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ESSAYS

ON THE

**ESSAY
FILM**

EDITED BY

NORA M. ALTER

TIMOTHY CORRIGAN

ESSAYS ON THE ESSAY FILM

FILM AND CULTURE

ESSAYS ON
THE ESSAY FILM

EDITED BY NORA M. ALTER
AND TIMOTHY CORRIGAN

Columbia University Press
New York



Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex
cup.columbia.edu
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Alter, Nora M., 1962– editor. | Corrigan, Timothy editor.
Title: Essays on the essay film / edited by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan.
Description: New York : Columbia University Press, 2017 |
Series: Film and culture | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016040210 (print) | LCCN 2016056155 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780231172660 (cloth : alk. paper) |
ISBN 9780231172677 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780231543996 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Experimental films—History and criticism. |
Documentary films—History and criticism.
Classification: LCC PN1995.9.E96 E88 2017 (print) | LLC PN1995.9.E96 (ebook) |
DDC 791.43/611—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016040210>



Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent
and durable acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America

COVER DESIGN: Lisa Hamm

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ESSAYS ON THE ESSAY FILM

INTRODUCTION

NORA M. ALTER AND TIMOTHY CORRIGAN

Essays have a history as long as human expression itself. For some, the essayistic form has its roots in Platonic dialogues and Roman epistles; for most, Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon are the modern forefathers of the genre in their explicit use of the term “essay” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Perhaps the most commonly agreed-on origin of the essay is the work of Montaigne (1533–1592). For him, the word “essays” emphasizes their provisional and explorative nature as “attempts,” “tries,” or “tests” that produce views of, comments on, and judgments of his faltering memory, love, friendship, lying, a “monstrous childe,” and a plethora of other common and uncommon questions picked almost haphazardly from a mind observing the world passing before and through it. Imagined, to some extent, as an active intellectual exchange with his deceased friend Étienne de La Boétie, Montaigne’s essays describe not only the constant changes and adjustments of a mind as it defers to experience but also the transformation of the essayistic self as part of that process. Over the following centuries, the essay evolved from its literary precedents to include the photographic essays of the twentieth century, from Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), through James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), to Martha Rosler’s *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–1975). Currently, the essayistic idea informs museum installations like John Akomfrah’s *Unfinished Conversation* (2012) and Isaac Julien’s *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), as well as

many digital platforms, including Chris Marker's *Second Life* and Kosinski's Channel on YouTube. Amid this proliferation, the essay film has emerged as one of its most creative, ubiquitous, and important forms in modern media history. Central to this expansion, the global reach of the contemporary essay film has become well established through films and commentaries from Africa, East Asia, and South Asia.

A SHORT HISTORY

Even through the relatively short span of the past 120 years of film history, the essay film itself accounts for myriad formal and cultural practices and changing definitions. A case can certainly be made for the early signs of the essayistic genre in the short travelogues, topical, and lecture films of the late 1890s, as these documentary-style and educational films are less about entertainment and more about the dissemination of information and ideas. A review in 1909 of D. W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat*, about the capitalist exploitation of the wheat trade, aligns that early film explicitly with an intervention in the public domain associated with editorials and essays: "The picture . . . is an argument, an editorial, an essay on a vital subject of deep interest to all. . . . [Yet] no orator, no editorial writer, no essayist, could so strongly and effectively present the thoughts that are conveyed in this picture. It is another demonstration of the force and power of motion pictures as a means of conveying ideas."¹

By the 1920s and 1930s, key film practices begin to appear at the intersection of documentaries and avant-garde cinema, an intersection that for some scholars and critics lays the groundwork for the essay film. Often noted are Sergei Eisenstein's early references to the essay film and his unachieved desire to make Marx's *Capital* into a political and social science argument on film. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, "city" films, such as Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926), Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Jean Vigo's *Apropos of Nice* (1930), and Luis Buñuel's sardonic travelogue *Land Without Bread* (1933) begin to ironize, personalize, and aestheticize documentary subjects (daily life in a Russian metropolis, the strata of society in a French resort town, and impoverished rural

communities in Spain) in a manner that suggests another focus of the essay film: an oblique cinematic encounter with everyday realities.

Even in these early experiments in cinematic representation, many of the defining features of the essay and essay film begin to appear: the blending of fact and fiction, the mixing of art- and documentary-film styles, the foregrounding of a personal or subjective point of view, a focus on public life, a dramatic tension between audial and visual discourses, and a dialogic encounter with audiences and viewers.

In the following decades, essay films grow increasingly visible and more commonly defined as cinematic versions of the literary and photo essay. In *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945), filmmaker Humphrey Jennings creates versions of the essay film as complex and particularly literary reflections on the public crisis of England during World War II through the lens of a personal voice-over struggling to make sense of that war. In 1948, French filmmaker Alexandre Astruc coins the term *caméra-stylo* as “a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel.”²

By the 1950s, the Cinémathèque française, founded by Henri Langlois in 1936 with filmmaker Georges Franju, becomes the most prominent product of the ciné-club tradition inherited from the 1920s, a tradition that ushered in changes and new directions in the spectatorial dynamics as a dialogic exchange of ideas and commentary between the film and its audience. By 1955, the European confederation Cinéma d'art et d'essai helps to shape what is sometimes called “advanced European art cinema,” and by the mid-1950s, the term *essai cinématographique* is in frequent use in France. Perhaps most important in the postwar emergence of the essay film, in 1958 the profoundly influential André Bazin famously characterizes Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1958) as a new form of cinema that he designates the essay film.

Meanwhile, various new-wave cinemas around the world begin to move away from explorations of alternative narrative forms and to embrace an essayistic reformulation of documentaries and other formats, often in the service of progressive ideologies or politics. French filmmaker and *Cahiers du cinéma* writer Jacques Rivette cites the groundwork of the Italian neorealist movement and, specifically, Roberto Rossellini as shaping a new essayistic perspective on film. Reconfiguring the implications

of the short film in April 1955, Rivette's essay "Letter on Rossellini" identifies a trend that would characterize even longer films as cinematic drafts or sketches. In these films, he argues, "the indefatigable eye of the camera invariably assumes the role of the pencil," so that "a temporal sketch is perpetuated before our eyes."³ Specifically in Rossellini's *Paisa* (1946), *Germany, Year Zero* (1948), and *Europa '51* (1952), there is "the common sense of the draft. . . . For there is no doubt that these hurried films, improvised out of very slender means and filmed in a turmoil that is often apparent from the images, contain the only real portrait of our times; and these times are a draft too. How could one fail suddenly to recognize, quintessentially sketched, ill-composed, incomplete, the semblance of our daily existence?"⁴ For Rivette, the model for these films and, most recognizably, *Viaggio in Italia* (1953), "is the essays of Montaigne," and "*Viaggio in Italia* . . . , with absolute lucidity, at least offers the cinema, hitherto condemned to narrative, the possibility of the essay."⁵ In these films, "a film-maker dares to talk about himself without restraint; it is true that Rossellini's films have more and more obviously become *amateur* films; home movies."⁶ As in many of the essay films that would follow, the "home movie" and the "amateur" valorize the personal, the transitional, the unauthorized, and the relatively formless shape of personal subjectivity, as it replaces the teleological organizations of narrative with an activity defined by the object itself.⁷

Not many years later, for Noël Burch, the filmic "sketch" as a historical prototype and marker of the essayistic form similarly becomes the vehicle for a public subjectivity in the process of thinking. In *Theory of Film Practice* and its concluding discussion of nonfictional filmmaking, Burch identifies two contemporary models as the film essay and the ritual film.⁸ For the former, his examples of breakthrough films are Georges Franju's *Le Sang des bêtes* (1948) and, especially, *Hôtel des Invalides* (1951). These "active" documentaries "are no longer documentaries in [an] objective sense, their entire purpose being to set forth thesis and antithesis through the very texture of the film. These two films of Franju are *meditations*, and their subjects a *conflict of ideas*. . . . Therein lies the tremendous originality of these two films, which were to cause nonfiction film production to take an entirely new direction."⁹ For Burch, Franju becomes "the only cinematographer to have successfully created from pre-existing material films that are truly essays," and his heritage becomes especially visible in

Godard's essay films of the 1960s, such as *My Life to Live* (1962), *A Married Woman* (1964), and *Masculine, Feminine* (1966), in which an "element of intellectual spectacle" announces this distinctive "cinema of ideas," long ago dreamed of by such dissimilar filmmakers as Jacques Feyder and Eisenstein.¹⁰ Indeed, during his Dziga Vertov period of the 1960s, Godard himself begins to describe his films as essays: "As a critic, I thought of myself as a film-maker. Today I still think of myself as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in novel form or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them."¹¹

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, various postwar avant-garde and documentary movements continue this emphasis on more creative, more personal documentary engagements, often made available by new lightweight film, video, and audio technologies. Diaries, memoirs, epistolary exchanges, travelogues, self-portraits, home movies, political lectures, and other older forms now become assimilated into film and media practices that stretch the boundaries of all these older traditions. Two particular landmarks during this period are Jonas Mekas's essay diary *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) and Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1974), while the South American filmmakers Glauber Rocha, Fernando Solanas, and Octavio Getino create a revolutionary politics whose key vehicles are written and filmed essays.

Since the 1980s, the essay film has become one of the most important and dynamic practices around the world. Signaled in Europe by the celebrated appearances of films such as Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), Sankofa's *A Passion for Remembrance* (1986), the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986), and Harun Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989), the essay film rapidly caught on in North America with Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985), Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), and Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989). It continued to diversify with Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000), Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005), Wim Wenders's 3-D *Pia* (2011), Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012), and Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* (2013), works that continue not only to explore the potentials of the essayistic form but also to confirm the commercial potential for a kind of filmmaking—somewhere between

documentaries and experimental cinema—that is traditionally outside the mainstream.

There are multiple reasons for the rapid proliferation and popularity of essay films in recent years. Digital technologies have made image making a ubiquitous activity that often takes the form of more personal engagements with contending representations of social issues and with the shapes of reality itself. New media platforms for distribution and exhibition have enabled the easy circulation of essay films. In recent decades, the essay film has become a full-blown global phenomenon, spreading throughout Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America, as well as across new regions of Europe and the United States. At the same time, essay films have increasingly opened the doors to other alternative artistic practices in video art, museum installation, and Internet communication. In a sense, the early twenty-first century may be the golden age of the essay film and the related essayistic practices and venues that surround it: regular conferences like those held at the University of Maryland (2014), University of Reading (2015), Columbia University (2015), and Florida State University (2015) explore different topics related to the essay film; various journals devote special issues to the subject; museums and public art forums feature more and more essayistic performances; and scholarly books investigate both old and new directions for the essay film.¹² All the more reason, we believe, to frame this practice in the larger history and arguments that have defined and debated the importance of this genre.

OVERVIEW OF THE COLLECTION

We have organized this volume into four parts. The first includes writings on the literary and philosophical form of the essay by Georg Lukács, Robert Musil, Max Bense, Theodor W. Adorno, and Aldous Huxley. The second consists of primary historical writings on the essay film by an international group of theorists and filmmakers, including first-time translations of Hans Richter and Alexandre Astruc. The third part is a collection of essays by critics and scholars of the essay film. These are chronologically organized and date to the early 1990s, when a more general awareness of

the essay film reached audiences. The fourth part assembles recent writings, meditations, and responses by contemporary filmmakers and artists who make essay films. Clearly the large majority of these writers emerge from European and American film cultures. That is not to deny the many other film cultures around the world that offer exciting variations on the Euro-American arguments and positions, but rather, mainly for pedagogical purposes, to provide key foundational and influential texts that have most visibly initiated the tradition of the essay film.

FOUNDATIONS

Since Montaigne, innumerable essayists have practiced and honed this mode of writing. And while there are many important and significant essays, a small number of authors and specific texts dominate the references within the field of the essay film. We have therefore selected texts that have been influential to both critics and practitioners of the contemporary film essay: Georg Lukács's "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" (1910); selections from Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–1943); Max Bense's "On the Essay and Its Prose" (1948), published here in translation for the first time; Theodor W. Adorno's "The Essay as Form" (1958); and Aldous Huxley's "Preface to *The Collected Essays of Aldous Huxley*" (1960).

There is a decidedly German bent to our selection, and this is due to a number of factors. Many audiovisual essays in the 1990s produced in a number of national contexts and languages incorporate, by either direct citation or visual reference, the words, theories, and methods of the German-language essayists. The gradual recognition of the essay film as a form at the end of the twentieth century coincided with the widespread popularity in North America, in particular, of what was loosely referred to as the Frankfurt School across a number of disciplines and fields, including philosophy, art history, literary studies, cultural studies, visual studies, and film and media studies. Translations of key texts by Walter Benjamin, Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, Lukács, and others led to their incorporation into myriad essay films transcending media, national, cultural, and racial borders. The German essay is thus literally appropriated and translated, not only from one language to another but from

literary to visual form, often with direct citations from the texts of these cultural theoreticians appearing in essay films. Lukács's seminal essay, Bense's rejoinder after World War II, and Adorno's indirect response in the 1950s to both of these writings are considered by many as key texts. Lukács's treatment of the essay ties it to a modernist crisis affecting such traditional literature as the novel, drama, and poetry, and to the arts of painting, sculpture, and music. His meditations on the contemporary essay focus primarily on situating it between scientific and aesthetic production, and he seeks to define the essay as "criticism as a form of art." Approximately two decades and one world war later—in a context of social, political, and economic upheaval—Musil's explorations of the essay are marked by the increasingly unstable contemporary intellectual landscape and the search for an alternative genre for the production of sociopolitical critique. In the same spirit, Bense, writing immediately following the horrors of World War II, seeks to find a possibility for critical writing in a post-apocalyptic landscape. For Bense, the essay not only is an experimental form of critique but, at the same time, is imbued with an ethical dimension. Bense argues that the essay emerges during times of crisis; he concludes, "The essay serves the crisis and its conquest by provoking the mind to experiment, to configure things differently." Adorno, for his part, rejects the ethical component of the essay and rather projects it as a politico-philosophical genre fighting an increasingly reified world. For Adorno, the essay is above all the genre of "critique of ideology." For all these writers, the essay represents a hybrid form whose determining characteristics include "luck," "play," and "irrationality" and whose method is based on a fragmentary wandering that does not seek to advance claims of truth.

Writing in the early 1960s, Huxley, too, proposes the essay as a unique hybrid form of writing. Whereas Lukács and Adorno probe the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of the modern essay, Huxley surveys contemporary essays and divides them into three poles: the "personal and the autobiographical," the "concrete-particular," and the "abstract-universal." Most essayists include only one or two of these poles in their writing; however, according to Huxley, the truly successful essay melds all three. It is interesting to note that Huxley, following the tradition of Montaigne, believes in the inclusion of the personal subjectivity of the author, a trait that is not necessary for Lukács, Bense, and Adorno.

THE ESSAY FILM THROUGH HISTORY

Most theorists and critics generally agree that Sergei Eisenstein first formally articulated the concept of the essay film just after he completed *October* (1927). At the time, Eisenstein was planning a film based on Karl Marx's *Capital*. In April 1928, he describes this project in a way that adumbrates the central goal of many essays films—to provoke thought: “The content of CAPITAL (its aim) is now formulated: to teach the worker to think dialectically.”¹³ Eisenstein never realized the project, and what remains of his effort are diary notes about the challenge of making a new type of experimental film based on abstract thoughts and ideas. Twelve years later, in 1940, avant-garde Dadaist filmmaker Hans Richter wrote a short essay: “The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary Film.” In this pioneering text, Richter proposes a new genre of film that would enable the filmmaker to make “problems, thoughts, and even ideas” perceptible, would “render visible what is not visible.” Richter dubbed the result an “essay,” since it deals with “difficult subjects and themes [in] generally comprehensible form.” Unlike the documentary film, which presents facts and information, the essay film produces complex thought—thought that, at times, is not grounded in *reality* but can be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic. The essay film, according to Richter, no longer binds the filmmaker to the rules and parameters of traditional documentary practice; rather, the imagination, with all its artistic potential, is now to be given free rein. While many authors have drawn on Richter's text, a definitive English translation has not been published until now.

Another dimension of the audiovisual essay develops out of a more properly cinematic legacy, especially as a reaction against the strict genre of documentary. This type of “essay film” is most prominently articulated by Alexandre Astruc, who in the late 1940s promoted a genre of “filmed philosophy.” Astruc advanced the notion of a *caméra-stylo* (camera-stylus) that would “become a means of writing, just as flexible and subtle as written language, . . . [rendering] more or less literal ‘inscriptions’ on images as ‘essays.’” Alongside his better known essay “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo,” Astruc wrote “The Future of Cinema” (1948), in which he proclaims that “the cinema that is being born will be much closer to a book than a performance; its language will be that of the essay, poetic, dramatic, and dialectic all at once.” Astruc was prescient in

his projection of a new type of spectator who would be able to read and respond to moving images, just as former generations had responded to printed texts. Rounding out this part, we include film critic André Bazin's review of Chris Marker's phenomenal essay film, *Letter from Siberia*. Writing shortly before his death in 1958, Bazin designates *Letter from Siberia* as an "essay on the reality of Siberia past and present in the form of a filmed report. . . . I would say, an essay documented by film. The important word is 'essay,' understood in the same sense that it has in literature—an essay at once historical and political, written by a poet as well." Bazin goes on to point out the complexities of *Letter from Siberia*, including Marker's strategy of editing from "ear to eye," with the acoustic track driving the image track. In this pithy text, Bazin begins to sketch out a theory of the essay film, one whose overriding trait is based on "intelligence."

Finally, a third important tradition of the essay film warrants mention; emerging from a cinema of revolutionary struggle, it is called Third Cinema. In 1969, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino penned their infamous tract, "Toward a Third Cinema," in which they appeal for a new type of filmmaking that will be "outside and against the System," "a cinema of liberation: the *third cinema*."¹⁴ They call for a guerrilla cinema of revolution and subversion that will include "pamphlet films, didactic films, report films, essay films, witness-bearing films." In this instance, the essay film is specifically evoked as a "militant form of expression" that "provides *discovery through transformation*."¹⁵ Above all, Solanas and Getino propose a new type of cinema in which "the film act means an open-ended film; it is essentially a way of learning."¹⁶

CONTEMPORARY POSITIONS

Essays, often but not exclusively in English, written by film critics, historians, and theoreticians over the past quarter of a century represent the growing awareness and recognition of the essay film as an accepted filmic practice. They attest to the theoretical development of the concept of the essay film, from tentative stabs at generally identifying it to highly sophisticated theoretical modes for defining it. Phillip Lopate, who discovers the essay film from his perspective as a creative writer and essayist, offers one of the earliest articles. In "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film"

(1992), Lopate seeks to define what for him is a new type of cinema. Lopate first recognizes the essay film in European cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, represented by such directors as Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Johan van der Keuken, and Georges Franju. For Lopate, the emergence of the essay film in the United States occurs belatedly in the 1980s, with films by Orson Welles, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Yvonne Rainer, and others. It is significant that although Lopate locates early essay films in the French tradition, it is to Adorno's "The Essay as Form" to which he turns as an important theoretical foundation.

Picking up on the importance of Adorno's seminal text for comprehending the essay film, Nora M. Alter's "The Political Im/Perceptible in the Essay Film" (1996) performs a close analysis of Harun Farocki's montage essay film, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, through which to launch a theory of the essay film that is based on anamorphosis. Alter is guided by Adorno's theory of the essay film as a form for political critique that has the potential to make visible what has been rendered invisible by ideology. Alter also introduces to an English readership Richter's theory of the essay film, of which Farocki was aware. Indeed, Alter proposes that Farocki consciously adopts the genre of the essay for his filmmaking practice.

The new millennium witnessed an explosion not only of essay films but also of writings on them. Film critic Paul Arthur brought the genre to the general English-speaking nonacademic public in "Essay Questions" (2003). In this piece of criticism, Arthur identifies the essay film as the "most rapidly evolving genre" in nonfiction and defines the essay film in contrast to the documentary. Arthur locates the beginnings of the essay film in France with such canonical works as Jean Rouch's *Les Maitre fous* (1955), Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), and Marker's *Letter from Siberia*. Arthur then sketches a brief history of the essay film, paying particular attention to its development in Germany with such practitioners as Hartmut Bitmosky, Harun Farocki, Werner Herzog, Alexander Kluge, Jean Marie Straub, and Danièle Huillet. Because essay films often contain an oppositional stance, Arthur points to the "significant number of women" and "artists of color" who "have adopted the essay as an instrument of creative struggle." Unlike Lopate, Arthur seeks less to define the essay film by what it is than by what it is not. Although he celebrates the essay film, Arthur concludes by issuing a prescient warning against the easy co-optation of the essay film's labile form, which might lead to abuse.

Michael Renov's "The Electronic Essay" (1995) was first conceptualized in a Society for Cinema and Media Studies panel devoted to the essay film in which both Renov and Timothy Corrigan presented what was for a North American audience a relatively new genre. Renov's focus is on the video essay. Following Raymond Bellour, he emphasizes that video technology is closer than cinema to the act of writing. Renov links the corporeal and performative nature of early video art to Montaigne's insistence on the importance of the self as subject of exploration for the essay. He concludes with an analysis of Godard's *Scénario du film "Passion"* (1982) as a "site at which a model of subjectivity, the potentialities of essayistic discourse, and those of videographic inscription momentarily converge."

In 2009, Laura Rascaroli published the first English-language book on the essay film: *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*. Rascaroli focused her study on the films of Farocki, Godard, and Marker in order to advance her theory of the essay as "a field in which the author problematises and questions not only her subject matter, but also her authorship and her subjectivity." The text excerpted for this volume is taken from Rascaroli's introduction and details her understanding of the rhetorical structures at play in the essay film between author and audience. As she explains, "The filmic essay decidedly points to the enunciating subject, who literally inhabits the text. This enunciator is embodied in a narrator, who (although never un-problematically or unreflexively) is close to the real, extra-textual author." Rascaroli thus advances and expands on theories of the inscription of the self into the essay form as put forward by Renov. At this stage in the development of theories of the essay film, Rascaroli productively includes in the conversation the role of the spectator. As she notes, "The essayist does not pretend to discover truths to which he holds the key, but allows the answers to emerge somewhere else, precisely in the position occupied by the embodied spectator."

