center in Los Angeles as our premiere venue, for he brought to the project not only his original video (with the blessings of his producer Cesar Messemaker of Lumen Films), new video interviews with Jewish and Bessarabian survivors of the two voyages, and additional archival materials from a number of European archives but also the Getty Center with its brilliant design team headed by Merritt Price and Leon Rodriguez and his Getty research associate Zaia Alexander (who cocurated the overall exhibition and cowrote the catalogue with me). Labyrinth brought its core team of digital media artists—interface designer Rosemary Comella and graphic design artists Kristy H. A. Kang and Scott Mahoy—plus San Francisco sound designer Jim McKee, USC sound engineer Christopher Cain, and several former USC students as digital editors: Jesse Cowell, Broderick Fox, Adam King, and Rebecca Rolnick. We also provided funding from the Annenberg and Rockefeller Foundations and all the equipment, facilities, and technical consultants. At the institutional level, the Getty and Annenberg Centers were as eager to work with each other, as were we and Forgács.

By starting with an installation, we were forced from the outset to spatialize the narrative. This demand enabled us to see the exhibition as

a narrative field full of story elements that could be recombined in different ways. And it led us to design alternative pathways that influenced how users understood the interwoven stories and the complex connections between them.

Perhaps most important, this emphasis on the narrative field enabled us to realize for the first time that we were actually making what we now call database documentaries—a generic designation that could also be applied productively both to earlier films by Forgács and to earlier interactive projects produced by Labyrinth.³ It was no accident that this realization came during a collaboration with an artist-archivist like Forgács, who owns his own archive that houses historical footage he has collected throughout Europe and that he draws on and remixes in most of his works. In his films there is always an awareness that whatever historical images you see on screen, they represent only a small percentage of the potential material that exists—in the public archives, in private collections, or in your own personal memory (based on other works you may have seen, heard, or read, or lived experiences you may have had). You are always made aware of what is omitted, as well as included, for you must read Forgács's images against a broader sweep of virtual history that you are partially responsible for bringing to the film.

Similar dynamics were operative in earlier collaborative projects by Labyrinth, where there is usually a competition between fiction and history for control over the narrative space. In *Bleeding through Layers of Los Angeles, 1920–1986*, you participate in creating the fictional story of a Jewish woman named Molly that cultural historian Norman Klein is spinning on the fly or investigate the ethnographic backstories of real-life individuals from various ethnic communities describing what life was like in this same narrative field—a three-mile radius of downtown Los Angeles that is one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the nation and the historic site of fierce battles over prime L.A. real estate. Loosely based on Klein's *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (1997), the project also documents buildings and neighborhoods that are no longer there. The collection of data being used—stills, movies, maps, and news clippings—is visualized as a database of thumbnails you can navigate at your own speed, enabling you to see how the same archival materials and narrative space can be captioned and appropriated for both the documentary and fiction.

In *Tracing the Decay of Fiction*, the interface trope of the hotel functions as a repository of cultural memories, from both history and fiction, that are interwoven in subjectivity. The Hotel Ambassador (recently demolished to make way for a new high school in Los Angeles) was not

might otherwise remain marginal.⁵ It is precisely this kind of historical recuperation that is central to the various versions of *The Danube Exodus*, as well as to all other films by Forgács and to Labyrinth's previous database documentaries.

By applying Taylor's approach to *The Danube Exodus*, we realize that the very act of turning this material into a museum installation had new ideological implications. For we were taking home movies of ordinary people in crisis—the kind of images that are typically displayed on a small scale within a modest domestic space—and enlarging them for projection within the kind of large-scale, multiscreen public venue that has traditionally been devoted to epic heroes or villains like Napoleon and Hitler. By moving them from the margins into the historical spotlight, we were insisting that amateur footage of ordinary people—the German farmers, the Jewish refugees, and the captain and his wife—deserves this kind of public attention.

Instead of perceiving the main competition being between database and narrative (which Manovich claims are “two essential responses to the world,” with modern media as “the new battlefield” for the competition between them),⁶ we at Labyrinth assume they always work together, a combination that is always made visible in our database documentaries. Instead, the main competition is among various rival narratives (both fiction and documentary) vying to explain the data, a choice that always has ideological implications.

We purposely made these ideological dynamics explicit in *The Danube Exodus*, where the database documentary dramatizes the rivalry among the three stories and where users are forced to decide which of the three they want to follow. This choice and its ideological implications become more complicated with historical hindsight, as one considers the current political status of Israel, Germany, and Hungary. We deliberately left room for these ambiguities because they get to the heart of the piece and to the ideological drive of database documentary.

While collaborating on *The Danube Exodus* installation with Forgács, we focused on six characteristics of database documentary, which proved crucial to our process of adaptation and to exploring the potential of this genre.



Database Documentaries Are Selective and Open-Ended

In the broad cognitive sense, narrative contextualizes the meaning of perceptions and therefore is constantly under reconstruction because

it always needs to accommodate new data we encounter. Thus narrative acknowledges the existence of gaps, even if one of its goals is to smooth over these absences and to reduce the anxiety they arouse. The open-ended structure of database narrative, then, is not really strange or counterintuitive—as many people argue. Rather, it is essential to our own life stories and to history.

Database narrative raises an interesting paradox, one that is particularly central to database documentary where issues of knowledge production and truth value are important. On the one hand, its open structure ruptures the illusionary smoothing over of gaps by exposing the underlying databases out of which narrative elements are selected and combined. Yet by presenting this array of choices and exposing the process, it potentially introduces another pleasurable illusion of wholeness—as if all the possibilities were contained in the archive. As Gilles Deleuze acknowledges in *The Time-Image*: “Sometimes, on the contrary, it is necessary to make holes, to introduce voids and white spaces, to rarify the image, by suppressing many things that have been added to make us believe that we were seeing everything. It is necessary to make a division or make emptiness in order to find the whole again.”⁷

What is clear is that database documentary enables one to emphasize either side of the paradox—the gaps or the illusion of wholeness.

Despite the fact that our adaptation of *The Danube Exodus* was based on a series of dramatic expansions (going from sixty minutes to forty hours of footage, from one screen to five, from stereo to a 5.2 immersive sound system), we chose to emphasize the gaps. As in all Labyrinth projects and all films by Forgács, we deliberately avoid the illusion of wholeness because we consider this epistemological tension to be one of the great ideological strengths of database documentary.

The power of Forgács’s films depends primarily on two things: the rarity of the amateur home movies he collects and his brilliance as an editor, a combination that foregrounds the decisions of what is included and what omitted. By expanding the footage (with parts of the captain’s footage that had been omitted from Forgács’s film, with more footage selected from public archives, and with new interviews with the survivors of both journeys), we were able to show how countless narratives could be woven out of this material. Yet the archival material is still valued primarily for its rarity, which serves as a marker of the line between survival and loss—the loss and retrieval of images, memories, and lives.

A Database Documentary Is Composed of a Network of Interwoven Stories

This emphasis on the plurality of stories is crucial to database documentary because it prevents any of the versions from becoming perceived as a master narrative or the whole story. Thus it defies the cyberstructuralist's dream of totality for both databases and narrative models.