"Of the History of the Essay Film: Vertov to Varda," from Timothy Corrigan's *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (2011), extends Rascaroli's theorization of the role of the spectator in constructing meaning in the essay film. For Corrigan, the relationship between the essay and its public is crucial to a theory of the essay film that is based on "a dialogue of ideas." Corrigan proposes that "one of the chief defining features of the essay film and its history becomes eliciting an active intellectual response to the questions and provocations that an unsettled subjectivity directs

at its public.” In this text, Corrigan provides a valuable prehistory of the essayistic tendencies in films of the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. Crucial for the development of the essay film was the establishment of ciné-clubs that catered to and created a public space for the “active, educated viewer.” Corrigan is adamant that, despite early interventions, the essay film proper does not emerge until the postwar period of the 1940s, when subjectivity itself becomes a state of crisis and “many of its defining structures and trends begin to coalesce and the term ‘essay’ becomes distinctly and more commonly associated with certain films.” Corrigan’s writing reflects his own experimental essayistic attempts as he includes analyses of such films such as Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Humphrey Jennings’s *Listen to Britain* (1942), and Agnès Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* (2000), which appear in italic type as disconnected monads or constellations interspersed throughout the text.

Although placed toward the end of this part due to its date of publication, Raymond Bellour’s “The Cinema and the Essay as a Way of Thinking” (2011), probably constitutes the earliest contemporary reflection on the essay film included in this volume. Bellour begins his essay recalling that already in 1963, he had written about the essay film, albeit from a position that, at the time, was unaware of Richter’s text from 1940. At the time, Astruc’s two short articles from 1948, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Style” and “The Future of Cinema,” were his touchstones. Bellour engages in a close analysis of Astruc’s two seminal articles and situates them historically within the postwar French cinematic landscape. In this remarkable text, Bellour then provides an overview of the development of the concept of “essay film” in Europe, tracking its appearance in several conferences and publications in Austria, France, and Germany from the 1990s to 2010. Through a careful survey and reading of the existent literature on the essay film, Bellour identifies a “confusion between the self-portrait and the essay.” Bellour, following Bense (whom he believes is a crucial theoretician of the essay), proposes the essay as a “way of thinking,” whereas the self-portrait should be considered as “a quality or as a substance, such as water or air or light.”

Thomas Elsaesser’s “The Essay Film: From Film Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form?” (2015) comments on the contemporary status of both the essay and the essay film. Elsaesser accepts that the essay may be the current idiom to refer to a shape-shifting form that moves

“from film festivals to art spaces, from television to installations, and from online streaming portals like Netflix and Hulu, to the Wild West of YouTube and Vimeo.” His essay touches on a broad swathe of films by recognized filmmakers such as Vertov and Varda, to collectives such as the Black Audio Film Collective and the Otolith Group, to younger artists such as Kevin Lee and Elisa Giardina Papa, in order to underscore his conclusion that “we now have something approximating a canon, with its masters and masterpieces.” Elsaesser is particularly attuned to the important challenges and constraints that the various institutions of exhibitions—theaters, museums, on-line viewing platforms, festivals, and the like—apply to the essay film. Finally, Elsaesser, citing the work of W. G. Sebald, suggests, reversing conventional doctrine, that the essay film has had an effect on literature and contemporary writing.

FILMMAKERS ON THE ESSAYISTIC

From the outset, one characteristic of the essay film has been that most of its practitioners were prolific writers and theoreticians (Richter, Marker, Godard, Farocki), with their filmmaking as an extension of their writing and vice versa. Thus it is no surprise that, for the most part, the essay filmmakers in this part are also writers, essayists. We asked artists and filmmakers to respond to the question: What does the essayistic form mean for your work?

Ursula Biemann, in “Performing Borders: Transnational Video” (2003), and Hito Steyerl, in “The Essay as Conformism? Some Notes on the Global Image Economies” (2011), link, in different ways, the form of the essay to economic and political conditions existing in the post-Fordist global capitalist system. Biemann sees a clear connection between the technology of the video essay and the flow of exploitative transnational labor practices. “Not unlike transnationalism, the essay practices dislocation; it sets across national boundaries and continents and ties together disparate places through a particular logic.” Steyerl, for her part, asserts that “the multiple and heterogeneous forms of essays . . . closely mimic the various formations of a contemporary brand of capitalism based on the compulsory manufacturing of difference, custom-tailored niche markets and flexible modular forms of production.”

In “Proposal for a Tussle” (2007), Jean-Pierre Gorin, borrowing from Manny Farber’s term “Termite Cinema,” describes the essay film as a form that “can navigate from documentary to fiction and back, creating other polarities in the process between which it can operate.” His essay is from the introduction to a catalogue that accompanied a curated film series on the essay film in Vienna. He concludes his survey with the important reminder: “One fact remains though: however dire the circumstance, the essayistic energy remains alive in the margins, an Id that haunts cinema. It is never more alive than when the times are more repressive and the dominant aesthetics occupy more squarely the middle of the road.”

Lynne Sachs addresses head on the topic of the essay film and how important the concept is for her filmic practice, explaining in “On Writing the Film Essay” (2016) that she feels a closer kinship to writers and artists than to filmmakers: “My job is not to educate but rather to spark a curiosity in my viewer that moves from the inside out.” Sachs then recalls key critical moments in several of her essay films, including *The House of Science: A Museum of False Facts* (1991), *Which Way Is East: Notebooks from Vietnam* (1994), *Biography of Lilith* (1997), and *States of Unbelonging* (2005).

For his contribution, “Tramp Steamer” (2016), Ross McElwee shares five days of his production journal for his essay film *Bright Leaves*.

The conversation between Harun Farocki and Christa Blümlinger, completed shortly before the former’s untimely death and published as “The ABCs of the Film Essay” (2015), is based on a lengthy e-mail exchange between the two on the topic of the essay film. Blümlinger is a key figure in putting the essay film on the map both with a conference on the essay film held in Vienna in 1991 and with the related publication *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*.¹⁷ In their exchange, Blümlinger asks Farocki a series of questions loosely related to the essay film. In his responses, Farocki traces a brief trajectory of his career, which began with the importance to him of Adorno’s “The Essay as Form,” to the early influence of Chris Marker, followed by the examples of Jean-Luc Godard and Artavazad Peleshian. Farocki faced a challenge: “How can I make a film structure which is not governed by a narrative?” Farocki situates his practice in the 1970s and 1980s in the institution of television before moving into the art world in the 1990s.

Laura Mulvey looks back on her earlier career as a filmmaker with Peter Wollen in “Riddles as Essay Film” (2016). She contextualizes their

collaborative films—*Penthesilea* (1974), *Riddle of the Sphinx* (1977), and *AMY!* (1981)—as “theoretical” rather than essay films. Mulvey explains how the films were an extension of the theoretical investigations initiated in their writing practice. In the 1970s, neither she nor Wollen was familiar with the term “essay film”; looking back, however, she realizes that formally their films exhibited many essayistic traits.

In reflecting on her essayistic filmmaking and installation practice in “Certain Obliquenesses” (2016), visual artist Renée Green asks, “What compels this way of essaying, of thinking through this matter, in combination with sound, and with different dimensions of the cinematic?” In answering her questions, she provides a list of words that the essayistic form conjures, such as “Reverberations,” “Resonances,” “Intersections,” “Broken structures,” “intervals,” “interstices . . .” For Green, as for John Akomfrah, a key term in understanding cinema is “migration,” as ideas, form, and exhibition platforms. How does cinema migrate into the art-exhibition space? What is lost and what is gained by such movements across very different institutions and viewing platforms?

Isaac Julien, in “From *Ten Thousand Waves* to Lina Bo Bardi, via *Kapital*” (2016), explains his working process, starting with Sergei Eisenstein’s notes for an unsuccessful filming of *Capital* to Julien’s own realization of a similar project in his two part work: *Kapital* (2013) and *Playtime* (2014). Julien meditates on the conundrum facing the filmmaker of how to film abstract concepts, how to represent them audiovisually. From the beginning of his cinematic practice in the early 1980s, Julien employed the essay film as a political and aesthetic form.

SOME LINGERING THOUGHTS

It is our hope that this volume will provide for an English-reading public some of the key texts and writings on the essay film. Our selection is not meant to be comprehensive or final, but to provide an opening for writers and artist alike to understand and grasp the often elusive and undefinable essay film. As mentioned by Thomas Elsaesser, the essay and the essay film continue to metamorphose into new areas, areas of practice that frequently overturn both the traditional hierarchies and the economics

of the essaysistic form. While early literary essays were often perceived to have less status than drama, poetry, and even novels, essay films were soon aligned with the prestigious tradition of art cinema and auteurs. Over the past century and especially over recent decades, much of that aesthetic status of art cinema survives in the essaysistic investigations found in museum installations, but, at the same time, recent practices have moved to, for example, YouTube shorts, cell-phone productions, and video games. If the essay has always had an unusual mobility (through coffeehouse newspapers and public lectures), the ubiquity and economics of contemporary technologies have socially expanded and financially leveled how essays can be made, distributed, and received.

Today, there are multi-screen essay installations such as John Akomfrah's remarkable *Vertigo Sea* (2015) and Isaac Julien's *Playtime*. In the last years of his life, Chris Marker posted short video essays on Kosinski's Channel, responding to questions and comments on the active blog associated with the site. Since the 2000s, Alexander Kluge has returned, after a hiatus of more than two decades devoted to television, to the long form of cinema, making essay masterpieces such as *Notes from an Ideological Antiquity* (2008), *Landscapes of Snow and Ice* (2010), and *Fruits of Labour* (2010). In one of the more unusual and experimental permutations of the essay film, Hito Steyerl created a motion-capture studio in which to view a video-game essay, *Factory of the Sun* (2015), that critiques venture capitalism. Indeed, these examples are just one indication of how the history of the essaysistic form and the essay film has moved full force into the present—not only on film but across a variety of media and digital platforms. *Essays on the Essay Film* aims to be a testimony to the richness of that history and to the energy and vibrancy of its changing future.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Tom Gunning, "A Corner in Wheat," in *The Griffith Project*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 3:135. As Gunning points out, these are "films that 'mean something,' picture-sermons that 'help those who see them,' [are] phrases [that] encapsulate the narrative ambitions of Griffith in 1909" (ibid.). Not coincidentally, a significant amount of writing about film in this era, from Vachel Lindsay to Béla Balázs, suggests that films of all types offer the possibilities for replicating and initiating thought and social action.

2. Alexandre Astruc, "Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: La caméra-stylo," in *Du stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo: Écrites (1942-1984)* (Paris: Archipel, 1992), 325.
3. Jacques Rivette, "Letter on Rossellini," in *Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 194.
4. *Ibid.*, 195.
5. *Ibid.*, 199.
6. *Ibid.*, 196.
7. Rivette's positive description of Rossellini's film as an amateurish "sketch" within a neo-realistic tradition again calls attention to and importantly differentiates the essay film from its contemporaneous counterparts in cinema vérité (and later American direct cinema), documentary practices so central to the essay film, that inform the essay film and act as a platform for its distinctions. An often voiced dissatisfaction with these two traditions coincides with the foregrounding of the essay film. There is, for instance, Godard's remark about Richard Leacock's direct cinema: "There's no point in having sharp images if you've got fuzzy ideas. Leacock's lack of subjectivity leads him ultimately to a lack of objectivity. He doesn't even know he's a metteur-en-scene, that pure reportage doesn't exist" (quoted in Richard Roud, *Godard* [New York: Doubleday, 1968], 139).
8. Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).
9. *Ibid.*, 159.
10. *Ibid.*, 162.
11. "Interview with Jean-Luc Godard," in *Godard on Godard*, trans. and ed. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 171.
12. For a comprehensive list of publications on the essay film, see the bibliography.
13. Sergei Eisenstein, "Notes for a Film of 'Capital,'" trans. Maciej Sliwowski, Jay Leyda, and Annette Michelson, *October* 2 (1976): 10
14. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, "Toward a Third Cinema," in *New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 1:43.
15. *Ibid.*, 47.
16. *Ibid.*, 55.
17. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff, eds., *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film* (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992).

I

FOUNDATIONS



1

ON THE NATURE AND FORM OF THE ESSAY (1910)

GEORG LUKÁCS

A Letter to Leo Popper
My friend,

The essays intended for inclusion in this book lie before me and I ask myself whether one is entitled to publish such works—whether such works can give rise to a new unity, a book. For the point at issue for us now is not what these essays can offer as “studies in literary history,” but whether there is something in them that makes them a new literary form of its own, and whether the principle that makes them such is the same in each one. What is this unity—if unity there is? I make no attempt to formulate it because it is not I nor my book that should be the subject under discussion here. The question before us is a more important, more general one. It is the question whether such a unity is possible. To what extent have the really great writings which belong to this category been given literary form, and to what extent is this form of theirs an independent one? To what extent do [*sic*] the standpoint of such a work and the form given to this standpoint lift it out of the sphere of science and place it at the side of the arts, yet without blurring the frontiers of either? To what extent do they endow the work with the force necessary for a conceptual re-ordering of life, and yet distinguish it from the icy, final perfection of philosophy? That is the only profound apology to be made for such writings, as well as the only profound criticism to be addressed to them; for

they are measured first and foremost by the yardstick of these questions, and the determining of such an objective will be the first step toward showing how far they fall short of attaining it.

The critique, the essay—call it provisionally what you will—as a work of art, a genre? I know you think the question tedious; you feel that all the arguments for and against have been exhausted long ago. Wilde and Kerr merely made familiar to everyone a truth that was already known to the German Romantics, a truth whose ultimate meaning the Greeks and Romans felt, quite unconsciously, to be self-evident: that criticism is an art and not a science. Yet I believe—and it is for this reason alone that I venture to importune you with these observations—that all the discussions have barely touched upon the essence of the real question: What is an essay? What is its intended form of expression, and what are the ways and means whereby this expression is accomplished? I believe that the aspect of “being well written” has been too one-sidedly emphasized in this context. It has been argued that the essay can be stylistically of equal value to a work of the imagination, and that, for this reason, it is unjust to speak of value differences at all. Yet what does that mean? Even if we consider criticism to be a work of art in this sense, we have not yet said anything at all about its essential nature. “Whatever is well written is a work of art.” Is a well-written advertisement or news item a work of art? Here I can see what so disturbs you about such a view of criticism: it is anarchy, the denial of form in order that an intellect which believes itself to be sovereign may have free play with possibilities of every kind. But if I speak here of criticism as a form of art, I do so in the name of order (i.e., almost purely symbolically and non-essentially), and solely on the strength of my feeling that the essay has a form which separates it, with the rigor of a law, from all other art forms. I want to try to define the essay as strictly as is possible, precisely by describing it as an art form.

Let us not, therefore, speak of the essay’s similarities with works of literary imagination, but of what divides it from them. Let any resemblance serve here merely as a background against which the differences stand out all the more sharply; the purpose of mentioning these resemblances at all will be to limit our attention to genuine essays, leaving aside those writings which, useful though they are, do not deserve to be described as essays because they can never give us anything more than information, facts, and “relationships.” Why, after all, do we read essays? Many are

read as a source of instruction, but there are others whose attraction is to be found in something quite different. It is not difficult to identify these. Our view, our appreciation of classical tragedy is quite different today, is it not, from Lessing's in the *Dramaturgy*; Winckelmann's Greeks seem strange, almost incomprehensible to us, and soon we may feel the same about Burckhardt's Renaissance. And yet we read them: why? On the other hand there are critical writings which, like a hypothesis in natural science, like a design for a machine part, lose all their value at the precise moment when a new and better one becomes available. But if—as I hope and expect—someone were to write a new *Dramaturgy*, a *Dramaturgy* in favor of Corneille and against Shakespeare—how could it damage Lessing's? And what did Burckhardt and Pater, Rohde, and Nietzsche do to change the effect upon us of Winckelmann's dreams of Greece?

“Of course, if criticism were a science . . .,” writes Kerr. “But the imponderables are too strong. Criticism is, at the very best, an art.” And if it were a science—it is not so impossible that it will become one—how would that change our problem? We are not concerned here with replacing something by something else, but with something essentially new, something that remains untouched by the complete or approximate attainment of scientific goals. Science affects us by its contents, art by its forms; science offers us facts and the relationships between facts, but art offers us souls and destinies. Here the ways part; here there is no replacement and no transition. In primitive, as yet undifferentiated epochs, science and art (and religion and ethics and politics) are integrated, they form a single whole; but as soon as science has become separate and independent, everything that has led up to it loses its value. Only when something has dissolved all its content in form, and thus become pure art, can it no longer become superfluous; but then its previous scientific nature is altogether forgotten and emptied of meaning.

There is, then, a science of the arts; but there is also an entirely different kind of expression of the human temperament, which usually takes the form of writing about the arts. Usually, I say, for there are many writings which are engendered by such feelings without ever touching upon literature or art—writings in which the same life-problems are raised as in the writings which call themselves criticism, but with the difference that here the questions are addressed directly to life itself: they do not need the mediation of literature or art. And it is precisely the writings of the

greatest essayists which belong to this category: Plato's dialogues, the texts of the mystics, Montaigne's *Essays*, Kierkegaard's imaginary diaries and short stories.

An endless series of almost imperceptible, subtle transitions leads from here to imaginative writing. Think of the last scene in the *Heracles* of Euripides: the tragedy is already over when Theseus appears and discovers everything that has happened—Hera's terrible vengeance on Heracles. Then begins the dialogue about life between the mourning Heracles and his friend; questions akin to those of the Socratic dialogues are asked, but the questioners are stiffer and less human, and their questions more conceptual, less related to direct experience than in Plato. Think of the last act of *Michael Kramer*, of the *Confessions of a Beautiful Soul*, of Dante, of *Everyman*, of Bunyan—must I quote further examples?

Doubtless you will say that the end of *Heracles* is undramatic and Bunyan is . . . Certainly, certainly, but why? The *Heracles* is undramatic because every dramatic style has this natural corollary, that whatever happens within human souls is projected into human actions, movements, and gestures, and is thus made visible and palpable to the senses. Here you see Hera's vengeance overtaking Heracles, you see Heracles in the blissful enjoyment of victory before vengeance is upon him, you see his frenzied gestures in the madness which Hera has dealt to him and his wild despair after the storm, when he sees what has happened to him. But of what comes after you see nothing at all. Theseus comes—and you try in vain to determine by other than conceptual means what happens next: what you see and hear is no longer a true means of expression of the real event, and that the event occurs at all is deep down a matter of indifference to you. You see no more than that Theseus and Heracles leave the stage together. Prior to that some questions are asked: What is the true nature of the gods? Which gods may we believe in, and which not? What is life and what is the best way of bearing one's sufferings manfully? The concrete experience which has led up to these questions is lost in an infinite distance. And when the answers return once more into the world of facts, they are no longer answers to questions posed by real life—questions of what these men must do or refrain from doing in this particular situation. These answers cast a stranger's eye upon all facts, for they have come from life and from the gods and know scarcely anything of Heracles' pain or of its cause in Hera's vengeance. Drama, I know, also addresses questions to

life, and in drama, too, the answer comes from destiny—and in the last analysis the questions and answers, even in drama, are tied to certain definite facts. But the true dramatist (so long as he is a true poet, a genuine representative of the poetic principle) will see a *life* as being so rich and so intense that almost imperceptibly it becomes *life*. Here, however, everything becomes undramatic because here the other principle comes into effect: for the life that here poses the question loses all its corporeality at the moment when the first word of the question is uttered.

There are, then, two types of reality of the soul: one is *life* and the other *living*; both are equally effective, but they can never be effective at the same time. Elements of both are contained in the lived experience of every human being, even if in always varying degrees of intensity and depth; in memory too, there is now one, now the other, but at any one moment we can only feel one of these two forms. Ever since there has been life and men have sought to understand and order life, there has been this duality in their lived experience. But the struggle for priority and pre-eminence between the two has mostly been fought out in philosophy, so that the battle cries have always had a different sound, and for this reason have gone unrecognized by most men and have been unrecognizable to them. It would seem that the question was posed most clearly in the Middle Ages, when thinkers divided into two camps, the ones maintaining that the *universalia*—concepts, or Plato's Ideas if you will—were the sole true realities, while the others acknowledged them only as words, as names summarizing the sole true and distinct *things*.

The same duality also separates means of expression: the opposition here is between image and "significance." One principle is an image-creating one, the other a significance-supposing one. For one there exist only things, for the other only the relationships between them, only concepts and values. Poetry in itself knows of nothing beyond things; for it, everything is serious and unique and incomparable. That is also why poetry knows no questions: you do not address questions to pure *things*, only to their relationships, for—as in fairy-tales—every question here turns again into a thing resembling the one that called it into being. The hero stands at the crossroads or in the midst of the struggle, but the crossroads and the struggle are not destinies about which questions may be asked and answers given; they are simply and literally struggles and crossroads. And the hero blows his miraculous horn and the expected miracle occurs: a thing which

once more orders life. But in really profound criticism there is no life of things, no image, only transparency, only something that no image would be capable of expressing completely. An “imagelessness of all images” is the aim of all mystics, and Socrates speaks mockingly and contemptuously to Phaedrus of poets, who never have nor ever could worthily celebrate the true life of the soul. “For the great existence which the immortal part of the soul once lived is colorless and without form and impalpable, and only the soul’s guide, the mind, can behold it.”

You may perhaps reply that my poet is an empty abstraction and so, too, is my critic. You are right—both are abstractions, but not, perhaps, quite empty ones. They are abstractions because even Socrates must speak in images of his “world without form,” his world on the far side of form, and even the German mystic’s “imagelessness” is a metaphor. Nor is there any poetry without some ordering of things. Matthew Arnold once called it *criticism of life*. It represents the ultimate relationships between man and destiny and world, and without doubt it has its origin in those profound regions, even if, often, it is unaware of it. If poetry often refuses all questioning, all taking up of positions, is not the denial of all questions in itself an asking of questions, and is not the conscious rejection of any position in itself a position? I shall go further: the separation of image and significance is itself an abstraction, for the significance is always wrapped in images and the reflection of a glow from beyond the image shines through every image. Every image belongs to our world and the joy of being in the world shines in its countenance; yet it also reminds us of something that was once there, at some time or another, a somewhere, its home, the only thing that, in the last analysis, has meaning and significance for the soul. Yes, in their naked purity they are merely abstractions, those two limits of human feeling, but only with the help of such abstractions can I define the two poles of possible literary expression. And the writings which most resolutely reject the image, which reach out most passionately for what lies behind the image, are the writings of the critics, the Platonists and the mystics.