The key challenge for our *Danube Exodus* project was how to spatialize the narrative in a way that would emphasize the complex networked relationships among the three stories. The uncanny juxtaposition between the Jewish and Bessarabian journeys caused each to be read in a different way, with the third story of the captain and the river mediating between them as historical anchor. We knew many people would object to any comparison between what these two groups of refugees had suffered, yet the historical presence of the captain in their respective stories and his inclusion of both groups within his own travel documentaries necessarily created what Forgács calls "the incomparable duet of the German-Jewish exodus." We decided to focus both on the differences and similarities between these two diasporic tales as well as on the historical irony of their juxtaposition, a strategy that was made explicit in the catalogue I coauthored with Zaia Alexander: "The Bessarabian Germans mourned the loss of their homeland and possessions. The Jews danced and rejoiced; they lost everything but their lives had been saved. Still, the uncanny parallelism is a matter of record. These Jews and Germans were both transported to safety and documented on film by the same river captain, who ferried them into historical memory."⁸ In all parts of the installation design, the primary emphasis was placed on the mediating image of the river, the rippling currents of which have interwoven many cultures and periods throughout Central Europe's stormy political history.

During the conceptualization phase, we quickly agreed that we needed three separate spaces. One would be entirely devoted to telling the story of the Jewish journey, which was organized by Aaron Grünhut (whose son attended our opening at the Getty). This story contained interviews with several fascinating survivors, including Else Friedlander and the Menzel and Ashkenazi families, who gave Forgács vivid narrative accounts of their family life in exile. A second parallel space would be dedicated to telling the less-familiar story of the Bessarabian Germans, their life in Paris, Bessarabia before the Soviet annexation, and the personal losses they suffered both during the exile and after their return to Germany and their relocation in Poland. This story was recounted by two surviving families, Helmut Fink and Ella and Guido Fano, whom Forgács

interviewed on camera. In both of these side spaces there were to be two seventeen-inch touch-screen monitors that enabled visitors to access the stories and interviews in any sequence, pattern, or rhythm they wanted to pursue. Here the primary drive was educational rather than emotive.

As soon as we began to discuss the third space, disagreements began to arise. I wanted to have the three stories vying for control over this central narrative space, which meant that visitors would be able to choose which of the stories to emphasize. Forgács wanted the room to focus primarily on the captain and the river and to simulate the experience of being on board a ship—with benchlike seats for the visitors and a captain's wheel or navigational map as an interface, a literalism that the rest of us wanted to avoid. Kristy Kang proposed the river itself as the main interface, with objects floating by in the rippling currents, each evoking one of the narrative segments. Though we adopted this idea, instead of the objects we decided to use a brief QuickTime movie from each of the orchestrations as an icon, which would periodically rise out of the depths of the river. This idea was proposed by Rosemary Comella, yet the concept was developed into an actual functioning interface by Scott Mahoy. Whatever the interface design or narrative emphasis, Comella wanted this central room to be a poetic space—immersive and essentially nonverbal. Although Péter was originally committed to including voice-over commentaries and printed captions, once we ran out of time he agreed to retain only a couple of voice-overs and to make the captions very minimal, choices that proved to be emotionally effective. Despite our initial disagreements, the final version managed to combine all these ideas into a coherent vision.

In the final version of the central poetic space, the three stories compete for control over the narrative, accentuating the comparison among them. Yet before any of these stories are chosen, visitors can watch default orchestrations that feature the captain's ship and other images he documented on his travels throughout Europe. The choices are made on one large (nineteen inch) touch-screen monitor, which is positioned in the center of the room and controls what is seen on the five large screens (each six feet by eight feet) that totally dominate the room. The five screens are arranged in a 180-degree half-circle, which helps to intensify the immersive nature of the viewer experience.

What users see on the touch-screen monitor are the rippling waters of the Danube. Periodically, a ring of six icons emerges out of the depths of the river, giving visitors a chance to select one or to choose an alternative ring. There are three rings in all, each with six icons, for a total of eighteen orchestrated narrative modules (each around five to ten minutes in

length). Six of the orchestrations feature an episode from the Jewish story, six from the Bessarabian Germans, and six from the captain and the river. Yet each orchestration incorporates images from the other two stories as well. Given that the orchestrations have minimal subtitles and only two of them have brief voice-overs, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish which characters on-screen are the German passengers and which are the Jews, an ambiguity that encourages visitors to compare them. No matter which sequence is chosen, the stories still compete for control over the central narrative space and the historical spotlight, and the user is still confronted with the difficult task of (what we called) comparing the incomparable. Thus instead of becoming totally immersed in one master story, visitors are always led to consider the relationship among them, yet they still have the freedom to read those relationships in a variety of ways.

Once a selection is made, the ring of icons sinks back into the water and there can be no other choices until that orchestration has finished playing. Although this limits the agency of the interactors, it ensures the emotional power of the orchestrations, which depends on the editing pace and rhythms. During the production phase, Forgács was editing these orchestrations on a computer with several monitors. The first time we were able to test them on the five large screens, he immediately realized that they had to be much slower or else they would lose their power. Consequently, he had to go back and reedit all the orchestrations he had thus far completed, which put us way behind in our production schedule and forced us to sacrifice many other orchestrations that we originally had intended to include. After this painful omission, there was no way Forgács was going to let the visitor change the pace, a decision we all supported.

► **Database Documentaries Encourage Experimentation in Sound-Image Relations**

Given its emphasis on plurality and its exposure of the underlying processes of selection and combination, the database documentary can easily treat sound and image as different databases in which the components can be remixed in a variety of ways, a dynamic we played with in our collaborative project with Pat O'Neill in *Tracing the Decay of Fiction*. These possibilities encourage experimentation with sound-image relationships, which can accentuate rather than smooth over the gaps between disjunctive spaces (e.g., past and present, landscape and mindscape) and dissonant drives (immersion and distantiation).⁹ These kinds of

disjunctions can be particularly effective in a museum setting, which is composed of many different spaces.

In many ways, the immersive power of the *Danube Exodus* installation was more dependent on sound than on image, a realization that was partly acknowledged in our choice of the word “orchestration” as a central structuring principle for the piece. But it was only in the central poetic space that visitors shared a common immersive experience defined by sound—for the side spaces had headsets, which encouraged interactors to pursue their own individual lines of inquiry, and the outer spaces had the ambient sounds of the ordinary museum experience.

In the central poetic space, each time a selection of a new orchestration was made, we heard a subtle splash of water as if signaling that the ring of visual icons was returning to the depths of the river and a new sonic experience was about to begin. The interface became part of the music, for when the interactor stepped up to the touch-screen monitor, it was like playing a musical instrument or conducting an orchestra with each of the five screens functioning like a different section: the strings, the brass, the winds, the percussions, and the soloist. As the shadowy images rippled across the room, constantly making new rhythmic patterns, the haunting musical score—of engines, voices, water, music, and wind—performed its own mediating mantra.

Once Jim McKee joined our collaboration as sound designer, the sonic interplay between immersion and distantiation was greatly enriched. Drawing on Szemző’s hypnotic score from Forgács’s film, McKee combined this minimalist music with the melodic ambience of the river and the percussive rhythms of the ship’s engines. These are the acoustic elements that set the melodic base, yet the movement of the ship is evoked through discreet sounds linked to specific images moving across the screen—for example, the cries of birds flying overhead, a flag flapping in the wind, the marching music of the German soldiers striding across Europe, the droning prayers of the Jewish passengers, the galloping horses moving across the Bessarabian plains, and the authentic folk music from different locales along the Danube. Assisted by sound editor Adam King and sound engineer Christopher Cain, McKee was able to install a 5.2 immersive sound system, with equipment loaned by Miller and Kreisel Sound.

As in Forgács’s extraordinary films, this sound design places visitors in a unique spectator position: sutured into the historical experience by the ambient sounds of the river, yet simultaneously distanced from the characters by the melancholy music that carries the weight of historical hindsight, all without sentimentality. Paradoxically, the distance does not

lessen the emotional nature of the immersion but actually makes it all the more moving. Forgács claims he lets Szemző's music orchestrate and rule the emotional story; his own editing rhythms become part of the score. That is why the concept of orchestration is so crucial to *The Danube Exodus* installation, for we realized we would be expanding the concept of editing not only across five large screens but also across an immersive surround sound system that would generate new sound-image relationships and bring greater attention to Szemző's mesmerizing score.