But in saying this I have already explained why this kind of feeling calls for an art form of its own—why every expression of this kind of feeling must always disturb us when we find it in other forms, in poetry. It was you who once formulated the great demand which everything that has been given form must satisfy, the only absolutely universal

demand, perhaps, but one that is inexorable and allows of no exception: the demand that everything in a work must be fashioned from the same material, that each of its parts must be visibly ordered from one single point. And because all writing aspires to both unity and multiplicity, this is the universal problem of style: to achieve equilibrium in a welter of disparate things, richness and articulation in a mass of uniform matter. Something that is viable in one art form is dead in another: here is practical, palpable proof of the inner divorce of forms. Do you remember how you explained to me the living quality of human figures in certain heavily stylized mural paintings? You said: these frescoes are painted between pillars, and even if the gestures of the men depicted in them are stiff like those of puppets and every facial expression is only a mask, still all this is more alive than the columns which frame the pictures and form a decorative unity with them. Only a little more alive, for the unity must be preserved; but more alive all the same, so that there may be an illusion of life. Here, however, the problem of equilibrium is posed in this way: the world and the beyond, image and transparency, idea and emanation lie in the two cups of a scale which is to remain balanced. The deeper down the question reaches—you need only compare the tragedy with the fairy-tale—the more linear the images become, the smaller the number of planes into which everything is compressed, the paler and more matte the radiance of the colors, the simpler the richness and multiplicity of the world, the more mask-like the expressions of the characters. But there are other experiences, for the expression of which even the simplest and most measured gesture would be too much—and too little; there are questions which are asked so softly that beside them the sound of the most toneless of events would be crude noise, not musical accompaniment; there are destiny-relationships which are so exclusively relationships between destinies as such that anything human would merely disturb their abstract purity and grandeur. I am not speaking here of subtlety or depth: those are value categories and are therefore valid only within a particular form. We are speaking of the fundamental principles which separate forms from one another—of the material from which the whole is constructed, of the standpoint, the world-view which gives unity to the entire work. Let me put it briefly: were one to compare the forms of literature with sunlight refracted in a prism, the writings of the essayists would be the ultra-violet rays.

There are experiences, then, which cannot be expressed by any gesture and which yet long for expression. From all that has been said you will know what experiences I mean and of what kind they are. I mean intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as immediate reality, as spontaneous principle of existence; the world-view in its undisguised purity as an event of the soul, as the motive force of life. The question is posed immediately: What is life, what is man, what is destiny? But posed as a question only: for the answer, here, does not supply a "solution" like one of the answers of science or, at purer heights, those of philosophy. Rather, as in poetry of every kind, it is symbol, destiny, and tragedy. When a man experiences such things, then everything that is outward about him awaits in rigid immobility the outcome of the struggle between invisible forces to which the senses have no access. 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. A man who experiences such things cannot be characterized by any outward feature—how then can he be given form in a work of literature? All writings represent the world in the symbolic terms of a destiny-relationship; everywhere, the problem of destiny determines the problem of form. This unity, this coexistence is so strong that neither element ever occurs without the other; here again a separation is possible only by way of abstraction. Therefore the separation which I am trying to accomplish here appears, in practice, merely as a shift of emphasis: poetry receives its profile and its form from destiny, and form in poetry appears always only as destiny; but in the works of the essayists form *becomes* destiny, it is the destiny-creating principle. This difference means the following: destiny lifts things up outside the world of things, accentuating the essential ones and eliminating the inessential; but form sets limits around a substance which otherwise would dissolve like air in the All. In other words, destiny comes from the same source as everything else, it is a thing among things, whereas form—seen as something finished, i.e., seen from outside—defines the limits of the immaterial. Because the destiny which orders things is flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood, destiny is not to be found in the writings of the essayists. For destiny, once stripped of its uniqueness and accidentally, is just as airy and immaterial as all the rest of the incorporeal matter of these writings, and is no more capable of giving them form than they

themselves possess any natural inclination or possibility of condensing themselves into form.

That is why such writings speak of forms. The critic is one who glimpses destiny in forms: whose most profound experience is the soul-content which forms indirectly and unconsciously conceal within themselves. Form is his great experience, form—as immediate reality—is the image-element, the really living content of his writings. This form, which springs from a symbolic contemplation of life-symbols, acquires a life of its own through the power of that experience. It becomes a world-view, a standpoint, an attitude vis-à-vis the life from which it sprang: a possibility of reshaping it, of creating it anew. 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. It is the mystical moment of union between the outer and the inner, between soul and form. It is as mystical as the moment of destiny in tragedy when the hero meets his destiny, in the short story when accident and cosmic necessity converge, in poetry when the soul and its world meet and coalesce into a new unity that can no more be divided, either in the past or in the future. Form is reality in the writings of critics; it is the voice with which they address their questions to life. That is the true and most profound reason why literature and art are the typical, natural subject-matter of criticism. For here the end-point of poetry can become a starting-point and a beginning; here form appears, even in its abstract conceptuality, as something surely and concretely real. But this is only the typical subject-matter of the essay, not the sole one. 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. Because literature, art, and philosophy pursue forms openly and directly, whereas in life they are no more than the ideal demand of a certain kind of men and experiences, a lesser intensity of critical capacity is needed to experience something formed than to experience something lived; and that is why the reality of form-vision appears, at the first and most superficial glance, less problematic in the sphere of art than in life. But this only seems to be so at the first and most superficial glance, for the form of life

is no more abstract than the form of a poem. Here as there, form becomes perceptible only through abstraction, and there as here the reality of form is no stronger than the force with which it is experienced. It would be superficial to distinguish between poems according to whether they take their subject-matter from life or else-where; for in any case the form-creating power of poetry breaks and scatters whatever is old, whatever has already been formed, and everything becomes unformed raw material in its hands. To draw such a distinction here seems to me just as superficial, for both ways of contemplating the world are merely standpoints taken up in relation to things, and each is applicable everywhere, although it is true that for both there exist certain things which, with a naturalness decreed by nature, submit themselves to one particular stand-point and others which can only be forced to do so by violent struggles and profound experiences.

As in every really essential relationship, natural effect and immediate usefulness coincide here: the experiences which the writings of the essayists were written to express become conscious in the minds of most people only when they look at the pictures or read the poem discussed and even then they rarely have a force that could move life itself. That is why most people have to believe that the writings of the essayists are produced only in order to explain books and pictures, to facilitate their understanding. Yet this relationship is profound and necessary, and it is precisely the indivisible and organic quality of this mixture of being-accidental and being-necessary which is at the root of that humor and that irony which we find in the writings of every truly great essayist—that peculiar humor which is so strong that to speak of it is almost indecent, for there is no use in pointing it out to someone who does not spontaneously feel it. And the irony I mean consists in the critic always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which implies that he is only discussing pictures and books, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of real life—and even then not their inner-most substance but only their beautiful and useless surface. Thus each essay appears to be removed as far as possible from life, and the distance between them seems the greater, the more burning and painfully we sense the actual closeness of the true essence of both. Perhaps the great *Sieur de Montaigne* felt something like this when he gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of “*Essays*.” The simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy.

The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best of his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness—the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in the face of life—and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty. In Plato, conceptuality is underlined by the irony of the small realities of life. Eryximachus cures Aristophanes of hiccups by making him sneeze before he can begin his deeply meaningful hymn to Eros. And Hippothales watches with anxious attention while Socrates questions his beloved Lysis—and little Lysis, with childish malice, asks Socrates to torment his friend Menexenus with questions just as he has tormented him. Rough guardians come and break up the gently scintillating dialogue, and drag the boys off home. Socrates, however, is more amused than anything else: “Socrates and the two boys wanted to be friends, yet were not even able to say what a friend really is.” I see a similar irony in the vast scientific apparatus of certain modern essayists (think only of Weininger), and only a different expression of it in the discretely reserved manner of a Dilthey. We can always find the same irony in every text by every great essayist, though admittedly always in a different form. The mystics of the Middle Ages are the only ones without inner irony—I surely need not tell you why.

We see, then, that criticism and the essay generally speak of pictures, books, and ideas. What is their attitude toward the matter which is represented? People say that the critic must always speak the truth, whereas the poet is not obliged to tell the truth about his subject-matter. It is not our intention here to ask Pilate’s question nor to enquire whether the poet, too, is not impelled toward an inner truthfulness and whether the truth of any criticism can be stronger or greater than this. I do not propose to ask these questions because I really do see a difference here, but once again a difference which is altogether pure, sharp, and without transitions only at its abstract poles. When I wrote about Kassner, I pointed out that the essay always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak “the truth” about

them, must find expression for their essential nature. Perhaps the difference can be most briefly formulated thus: poetry takes its motifs from life (and art); the essay has its models in art (and life). Perhaps this is enough to define the difference: the paradox of the essay is almost the same as that of the portrait. You see why, do you not? In front of a landscape we never ask ourselves whether this mountain or that river really is as it is painted there; but in front of every portrait the question of likeness always forces itself willy-nilly upon us. Give a little more thought, therefore, to this problem of likeness—this problem which, foolish and superficial as it is, drives true artists to despair. You stand in front of a Velasquez portrait and you say: “What a marvelous likeness,” and you feel that you have really said something about the painting. Likeness? Of whom? Of no one, of course. You have no idea whom it represents, perhaps you can never find out; and if you could, you would care very little. Yet you feel that it is a likeness. Other portraits produce their effect only by color and line, and so you do not have this feeling. In other words, the really significant portraits give us, besides all other artistic sensations, also this: the life of a human being who once was really alive, forcing us to feel that his life was exactly as shown by the lines and colors of the painting. Only because we see painters in front of their models fight such a hard battle for this ideal expression—because the look and the battle cry of this battle are such that it cannot be anything else than a battle for likeness—only for this reason do we give this name to the portrait’s suggestion of real life, even though there is no one in the world whom the portrait could be like. For even if we know the person represented, whose portrait we may call “like” or “unlike”—is it not an abstraction to say of an arbitrarily chosen moment or expression that *this* is that person’s likeness? And even if we know thousands of such moments or expressions, what do we know of the immeasurably large part of his life when we do not see him, what do we know of the inner light which burns within this “known” person, what of the way this inner light is reflected in others? And that, you see, is more or less how I imagine the truth of the essay to be. Here too there is a struggle for truth, for the incarnation of a life which someone has seen in a man, an epoch, or a form; but it depends only on the intensity of the work and its vision whether the written text conveys to us this suggestion of that particular life.

The great difference, then, is this: poetry gives us the illusion of the life of the person it represents; nowhere is there a conceivable someone

or something against which the created work can be measured. The hero of the essay was once alive, and so his life must be given form; but this life, too, is as much inside the work as everything is in poetry. The essay has to create from within itself all the preconditions for the effectiveness and validity of its vision. Therefore two essays can never contradict one another: each creates a different world, and even when, in order to achieve a higher universality, it goes beyond that created world, it still remains inside it by its tone, color, and accent; that is to say, it leaves that world only in the inessential sense. It is simply not true that there exists an objective, external criterion of life and truth, e.g., that the truth of Grimm's, Dilthey's, or Schlegel's Goethe can be tested against the "real" Goethe. It is not true because many Goethes, different from one another and each profoundly different from our Goethe, may convince us of their life: and, conversely, we are disappointed if our own visions are presented by others, yet without that vital breath which would give them autonomous life. It is true that the essay strives for truth: but just as Saul went out to look for his father's she-asses and found a kingdom, so the essayist who is really capable of looking for the truth will find at the end of his road the goal he was looking for: life.

The illusion of truth! Do not forget how slowly and with how much difficulty poetry abandoned that ideal. It happened not so very long ago, and it is highly questionable whether the disappearance of the illusion was entirely advantageous. It is highly questionable whether man should want the precise thing he sets out to attain, whether he has the right to walk toward his goal along straight and simple paths. Think of the chivalresque epics of the Middle Ages, think of the Greek tragedies, think of Giotto and you will see what I am trying to say. We are not speaking here of ordinary truth, the truth of naturalism which it would be more accurate to call the triviality of everyday life, but of the truth of the myth by whose power ancient tales and legends are kept alive for thousands of years. The true poets of myths looked only for the true meaning of their themes; they neither could nor wished to check their pragmatic reality. They saw these myths as sacred, mysterious hieroglyphics which it was their mission to read. But do you not see that both worlds can have a mythology of their own? It was Friedrich Schlegel who said long ago that the national gods of the Germans were not Hermann or Wotan but science and the arts. Admittedly, that is not true of the *whole* life of Germany, but it is all the more

apt as a description of *part* of the life of every nation in every epoch—that part, precisely, of which we are speaking. That life, too, has its golden ages and its lost paradises; we find in it rich lives full of strange adventures and enigmatic punishments of dark sins; heroes of the sun appear and fight out their harsh feuds with the forces of darkness; here, too, the magic words of wise magicians and the tempting songs of beautiful sirens lead weaklings into perdition; here too there is original sin and redemption. All the struggles of life are present here, but the stuff of which everything is made is different from the stuff of the “other” life.

We want poets and critics to give us life-symbols and to mould the still-living myths and legends in the form of our questions. It is a subtle and poignant irony, is it not, when a great critic dreams our longing into early Florentine paintings or Greek torsos and, in that way, gets something out of them for us that we would have sought in vain everywhere else—and then speaks of the latest achievements of scientific research, of new methods and new facts? Facts are always there and everything is always contained in facts, but every epoch needs its own Greece, its own Middle Ages and its own Renaissance. Every age creates the age it needs, and only the next generation believes that its fathers’ dreams were lies which must be fought with its own new “truths.” The history of the effect of poetry follows the same course, and in criticism, too, the continuing life of the grandfather’s dreams—not to mention those of earlier generations—is barely touched by the dreams of men alive today. Consequently the most varied “conceptions” of the Renaissance can live peacefully side by side with one another, just as a new poet’s new Phèdre, Siegfried or Tristan must always leave intact the Phèdre, Siegfried, or Tristan of his predecessors.

Of course there is a science of the arts; there has to be one. The greatest essayists are precisely those who can least well do without it: what they create must be science, even when their vision of life has transcended the sphere of science. Sometimes its free flight is constrained by the unassailable facts of dry matter; sometimes it loses all scientific value because it is, after all, a vision, because it precedes facts and therefore handles them freely and arbitrarily. The essay form has not yet, today, traveled the road to independence which its sister, poetry, covered long ago—the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics, and art. Yet the beginning of that road was so tremendous that subsequent

developments have rarely equaled it. I speak, of course, of Plato, the greatest essayist who ever lived or wrote, the one who wrested everything from life as it unfolded before his eyes and who therefore needed no mediating medium; the one who was able to connect his questions, the most profound questions ever asked, with life as lived. This greatest master of the form was also the happiest of all creators: man lived in his immediate proximity, man whose essence and destiny constituted the paradigmatic essence and destiny of his form. Perhaps they would have become paradigmatic in this way even if Plato's writing had consisted of the driest notations—not just because of his glorious form-giving—so strong was the concordance of life and form in this particular case. But Plato met Socrates and was able to give form to the myth of Socrates, to use Socrates' destiny as the vehicle for the questions he, Plato, wanted to address to life about destiny. The life of Socrates is the typical life for the essay form, as typical as hardly any other life is for any literary form—with the sole exception of Oedipus' life for tragedy. Socrates always lived in the ultimate questions; every other living reality was as little alive for him as his questions are alive for ordinary people. The concepts into which he poured the whole of his life were lived by him with the most direct and immediate life-energy; everything else was but a parable of that sole true reality, useful only as a means of expressing those experiences. His life rings with the sound of the deepest, the most hidden longing and is full of the most violent struggles; but that longing is—simply—longing, and the form in which it appears is the attempt to comprehend the nature of longing and to capture it in concepts, while the struggles are simply verbal battles fought solely in order to give more definite limits to a few concepts. Yet the longing fills that life completely and the struggles are always, quite literally, a matter of life and death. But despite everything the longing which seems to fill that life is not the essential thing about life, and neither Socrates' life nor his death was able to express those life-and-death struggles. If this had been possible, the death of Socrates would have been a martyrdom or a tragedy—which means that it could be represented in epic or dramatic form. But Plato knew exactly why he burned the tragedy he wrote in his youth. For a tragic life is crowned only by its end, only the end gives meaning, sense, and form to the whole, and it is precisely the end which is always arbitrary and ironic here, in every dialogue and in Socrates' whole life. A question is thrown up and extended so far in depth that it becomes the question of all questions,

but after that everything remains open; something comes from outside—from a reality which has no connection with the question nor with that which, as the possibility of an answer, brings forth a new question to meet it—and interrupts everything. This interruption is not an end, because it does not come from within, and yet it is the most profound ending because a conclusion from within would have been impossible. For Socrates every event was only an occasion for seeing concepts more clearly, his defense in front of the judges only a way of leading weak logicians *ad absurdum*—and his death? Death does not count here, it cannot be grasped by concepts, it interrupts the great dialogue—the only true reality—just as brutally, and merely from the outside, as those rough tutors who interrupted the conversation with Lysis. Such an interruption, however, can only be viewed humoristically, it has so little connection with that which it interrupts. But it is also a profound life-symbol—and, for that reason, still more profoundly humorous—that the essential is always interrupted by such things in such a way.

The Greeks felt each of the forms available to them as a reality, as a living thing and not as an abstraction. Alcibiades already saw clearly what Nietzsche was to emphasize centuries later—that Socrates was a new kind of man, profoundly different in his elusive essence from all other Greeks who lived before him. But Socrates, in the same dialogue, expressed the eternal ideal of men of his kind, an ideal which neither those whose way of feeling remains tied to the purely human nor those who are poets in their innermost being will ever understand: that tragedies and comedies should be written by the same man; that “tragic” and “comic” is entirely a matter of the chosen standpoint. In saying this, the critic expressed his deepest life-sense: the primacy of the standpoint, the concept, over feeling; and in saying it he formulated the profoundest anti-Greek thought.

Plato himself, as you see, was a “critic,” although criticism, like everything else, was for him only an occasion, an ironic means of expressing himself. Later on, criticism became its own content; critics spoke only of poetry and art, and they never had the fortune to meet a Socrates whose life might have served them as a springboard to the ultimate. But Socrates was the first to condemn such critics. “It seems to me,” he said to Protagoras, “that to make a poem the subject of a conversation is too reminiscent of those banquets which uneducated and vulgar people give in their houses. . . . Conversations like the one we are now enjoying—conversations

among men such as most of us would claim to be—do not need outside voices or the presence of a poet . . .”

Fortunately for us, the modern essay does not always have to speak of books or poets; but this freedom makes the essay even more problematic. It stands too high, it sees and connects too many things to be the simple exposition or explanation of a work; the title of every essay is preceded in invisible letters, by the words “Thoughts occasioned by . . .” The essay has become too rich and independent for dedicated service, yet it is too intellectual and too multiform to acquire form out of its own self. Has it perhaps become even more problematic, even further removed from life-values than if it had continued to report faithfully on books?

When something has once become problematic—and the way of thinking that we speak of, and its way of expression, have not become problematic but have always been so—then salvation can only come from accentuating the problems to the maximum degree, from going radically to its root. The modern essay has lost that backdrop of life which gave Plato and the mystics their strength; nor does it any longer possess a naive faith in the value of books and what can be said about them. The problematic of the situation has become accentuated almost to the point of demanding a certain frivolity of thought and expression, and this, for most critics, has become their life-mood. This has shown, however, that salvation is necessary and is therefore becoming possible and real. The essayist must now become conscious of his own self, must find himself and build something of his own out of himself. The essayist speaks of a picture or a book, but leaves it again at once—why? Because, I think, the idea of the picture or book has become predominant in his mind, because he has forgotten all that is concretely incidental about it, because he has used it only as a starting-point, a springboard. Poetry is older and greater—a larger, more important thing—than all the works of poetry: that was once the mood with which critics approached literature, but in our time it has had to become a conscious attitude. The critic has been sent into the world in order to bring to light this *a priori* primacy over great and small, to proclaim it, to judge every phenomenon by the scale of values glimpsed and grasped through this recognition. The idea is there before any of its expressions, it is a soul-value, a world-moving and life-forming force in itself: and that is why such criticism will always speak of life where it is most alive. The idea is the measure of everything that exists,

and that is why the critic whose thinking is “occasioned by” something already created, and who reveals its idea, is the one who will write the truest and most profound criticism. Only something that is great and true can live in the proximity of the idea. When this magic word has been spoken, then everything that is brittle, small and unfinished falls apart, loses its usurped wisdom, its badly fitting essence. It does not have to be “criticism”: the atmosphere of the idea is enough to judge and condemn it.

Yet it is now that the essayist’s possibility of existence becomes profoundly problematic. He is delivered from the relative, the inessential, by the force of judgment of the idea he has glimpsed; but who gives him the right to judge? It would be almost true to say that he seizes that right, that he creates his judgment-values from within himself. But nothing is separated from true judgment by a deeper abyss than its approximation, the squint-eyed category of complacent and self-satisfied knowledge. The criteria of the essayist’s judgment are indeed created within him, but it is not he who awakens them to life and action: the one who whispers them into his ear is the great value-definer of aesthetics, the one who is always about to arrive, the one who is never quite yet there, the only one who has been called to judge. The essayist is a Schopenhauer who writes his *Parerga* while waiting for the arrival of his own (or another’s) *The World as Will and Idea*, he is a John the Baptist who goes out to preach in the wilderness about another who is still to come, whose shoelace he is not worthy to untie. And if that other does not come—is not the essayist then without justification? And if the other does come, is he not made superfluous thereby? Has he not become entirely problematic by thus trying to justify himself? He is the pure type of the precursor, and it seems highly questionable whether, left entirely to himself—i.e., independent from the fate of that other of whom he is the herald—he could lay claim to any value or validity. To stand fast against those who deny his fulfillment within the great, redeeming system is easy enough: a true longing always triumphs over those who lack the energy to rise above the vulgar level of given facts and experiences; the existence of the longing is enough to decide the outcome. For it tears the mask off everything that is only apparently positive and immediate, reveals it as petty longing and cheap fulfillment, points to the measure and order to which even they who vainly and contemptibly deny its existence—because measure and order seem inaccessible to them—unconsciously aspire. The essay can calmly and proudly set its

fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific exactitude or impressionistic freshness; but its purest fulfillment, its most vigorous accomplishment becomes powerless once the great aesthetic comes. Then all its creations are only an application of the measure which at last has become undeniable, it is then something merely provisional and occasional, its results can no longer be justified purely from within themselves. Here the essay seems truly and completely a mere precursor, and no independent value can be attached to it. But this longing for value and form, for measure and order and purpose, does not simply lead to an end that must be reached so that it maybe cancelled out and become a presumptuous tautology. Every true end is a real end, the end of a road, and although road and end do not make a unity and do not stand side by side as equals, they nevertheless coexist: the end is unthinkable and unrealizable without the road being traveled again and again; the end is not standing still but arriving there, not resting but conquering a summit. Thus the essay seems justified as a necessary means to the ultimate end, the penultimate step in this hierarchy. This, however, is only the value of what it *does*; the fact of what it *is* has yet another, more independent value. For in the system of values yet to be found, the longing we spoke of would be satisfied and therefore abolished; but this longing is more than just something waiting for fulfillment, it is a fact of the soul with a value and existence of its own: an original and deep-rooted attitude toward the whole of life, a final, irreducible category of possibilities of experience. Therefore it needs not only to be satisfied (and thus abolished) but also to be given form which will redeem and release its most essential and now indivisible substance into eternal value. That is what the essay does. Think again of the example of the *Parerga*: whether they occurred before or after the system is not a matter simply of a time-sequence; the time-historical difference is only a symbol of the difference between their two natures. The *Parerga* written before the system create their preconditions from within themselves, create the whole world out of their longing for the system, so that—it seems—they can give an example, a hint; immanently and inexpressibly, they contain the system and its connection with lived life. Therefore they must always occur before the system; even if the system had already been created, they would not be a mere application but always a new creation, a coming-alive in real experience. This “application” creates both that which judges and that which is judged, it encompasses a whole world in

order to raise to eternity, in all its uniqueness, something that was once there. The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging.