Database Documentaries Combine a Series of Disjunctive Spaces

In database documentaries, it is the sheer diversity of materials that inevitably leads to a spatial discontinuity that is both external and interior, physical and mental, and that cuts across layers of time. These spatial disjunctures can be geographical, cultural, and historical. They also involve tensions between physical presence (what is actually included in the piece) and virtuality (what could have been selected from the database but was not chosen). Such disjunctures underscore both the cognitive and ideological functions of narrative as a way of processing and interpreting sensory data. Instead of being hidden or denied, these discontinuities can be leveraged to make ideological implications more apparent.

In *The Danube Exodus*, we were dealing with disjunctive spaces that were immediately apparent in the content. For example, the network of interwoven narratives contain historical representations of the interiors of the *Erzsébet Királyné* cruise ship, which is explored on a number of different journeys; the various stops along the Danube River for the Jewish and Bessarabian voyages; the touristic destinations of the captain on his earlier sightseeing journeys that enabled him to witness history, including events that led to World War II and the Holocaust; the Bessarabian farmlands that the German farmers were forced to abandon; the respective destinations of the Jewish and Bessarabian refugees in Palestine and Europe; and the various far-flung destinations, in Europe, the United States, and Israel, where survivors of these two journeys forged a new life. Though most of these spatial disjunctions in content also existed in Forgács's sixty-minute film, the move to the installation raised a much more serious challenge.

In *The Danube Exodus* installation, the most crucial spatial disjunction we faced was between the spatialized narrative we were conceptualizing and the physical space to which it had to be adapted—a process repeated each time it is exhibited in a new museum but was most

intense at the premiere venue.¹⁰ Before we could move beyond the conceptual phase, we had to examine the exhibition space at the Getty Center. We discovered to our dismay that the two connected exhibition spaces available to us in the Getty Research Institute (GRI) were far too small for what we were conceptualizing. To our great relief, we were told by GRI director Tom Crow that we were welcome to use the institute's lecture-seminar room, which was connected to the other two exhibition rooms, even though it had never previously been used as an exhibition space. Yet it was tentatively scheduled to be remodeled sometime in the near future.

As soon as we entered that room, we all breathed a sigh of relief, for here was the perfect space to construct what we were imagining. Not only did this oddly shaped room create the sense of being on board a ship, but on the north wall it had a curved rear-screen projection system and on the south wall, a projection booth. Here was our central narrative space where we could have large screens on which to project the interplay among the three stories. We imagined creating two temporary walls, one on each side, which would serve not only as borders for the separate Jewish and Bessarabian spaces but also as support for two of the large screens, which could be two-sided. Each of these two-sided screens could be devoted to one of the journeys. In this way, no matter what was being projected on the central screens (which would now give greater emphasis to the third story of the captain and the Danube River), we would always be reminded of the separate stories of the Germans and Jews and (because of the two-sidedness) would be able to see part of what was being projected in the two side spaces.

Another great advantage of using the lecture space for the immersive video installation is that it freed the other two exhibition spaces for a more traditional display of material objects—historic encyclopedias, maps, and vintage camera and film equipment used by the captain—and for more extensive signage and didactics, including an illustrated written introduction to these three interwoven narratives, with a detailed graphic timeline. We began looking for literary quotations that would help weave the various parts of the exhibition together. From our very first meeting, we had agreed on the quotation from Heraclitus as a means of establishing the Danube River as a trope for both history and memory. And as soon as we decided to use the seven-volume Reuters map of the Danube, the pages of which ingeniously unfold to depict in great graphic detail the river's fascinating undulations across Central Europe, I found a perfect quote from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "There was . . . one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body

at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map . . . it fascinated me as a snake would a bird . . . I went on . . . but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me.”¹¹ Although Conrad’s Congo was far removed from the Danube, his fictional Captain Marlow suggested a parallel with Andrásovits, a connection we noted in the signage and extended into a series of comparisons that challenged the distinction not only between history and fiction but also between professionals and amateurs.