Only now may we write down the opening words: the essay is an art form, an autonomous and integral giving-of-form to an autonomous and complete life. Only now would it not be contradictory, ambiguous, and false to call it a work of art and yet insist on emphasizing the thing that differentiates it from art: it faces life with the same gesture as the work of art, but only the gesture, the sovereignty of its attitude is the same; otherwise there is no correspondence between them.

It was of this possibility of the essay that I wanted to speak to you here, of the nature and form of these “intellectual poems,” as the older Schlegel called those of Hemsterhuys. This is not the place to discuss or decide whether the essayists’ becoming conscious of their own nature, as they have been doing for some time past, has brought perfection or can bring it. The point at issue was only the possibility, only the question of whether the road upon which this book attempts to travel is really a road; it was not a question of who has already traveled it or how—nor, least of all, the distance this particular book has traveled along it. The critique of this book is contained, in all possible sharpness and entirety, in the very approach from which it sprang.

Florence, October 1910

2

FROM *THE MAN WITHOUT QUALITIES*

(1930–1943)

ROBERT MUSIL

Later, when Ulrich's intellectual capacity was more highly developed, this became an idea no longer connected with the vague word "hypothesis" but with a concept he oddly termed, for certain reasons, "essay." It was more or less in the way an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it—for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down to a concept—that he believed he could most rightly survey and handle the world and his own life. The value of an action or a quality, and indeed its meaning and nature, seemed to him to depend on its surrounding circumstances, on the aims it served; in short, on the whole—constituted now one way, now another—to which it belonged. This is only a simple description of the fact that a murder can appear to us as a crime or a heroic act, and making love as a feather that has fallen from the wing of an angel or that of a goose. But Ulrich generalized this: all moral events take place in a field of energy whose constellation charges them with meaning. They contain good and evil the way an atom contains the possibilities of certain chemical combinations. They are what they will become, so to speak; and just as the word "hard" denotes four entirely different essences, depending on whether it is connected with love, brutality, zeal, or discipline, the significance of all moral events seemed to him to be the function of other events on which they depended. In this way an open-ended system of relationships arises, in which independent meanings, such as

are ascribed to actions and qualities by way of a rough first approximation in ordinary life, no longer exist at all. What is seemingly solid in this system becomes a porous pretext for many possible meanings; the event occurring becomes a symbol of something that perhaps may not be happening but makes itself felt through the symbol; and man as the quintessence of his possibilities, potential man, the unwritten poem of his existence, confronts man as recorded fact, as reality, as character. Accordingly, Ulrich felt that he was basically capable of every virtue and every baseness; the fact that in a balanced social order virtues as well as vices are tacitly regarded as equally burdensome attested for him to what happens in nature generally, that every play of forces tends in time toward an average value and average condition, toward compromise and inertia. Ulrich regarded morality as it is commonly understood as nothing more than the senile form of a system of energies that cannot be confused with what it originally was without losing ethical force.

It is possible that these views also reflected some uncertainty about life, but uncertainty is sometimes nothing more than mistrust of the usual certainties, and anyway, it is good to remember that even so experienced a person as mankind itself seems to act on quite similar principles. In the long run it revokes everything it has done, to replace it with something else; what it used to regard as a crime it regards as a virtue, and vice versa; it builds up impressive frameworks of meaningful connections among events, only to allow them to collapse after a few generations. However, all this happens in succession instead of as a single, homogeneous experience, and the chain of mankind's experiments shows no upward trend. By contrast, a conscious human essayism would face the task of transforming the world's haphazard awareness into a will. And many individual lines of development indicate that this could indeed happen soon. The hospital aide clothed in lily-white, who, with the help of acids, thins out a patient's stool in a white china dish in order to obtain a purple smear, rubbing it until the right hue rewards her attention, is already living, whether she knows it or not, in a world more open to change than is the young lady who shudders at the sight of the same stuff in the street. The criminal, caught up in the moral magnetic field of his act, can only move like a swimmer who has to go with the current that sweeps him along, as every mother knows whose child has ever suffered this fate, though no one would believe her, because there was no place for such a belief.

Psychiatry calls great elation “a hypomanic disturbance,” which is like calling it a hilarious distress, and regards all heightened states, whether of chastity or sensuality, scrupulosity or carelessness, cruelty or compassion, as pathologically suspect—how little would a healthy life mean if its only goal were a middle condition between two extremes! How drab it would be if its ideal were really no more than the denial of the exaggeration of its ideals! To recognize this is to see the moral norm no longer as a set of rigid commandments but rather as a mobile equilibrium that at every moment requires continual efforts at renewal. We are beginning to regard as too limiting the tendency to ascribe involuntarily acquired habits of repetitiveness to a man as his character, and then to make his character responsible for the repetitions. We are learning to recognize the interplay between inner and outer, and it is precisely our understanding of the impersonal elements in man that has given us new clues to the personal ones, to certain simple patterns of behavior, to an ego-building instinct that, like the nest-building instinct of birds, uses a few techniques to build an ego out of many various materials. We are already so close to knowing how to use certain influences to contain all sorts of pathological conditions, as we can a wild mountain stream, and it will soon be a mere lapse of social responsibility or a lingering clumsiness if we fail to transform criminals into archangels at the right time. And there is so much more one could add, scattered manifestations of things that have not yet coalesced to act together, the general effect of which is to make us tired of the crude approximations of simpler times, gradually to make us experience the necessity of altering the basic forms and foundations of a moral order that over two thousand years has adjusted only piecemeal to evolving tastes and exchanging it for a new morality capable of fitting more closely the mobility of facts.

Ulrich was convinced that the only thing missing was the right formula, the expression that the goal of a movement must find in some happy moment before it is achieved, in order that the last lap can be accomplished. Such an expression is always risky, not yet justified by the prevailing state of affairs, a combination of exact and inexact, of precision and passion. But it was in just those years that should have spurred him on that something peculiar happened to Ulrich. He was no philosopher. Philosophers are despots who have no armies to command, so they subject the world to their tyranny by locking it up in a system of thought.

This apparently also accounts for the presence of great philosophers in times of great tyrants, while epochs of progressive civilization and democracy fail to bring forth a convincing philosophy, at least to judge by the disappointment one hears so widely expressed on the subject. Hence today we have a terrifying amount of philosophizing in brief bursts, so that shops are the only places where one can still get something without *Weltanschauung*, while philosophy in large chunks is viewed with decided mistrust. It is simply regarded as impossible, and even Ulrich was by no means innocent of this prejudice; indeed, in the light of his scientific background, he took a somewhat ironic view of philosophy. This put him in a position where he was always being provoked to think about what he was observing, and yet at the same time was burdened with a certain shyness about thinking too hard.

But what finally determined his attitude was still another factor. There was something in Ulrich's nature that in a haphazard, paralyzing, disarming way resisted all logical systematizing, the single-minded will, the specifically directed drives of ambition; it was also connected with his chosen term, "essayism," even though it contained the very elements he had gradually and with unconscious care eliminated from that concept. The accepted translation of "essay" as "attempt" contains only vaguely the essential allusion to the literary model, for an essay is not a provisional or incidental expression of a conviction capable of being elevated to a truth under more favorable circumstances or of being exposed as an error (the only ones of that kind are those articles or treatises, chips from the scholar's work-bench, with which the learned entertain their special public); an essay is rather the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in a decisive thought. Nothing is more foreign to it than the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism. Terms like true and false, wise and unwise, are equally inapplicable, and yet the essay is subject to laws that are no less strict for appearing to be delicate and ineffable. There have been more than a few such essayists, masters of the inner hovering life, but there would be no point in naming them. Their domain lies between religion and knowledge, between example and doctrine, between *amor intellectualis* and poetry; they are saints with and without religion, and sometimes they are also simply men on an adventure who have gone astray.

Nothing is more revealing, by the way, than one's involuntary experience of learned and sensible efforts to interpret such essayists, to turn their living wisdom into knowledge to live by and thus extract some "content" from the motion of those who were moved: but about as much remains of this as of the delicately opalescent body of a jellyfish when one lifts it out of the water and lays it on the sand. The rationality of the uninspired will make the teachings of the inspired crumble into dust, contradiction, and nonsense, and yet one has no right to call them frail and unviable unless one would also call an elephant too frail to survive in an airless environment unsuited to its needs. It would be regrettable if these descriptions were to evoke an impression of mystery, or of a kind of music in which harp notes and sighing glissandi predominate. The opposite is the case, and the underlying problem presented itself to Ulrich not at all intuitively but quite soberly, in the following form: A man who wants the truth becomes a scholar; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between? Examples of what lies in between can be found in every moral precept, such as the well-known and simple: Thou shalt not kill. One sees right off that that is neither a fact nor a subjective experience. We know that we adhere to it strictly in some respects, while allowing for a great many, if sharply defined, exceptions; but in a very large number of cases of a third kind, involving imagination, desires, drama, or the enjoyment of a news story, we vacillate erratically between aversion and attraction. What we cannot classify as either a fact or a subjective experience we sometimes call an imperative. We have attached such imperatives to the dogmas of religion and the law and thereby give them the status of deduced truth. But the novelists tell us about the exceptions, from Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac to the most recent beauty who shot her lover, and dissolve it again into something subjective. We can cling to one of these poles or let ourselves be swept back and forth between them by the tide—but with what feelings? The feeling of most people for this precept is a mixture of wooden obedience (including that of the "wholesome type" that flinches from even thinking of such a thing but, only slightly disoriented by alcohol or passion, promptly does it) and a mindless paddling about in a wave of possibilities. Is there really no other approach to this precept? Ulrich felt that as things stood, a man longing to do something with all his heart

does not know whether he should do it or leave it undone. And yet he suspected that it could be done, or not done, wholeheartedly. In themselves, an impulse to act and a taboo were equally meaningless to him. Linking them to a law from above or within aroused his critical intelligence; more than that, the need to ennoble a self-sufficient moment by giving it a noble pedigree diminished its value. All this left his heart silent, while only his head spoke; but he felt that there might be another way to make his choice coincide with his happiness. He might be happy because he didn't kill, or happy because he killed, but he could never be the indifferent fulfiller of an imperative demanded of him. What he felt at this moment was not a commandment; it was a region he had entered. Here, he realized, everything was already decided, and soothed the mind like mother's milk. But what gave him this insight was no longer thinking, nor was it feeling in the usual incoherent way: it was a "total insight" and yet again only a message carried to him from far away by the wind, and it seemed to him neither true nor false, neither rational nor irrational; it seized him like a faint, blissful hyperbole dropped into his heart.

And as little as one can make a truth out of the genuine elements of an essay can one gain a conviction from such a condition—at least not without abandoning the condition, as a lover has to abandon love in order to describe it. The boundless emotion that sometimes stirred Ulrich without activating him contradicted his urge to act, which insisted on limits and forms. Now, it may be only right and natural to want to *know* before letting one's feelings speak; he involuntarily imagined that what he wanted to find and someday would, even if it should not be truth, would be no less firm than truth. But in his special case, this made him rather like a man busily getting equipment together while losing interest in what it is meant for. If someone had asked him at any point while he was writing treatises on mathematical problems or mathematical logic, or engaged in some scientific project, what it was he hoped to achieve, he would have answered that there was only one question worth thinking about, the question of the right way to live. But if one holds up an imperative for a long time without anything happening, the brain goes to sleep, just as the arm does that has held something up for too long; our thoughts cannot be expected to stand at attention indefinitely any more than soldiers on parade in summer; standing too long, they will simply fall down in a faint. As Ulrich had settled on his view of life around his twenty-sixth year,

it no longer seemed quite genuine in his thirty-second. He had not elaborated his ideas any further, and apart from a vague, tense feeling such as one has when waiting for something with one's eyes closed, there was not much sign of personal emotion in him, since the days of his tremulous earliest revelations had gone. Yet it was probably an underground movement of this kind that gradually slowed him down in his scientific work and kept him from giving it all he had. This generated a curious conflict in him. One must not forget that basically the scientific cast of mind is more God-oriented than the aesthetic mind, ready to submit to "Him" the moment "He" deigns to show Himself under the conditions it prescribes for recognizing Him, while our aesthetes, confronted with His manifestation, would find only that His talent was not original and that His view of the world was not sufficiently intelligible to rank Him with really God-given talents. Ulrich could not abandon himself to vague intimations as readily as anyone of that species could, but neither could he conceal from himself that in all those years of scientific scrupulosity he had merely been living against his grain. He wished something unforeseen would happen to him, for when he took what he somewhat wryly called his "holiday from life" he had nothing, in one direction or the other, that gave him peace.

Perhaps one could say on his behalf that at a certain age life begins to run away with incredible speed. But the day when one must begin to live out one's final will, before leaving the rest behind, lies far ahead and cannot be postponed. This had become menacingly clear to him now that almost six months had gone by and nothing had changed. He was waiting: all the time, he was letting himself be pushed this way and that in the insignificant and silly activity he had taken on, talking, gladly talking too much, living with the desperate tenacity of a fisherman casting his nets into an empty river, while he was doing nothing that had anything to do with the person he after all signified; deliberately doing nothing: he was waiting. He waited hiding behind his person, insofar as this word characterizes that part of a human being formed by the world and the course of life, and his quiet desperation, dammed up behind that façade, rose higher every day. He felt himself to be in the worst crisis of his life and despised himself for what he had left undone. Are great ordeals the privilege of great human beings? He would have liked to believe it, but it isn't so, since even the dullest neurotics have their crises. So all he really had

left in the midst of his deep perturbation was that residue of imperturbability possessed by all heroes and criminals—it isn't courage, willpower, or confidence, but simply a furious tenacity, as hard to drive out as it is to drive life out of a cat even after it has been completely mangled by dogs.

If one wants to imagine how such a man lives when he is alone, the most that can be said is that at night his lighted windows afford a view of his room, where his used thoughts sit around like clients in the waiting room of a lawyer with whom they are dissatisfied. Or one could perhaps say that Ulrich once, on such a night, opened the window and looked out at the snake-smooth trunks of the trees, so black and sleekly twisted between the blankets of snow covering their tops and the ground, and suddenly felt an urge to go down into the garden just as he was, in his pajamas; he wanted to feel the cold in his hair. Downstairs he turned out the light, so as not to stand framed in the lighted doorway; a canopy of light projected into the shadow only from his study. A path led to the iron gate fronting the street; a second crossed it, darkly outlined. Ulrich walked slowly toward it. And then the darkness towering up between the treetops suddenly, fantastically, reminded him of the huge form of Moosbrugger, and the naked trees looked strangely corporeal, ugly and wet like worms and yet somehow inviting him to embrace them and sink down with them in tears. But he didn't do it. The sentimentality of the impulse revolted him at the very moment it touched him. Just then some late passersby walked through the milky foam of the mist outside the garden railing, and he may have looked like a lunatic to them, as his figure in red pajamas between black tree trunks now detached itself from the trees. But he stepped firmly onto the path and went back into his house fairly content, feeling that whatever was in store for him would have to be something quite different.

3

ON THE ESSAY AND ITS PROSE

(1948)

MAX BENSE

It should not surprise anyone if a logician proceeds to make a few remarks on the more subtle aspects of prose, its form and style, aspects on which generally only critics or masters of literary creations tend to comment. I think it is time to evaluate the elements of beauty and perfection of literary and poetic taste with regard to the *esprit géométrique* as well as the *esprit de finesse*. Pascal's ethos returns to us now and then, and when this happens, we tend to differentiate in this manner. I think it would be prudent for poets and writers to comment from time to time on their experiences with objects of their trade, such as prose, fragments, verse, and sentences. From this, I think a rather respectable theory could emerge, a theory with the added advantage of having an empirical origin.

Thus the question that concerns me greatly is how to know whether I am confronted with a piece of genuine prose or a poetic piece, because I know that it cannot be the verse itself, as Sulzer has previously proclaimed, that draws a clear boundary. Nonetheless, in spite of this considerable clarity, I can follow only with great effort the subtle trace of a continued transition from poetry to prose in literary expressions. Hence, I merely want to articulate briefly that I can recognize inner perfection of that which we call prose only in some cases, then again poetry in other instances, as a meaningful measurement if I am concurrently permitted to regard prose as a generalized form of poetry. In this case, rhythm and meter, which are characteristics of all poetry, turn in soft continuity into

clear periods and distinct style, Lessing's so beautifully interpreted "ideal sensual speech" [*vollkommene sinnliche Rede*]¹ transforms itself into representative sentence sequences of a kind of prose that attains its highest degree of transparency in Pascal's fragments or Stendhal's epic. From this I deduce that the poet can finally be understood only from within poetry and the writer from within prose, and I have to make a few comments on this as well before I can proceed to my actual topic.

To this I have to add an explanation. An intellectual is either a creator or a teacher. He has either a creation or a persuasion [*Tendenz*].² To us, the significant difference between a poet and a writer seems to be that the poet is creative and expands the essence of being [*das Sein*], whereas the writer expresses the education, persuasion, and intellect that one represents. In poetry, creation is possible; in prose, basically only persuasion. More precisely, poetry is the medium of creation, whereas prose is the medium of persuasion.

I don't want to leave unmentioned that I am of the opinion that creation is an aesthetic category, whereas persuasion is inherently situated in ethics. From this, I conclude that art is interesting only from the perspective of its production and that any aesthetic state produced by art is an approximation of creation, whereas the ethical state has nothing to do with production but instead persists in education [*Bildung*], upbringing [*Erziehung*], transformation, and revolution. I am aware of what I am saying: that perfect poetry means expression of an aesthetic state, whereas mastery in prose reveals the ethicist. The subtle difference between an aesthetic and an ethical style is a qualitative difference, even if there are visible crossovers between works, between poetry and prose.

For this reason, the space into which the writer gazes is stiller and tighter, but this gaze is not more intimate and lingering. On the contrary, this gaze is more discriminating, cultivating [*züchterisch*], and sorrowful. Only as a writer with a persuasion, with a stance to which one is committed, can one be a poet, scientist, philosopher, a religious or political critic. And maybe one has to have overcome the deep desire for creating if one wants to replace the song by the will, the glow of purpose, of upbringing. And this desire will wane of its own volition when one pursues a purpose and not a creation. Thinking about potential readers distracts from the poetics, as does thinking about the use value impair the course of science. Unfettered passion, from which creation springs,

does not without difficulty complement free will, the one that propels the mind which has an opinion.

One can learn from the history of ideas that the intellectual with a certain persuasion always gains influence and makes it known that he is irreplaceable when epochal difficulties appear. This is all but a superfluous addendum. The poet is not understandable from the perspective of a turbulent era, but the writer is. In this way, Lessing, Herder, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche were persuasive writers of great style. They not only influenced the nineteenth century, but still constitute effective forces today. Gide in France, and Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset in Spain also fall into that category.

We observe a rather odd correlation between persuasion and creation with these writers. Where there is creation, there is poetry—this cannot be denied—but at the same time the expression, the form in which the creation emerges, is emphasized. This happens not through pathos, not with an indication, but simply by way of the calm manner of tireless repetition. Thus here exists a type of prose that, in particular ascertainable moments, always acts in the same manner. It is significant that this process creeps into even the literal phrase. Not the writer's thought has persuasion, but the expression of the thought. It progresses emblematically; prose appears every now and then in calculating form; it possesses symbols for phrases, for specific phrases, that are supposed to express a particular connection in an objective manner. This curious calculative prose naturally contains the specter of strongly expressed precision; it is crypto-rational. It hides its reason. Why? Because this prose is not pure persuasion, but coinciding persuasion. It is still poetry. It performs for the sake of creation, not for persuasion. This is how it has to be when one pursues a purpose with regard to form and not thought, when it is not insight but its expression that motivates the will. Actually, this will is controlled by reason, but reason has to be hidden on behalf of form, which remains an aesthetic category. Otherwise, the ethicist would come too much to the foreground, which, in theory, is not a desirable outcome. In other words, in order to instruct through form, repetition is required, consideration of aesthetic space, but the unintended impression of reason, which emerges from this, only feigns the ethicist. In reality, he stays veiled. All this brings up a fundamental question: Can a persuasion which develops from bare form persist in the long run? In this case, is persuasion not

concurrently thought and content? The problem with form is a problem of abstraction, and there is always the point at which abstraction turns into a highly concrete act. Because the nature of persuasion is such that it represents a will propelled by a thought, it is an existential phenomenon; in no way can it suppress the existential moment if it is genuine persuasion. That is why there comes a point in every aesthetic persuasion when the ethicist emerges.

Therefore, I arrive at the conclusion that there is a strange border area [*Confinium*] that develops between poetry and prose, between the aesthetic stage of creation and the ethical stage of persuasion. It always remains somewhat enigmatic, but it captures a well-known literary position. This is because the “essay” is the unmediated literary expression of this strange border area between poetry and prose, between creation and persuasion, between an aesthetic and an ethical stage.

Thus we have arrived at our main topic. The essay is a type of prose, but it is not a fragment in the sense of Pascal-esque fragments, and it is not an epic piece in the sense of Stendhal-esque epic. The essay reveals a gap, a completely autonomous representational reality, and therefore is itself a literary reality.

“Essay” means “attempt” or “experiment” [*Versuch*] in German. This raises the question whether this expression means that a literary-leaning person “attempts” to write about something, or whether the writing about an explicit or a partly explicit topic has the character of an attempt, an experiment with that topic. I am convinced that the essay is an expression of an experimental method; the essay is experimental writing, and one needs to address it in the same manner as one addresses experimental physics, a type of physics that is clearly distinguished from theoretical physics. In experimental physics, so as to stay true to our example, one asks nature a question, expects an answer, scrutinizes the answer, and quantifies it; theoretical physics describes nature by demonstrating analytically, axiomatically, and deductively its principles stemming from mathematical necessity. Thus the essay distinguishes itself from a treatise. He who writes essayistically; who composes something experimentally; who turns his subject this way and that, questions, touches, inspects, and reflects upon it thoroughly; who approaches it from different angles, and collects what he sees in his mind’s eye, and formulates in words what his topic reveals under the conditions established by writing.

Hence, “attempting” something within the essay does not signify true writing subjectivity. Instead, it produces conditions under which a topic is moved closer into the context of a literary configuration. There is no attempt to write or to recognize. There is an attempt to see how a topic behaves in a literary manner. Hence, a question is posed, an experiment conducted on a topic. This allows us to see that the character of the essay is not defined by the literary form in which it is composed, but rather the content, the topic that is treated, appears “essayistic” because it appears under conditions. Thus every essay inherently contains the potential for a perspective in the tradition of Leibniz, Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Ortega y Gasset. They represent a type of philosophical perspectivism in the sense that they apply a specific viewpoint in thinking and perception to their observations. Even those who have read only a small portion of these men’s writings cannot mistake their mastery of essay writing. Whereas in Leibniz, this mastery may be concealed in the epistolary format, with Dilthey it is evident. Whereas it masquerades in Nietzsche as the ability to compose aphorisms, with Ortega the essay itself is the intended form.

At this point, I have to emphasize that every essay contains beautiful sentences that are like seeds of the entire essay, out of which the essay can continue to grow. I am referring to those charming prose sentences which illustrate that there is no perfect boundary that distinguishes the essay from prose. These are at the same time elementary sentences of the essay that belong to poetry as well as prose. They are fragments of “perfect sensual speech”—that is, fragments of a linguistic body that touches us like a part of nature—and they are fragments of a pointed thought, hence fragments of perfect deduction, that affects us like a piece of Platonic idea. One has to take it upon oneself to read in both languages if one wants to enjoy the full pleasure of the essay . . . or one transforms the essay, before one is aware, into a succession of aphorisms, each of which represents a pointed thought, as can be observed with Lichtenberg, Novalis, and Goethe, or perhaps into a series of highly compressed images that, in the manner of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, represent the torn pieces of nearly perfect endless lyric poetry.

This brings us to another point of definition in our observations. Is it not peculiar that all great essayists are critics? Is it not noteworthy that all eras that are distinguished by the essay are significant periods marked by criticism? What does that mean?

To deconstruct this thought: In France, the essay developed in connection with the placid, critical works of Montaigne. His instructions for living and dying, for thinking and working, for enjoying and lamenting, originate from a critical spirit. The element within which these reflections operate is the element of the great French moralists and skeptics. He is a gadfly of his time, the beginning of a protesting critical zeitgeist that continues to dominate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There exists a lineage spanning from Montaigne to Gide, Valéry, and Camus. Bacon developed the essay in England. Bacon wrote his essays in every respect with an astute moralistic, skeptical, enlightened—in short, critical—hidden agenda. Essentially, he gave rise to Swift, Defoe, Hume, W. G. Hamilton, De Quincey, and Poe, but also, in more recent times, to Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, Strachey, and others. In Germany, we see Lessing, Möser, and Herder—the last especially in his unfailing *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* [*Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*], simply the most important collection of German essays—initiating this form of experimental literature and at the same time mastering it. Everyone knows of the depth of criticism that is contained in their works. Friedrich Schlegel, himself a master of criticism and the essay, describes Herder as a pure critic and recognizes in him a protester in the broadest sense. Adam Müller, as well, calls “Lessing in his lecture concerning the development of German criticism one of the central figures.” Furthermore, I have already mentioned Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Ortega y Gasset. More recently, Gottfried Benn, emerging from the Expressionist movement; Hofmiller, one of the first literary critics; Karl Hillebrand and Ernst Robert Curtius, who have managed to apply a penetrating analytic’s vision of the world to the contemporary moment. Ernst Jünger, whose essays experiment with issues in a relaxed, half-cynical, half-skeptical manner recalling Montaigne; Rudolf Kassner, tirelessly wanting to sublimate [*aufheben*] again and again the world’s historical conditions of analytical intellect; Thomas Mann, who pours the breath of the epic into prolonged remarks—indeed, with a thematic diversity that encompasses art, historiography, psychology, history, and politics. Finally, the Austrian essayists von Kürenberger and Speidel, as well as Karl Kraus, Hofmannsthal, and Stoessl, who even dedicated to this literary form a theory, remarking that “libido and consciousness” [*Triebhaftes und Bewußtes*] are “equally at work” in the essay.

This much is obvious: the essay originates from our intellect's critical essence, whose delight for experimentation simply constitutes a necessity of its manner of being, its method. I shall expand on this by saying that the essay is the form of the critical category of our mind per se. For he who criticizes must also necessarily experiment; he must create conditions under which a topic becomes visible anew, differently from an author. Most important, the invalidity of a topic must be put to the test, tried out, and that is exactly the point of the small variation that the topic gains through a critic. One could prompt the literary critic to set up laws and regulations, as this has happened in old poetic treatises for other categories; he would have to declare that every good criticism contains a law for retaining minimal variations of a topic. However, this variation will lead to a place where either the full magnitude or the full calamity of the author's topic in question becomes visible. In any case, and this I want to emphasize, the law of minimal variation, of displacement [*Verrückung*], is also the law under which the critical essayist works; it is the method of his experiment. In this way, it contains everything that falls into the category of critical spirit: satire, irony, cynicism, skepticism, reasoning, leveling, caricature, and the like. Thus, due to the critic's preference for the essay, it also becomes apparent that he is at home in the border area [*Confinium*] between the creative and aesthetic state, on the one hand, and the ethical state of persuasion, on the other hand. He does not fully belong to either state, but resides in a border area, and sociologically speaking this expresses itself in that, as a type between categories and a contemporary between eras, he finds his companions where open or secret revolutions, acts of resistance, and regroupings are taking place or are being planned.

I have stated what the essay can accomplish. But what becomes visible? I would like to say that the contour of something becomes visible in the essayistic method, the contour of inner and outer being, the contour of being what it is [*So seins*], if you will. There is no substantive limit to making a contour visible, at least not in principle. The essayistic experiment is, in principle, even independent from substance, from the subject matter. It can even bear a degree of heterogeneity of substance. One need not fundamentally, systematically, deductively "stick to the point," pursuant to a number of aphorisms. That does not, however, indicate that there is a kinship with aphorisms. Both forms are completely different with regard to plenitude, density, style, and intention; in one, the pointedly

illustrated reigns and in the other, the epic. Only this can be the meaning of Hofmiller's statement that the essay is not scientific: where science is defined as a sum, as a system of axiomatic-deductive statements about clearly defined subject matter, treatise, not essays, are possible. But insofar as every science determines subject matters and these become the subject of critical reflection, a scientific essay may exist. In Germany, France, and England, there are ample examples of scientific essay writing. Goethe's essay "On Granite" is a fitting example. Max Weber, one of the last scientific types who wrote in great style, provided in his two last lectures, "Politics as a Vocation" [Politik als Beruf] and "Science as a Vocation" [Wissenschaft als Beruf], fitting examples of such essays of scientific nature. I also remember the splendid essay by Heinrich Scholz about the theologian and scientific organizer Adolf von Harnack, as a response to the great Harnack biography by Zahn-Harnack. Heisenberg's lectures "The Development of Quantum Mechanics" and "Transformations in the Foundations of Natural Science" are exemplary essays of scientific prose in German. However, Strachey's historical essays all contain Anglo-Saxon traits of genuine experimental literary art implemented within the boundaries of science. It should become apparent from this list why I do not really differentiate between scientific and literary essays, but denote the difference by using the concepts aesthetic [*schöngeistig*] and sophisticated [*feingeistig*]. Aesthetic essay writing develops a topic beyond scientific domains, reflection, often rambling, intuitive, and irrational; does not dispense with clarity, but this clarity is not one of conceptual definition, but rather one of perusal through the poetic or intellectual space that one has entered. Sophisticated essay writing, emerging from efforts to define, make self-evident, a rather definitive object belonging to a science, contains an indestructible inclination for logic; it reveals a style of lucid reason, from which it never departs. It analyzes, makes elementary, and granulates the substance, which it retains in complete experimental variation. It begs the question whether one should add a special class for polemical essays, those that are not critical but vary the object with the fierceness of a destructive attack. There is nothing standing in the way. Naturally, it will bring the object with all available measures to a position in which its fragility, its sense of adventure, its infirmity, will rather seem suicidal. All means are necessary for this to happen, aesthetic contemplation as well as sophisticated dissection. Lessing was one of its masters, and

nearly all great polemicists of world literature have successfully engaged in the experimental art of the polemic essay.

At this point, it is no longer difficult to express what literarily should be said about the essay and its substance. It is the result of a literary “ars combinatoria.” The essayist is a combiner, a tireless creator of configurations around a specific object. Everything that is even somewhat in the vicinity of this object, defining the subject of the essay, giving it the possibility of existence, enters into the combination and causes a new configuration. The transformation of a configuration, in which the object is located, is the point of the experiment, and the goal of the essay is less the revelation of the object’s definition than is the sum of factors, the sum of configurations, in which it becomes possible. That is also of scientific value, because the circumstance, the atmosphere, in which something flourishes wants to be recognized and, after all, reveals something. Therefore, configuration is an epistemological category that cannot be achieved through axiomatic deduction, but rather through a literary “ars combinatoria,” in which imagination has replaced pure knowledge. Because new objects are not created in the imagination, but configurations for objects are, and the configurations do not appear with deduced but with experimental necessity. All great essayists have been combiners and possessed extraordinary imagination.

Of course, it is difficult to assess whether there is an experiment with an idea or a form, and thus it is not easy to ascertain whether we are confronted with a genuine essay and to what degree the author has surpassed a simple report. Therefore, I want to declare that the essay is the literary form that is most difficult to master and to assess. Take any one thing—for example, the Green Woodpecker. An analytic description leads to nothing more than a piece by Brehm.³ But if one has an idea while looking at the Green Woodpecker, let’s say concerning the concept of rhythm, and reflects this idea in the Green Woodpecker and comments that at the moment of creation it is positioned at the location at which “rhythm and Melos” divide, the experimental enters into the report that elevates the Brehm-like report. That thought is now put to the test. Everywhere, the bird’s cycle of activity is examined, and if one suddenly finds the line in which this type of combination is described as “little models of a different manner in which to view things,” one has found the persuasion and, behind it, the spirit divided by pure reason. We shall say that this is

“a real disciple,” purposefully seeming to ramble on and on. Nonetheless, we are confronted by a thought, spic and span, and a man’s true opinion. Accordingly, this is how it always happens: the man who has dedicated an essay to this combinational conclusion proves himself to be a splendid master of this method, which is part of the foundation of the essay. And this method makes it possible for the subjectivity of writing, the literary agent in the better sense of this word, to be suddenly integrated into the combination, and to such a degree, that, openly or discreetly, persuasion is transformed into existence.

Persuasion expresses itself wonderfully in the essay. Having a persuasion means experimenting. This completes this line of thought. At first, the object is isolated through experimentation in the luster of combining concepts and ideas, and images and comparisons. Then, slowly, persuasion shines through the web of literary essay writing. Finally, there is an appeal from the stance of persuasion, and the real writer emerges, the real man of letters in the spirit of Lessing, the mind and the heart, which try to possess something. In this way, it becomes understandable that a mere literary form, the essay, penetrates the aesthetic shell and becomes ethical, existential; it becomes intelligible that an existential category, that of the experiment, becomes, metaphorically and methodologically, a literary form.

The intellectual who does not have creation but persuasion on his mind wants to create the existential being. His concern is concrete. We have seen, finally, that all persuasion is existential. Therefore, it is able to produce the existential. It has Socratic intentions. Socrates brought forth what he wanted to say, hence said experimentally, in conversation, in dialogue, quasi in a prototype of the dramatic act. On the other hand, the intellectual, who represents a view, nowadays favors the essay, the experiment or attempt, because creating the existential bears in itself the character of the experiment. The essay replaces simultaneously the dramatic dialogue. It is a type of contemplative monologue and therefore itself a dramatic form. The dialectic lies in the experimental. The essay’s essence in form and content consists of nothing but to achieve, through the Socratic method, an intent by experimental means or to bring forth an object experimentally. What is intended to be said is not uttered right away as a finite verdict, as a law; it is, rather, produced before the reader’s mind’s eye in an act of untiring variation on the starting product. This happens in a way that corresponds, on the one hand, with an experimental

demonstration of a physical effects and, on the other hand, with the production of a well-defined configuration in a kaleidoscope.

I have said that the essay—as its name suggests—experiments, in concrete terms represents nothing but the execution of an experiment. I have also added that this is not simply an experiment with ideas. Lichtenberg once commented that that which has been experimented must be performed. In a genuine essay, this aesthetic act is far exceeded. No essay remains in the realm of the aesthetic, even though, as I admit, it initially signifies a problem of the artistic form of prose. The essayist distances himself from all theory. He neither represents theory nor develops a theory. He moves in the realm of the concrete in accordance with Kierkegaard's demand, made in opposition to Hegel, for "space and time and flesh and blood." So what does he do? Which concrete entity is completely separate from theory? The concrete case. The essay consciously generates the concrete case of an idea, reflected in the essayist himself.

I have reached the conclusion of this examination, which did not want to point out merely in passing the necessity and the seriousness of a literary genre. The essay cannot be conjured by the short-windedness of a rapid, in many aspects cursory, as a whole bellicose time. Due to the critical situation as a whole, due to the crisis in which mind and existence thrive, the essay has become a characteristic of our literary era. The essay serves the crisis and its conquest by provoking the mind to experiment, to configure things differently, but it is not simply an accent, a mere expression of the crisis. The essay inherently contains the possibility of perfection and completion [*Vollendung*], because it is a unique literary form. Those who see the essay as an art of popularization have thoroughly misunderstood its meaning. That which is a creature of critique is beyond the dichotomy of the popular and the not popular.

Translated by Margit Grieb

NOTES

1. In the original: "ein Gedicht ist eine vollkommene sinnliche Rede."
2. All subsequent uses of *Tendenz* will be translated as "persuasion."
3. Alfred Edmund Brehm (1829–1884) was a German zoologist and scientific author who wrote the popular zoological encyclopedia *Brehms Tierleben* (*Brehm's Life of Animals*).

4

THE ESSAY AS FORM (1958)

THEODOR W. ADORNO

Destined to see what is illuminated, not the light.

GOETHE, PANDORA

That in Germany the essay is condemned as a hybrid, that the form has no compelling tradition, that its emphatic demands are met only intermittently—all this has been said, and censured, often enough. “The essay form has not yet, today, travelled the road to independence which its sister, poetry, covered long ago; the road of development from a primitive, undifferentiated unity with science, ethics, and art.”¹ But neither discomfort with this situation nor discomfort with the mentality that reacts to it by fencing off art as a preserve for irrationality, equating knowledge with organized science, and excluding anything that does not fit that antithesis as impure, has changed anything in the prejudice customary here in Germany. Even today, to praise someone as an *écrivain* is enough to keep him out of academia. Despite the telling insights that Simmel and the young Lukács, Kassner, and Benjamin entrusted to the essay as speculation on specific, culturally pre-formed objects,² the academic guild accepts as philosophy only what is clothed in the dignity of the universal and the enduring—and today perhaps the ordinary. It gets involved with particular cultural artifacts only to the extent to which they can be used to exemplify universal categories, or to the extent to which the particular becomes transparent when seen in terms of them. The stubbornness with which this schema survives would be as puzzling as the emotions attached to it if it were not fed by motives stronger than the painful memory of the lack of cultivation in a culture

in which the *homme de lettres* is practically unknown. In Germany the essay arouses resistance because it evokes intellectual freedom. Since the failure of an Enlightenment that has been lukewarm since Leibniz, even under present-day conditions of formal freedom, that intellectual freedom has never quite developed but has always been ready to proclaim its subordination to external authorities as its real concern. The essay, however, does not let its domain be prescribed for it. Instead of accomplishing something scientifically or creating something artistically, its efforts reflect the leisure of a childlike person who has no qualms about taking his inspiration from what others have done before him. The essay reflects what is loved and hated instead of presenting the mind as creation *ex nihilo* on the model of an unrestrained work ethic. Luck and play are essential to it. It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say. Hence it is classified a trivial endeavor. Its concepts are not derived from a first principle, nor do they fill out to become ultimate principles. Its interpretations are not philologically definitive and conscientious; in principle they are over-interpretations—according to the mechanized verdict of the vigilant intellect that hires out to stupidity as a watchdog against the mind. Out of fear of negativity, the subject's efforts to penetrate what hides behind the facade under the name of objectivity are branded as irrelevant. It's much simpler than that, we are told. The person who interprets instead of accepting what is given and classifying it is marked with the yellow star of one who squanders his intelligence in impotent speculation, reading things in where there is nothing to interpret. A man with his feet on the ground or a man with his head in the clouds—those are the alternatives. But letting oneself be terrorized by the prohibition against saying more than was meant right then and there means complying with the false conceptions that people and things harbor concerning themselves. Interpretation then becomes nothing but removing an outer shell to find what the author wanted to say, or possibly the individual psychological impulses to which the phenomenon points. But since it is scarcely possible to determine what someone may have thought or felt at any particular point, nothing essential is to be gained through such insights. The author's impulses are extinguished in the objective substance they seize hold of. In order

to be disclosed, however, the objective wealth of meanings encapsulated in every intellectual phenomenon demands of the recipient the same spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is castigated in the name of objective discipline. Nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it at the same time. The criteria for such interpretation are its compatibility with the text and with itself, and its power to give voice to the elements of the object in conjunction with one another. In this, the essay has something like an aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art, although it is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance. Lukács failed to recognize this when he called the essay an art form in the letter to Leo Popper that introduces *Soul and Form*.³ But the positivist maxim according to which what is written about art may in no way lay claim to artistic presentation, that is, autonomy of form, is no better. Here as elsewhere, the general positivist tendency to set every possible object, as an object of research, in stark opposition to the subject, does not go beyond the mere separation of form and content—for one can hardly speak of aesthetic matters unaesthetically, devoid of resemblance to the subject matter, without falling into philistinism and losing touch with the object a priori. In positivist practice, the content, once fixed on the model of the protocol sentence, is supposed to be neutral with respect to its presentation, which is supposed to be conventional and not determined by the subject. To the instinct of scientific purism, every expressive impulse in the presentation jeopardizes an objectivity that supposedly leaps forth when the subject has been removed. It thereby jeopardizes the authenticity of the object, which is all the better established the less it relies on support from the form, despite the fact that the criterion of form is whether it delivers the object pure and without admixture. In its allergy to forms as mere accidental attributes, the spirit of science and scholarship [*Wissenschaft*] comes to resemble that of rigid dogmatism. Positivism's irresponsibly sloppy language fancies that it documents responsibility in its object, and reflection on intellectual matters becomes the privilege of the mindless.

None of these offspring of resentment are pure falsehood. If the essay declines to begin by deriving cultural works from something underlying them, it embroils itself all too eagerly in the cultural enterprise promoting

the prominence, success, and prestige of marketable products. Fictionalized biographies and all the related commercial writing that depend on them are not mere products of degeneration; they are a permanent temptation for a form whose suspiciousness of false profundity does not protect it from turning into slick superficiality. This can be seen even in Sainte-Beuve, from whom the genre of the modern essay derives. In products like Herbert Eulenberg's biographical silhouettes, the German prototype of a flood of cultural trash, and down to films about Rembrandt, Toulouse-Lautrec and the Bible, this involvement has promoted the neutralization of cultural works to commodities, a process that in recent intellectual history has irresistibly taken hold of what the Eastern bloc ignominiously calls "the heritage." The process is perhaps most obvious in Stefan Zweig, who produced several sophisticated essays in his youth and ended up descending to the psychology of the creative individual in his book on Balzac. This kind of writing does not criticize abstract fundamental concepts, aconceptual data, or habituated clichés; instead, it presupposes them, implicitly but by the same token with all the more complicity. The refuse of interpretive psychology is fused with current categories from the *Weltanschauung* of the cultural philistine, categories like "personality" or "the irrational." Such essays confuse themselves with the same feuilleton with which the enemies of the essay form confuse it. Forcibly separated from the discipline of academic unfreedom, intellectual freedom itself becomes unfree and serves the socially preformed needs of its clientele. Irresponsibility, itself an aspect of all truth that does not exhaust itself in responsibility to the status quo, then justifies itself to the needs of established consciousness; bad essays are just as conformist as bad dissertations. Responsibility, however, respects not only authorities and committees, but also the object itself.

The essay form, however, bears some responsibility for the fact that the bad essay tells stories about people instead of elucidating the matter at hand. The separation of science and scholarship from art is irreversible. Only the naiveté of the manufacturer of literature takes no notice of it; he considers himself at least an organizational genius and grinds good works of art down into bad ones. With the objectification of the world in the course of progressive demythologization, art and science have separated. A consciousness for which intuition and concept, image and sign would be one and the same—if such a consciousness ever existed—cannot be

magically restored, and its restitution would constitute a regression to chaos. Such a consciousness is conceivable only as the completion of the process of mediation, as utopia, conceived by the idealist philosophers since Kant under the name of *intellektuelle Anschauung*, intellectual intuition, something that broke down whenever actual knowledge appealed to it. Wherever philosophy imagines that by borrowing from literature it can abolish objectified thought and its history—what is commonly termed the antithesis of subject and object—and even hopes that Being itself will speak, in a *poésie* concocted of Parmenides and Jungnickel, it starts to turn into a washed-out cultural babble. With a peasant cunning that justifies itself as primordiality, it refuses to honor the obligations of conceptual thought, to which, however, it had subscribed when it used concepts in its propositions and judgments. At the same time, its aesthetic element consists merely of watered-down, second-hand reminiscences of Hölderlin or Expressionism, or perhaps Jugendstil, because no thought can entrust itself as absolutely and blindly to language as the notion of a primordial utterance would lead us to believe. From the violence that image and concept thereby do to one another springs the jargon of authenticity, in which words vibrate with emotion while keeping quiet about what has moved them. Language's ambitious transcendence of meaning ends up in a meaninglessness which can be easily seized upon by a positivism to which one feels superior; one plays into the hands of positivism through the very meaninglessness it criticizes, a meaninglessness which one shares by adopting its tokens. Under the spell of such developments, language comes, where it still dares to stir in scholarship and science, to resemble the handicrafts, and the researcher who resists language altogether and, instead of degrading language to a mere paraphrase of his numbers, uses tables that unqualifiedly acknowledge the reification of consciousness, is the one who demonstrates, negatively, faithfulness to the aesthetic. In his charts he finds something like a form for that reification without apologetic borrowing from art. To be sure, art has always been so intertwined with the dominant tendencies of enlightenment that it has made use of scientific and scholarly findings in its techniques since classical antiquity. But quantity becomes quality. If technique is made absolute in the work of art; if construction becomes total and eradicates expression, its opposite and its motivating force; if art thus claims to be direct scientific knowledge and correct by scientific

standards, it is sanctioning a preartistic manipulation of materials as devoid of meaning as only the *Sein* [Being] of the philosophy departments can be. It is fraternizing with reification—against which it has been and still is the function of what is functionless, of art, to protest, however mute and reified that protest itself may be.