No one knows why Andrásovits accepted the commission for the Slovakian Jewish transport of 1939 or let his cruise ship, the *Erzsébet Királyné*, help repatriate the Bessarabian Germans in 1940. Was he merely a captain-for-hire? Or was he a humanitarian like Schindler and Grünhut, a curious objective observer like Joseph Conrad’s fictional Captain Marlow, or a persistent filmmaker like Péter Forgács?

We were also able to devote considerable space to selections from the eighteenth-century, six-volume encyclopedia on the Danube by Italian naturalist Luigi Fernando Marsili, which Zaia Alexander had found in the Getty collection. Functioning like a modern database, it provided another analogy with our own project and demonstrated that database documentary has several antecedents. Each volume gathers information concerning a different aspect of the region, showing both the richness of the river and the breadth of Marsili’s interests. Perceiving a striking parallel to both Captain Andrásovits’s documentation of daily life on the Danube and his own gathering of vintage found footage from the same region, Forgács wove Marsili’s volumes into his expanding narrative about the river.

In these outer rooms there was also space for a website, which was designed by Hungarian multimedia company C3, the Center for Culture and Communication in Budapest. Providing another interactive experience, this informative website gave visitors access to additional archival information (stills, voice-overs, video footage) related to the three stories. It also enabled visitors to contribute any information they might have about the captain or the two voyages and to record their reactions to the exhibition.

Although we had been warned that the GRI lecture room was going to be remodeled, its repeated delays led to a postponement of the exhibition from August 2001 to August 17, 2002. While we welcomed having additional time to complete the installation, we were worried that the new spatial configuration might not be compatible with our design. These anxieties were not unfounded, for we were forced to make adjustments. A new wall was built close to where we had originally intended to place our temporary border, which forced us to abandon our two-sided screens.

This meant we now had to rely entirely on the large projections in the central space to interweave the three stories. Far more troubling, the new wall destroyed the symmetry we had wanted for the two side spaces. The German space on the right was now much narrower than the Jewish space on the left, allowing us to have only one computer with touch screen for the former in contrast to two computers with two touch screens for the latter. This change obviously had ideological implications, for it privileged the Jewish experience over the German—even though we had purposely avoided this in our original conceptual design and would need to rectify it in future venues. At one point the Getty staff tried to convince us to combine the computers devoted to the Jewish and German interviews in one space, but we refused to give up the division into three, which we considered crucial to our conception.

Although our installation brought these diverse spaces together within a single narrative field, it never disguised the gaps between them. Each of the adjacent rooms provided access to the complex network of stories in a quite different way. Museumgoers could move through these disjunctive spaces any way they chose. Some moved directly to the poetic space for the emotional impact and then went to the other rooms to find out more about what they had just experienced. Others went directly to the website. Others systematically digested all the information in the outer rooms and side spaces before stepping into the poetic space. Others shuttled back and forth. Each sequential order created a different experience, but there was an advantage in retaining the gaps and keeping them visible—for in database documentary, these are the spaces that most strongly arouse our speculation and desire.

We realize this structure is not unique. In fact, our installation purposely demonstrates that virtually every museum exhibition functions as a narrative field that invites some form of interactivity from visitors, who move through these disjunctive spaces, deciding where to linger.