But although art and science became separate in the course of history, the opposition between them should not be hypostatized. Aversion to an anachronistic conflation of the two does not render a compartmentalized culture sacrosanct. For all their necessity, those compartments represent institutional confirmation of the renunciation of the whole truth. The ideals of purity and tidiness that are common to the enterprises of a veritable philosophy versed in eternal values, an airtight and thoroughly organized science, and an aconceptual intuitive art, bear the marks of a repressive order. A certificate of competency is required of the mind so that it will not transgress upon official culture by crossing culturally confirmed boundary lines. Presupposed in this is the notion that all knowledge can potentially be converted to science. The epistemologies that distinguish prescientific from scientific consciousness have one and all conceived the distinction solely as one of degree. The fact that it has gone no farther than the mere assurance of this convertibility, without living consciousness ever in actuality having been transformed into scientific consciousness, points up the precariousness of the transition, a qualitative difference. The simplest reflection on the life of consciousness would teach us to what a slight extent insights, which are by no means arbitrary hunches, can be fully captured within the net of science. The work of Marcel Proust, which is no more lacking in a scientific-positivist element than Bergson's, is an attempt to express necessary and compelling insights into human beings and social relations that are not readily accommodated within science and scholarship, despite the fact that their claim to objectivity is neither diminished nor abandoned to a vague plausibility. The measure of such objectivity is not the verification of assertions through repeated testing but rather individual human experience, maintained through hope and disillusionment. Such experience throws its observations into relief through confirmation or refutation in the process of recollection. But its individually synthesized unity, in which the whole nevertheless appears, cannot be distributed and recategorized under the separate persons and apparatuses of psychology and sociology. Under the pressure

of the scientific spirit and its desiderata, which are ubiquitous, in latent form, even in the artist, Proust tried, through a technique itself modeled on the sciences, a kind of experimental method, to salvage, or perhaps restore, what used to be thought of—in the days of bourgeois individualism, when individual consciousness still had confidence in itself and was not intimidated by organizational censorship—as the knowledge of a man of experience like the now extinct *homme de lettres*, whom Proust conjures up as the highest form of the dilettante. It would not have occurred to anyone to dismiss what such a man of experience had to say as insignificant, arbitrary, and irrational on the grounds that it was only his own and could not simply be generalized in scientific fashion. Those of his findings that slip through the meshes of science most certainly elude science itself. As *Geisteswissenschaft*, literally the science of mind, scientific scholarship fails to deliver what it promises the mind: to illuminate its works from the inside. The young writer who wants to learn what a work of art is, what linguistic form, aesthetic quality, and even aesthetic technique are, at college will usually learn about them only haphazardly, or at best receive information taken ready-made from whatever philosophy is in vogue and more or less arbitrarily applied to the content of the works in question. But if he turns to philosophical aesthetics he is besieged with abstract propositions that are not related to the works he wants to understand and do not in fact represent the content he is groping toward. The division of labor in the *kosmos noetikos*, the intellectual world, between art on the one hand and science and scholarship on the other, however, is not solely responsible for all that; its lines of demarcation cannot be set aside through good will and comprehensive planning. Rather, an intellect irrevocably modeled on the domination of nature and material production abandons the recollection of the stage it has overcome, a stage that promises a future one, the transcendence of rigidified relations of production; and this cripples its specialist's approach precisely when it comes to its specific objects.

In its relationship to scientific procedure and its philosophical grounding as method, the essay, in accordance with its idea, draws the fullest conclusions from the critique of system. Even empiricist theories, which give priority to experience that is open-ended and cannot be anticipated, as opposed to fixed conceptual ordering, remain systematic in that they deal with preconditions for knowledge that are conceived as more or less constant and develop them in as homogeneous a context as possible.

Since Bacon—himself an essayist—empiricism has been as much a “method” as rationalism. In the realm of thought it is virtually the essay alone that has successfully raised doubts about the absolute privilege of method. The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character.

Perhaps the great *Sieur de Montaigne* felt something like this when he gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of “Essay.” The simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy. The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best of his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness—the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life—and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty.⁴

The essay does not play by the rules of organized science and theory, according to which, in *Spinoza's* formulation, the order of things is the same as the order of ideas. Because the unbroken order of concepts is not equivalent to what exists, the essay does not aim at a closed deductive or inductive structure. In particular, it rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since *Plato*, that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy—that old injustice done to the transitory, whereby it is condemned again in the concept. The essay recoils from the violence in the dogma according to which the result of the process of abstraction, the concept, which, in contrast to the individual it grasps, is temporally invariant, should be granted ontological dignity. The fallacy that the *ordo idearum*, the order of ideas, is the *ordo rerum*, the order of things, is founded on the imputation of immediacy to something mediated. Just as something that is merely factual cannot be conceived without a concept, because to think it is always already to conceive it, so too the purest concept cannot be thought except in relation to facticity. Even the constructs of fantasy, presumably free of time and space, refer, if derivatively, to individual existence. This is why the essay refuses to be intimidated by the depraved profundity according to which truth and history are

incompatible and opposed to one another. If truth has in fact a temporal core, then the full historical content becomes an integral moment in it; the a posteriori becomes the a priori concretely and not merely in general, as Fichte and his followers claimed. The relationship to experience—and the essay invests experience with as much substance as traditional theory does mere categories—is the relationship to all of history. Merely individual experience, which consciousness takes as its point of departure, since it is what is closest to it, is itself mediated by the overarching experience of historical humankind. The notion that the latter is mediated and one's own experience unmediated is mere self-deception on the part of an individualistic society and ideology. Hence the essay challenges the notion that what has been produced historically is not a fit object of theory. The distinction between a *prima philosophia*, a first philosophy, and a mere philosophy of culture that would presuppose that first philosophy and build upon it—the distinction used as a theoretical rationalization for the taboo on the essay—cannot be salvaged. An intellectual *modus operandi* that honors the division between the temporal and the atemporal as though it were canonical loses its authority. Higher levels of abstraction invest thought with neither greater sanctity nor metaphysical substance; on the contrary, the latter tends to evaporate with the advance of abstraction, and the essay tries to compensate for some of that. The customary objection that the essay is fragmentary and contingent itself postulates that totality is given, and with it the identity of subject and object, and acts as though one were in possession of the whole. The essay, however, does not try to seek the eternal in the transient and distill it out; it tries to render the transient eternal. Its weakness bears witness to the very nonidentity it had to express. It also testifies to an excess of intention over object and thereby to the utopia which is blocked by the partition of the world into the eternal and the transient. In the emphatic essay thought divests itself of the traditional idea of truth.

In doing so it also suspends the traditional concept of method. Thought's depth depends on how deeply it penetrates its object, not on the extent to which it reduces it to something else. The essay gives this a polemical turn by dealing with objects that would be considered derivative, without itself pursuing their ultimate derivation. It thinks conjointly and in freedom about things that meet in its freely chosen object. It does not insist on something beyond mediations—and those are the historical

mediations in which the whole society is sedimented—but seeks the truth content in its objects, itself inherently historical, It does not seek any primordial given, thus spiting a societalized [*vergesellschaftete*] society that, because it does not tolerate anything that does not bear its stamp, tolerates least of all anything that reminds it of its own ubiquity, and inevitably cites as its ideological complement the very nature its praxis has completely eliminated. The essay quietly puts an end to the illusion that thought could break out of the sphere of *thesis*, culture, and move into that of *physis*, nature. Spellbound by what is fixed and acknowledged to be derivative, by artifacts, it honors nature by confirming that it no longer exists for human beings. Its alexandrinism is a response to the fact that by their very existence, lilacs and nightingales—where the universal net has permitted them to survive—make us believe that life is still alive. The essay abandons the royal road to the origins, which leads only to what is most derivative—Being, the ideology that duplicates what already exists, but the idea of immediacy, an idea posited in the meaning of mediation itself, does not disappear completely. For the essay all levels of mediation are immediate until it begins to reflect.

Just as the essay rejects primordial givens, so it rejects definition of its concepts. Philosophy has arrived at a thoroughgoing critique of definitions from the most divergent perspectives—in Kant, in Hegel, in Nietzsche. But science has never adopted this critique. Whereas the movement that begins with Kant, a movement against the scholastic residues in modern thought, replaces verbal definitions with an understanding of concepts in terms of the process through which they are produced, the individual sciences, in order to prevent the security of their operations from being disturbed, still insist on the pre-critical obligation to define. In this the neopositivists, who call the scientific method philosophy, are in agreement with scholasticism. The essay, on the other hand, incorporates the antisystematic impulse into its own way of proceeding and introduces concepts unceremoniously, “immediately,” just as it receives them. They are made more precise only through their relationship to one another. In this, however, the essay finds support in the concepts themselves. For it is mere superstition on the part of a science that operates by processing raw materials to think that concepts as such are unspecified and become determinate only when defined. Science needs the notion of the concept as a *tabula rasa* to consolidate its claim to authority, its claim to be the sole

power to occupy the head of the table. In actuality, all concepts are already implicitly concretized through the language in which they stand. The essay starts with these meanings, and, being essentially language itself, takes them farther; it wants to help language in its relation to concepts, to take them in reflection as they have been named unreflectingly in language. The phenomenological method of interpretive analysis embodies a sense of this, but it fetishizes the relationship of concepts to language. The essay is as skeptical about this as it is about the definition of concepts. Unapologetically it lays itself open to the objection that one does not know for sure how one is to understand its concepts. For it understands that the demand for strict definition has long served to eliminate—through stipulative manipulations of the meanings of concepts—the irritating and dangerous aspects of the things that live in the concepts. But the essay does not make do without general concepts—even language that does not fetishize concepts cannot do without them—nor does it deal with them arbitrarily. Hence it takes presentation more seriously than do modes of proceeding that separate method and object and are indifferent to the presentation of their objectified contents. The manner of expression is to salvage the precision sacrificed when definition is omitted, without betraying the subject matter to the arbitrariness of conceptual meanings decreed once and for all. In this, Benjamin was the unsurpassed master. This kind of precision, however, cannot remain atomistic. 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. Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture. The thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unraveling it. While even traditional thought is fed by impulses from such experience, it eliminates the memory of the process by virtue of its form. The essay, however, takes this experience as its model without, as reflected form, simply imitating it. The experience is mediated through the essay's own conceptual organization; the essay proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically.

The way the essay appropriates concepts can best be compared to the behavior of someone in a foreign country who is forced to speak its language instead of piecing it together out of its elements according to rules

learned in school. Such a person will read without a dictionary. If he sees the same word thirty times in continually changing contexts, he will have ascertained its meaning better than if he had looked up all the meanings listed, which are usually too narrow in relation to the changes that occur with changing contexts and too vague in relation to the unmistakable nuances that the context gives rise to in every individual case. This kind of learning remains vulnerable to error, as does the essay as form; it has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death. It is not so much that the essay neglects indubitable certainty as that it abrogates it as an ideal. The essay becomes true in its progress, which drives it beyond itself, not in a treasure-hunting obsession with foundations. Its concepts receive their light from a *terminus ad quem* hidden from the essay itself, not from any obvious *terminus a quo*, and in this the method itself expresses its utopian intention. All its concepts are to be presented in such a way that they support one another, that each becomes articulated through its configuration with the others. In the essay discrete elements set off against one another come together to form a readable context; the essay erects no scaffolding and no structure. But the elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay's gaze.

The essay gently challenges the ideal of *clara et distincta perceptio* and indubitable certainty. Altogether, it might be interpreted as a protest against the four rules established by Descartes' *Discourse on Method* at the beginning of modern Western science and its theory. The second of those rules, the division of the object into "as many parts as possible, and as might be necessary for its adequate solution,"⁵ outlines the analysis of elements under whose sign traditional theory equates conceptual schemata of classification with the structure of being. Artifacts, however, which are the subject matter of the essay, do not yield to an analysis of elements and can be constructed only from their specific idea. Kant had good reasons for treating works of art and organisms as analogous in this respect, although at the same time, in unerring opposition to Romantic obscurantism, he took pains to distinguish them. The totality can no more be hypostatized as something primary than can elements, the product of analysis. In contrast to both, the essay orients itself to the idea of

a reciprocal interaction that is as rigorously intolerant of the quest for elements as of that for the elementary. The specific moments are not to be simply derived from the whole, nor vice versa. The whole is a monad, and yet it is not; its moments, which as moments are conceptual in nature, point beyond the specific object in which they are assembled. But the essay does not pursue them to the point where they would legitimate themselves outside the specific object; if it did so, it would end up in an infinity of the wrong kind. Instead, it moves in so close to the *hie et nunc* of the object that the object becomes dissociated into the moments in which it has its life instead of being a mere object.

The third Cartesian rule, “to conduct my thoughts in such an order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex,” is in glaring contradiction to the essay form, in that the latter starts from the most complex, not from what is simplest and already familiar. The essay form maintains the attitude of someone who is beginning to study philosophy and somehow already has its idea in his mind. He will hardly begin by reading the most simple-minded writers, whose common sense for the most part simply babbles on past the points where one should linger; instead, he reaches for those who are allegedly the most difficult and who then cast their light backwards onto the simple things and illuminate them as an “attitude of thought toward objectivity.” The naiveté of the student who finds difficult and formidable things good enough for him has more wisdom in it than a grown-up pedantry that shakes its finger at thought, warning it that it should understand the simple things before it tackles the complex ones, which, however, are the only ones that tempt it. Postponing knowledge in this way only obstructs it. In opposition to the cliché of “comprehensibility,” the notion of truth as a casual relationship, the essay requires that one’s thought about the matter be from the outset as complex as the object itself; it serves as a corrective to the stubborn primitiveness that always accompanies the prevailing form of reason. If science and scholarship, falsifying as is their custom, reduce what is difficult and complex in a reality that is antagonistic and split into monads to simplified models and then differentiate the models in terms of their ostensible material, the essay, in contrast, shakes off the illusion of a simple and fundamentally logical world, an illusion well suited to the defense of the status quo. The essay’s differentiatedness is

not something added to it but its medium. Established thought is quick to ascribe that differentiatedness to the mere psychology of the cognitive subjects and thinks that by doing so it has eliminated what is compelling in it. In reality, science and scholarship's self-righteous denunciations of oversophistication are aimed not at a precocious and unreliable method but at the upsetting aspects of the object that method makes manifest.

The fourth Cartesian rule, that one "should in every case institute such exhaustive enumerations and such general surveys" that one "is sure of leaving nothing out," the true principle of systematic thought, recurs unchanged in Kant's polemic against Aristotle's "rhapsodic" thought. This rule corresponds to the charge that the essay is, as the schoolmaster would put it, not exhaustive, while in fact every object, and certainly an intellectual one, encompasses an infinite number of aspects, and only the intention of the cognitive subject decides among them. A "general overview" would be possible only if it were established in advance that the object to be dealt with was fully grasped by the concepts used to treat it, that nothing would be left over that could not be anticipated from the concepts. The rule about the exhaustive enumeration of the individual parts claims, as a consequence of that first assumption, that the object can be presented in a seamless deductive system, a supposition of the philosophies of identity. As in the requirement of definition, the Cartesian rule has survived the rationalist theorem it was based on, in the form of a guide to practical thought: the comprehensive overview and continuity of presentation are demanded even of empirically open science. What in Descartes was to be an intellectual conscience monitoring the necessity of knowledge is thereby transformed into arbitrariness, the arbitrariness of a "frame of reference," an axiomatics to be established at the outset to satisfy a methodological need and for the sake of the plausibility of the whole, but no longer able to demonstrate its own validity or self-evidence. In the German version, this is the arbitrariness of an *Entwurf*, a project, that merely hides its subjective determinants under a pathos-laden quest for Being. The demand for continuity in one's train of thought tends to prejudge the inner coherence of the object, its own harmony. A presentation characterized by continuity would contradict an antagonistic subject matter unless it defined continuity as discontinuity at the same time. In the essay as a form, the need makes itself felt, unconsciously and atheoretically, to annul theoretically outdated claims to completeness and continuity in the concrete

modus operandi of the mind as well. If the essay opposes, aesthetically, the mean-spirited method whose sole concern is not to leave anything out, it is following an epistemological impulse. The Romantic conception of the fragment as a construction that is not complete but rather progresses onward into the infinite through self-reflection champions this anti-idealist motive in the midst of Idealism. Even in the manner of its presentation, the essay may not act as though it had deduced its object and there was nothing left to say about it. Its self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it could always break off at any point. It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over. An unequivocal logical order deceives us about the antagonistic nature of what that order is imposed upon. Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its subject matter is always a conflict brought to a standstill. While the essay coordinates concepts with one another by means of their function in the parallelogram of forces in its objects, it shrinks from any overarching concept to which they could all be subordinated. What such concepts give the illusion of achieving, their method knows to be impossible and yet tries to accomplish. The word *Versuch*, attempt or essay, in which thought's utopian vision of hitting the bull's-eye is united with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional character, indicates, as do most historically surviving terminologies, something about the form, something to be taken all the more seriously in that it takes place not systematically but rather as a characteristic of an intention groping its way. The essay has to cause the totality to be illuminated in a partial feature, whether the feature be chosen or merely happened upon, without asserting the presence of the totality. It corrects what is contingent and isolated in its insights in that they multiply, confirm, and qualify themselves, whether in the further course of the essay itself or in a mosaic-like relationship to other essays, but not by a process of abstraction that ends in characteristic features derived from them. "This, then, is how the essay is distinguished from a treatise. The person who writes essayistically is the one who composes as he experiments, who turns his object around, questions it, feels it, tests it, reflects on it, who attacks it from different sides and assembles what he sees in his mind's eye and puts into words what the object allows one to see under the conditions created in the course of writing."⁶ There is both truth and untruth in the discomfort this procedure arouses, the

feeling that it could continue on arbitrarily. Truth, because the essay does not in fact come to a conclusion and displays its own inability to do so as a parody of its own a priori. The essay is then saddled with the blame for something for which forms that erase all trace of arbitrariness are actually responsible. That discomfort also has its untruth, however, because the essay's constellation is not arbitrary in the way a philosophical subjectivism that displaces the constraint emanating from the object onto the conceptual order imagines it to be. What determines the essay is the unity of its object along with that of the theory and experience that have migrated into the object. The essay's openness is not the vague openness of feeling and mood; it is given contour by its substance. It resists the idea of a masterpiece, an idea which itself reflects the idea of creation and totality. Its form complies with the critical idea that the human being is not a creator and that nothing human is a creation. The essay, which is always directed toward something already created, does not present itself as creation, nor does it covet something all-encompassing whose totality would resemble that of creation. Its totality, the unity of a form developed immanently, is that of something not total, a totality that does not maintain as form the thesis of the identity of thought and its object that it rejects as content. At times, emancipation from the compulsion of identity gives the essay something that eludes official thought—a moment of something inextinguishable, of indelible color. Certain foreign words in Georg Simmel's work—*cachet*, *attitude*—reveal this intention, although it is not discussed in theoretical terms.

The essay is both more open and more closed than traditional thought would like. It is more open in that its structure negates system, and it satisfies its inherent requirements better the more rigorously it holds to that negation; residues of system in essays, through which they hope to make themselves respectable, as for instance the infiltration of literary studies by ready-made popular philosophical ideas, are as worthless as psychological trivialities. But the essay is also more closed, because it works emphatically at the form of its presentation. Consciousness of the non-identity of presentation and subject matter forces presentation to unremitting efforts. In this alone the essay resembles art. In other respects it is necessarily related to theory by virtue of the concepts that appear in it, bringing with them not only their meanings but also their theoretical contexts. To be sure, the essay behaves as cautiously toward theory as it does toward concepts.

It does not deduce itself rigorously from theory—the chief flaw in all Lukács’s later essayistic works—nor is it a down payment on future syntheses. The more it strives to consolidate itself as theory and to act as though it held the philosopher’s stone in its hands, the more intellectual experience courts disaster. At the same time, by its very nature intellectual experience strives for such objectification. This antinomy is reflected in the essay. Just as it absorbs concepts and experiences from the outside, so too it absorbs theories. Its relationship to them, however, is not that of a “perspective.” If in the essay the lack of a standpoint is no longer naive and in bondage to the prominence of its objects, if instead the essay uses its relationship to its objects as an antidote to the spell cast by the notion of a beginning, then the essay carries out, in the form of parody, thought’s otherwise impotent polemic against a philosophy of mere “perspectives.” The essay devours the theories that are close to it; its tendency is always to liquidate opinion, including the opinion it takes as its point of departure. The essay is what it was from the beginning, the critical form *par excellence*; as immanent critique of intellectual constructions, as a confrontation of what they are with their concept, it is critique of ideology.

The essay is the form of the critical category of the mind. For the person who criticizes must necessarily experiment, he must create conditions under which an object becomes visible anew, and do so still differently than an author does; above all, the object’s frailties must be tried and tested, and this is the meaning of the slight variation the object experiences at the hands of its critic.⁷

When the essay is charged with having no point of view of its own and accused of relativism because it does not acknowledge any standpoint outside itself, the notion of truth as something “fixed,” a hierarchy of concepts, has come into play, the very notion that Hegel, who did not like points of view, had destroyed. Here the essay is in accord with its polar opposite, the philosophy of absolute knowledge. It wants to heal thought of its arbitrary character by incorporating arbitrariness reflectively into its own approach rather than disguising it as immediacy.

Idealist philosophy, to be sure, suffered from the inconsistency of criticizing an abstract overarching concept, a mere “result,” in the name of process, which is inherently discontinuous, while at the same time talking

about dialectical method in the manner of idealism. For this reason the essay is more dialectical than the dialectic is when the latter discourses on itself. The essay takes Hegelian logic at its word: the truth of the totality cannot be played off against individual judgments. Nor can truth be made finite in the form of an individual judgment; instead, singularity's claim to truth is taken literally, up to the point where its untruth becomes evident. The daring, anticipatory, and not fully redeemed aspect of every essayistic detail attracts other such details as its negation; the untruth in which the essay knowingly entangles itself is the element in which its truth resides. Certainly there is untruth in its very form as well; it relates to something culturally preformed and derivative as though it were an autonomous entity. But the more vigorously the essay suspends the notion of something primary and refuses to concoct culture out of nature, the more fundamentally it acknowledges the quasi-natural character of culture itself. Even now, the blind context of nature, myth, perpetuates itself in culture, and this is precisely what the essay reflects on: the relationship of nature and culture is its true theme. Instead of "reducing" cultural phenomena, the essay immerses itself in them as though in a second nature, a second immediacy, in order to negate and transcend the illusion of immediacy through its perseverance. It has no more illusions about the difference between culture and what lies beneath it than does the philosophy of origin. But for it culture is not an epiphenomenon that covers Being and should be destroyed; instead, what lies beneath culture is itself *thesis*, something constructed, the false society. This is why the origin has no more value for the essay than the superstructure. It owes its freedom in the choice of its objects, its sovereignty in the face of all priorities of fact or theory, to the fact that for it all objects are in a certain sense equally close to the center—equally close to the principle that casts its spell over all of them. It does not glorify concern with the original as more primordial than concern with what is mediated, because for it primordially is itself an object of reflection, something negative. This corresponds to a situation in which primordially, as a standpoint of the spirit in the midst of a societalized world, becomes a lie. The lie extends from the elevation of historical concepts in historical languages to primal words, to academic instruction in "creative writing," and to primitiveness pursued as a handicraft, to recorders and finger painting, in which pedagogical necessity acts as though it were a metaphysical virtue. Baudelaire's revolt of literature

against nature as a social preserve does not spare thought. The paradises of thought too are now only artificial ones, and the essay strolls in them. Since, in Hegel's dictum, there is nothing between heaven and earth that is not mediated, thought remains faithful to the idea of immediacy only in and through what is mediated; conversely, it falls prey to the mediated as soon as it tries to grasp the unmediated directly. The essay cunningly anchors itself in texts as though they were simply there and had authority. In this way, without the deception of a first principle, the essay gets a ground, however dubious, under its feet, comparable to theological exegeses of sacred texts in earlier times. Its tendency, however, is the opposite, a critical one: to shatter culture's claims by confronting texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each one intends even if it does not want to intend it, and to move culture to become mindful of its own untruth, of the ideological illusion in which culture reveals its bondage to nature. Under the essay's gaze second nature recognizes itself as first nature.

If the essay's truth gains its force from its untruth, that truth should be sought not in mere opposition to the dishonorable and proscribed element in the essay but rather within that element itself, in the essay's mobility, its lack of the solidity the demand for which science transferred from property relations to the mind. Those who believe that they have to defend the mind against lack of solidity are its enemies: the mind itself, once emancipated, is mobile. Once it wants more than the mere administrative duplication and processing of what has always already existed, the mind seems to have an exposed quality; abandoned by play, truth would be nothing but tautology. For historically the essay too is related to rhetoric, which the scientific mentality has wanted to get rid of since Bacon and Descartes—until, appropriately, in a scientific age it degenerated to a science *sui generis*, that of communications. Rhetoric was probably never anything but thought in its adaptation to communicative language. Such thought aimed at something unmediated: the vicarious gratification of the listeners. The essay retains, precisely in the autonomy of its presentation, which distinguishes it from scientific and scholarly information, traces of the communicative element such information dispenses with. In the essay the satisfactions that rhetoric tries to provide for the listener are sublimated into the idea of a happiness in freedom vis-à-vis the object, a freedom that gives the object more of what belongs to it than if it were

mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas. Scientific consciousness, which opposes all anthropomorphic conceptions, was always allied with the reality principle and, like the latter, antagonistic to happiness. While happiness is always supposed to be the aim of all domination of nature, it is always envisioned as a regression to mere nature. This is evident all the way up to the highest philosophies, even those of Kant and Hegel. These philosophies have their pathos in the absolute idea of reason, but at the same time they always denigrate it as insolent and disrespectful when it relativizes accepted values. In opposition to this tendency, the essay salvages a moment of sophistry. The hostility to happiness in official critical thought is especially marked in Kant's transcendental dialectic, which wants to immortalize the line between understanding and speculation and prevent thought from "wandering off into intelligible worlds," as the characteristic metaphor expresses it. Whereas a self-critical reason should, according to Kant, have both feet firmly on the ground, should ground itself, it tends inherently to seal itself off from everything new and also from curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought, something existential ontology vilifies as well. What Kant saw, in terms of content, as the goal of reason, the creation of humankind, utopia, is hindered by the form of his thought, epistemology. It does not permit reason to go beyond the realm of experience, which, in the mechanism of mere material and invariant categories, shrinks to what has always already existed. The essay's object, however, is the new in its newness, not as something that can be translated back into the old existing forms. By reflecting the object without violence, as it were, the essay mutely laments the fact that truth has betrayed happiness and itself along with it, and this lament provokes the rage directed against the essay. The persuasive element of communication is alienated from its original aim in the essay—just as the function of many musical features changes in autonomous music—and becomes a pure determinant of the presentation itself; it becomes the compelling element in its construction, whose aim is not to copy the object but to reconstitute it from its conceptual *membra disjecta*. The offensive transitions in rhetoric, in which association, verbal ambiguity, and a relaxation of logical synthesis made it easy for the listener and subjugated him, enfeebled, to the orator's will, are fused in the essay with the truth content. Its transitions repudiate conclusive deductions in favor of cross-connections between elements, something for which discursive logic has no place. The essay

uses equivocations not out of sloppiness, nor in ignorance of the scientific ban on them, but to make it clear—something the critique of equivocation, which merely separates meanings, seldom succeeds in doing—that when a word covers different things they are not completely different; the unity of the word calls to mind a unity, however hidden, in the object itself. This unity, however, should not be mistaken for linguistic affinity, as is the practice of contemporary restorationist philosophies. Here too the essay approaches the logic of music, that stringent and yet aconceptual art of transition, in order to appropriate for verbal language something it forfeited under the domination of discursive logic—although that logic cannot be set aside but only outwitted within its own forms by dint of incisive subjective expression. For the essay does not stand in simple opposition to discursive procedure. It is not unlogical; it obeys logical criteria insofar as the totality of its propositions must fit together coherently. No mere contradictions may remain unless they are established as belonging to the object itself. But the essay does not develop its ideas in accordance with discursive logic. It neither makes deductions from a principle nor draws conclusions from coherent individual observations. It coordinates elements instead of subordinating them, and only the essence of its content, not the manner in which it is presented, is commensurable with logical criteria. In comparison with forms in which a preformed content is communicated indifferently, the essay is more dynamic than traditional thought by virtue of the tension between the presentation and the matter presented. But at the same time, as a constructed juxtaposition of elements, it is more static. Its affinity with the image lies solely in this, except that the staticness of the essay is one in which relationships of tension have been brought, as it were, to a standstill. The slight elasticity of the essayist's train of thought forces him to greater intensity than discursive thought, because the essay does not proceed blindly and automatically, as the latter does, but must reflect on itself at every moment. This reflection extends not only to its relationship to established thought but also to its relationship with rhetoric and communication. Otherwise the essay, which fancies itself more than science, becomes fruitlessly prescientific.

The contemporary relevance of the essay is that of anachronism. The time is less favorable to it than ever. It is ground to pieces between an organized system of science and scholarship on the one side, in which everyone presumes to control everyone and everything and where

everything not tailored to the current consensus is excluded while being praised hypocritically as “intuitive” or “stimulating,” and on the other side a philosophy that has to make do with the empty and abstract remnants of what the scientific enterprise has not yet taken over and which thereby become the object of second-order operations on its part. The essay, however, is concerned with what is blind in its objects. It wants to use concepts to pry open the aspect of its objects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is a merely subjective arrangement. It wants to polarize the opaque element and release the latent forces in it. Its efforts are directed toward concretizing a content defined in time and space; it constructs a complex of concepts interconnected in the same way it imagines them to be interconnected in the object. It eludes the dictates of the attributes that have been ascribed to ideas since Plato’s definition in the *Symposium*, “existing eternally and neither coming into being nor passing away, neither changing nor diminishing,” “a being in and for itself eternally uniform,” and yet it remains idea in that it does not capitulate before the burden of what exists, does not submit to what merely is. The essay, however, judges what exists not against something eternal but by an enthusiastic fragment from Nietzsche’s late period:

If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things: and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.⁸

Except that the essay distrusts even this kind of justification and affirmation. It has no name but a negative one for the happiness that was sacred to Nietzsche. Even the highest manifestations of the spirit, which express this happiness, are always also guilty of obstructing happiness as long as they remain mere spirit. Hence the essay’s innermost formal law is heresy. Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy’s secret and objective aim to keep invisible.

NOTES

1. Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), 13 [see chapter 1, this volume].
2. *Ibid.*, 10: "The essay is always concerned with something already formed, or at best, with something that has been; it is part of its essence that it does not draw something new out of an empty vacuum, but only gives a new order to such things as once lived. And because he only newly orders them, not forming something new out of the formless, he is bound to them; he must always speak 'the truth' about them, find, that is, the expression for their essence."
3. *Ibid.*, 1–18.
4. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
5. René Descartes, *A Discourse on Method*, trans. John Veitch (New York: Dutton, 1951), 15.
6. Max Bense, "Über den Essay und seine Prosa," *Merkur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für Europäisches Denken* 3 (1947): 418 [see chapter 3, this volume].
7. *Ibid.*, 420.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 532–533.

5

PREFACE TO *THE COLLECTED ESSAYS* OF ALDOUS HUXLEY

(1960)

ALDOUS HUXLEY

“I am a man and alive,” wrote D. H. Lawrence. “For this reason I am a novelist. And, being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog. . . . Only in the novel are all things given full play.”

What is true of the novel is only a little less true of the essay. For, like the novel, the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything. By tradition, almost by definition, the essay is a short piece, and it is therefore impossible to give all things full play within the limits of a single essay. But a collection of essays can cover almost as much ground, and cover it almost as thoroughly as can a long novel. Montaigne’s Third Book is the equivalent, very nearly, of a good slice of the *Comédie Humaine*.

Essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal. Most essayists are at home and at their best in the neighborhood of only one of the essay’s three poles, or at the most only in the neighborhood of two of them. There are the predominantly personal essayists, who write fragments of reflective autobiography and who look at the world through the keyhole of anecdote and description.

There are the predominantly objective essayists who do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme. Their art consists in setting forth, passing judgment upon, and drawing general conclusions from, the relevant data. In a third group we find those essayists who do their work in the world of high abstractions, who never condescend to be personal and who hardly deign to take notice of the particular facts, from which their generalizations were originally drawn. Each kind of essay has its special merits and defects. The personal essayists may be as good as Charles Lamb at his best, or as bad as Mr. X at his cutest and most self-consciously whimsical. The objective essay may be as lively, as brashly contentious as a piece by Macaulay; but it may also, with fatal ease, degenerate into something merely informative or, if it be critical, into something merely learned and academic. And how splendid, how truly oracular are the utterances of the great generalizers! "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief." And from Bacon we pass to Emerson. "All men plume themselves on the improves. Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. For everything that is given, something is taken." Even a Baltasar Gracian, that briefest of essayists who writes as though he were cabling his wisdom, at two dollars a word, to the Antipodes, sometimes achieves a certain magnificence. "Things have their period; even excellences are subject to fashion. The sage has one advantage: he is immortal. If this is not his century, many others will be." But the medal of solemn and lapidary generalization has its reverse. The constantly abstract, constantly impersonal essayist is apt to give us not oracles but algebra. As an example of such algebraic writing, let me quote a short passage from the English translation of Paul Valéry's *Dialogues*. It is worth remarking that French literature has a tradition of high and sustained abstraction; English literature has not. Works that in French are not at all out of the common seem, when translated, strange almost to the point of absurdity. But even when made acceptable by tradition and a great talent, the algebraic style strikes us as being very remote from the living reality of our immediate experience. Here, in the words of an imaginary Socrates, is Valéry's description of the kind of language in which (as I think, unfortunately) he liked to write.

What is more mysterious than clarity? What more capricious than the way in which light and shade are distributed over the hours and over men? Certain peoples lose themselves in their thoughts, but for the Greeks all things are forms. We retain only their relations and, enclosed, as it were, in the limpid day, Orpheus like we build, by means of the word, temples of wisdom and science that may suffice for all reasonable creatures. This great art requires of us an admirably exact language. The very word that signifies language is also the name, with us, for reason and calculation; the same word says these three things.

In the stratosphere of abstract notions this elegant algebra is all very well; but a completely bodiless language can never do justice to the data of immediate experience, nor can it contribute anything to our understanding of the “capricious lights and shades” in the midst of which, whether we like it or not, we must perforce live out our lives.

The most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist. Freely, effortlessly, thought and feeling move in these consummate works of art, hither and thither between the essay’s three poles—from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience.



THE ESSAY FILM THROUGH
HISTORY



6

THE FILM ESSAY

A New Type of Documentary Film (1940)

HANS RICHTER

Swiss feature film is in full bloom. This has given it enormous opportunities for development that were not available yesterday. It is unpopular to speak of documentary film at such a moment; but it may be excused by the fact that it, too, has been experiencing an interesting development, albeit not due to an economic boom, but due to a certain zeitgeist.

It has not been very long since it became generally known that a postcard is not an ideal model for a documentary film. But even today this point of view lingers on in some hearts, minds, and cameras (albeit hidden); and when it nevertheless breaks through, acting against the will of the documentary filmmaker, who long ago renounced this falseness, then we see castles bathed in moonlight, romantic perspectives, idealized shots, and completely artificial people on the screen.

If we resist these bad habits, which the documentary film—to the detriment of its reputation—still lugs around, documentary film reveals possibilities that are at least as interesting as those of a feature film. To research these possibilities today is therefore an especially rewarding task, as every day they become more and more topical.

The American [Robert] Flaherty led the way with his powerful epic film (*Nanook of the North* and *Man of Aran*). He portrays the great human fight of man against nature—against cold, hunger, the ocean—in a simple matter-of-fact account. He has provided intellectual substance, not just pretty views (postcard views), and with his splendid solution

for representing this intellectual substance, he has managed to electrify an entire world.

This task, to lend form to intellectual substance, confronts today's documentary film, although in a more up-to-date form.

Financing documentaries through advanced sales and rental contracts is only rarely feasible. Feature film has an advantage in this regard. Documentary film survives mainly due to commissions. And those who have commissioned the film, whether it be the state, a club, or a private person—that is, those who represent public interests, such as national defense, fatigue duty, the postal service, radio, forestry; or represent special interests, such as advertisements for transit, manufacturing, and the like—all make different demands. Some are satisfied by the common type of documentary film—others are not.

Films about landscapes and national customs, winter sports, and summer hikes; how a cogwheel is made; how paint is extracted from tar; or even how an embryo grows can be portrayed convincingly by accurate reproduction or showing chronologically all visible stages of development; they even require accurate reproduction in simple chronological order in order to be comprehensible.

But a different category exists for which this method cannot be used. The problem starts when for a task, such as to show that “the function of the stock exchange is that of a market,” reproducing the stages involved in the stock exchange exactly and in chronological order, however meticulously observed, is no longer sufficient. This is due to the fact that the function of the represented object—in this case, the stock market—is fundamentally different from that of a machine. One can read how a machine functions from A–Z right off the machine itself. However, in order to make comprehensible how the stock market functions, one must include other factors: the economy, the needs of the public, market laws, supply and demand, and so on. In other words, one cannot rely on simply photographing the object, as is the case in straightforward documentaries; instead, one has to try—by whatever means necessary—to reproduce the idea of the object. One has to try to substantiate the notion that one has of the “stock exchange as a market.”

In this way, documentary film is given the task of visualizing notions of the imaginary. Even that which cannot be seen has to be made visible. The staged scene as well as the reproduced facts are points in a line

of argument that has as its aim to make problems, thoughts, and even ideas comprehensible to everyone. Therefore, I consider the term “essay” appropriate for this type of form, as even in literature the word “essay” is used for the treatment of difficult subjects and themes to render them into a generally comprehensible form.

The “stock exchange as a market” is a simple topic in comparison with and similar to the topic “radio’s relevance in today’s civilization” by the English postal service. Treatment of a subject such as the “United States of Europe” is more difficult, and still more difficult is a topic such as “freedom as aim of society’s development.” Of course, these films would have simpler titles in the cinema, but such task descriptions occur often nowadays. These topics are doubtlessly interesting and worth showing—but are they representable? Can they be presented in such a way as to demand from an audience, which feature film has satiated and which has come to the theater exclusively to be entertained, to go along, think for itself, and empathize?

Some of the films made in the past few years answer this question in the affirmative and intimate the possibilities for a development of this new type of film. This is the case for works by English documentarians following the filmmakers [Alberto] Cavalcanti, [Basil] Wright, [John] Grierson (who wanted to show one-half of the population how the other half works, thinks, feels, and lives); the French filmmakers led by [Jacques] Brunius (who, in his film *Violons d’Ingres*, shown at the New York World’s Fair, praises man’s right to private bliss so impressively and wittily); the Belgian group following [Henri] Storck (*L’Histoire de l’ancienne Belgique*); as well as my own (*Inflation, Stock Exchange*).

As diverse as all these works are, they all have the same aim: to visualize thoughts on screen.

The essay film, in its attempt to make the invisible world of imagination, thoughts, and ideas visible, can draw from an incomparably larger reservoir of expressive means than can the pure documentary film. Since in the essay film the filmmaker is not bound by the depiction of external phenomena and the constraints of chronological sequences, but, on the contrary, has to enlist material from everywhere, the filmmaker can bounce around freely in space and time. For example, he can switch from objective representation to fantastic allegory and from there to a staged scene; the filmmaker can portray dead as well as living things, and

artificial as well as natural objects—the filmmaker can use everything that exists and what can be invented—as long as they serve the purpose of making visible the fundamental idea. With this abundance of means, even prosaic thoughts and difficult ideas can provide color and entertainment, which the public needs in order to enjoy the subject matter.

Thus documentary film enjoys new and great artistic possibilities. It seems reasonable to me that such opportunities could attract young filmmakers, those who are currently still enticed by the dazzling light of the machinations of the feature film. Perhaps they are contemplating whether or not it would be more rewarding artistically to work on smart documentary filmic material rather than to contribute to an idiotic feature film (and at some point, even the most thriving boom comes to an end). Their wavering would itself be worthwhile, for their gaze might be directed to see the great possibilities of film as an art form, which is to be able to reach deep into the mindscape of our time. And would that not be an aim most worthwhile to pursue?

Translated by Maria P. Alter

7

THE FUTURE OF CINEMA (1948)

ALEXANDRE ASTRUC

An art has a chance of reaching maturity only when it becomes a form of expression. The problem with the future of cinema, one that we are wondering about a lot at the moment, lies within this question: Will cinema or will it not be able to become a medium to express any human thought? In other words: Will it be possible to say, one day, on film, what has been said through the centuries on the canvases of paintings or on the pages of novels.

Which is far from being the actual situation of our art. To understand the scope of this question, we must not forget this: cinema is still, today, nothing more than entertainment, and aside from a few vertiginous exceptions, its best successes are aimed only toward entertainment or anecdotes. The big names of painting or literature are not only those of *writers* or *painters*, in other words artisans or technicians putting a certain skill to use with a certain sensibility; they are first and foremost minds that have inscribed in their works what we can call metaphysics and that now belong as much to human spirit as to the spirit of shapes. Michelangelo is not only a painter skilled at painting tortured bodies, and Balzac is not only a craftsman of plots who learned his trade from Walter Scott. Western art was never more than an art of ideas, and its painters are lyrical poets as its philosophers are poets. Pascal was a philosopher and Racine a playwright, but Racine and Pascal said the same thing: that man is nothing without grace. Nietzsche, proclaiming that God is dead, is a

thought that is also what was shouted at the end of the nineteenth century by the novelist Balzac and the musician Debussy, and it is the same scream of agony of a universe hollowed out by the movement that creates it, that rises from the icy rhetoric of Mallarmé and the apples of Paul Cézanne.

Let us return to cinema. Here is the paradox: the art of film is, for the moment, that of not saying anything. What it says, it says in spite of itself, and insofar as it is silent. It is not by chance, believe me, that cinema began as the art of silence. This art was born gagged, and since then we have taught it to speak, but it fears nothing more than opening its mouth. It is true that this silence is revelatory. But from the point of view of psychoanalysis, or sociology, whose field, whatever German aesthetics states, does not coincide with the history of art. American comedy mirrors the twentieth century, but in the same way that the popular novel is linked to the nineteenth century; it symbolizes its era, but does not create it. In other words: the nineteenth century is Stendhal and Rimbaud, not Eugène Sue. Sociologically, I can accept that Sue is more interesting than Balzac. However, Sue was entirely created by his epoch (it was under its dictation that he wrote what the current times expected of him), while Mallarmé and his little papers founded it by expressing only the essential.

The real filmmakers are the producers. There are no complete works of Hitchcock or Wyler; there are those of [David] Selznick or Darryl Zanuck. Written for mediocre sensibilities, it is indispensable that they reflect only temperaments that do not stray from the ordinary. But the domain of sensibility does not necessarily cover that of art—in Romantic periods, for example. Obviously, Beethoven is “easier” than Bach, because in Beethoven there is a common denominator with romance. In cinema, for a writer, the essential question is precisely to balance this common denominator: that is why all subjects are treated indirectly. Imagine Mallarmé forced to disguise himself as [Pierre-Jean de] Béranger in order to reassure everyone.

In cinema, this disguise will become more and more necessary. Note that there was a time when the question was not even considered. Why? Because during the first fifty years of its history, the field of cinema precisely coincided with the sensibility of its times. The themes of silent film, for example, are postwar themes (escape, exoticism, bar, jazz, infantilism, police, etc.). Cinema benefitted until that point from a state of innocence; why, then, were there so few accursed filmmakers, [Jean] Vigo perhaps,

and [Eric von] Stroheim today, while in painting and poetry . . . ? And so few films booed and misunderstood? For cinema to have its “Manet Affair” or its “Baudelaire Scandal,” we must wait for *The Rules of the Game*, when audiences destroyed their seats; *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*; or *The Magnificent Ambersons*. These works were shocking not because they were shocking in themselves, but because they forgot their disguise in the dressing room.

Chasing rabbits in the fields of *The Rules of the Game*, [Jean] Renoir, in his creative excitement, does not realize that he let his show business agent’s mask fall off. He forgets to make a film in favor of speaking about what he holds dear. We were expecting *The Grand Illusion*, which was good filmmaking, and suddenly we have something that is perhaps the *Dangerous Liaisons* of that time, and that offers only the weakest of links to what is agreed upon as “cinema.” Same thing with *A Day in the Country*, which was kept in storage for ten years before being shown.