►

Database Documentary Invites a Performative Mode of Interactivity

Even in noninteractive forms of database narrative (such as movies like Chris Marker's *La jetee* and *Sans soleil*; Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*; Luis Buñuel's *Milky Way* and *Phantom of Liberty*; Richard Linklater's *Slackers*; David Lynch's *Lost Highway*; Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*; Agnes Varda's *The Gleaners and I*; Chantal Akerman's *Toute une nuit*; Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*; or any

film by Jean-Luc Godard or Péter Forgács), the audience is positioned as active spectators who are able to perceive the various narrative pathways available to the characters, camera, and filmmakers and to consider the implications of the narrative choices being made.¹² But once an interactive option is possible (online, or on a DVD-ROM, mobile device, or game console), the interactor then becomes a performer who pursues her own curiosity and desire while making those narrative decisions. The same dynamics apply to an interactive museum installation, except now there is an audience of other visitors who watch the interactor's performance. And when the database narrative is a documentary, where knowledge production could potentially be as important as pleasure, the performative style and choices become all the more significant.

In our *Danube Exodus* installation, we tried to intensify the interactors' experience as performers, even though their options were in some ways restricted. Visitors moved through the installation at their own pace, pursuing their own pattern of integrating the disjunctive spaces and deciding where, how, and for what period they would utilize the interactive options. This dynamic applied not only to selecting icons from the touch-screen monitors in the central poetic space and side spaces or using the website but also to reading the printed texts and maps from the more traditional nondigital museum displays.

Issues of time and sequence proved to be intriguing. Although we were told by the Getty staff that we could not expect most museumgoers to spend more than twenty minutes in the exhibit and we designed the length of the orchestrations accordingly, the time actually spent by most visitors was much longer. On the opening night, a number of visitors breezed through the outer rooms and then, drawn by the immersive sound, went directly to the central poetic space where they sat down on the benches or lay on the floors and remained there for well over an hour. Periodically individuals would drift to the side spaces, where they would await their turn on the touch screen and where they would recognize figures they had only briefly glimpsed on the five large screens in the central space. Once they listened to the personal stories and historical backgrounds of these individuals, they would then return to the central poetic space where they would now seek out these figures and watch them in a new way. While many of the younger visitors spent most of their time in the central space, some of the more elderly visitors became totally immersed in the side spaces, where they would systematically go through every single option. At times I would see middle-aged daughters or sons go to their parents and try to draw them away from the computers in the Jewish or Bessarabian space, but the elders usually refused until they had

listened to every personal account. Many visitors spent over two hours in the installation, which was a great surprise to us, as well as to the Getty staff, and the show broke all attendance records for a GRI exhibition.

Within the central poetic space, one could observe different performative styles of interaction. Sometimes young children would dart to the touch screen whenever the icons emerged from the river (an emergence that was also visible on the central large screen). Eager to push the buttons, these youngsters rarely paused to consider the options but seemed gratified to experience the immediate effect throughout the room—the splash of water followed by the sudden emergence of new images spreading across the five giant screens and the new rush of immersive sounds. Even if their choice merely repeated what had just gone before, they hardly seemed to notice. Adult interactors sometimes would hover over the touch-screen monitor as if to ensure their turn at mastery and would usually take a long time to choose a particular icon. Some users took a systematic approach, as if to ensure that they would see all eighteen orchestrations, no matter how long it might take. But this would mean barring others from making the choices, or expressing exasperation if someone chose to repeat an orchestration that had just been played. Others more interested in the pleasures of immersion rather than mastery were content to lie on the floor and experience the flow of images and sounds swirling around them, even if it was merely the transitional (default) interludes between the orchestrations. If no one else made a choice, they saw no need to rise to the challenge; as in cinema, they apparently were enjoying and reacting to the interactive potential inherent in the montage.

I was glad we resisted the impulse to make the piece more interactive simply for the sake of interactivity, as if agency were some ultimate fetishized goal, always to be pursued regardless of the ends of the particular piece. We were gratified that so many people seemed to find the installation emotionally powerful; we knew we had a hit once we observed the reactions of the museum guards. They got it because they tuned into its pleasures. But there were others who were disappointed because they expected or wanted something else. Like the Hungarian literary scholar who thought we should have provided more historical background material on the Holocaust before letting anyone enter the central space. Or the freelance journalist for the *New York Times*, who wrote a flattering piece on the exhibition at the Getty and then called a few weeks after his article had appeared to ask whether he could borrow a copy of Forgács's original documentary so that he could pitch it to a studio as a fictional feature. He was apparently ready to perform another reorchestration of the material.

What I learned about Labyrinth's approach to performative interactivity, Forgács's approach to filmmaking, and the genre of database documentary is how largely all three depend on a performative approach to montage—one that is physically embodied, structurally dialectic, and conceptually musical, or what in this piece we have called *reorchestration*. This approach applied not only to those of us who had collaborated on the conceptual design of the piece (and who were interacting with the earlier performative filmmaking choices of Forgács and the captain) but also to visitors who were bringing their own repertoire of memories, associations, and expectations to the exhibit. Again, this was not a unique dimension of the installation but one that underscores an underlying truth about all movies, exhibitions, narratives, and database documentaries: the crucial role of montage in generating any form of active spectatorship, regardless of medium. That is why Eisenstein's theories of dialectic montage acquire new resonance in the context of digital media and database documentaries and why they exerted such an important influence on our interface design. I am thinking particularly of his essay "Methods of Montage," which takes a multitiered approach to theorizing an interactive form of spectatorship that extends across many art forms and beyond, into realms of mind and nature.

This borrowing from Eisenstein enabled us to challenge the unwarranted assumption of many new media theorists: that cinema spectatorship is inherently passive and incompatible with database forms. Rather, we think this conception of performative interactivity emphasizes the writerly potential of cinema spectatorship, where the collisions of dialectic montage detonate within the mind of the viewer with explosive effects on the registers of the body, the emotions, the intellect, and the spirit, a multitiered dimension that is always present in the films of Péter Forgács. This is precisely the dimension we strove to expand through our reorchestrations of history and database documentary in *The Danube Exodus* installation.

NOTES

1. In 1997, I founded the Labyrinth Project at the Annenberg Center for Communication at the University of Southern California (USC). As executive director, I assembled a core team of media artists—Rosemary Comella, Kristy H. A. Kang, and Scott Mahoy—and together we produced a series of multimedia projects (installations, websites, and DVD-ROMs) in

collaboration with artists, scholars, scientists, archivists, museums, and talented USC students from a wide range of departments. Since 2006, we have been housed in USC's School of Cinematic Arts.

2. Heraclitus, *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus*, trans. Brooks Haxton (New York: Viking, 2001).
3. *Mysteries and Desires: Searching the Worlds of John Rechy* (2000), a collaboration with the novelist; *Tracing the Decay of Fiction: Encounters with a Film by Pat O'Neill* (2001), a collaboration with the filmmaker; and *Bleeding through Layers of Los Angeles, 1920–1986* (2001), a coproduction with ZKM.
4. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 233.
5. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).
6. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 233.
7. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
8. Zaia Alexander and Marsha Kinder, catalogue essay for *The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River*, an interactive installation by Péter Forgács and the Labyrinth Project, Getty Research Institute, August 17–September 29, 2002.
9. This strategy violates the conventions that Mary Ann Doane was the first to theorize in her pioneering essay "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 33–50.
10. For example, both in Barcelona and Berkeley the installation had to be adapted to a much smaller exhibition space and to a larger space in Budapest, where an image of the captain's boat could be seen against the actual Danube River, which was visible through the window. Labyrinth designer Scott Mahoy oversees these adaptations to each new exhibition site.
11. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: New American Library, 1902), 71.
12. For an elaboration on how these films can be read as database narratives, see my essay "Hot Spots, Avatars, and Narrative Fields Forever: Buñuel's Legacy for New Digital Media and Interactive Database Narrative," *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 2–15.