And here is why it will be necessary to put on disguises: because we have arrived at the point where cinema will be able to say everything. And not only show everything, but express everything. The little domain that was allotted to it, somewhere between theatrical comedy, novel, and news coverage, has been depleted: we are not going to remake a hundred times the poetic Parisian documentary, the collection of news, or the American comedy. What is left to say? Everything. Cinema has had its chroniclers and its photographers; today it awaits its Stendhal, its Shakespeare, its Pascal, its Valéry, or its Proust. But that will be when wearing a mask will be necessary, because Stendhal can afford to wait a hundred years, but when it comes to us . . .

Cinema is going through a fundamental crisis in these years. Something is now dying, and it is the entertainment-film, 90 minutes of visual narration, cut into 20 sequences and about 600 shots. The cinema that is being born will be much closer to a book than a performance; its language will be that of the essay, poetic, dramatic, and dialectic all at once. We must understand, indeed, that the actual conditions of the exploitation of cinematic vision are not necessarily definitive. There is no reason to believe that cinema will always be entertainment.

Nothing can tell us what television will be, but there are strong chances that it will contribute to a new cinema that will be more capable of addressing intelligence. That is why the idea of a Descartes of cinema is

not paradoxical in itself. It is today, only insofar as that no distributor would be crazy enough to show a film that would be the cinematic equivalent of Pascal's *Pensées* or Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*. But there exists a public for Valéry, and it is significant enough for a television program to allot it a few hours a week.

The future of cinema is wholly contained in its possibility of developing into a language. The age of the documentary, of the camera placed in street corners, haphazardly recording its fill of images, is gone. Henceforth, it will be necessary to speak and speak to say something. Little by little, film replaces paper or canvas as the privileged medium on which is inscribed or projected the film of personal obsessions. The filmmaker will say "I" like the novelist or the poet, and sign with his obsessive fear the oscillating cathedrals of his reel, just like Van Gogh was able to speak of himself with a chair placed on kitchen tiles. No work will be valid only insofar as it will be an internal landscape. We ask of tomorrow's cinema to be the seismograph of our hearts, a disorderly pendulum inscribing on film the tense dialectics of our ideas.

Let it be known that the problem lies there. Cinema has a future only if the camera eventually replaces the pen: that is why I say that its language is not that of fiction or news reports, but that of the essay. Or, alternatively, it will tear itself away from the dictatorship of photography and the faithful representation of reality. And, finally, it will become a pathway toward the abstract.

Today the improvement of the 16mm, tomorrow television will multiply the possibility of cinematic expression. We will arrive little by little to a stage where there will no longer be a dividing line between amateur cinema and professional cinema. It is very admissible to conceive that the actual cinematic crisis, a commercial crisis, contributes toward the generation of those marginal works created in extraordinary conditions, and on unusual topics, and whose creation would have been unthinkable in normal times. If we push things to an extreme, if the prime cost of film continues to rise, we can imagine a situation in which all studios would be closed, while streets and private apartments would be taken by storm by amateurs writing their confessions with a 16mm Paillard in their parents' dining room.

I barely exaggerate. An epoch of the history of cinema is dying. The already long tradition of the entertainment-film that in France, for

example, goes from [Jean de] Baroncelli to the students of [Marcel] Carné, passing through [Jacques] Feyder, is giving its last fruits, in which the art of film is nothing more than the dramatic staging and photographic illustration of a story. We cannot see *The Charterhouse of Parma*, for example, without feeling, even with the question of quality aside, that strange feeling of viewing a spectacle of another age, in which nothing resonates with our ideas, our preoccupations, our conceptions.

This art, which is barely a technique, is limited to animated photography: none of the intrinsic problems of cinema are touched on or, more importantly, resolved, and where we expected something that would be the equivalent in cinematic language of Stendhal, we have a rhetoric of camera motions that in the best of cases are justified only by the perspective of the story itself—in other words, to accompany characters or display panoramas—but that never attempt to introduce what is in the cinema the equivalent of a literary or pictorial style, that gulf, that imperceptible break between the work and the creator through which the latter takes a position facing it. To summarize a whole lot of ideas, familiar to a new generation of critics, aestheticians, and producers, the technique is still at that stage where it is a means of displaying, very exactly, a staging . . . and what does it become, instead, in our dreams, other than a language of an uncanny precision where camera motions and zoom on the shots start to correspond to the tenses and moods of verbs to make up a syntax and thus a metaphysics.

In other words, technical cutting will have to become the means of expression of a conception of the world. Formal problems will become ontological in nature. Where [John] Dos Passos employed the preterite and [Gustave] Flaubert the imperfect because the preterite and the imperfect corresponded to their reciprocal conception of time, the filmmaker calls upon the disposition of elements in a frame, employs or not the depth of field, the mobile framings or tracking shots. In cinema, every choice of technique relates to a conception of the world, and it is precisely in the choice of these techniques that lies all the art of cinema.

This is true of all art forms and all the more so if it is more evolved, thus more individualized, and more significant, because, as [André] Malraux admirably showed in his *Musée imaginaire*, to the greatest rigor and the greatest authenticity of inspiration corresponds the greatest specificity of

technique. Painting becomes more significant at the same time as it rids itself of everything about it that is not painting. Cézanne says more than [Ernest] Meissonnier does, though his art may appear less figurative, and it is precisely insofar as it is more formal that it holds more meaning. In parallel, it is not by chance that the only specific technique of French cinema, that of Jean Renoir, that cannot be linked to any school, is that of the creator whose works contain the most of what, for lack of a better word, must be named a worldview. Here there is technique only because there is something to show.

I know that there is nothing more suspicious in the field of cinema than speaking of technique. A phenomenon analogous to the one that Jean Paulhan denounced in the world of literature under the name of *Terror* is observable here; it is both an obsession with innocence and a romantic, naïve belief in a sort of primacy of intuition for means of expression. But, of course, it is with the producers, whose technique is more aggressively unskilled, that this bad conscience is most sensitive and generally disappears once they have subdued it. The ease and virtuosity with which Renoir solves the most abstract of problems betray a pure soul. Technique does not exist for him (as a problem and obstacle). Hence it is possible for him to create it as a means of expression. If one analyzed, shot by shot, Renoir's films, one would discover, for example, that all his cutting is done to give depth. All the characters' entrances are from under the camera, or at the back of the frame, never from the left or the right, as with Carné or Christian Jacques, where the technique is two-dimensional. Renoir works with space; his camera motions do not show the scene up and down; they make it spin. Hence the abundance of tracking shots, cropping in spinning motions. And a comparison imposes itself, of the usage of tracking shots with Renoir or Carné, that sheds a singular light on that famous analytical and descriptive French style of which we are, it seems, so proud: Carné uses movement only to tell and draw; he follows, analyzes, stretches from frame to frame the thread of the story that [Jacques] Prévert had provided for him. Renoir, instead, penetrates, enters, advances in his universe on his triumphal chariot. He frolics in it, rolls around it in, splashes himself, and installs himself like an old Negro king in his creation. Snatching with his framings the characters of his mind, he is not satisfied with analysis: he creates. He makes the universe speak by cutting it according to depth; he

works with a snowplow, squashing the extras into the edges of his camera, running straight toward the finish line with Sylvia Bataille rolling in the grass, taking his time, however, on a bit of scenery, throwing the tablecloth in the big snout of the objective, taking out the little spoons, uncorking some table wine, and tying a napkin around his neck. Framing, with Renoir, is a perpetual re-creation. The frosted-glass mirror is really the only one in which we can make up a world: already, it is no longer the mirror moving down Stendhal's road; it is the world that is born in a mirror, and the camera is placed on a large locomotive, and we are not sure, exactly, what will appear in this mirror on the edge of the road, peasants, soldiers, nannies, or bus drivers; we do not know, we advance, we advance still, and everything seems to issue from the belly of Father Renoir, who that day put on boots to better wade in his little personal universe.

I apologize for this sudden outburst of enthusiasm for Renoir. A journal article should, in its entirety, follow the same formal tone. This tone, starting in speculation, finishes lyrically, drumroll, machine guns at the corners of pages, and the whole thesaurus, gripped by indigestion, spilling out on the lattice of the lines a spoiled cargo of successive approximations. But in this new cinema that is being born, Father Renoir is something of a prophet. He is the precursor, the misunderstood one, the monolith, the inspired one. With [Robert] Bresson, who is the conscience; [Orson] Welles, the fireworks; [Roberto] Rosellini, the cunning, he is the first in a gallery of filmmakers, camera men, cutting their obsessions from clay through their framing, as far removed from a documentary's realism as from theater, true writers of cinema, camera men, glycerine sculptors, rhetoricians on film, set with watchful eyes under their camera, snapping at the faces of the stars and drawing on them, in dotted lines, the lines of their dreams. Not directors, of course, filmmakers, kneading the totality of the objects and beings of the world to turn them from their natural order and oblige them to become landmarks in their figurative universe. Ahead of their time, cursed filmmakers whose works skid down the image-track under the hostile silence of Saturday-evening audiences, they manage to make films for some people, filtered haphazardly, having passed, who knows how, who knows why, through the film wall of current production.

All at once directors, screen writers, decorators, makeup artists, it must be so, and perhaps music composers, and actors of course, cinema

between their hands becomes once again the work of an individual, the reel unfurling a rigorous dialectic of a succession of images, whose theme gets lost, while merging with an incessant transformation of forms and actions that are no longer illustration, but creation itself. Four or five films from today and yesterday thus foreshadow the future age of cinema, which is why we have learned them by heart, showing them again and again on the Moviola to capture their secret; I find significant the story of that boy who had not liked *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, shown on Saturday afternoon in a theater in Champs-Élysées, but suffocated, fascinated by its slow unfolding, put in motion for him only, on a portable screen, as if it was by *reading*, and not *seeing*, that he could discover this unusual work in all its true aspects.

Here is, then, where we are, and what we await, what we believe in: the camera in the right pants pocket, the recording on a picture soundtrack, of twist and turns, and the frantic unfurling of our imaginary universe, the cinema-confession, essay, revelation, message, psychoanalysis, obsession, a machine that reads the words and images of our personal landscape, the totality of things, objects, beings, rocks, cities, the gestures and complaints of a universe returned to the role of material, the art in which one paints with tense faces and writes with the guttural sound of slaughtered seals, the pen that pumps directly from that universe the most formidable vocabulary that an artist has, until now, had at his disposition, human reality dancing on the stage of the universe the ballets of our imagination, the rocks ground and reinstalled following another order, and then we are God, because we remake in our image all of creation, the camera-pen, the art where the entire universe is our medium, and do you think that we will confine ourselves to take only a faithful reflection or an imprint, Oh proponents of realism, when it is only asked of us to sacrifice the excessive human dream by building, with faces and sighs, the cathedrals of our imaginations.

There is a time for modesty, but there is also one for hubris. [Abel] Gance, flouted by a generation of sneering critics, we propose clearing your name. Cinema needs, today, rabid ambition, excess, insanity, idiotic dreams, hypertrophy of the brain, voluntary pride, explosions of the skull, hostile disturbances as consciousness or free will. And then we are done with the contemplation of the great ancestors, are we not, our buttocks tranquilly installed on the faux leather of

movie clubs, those night-school classes. Understand that a fundamental game is being played, in which an art, slowly taking possession of domains reserved, until now, for other forms of expression, becomes the most total and exhaustive means of expression offered to mankind. The future of cinema merges already today with the future of art. It is, in the twentieth century, that unique and privileged form, destined to replace all those that preceded it, and outside of which there will soon be no other expression possible.

Translated by Sofia Rabaté

8

BAZIN ON MARKER (1958)

ANDRÉ BAZIN

Chris Marker, as you may remember, wrote the narration for Bibliothèque Nationale (*Toute la mémoire du monde*) and *Statues Also Die* (which the public still has only been able to see in a version cut to half its length by the censorship board). These incisive, powerful texts, in which cutting irony plays hide and seek with poetry, would be enough to secure their author a privileged place in the field of short filmmaking, currently the liveliest fringe of the French cinema. As the writer of the narrations for these films by his friend [Alain] Resnais, with whom he shares a marvelous understanding, Chris Marker has already profoundly altered the visual relationship between text and image. But his ambition was obviously even more radical, and it became necessary for him to make his own films.

First there was *Sunday in Peking*, which justly won a prize at the 1956 Festival of Tours, and now, at last, there is the extraordinary *Letter from Siberia*. Admirable as *Sunday in Peking* was, it was also slightly disappointing, in that the restrictions of the short format seemed inadequate for such a big subject. And it also has to be said that the images, while often very beautiful, did not supply sufficient documentary material in the end. It left us wanting more. But the seed of the dialectic between word and image that Marker would go on to sow in *Letter from Siberia* was already there. In the new film, it grows to the dimensions appropriate to a feature film, and takes the weight.

A DOCUMENTARY POINT OF VIEW

How to describe *Letter from Siberia*? Negatively, at first, in pointing out that it resembles absolutely nothing that we have ever seen before in films with a documentary basis—films with “a subject.” But then it becomes necessary to say what it is. Flatly and objectively, it is a film report from a Frenchman given the rare privilege of traveling freely in Siberia, covering several thousand kilometers. Although in the last three years we have seen several film reports from French travelers in Russia, *Letter from Siberia* resembles none of them. So, we must take a closer look. I would propose the following approximate description: *Letter from Siberia* is an essay on the reality of Siberia past and present in the form of a filmed report. Or, perhaps, to borrow Jean Vigo’s formulation of *À propos de Nice* (“a documentary point of view”), I would say, an essay documented by film. The important word is “essay,” understood in the same sense that it has in literature—an essay at once historical and political, written by a poet as well.

Generally, even in politically engaged documentaries or those with a specific point to make, the image (which is to say, the uniquely cinematic element) effectively constitutes the primary material of the film. The orientation of the work is expressed through the choices made by the filmmaker in the montage, with the commentary completing the organization of the sense thus conferred on the document. With Marker it works quite differently. I would say that the primary material is intelligence, that its immediate means of expression is language, and that the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence. The usual process is reversed. I will risk another metaphor: Chris Marker brings to his films an absolutely new notion of montage that I will call “horizontal,” as opposed to traditional montage that plays with the sense of duration through the relationship of shot to shot. Here, a given image doesn’t refer to the one that preceded it or the one that will follow, but rather it refers laterally, in some way, to what is said.

FROM THE EAR TO THE EYE

Better, it might be said that the basic element is the beauty of what is said and heard, that intelligence flows from the audio element to the visual.

The montage has been forged from ear to eye. Because of space limitations, I will describe only a single example, which is also the film's most successful moment. Marker presents us with a documentary image that is at once full of significance and completely neutral: a street in Irkutsk. We see a bus going by and workers repairing the roadway, and then at the end of the shot a fellow with a somewhat strange face (or at least, little blessed by nature) who happens to pass in front of the camera. Marker then comments on these rather banal images from two opposed points of view: first, that of the Communist party line, in the light of which the unknown pedestrian becomes "a picturesque representative of the north country," and then in that of the reactionary perspective, in which he becomes "a troubling Asiatic."

This single, thought-provoking antithesis is a brilliant stroke of inspiration in itself, but its wit remains rather facile. It's then that the author offers a third commentary, impartial and minutely detailed, that objectively describes the unhappy Mongol as "a cross-eyed Yak-out." And this time we are way beyond cleverness and irony, because what Marker has just demonstrated is that objectivity is even more false than the two opposed partisan points of view; that, at least in relation to certain realities, impartiality is an illusion. The operation we have observed is thus precisely dialectic, consisting of placing the same image in three different intellectual contexts and following the results.¹

INTELLIGENCE AND TALENT

In order to give the reader a complete sense of this unprecedented enterprise, it remains for me to point out that Chris Marker does not restrict himself to using documentary images filmed on the spot, but uses any and all filmic material that might help his case—including still images (engravings and photos), of course, but also animated cartoons. Like [Norman] McLaren, he does not hesitate to say the most serious things in the most comic way (as in the sequence with the mammoths). There is only one common denominator in this firework display of technique: intelligence. Intelligence and talent. It is only just to also

point out that the photography is by Sacha Vierny, the music the work of Pierre Barbaud, and that the narration is excellently read by Georges Rouquier.²

Translated by David Kehr

NOTES

1. Here the translation does not do full justice to the complexity of Bazin's text. Bazin writes that the commentaries project/send "trois faisceaux intellectuels et recevoir l'écho." This may be loosely translated as the commentaries projecting "three intellectual beams (as in beams of light) onto a single track and receiving their reverberation in return." Bazin's metaphor of beams thus evokes the dynamic and vibrating rays of light projected by cinema. See Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 15.
2. After the publication of this translation in *Film Comment*, Marker responded with the following short letter titled "Lost in Translation":

I generally don't criticize others—I'm not satisfied enough with my own homework. Yet there are limits. When I correctly mentioned my infatuation with "the Elephant's Child" in *Just So Stories* (and I DO specify he comes from *Just So Stories . . .*) any red-blooded Kipling reader would expect that to be translated as ol' Rudyard christened him, the Elephant's Child ("full of 'satiabie curiosity,' by the way . . .). And what pops out instead? "The Elephant Boy"—a title by Zoltan Korda, which, adding insult to injury, refers to the boy, not the elephant. So now people in good faith will quote me saying I identify with Sabu! Big deal. I guess the translator should apologize, not to me, but to elephants at large.

Chris Marker, Paris



CONTEMPORARY POSITIONS



9

IN SEARCH OF THE CENTAUR

The Essay-Film

(1992)

PHILLIP LOPATE

My intention here is to define, describe, survey, and celebrate a cinematic genre that barely exists. As a cinephile and personal essayist, I have an urge to see these two interests combined through the works of filmmakers who commit essays on celluloid. But, while there are cinematic equivalents to practically every literary genre, filmmakers tend to shy away from the essay, and that in itself is intriguing. What it signals to me is that, in spite of Alexandre Astruc's tempting utopian term "caméra-stylo," the camera is not a pencil, and it is rather difficult to think with it in the way an essayist might.

Ever since I began looking for essay-films, the cinema mavens I consulted were quick to suggest candidates that seemed pretty far-fetched, given my idea of what an essay is. I was told, for instance, that [Stan] Brakhage's abstract film-poems, [Miklós] Jancsó's masterly tracking shots, [Andrei] Tarkovsky's transcendental dramas, even the supposedly genre-subversive remake of *Little Shop of Horrors*, were all "essays" of one sort or another. These examples suggested a confusion between a reflective, self-conscious style and an essayistic one. While an essay must reflect or meditate, not all meditative sensibilities are essayistic. Take Brakhage: for all the mythic sweat of his writings or the lyrical satisfaction of his visuals, I am unable to follow a coherent argument or know what he actually thinks about, say, the play of light on an ashtray for forty minutes. So let me propose that, rather than rushing in anxiously

to fill the void, it might be important as a starting-point to face the brute absence—the scarcity—of essay-films.

What exactly do I mean by an essay-film? To answer that I have to step back first and convey my sense of the literary essay. To me, the essay is as much a tradition as a form, and a fairly discrete one: prefigured by classical authors such as Cicero, Plutarch, and Seneca, it crystallized with Montaigne and Bacon; thrived with the English familiar essay of Dr. Johnson, Addison and Steele, Hazlitt, Lamb, Stevenson, Orwell, and Virginia Woolf; propagated an American branch with Emerson, Thoreau, Mencken, and E. B. White, down to our contemporaries Didion, Hoagland, Gass, and Hardwick. There is also a European strand of philosophical essay-writing that extends from Nietzsche to Weil, Benjamin, Barthes, Sartre, Cioran, and others; and a Japanese essay tradition that includes Kenko, Dazai, Tanizaki, and so on.

It is easier to list the essay's practitioners than to fix a definition of its protean form. "A short literary composition on a single subject, usually presenting the personal views of the author," says the *American Heritage Dictionary*. While I defy anyone to boil down Montaigne's rambling late essays to a single subject or characterize them as short, I do agree that the essay offers personal views. That's not to say it is always first-person or autobiographical, but it tracks a person's thoughts as he or she tries to work out some mental knot, however various its strands. An essay is a search to find out what one thinks about something.

Often the essay follows a helically descending path, working through preliminary supposition to reach a more difficult core of honesty. The narrative engine that drives its form is "What do I *really* think about X?" not, "What are the conventional views I am expected to have?" For this reason the essayist often plays the nonconformist, going against the grain of prevailing pieties.

Essayists often cast themselves in the role of the superfluous man/woman, the marginal belle lettrist. The obverse of this humility, Montaigne's "What do I know?" is a mental freedom and a cheekiness in the face of fashion and authority. The essayist wears proudly the confusion of an independent soul trying to grope in isolation toward the truth.

Adorno, in "The Essay as Form," saw precisely the antisystematic, subjective, nonmethodic method of the essay as its radical promise, and he called for modern philosophy to adopt its form, at a time when

authoritative systems of thought had become suspect. Nietzsche asserted famously that all philosophies were disguised psychopathologies. The essayist often begins with a confession of pathology, prejudice, or limitation, and then in the best cases rises to a level of general wisdom that might be generously called philosophy.

Whatever twists and turns occur along its path, and however deep or moral its conclusions, an essay will have little enduring interest unless it also exhibits a certain sparkle or stylistic flourish. It is not enough for the essayist to slay the bull; it must be done with more finesse than butchery. Freshness, honesty, self-exposure, and authority must all be asserted in turn. An essayist who produces magisterial and smoothly ordered arguments but is unable to surprise himself in the process of writing will end up boring us. An essayist who is vulnerable and sincere but unable to project any authority will seem, alas, merely pathetic and forfeit our attention. So it is a difficult game to pull off. Readers must feel included in a true conversation, allowed to follow thorough mental processes of contradiction and digression, yet be aware of a formal shapeliness developing simultaneously underneath.

An essay is a continual asking of questions—not necessarily finding “solutions,” but enacting the struggle for truth in full view. Lukács, in his meaty “On the Nature and Form of the Essay,” wrote: “The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging.”

I will now try to define the qualities that to my mind make an essay-film. Starting with the most questionable proposition first:

1. An essay-film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled, or intertituled. Say all you like about visualization being at the core of thinking. I cannot accept an utterly pure, silent flow of images as constituting essayistic discourse. Ditto for a movie composed of images with incidental background noises, like Robert Gardner’s exquisite *Forest of Bliss* or Johan van der Keuken’s *The Eye Above the Well*; whatever their other virtues, these are not, to my thinking, essay-films. To be honest, I’ve never seen a silent-era movie that I could consider an essay-film. I have been told that Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs of Lenin* transmits its ideational content solely through its visuals. I grant that it delivers a clear ideological

point, as does, say, [Georges] Franju's *Blood of the Beasts*, but conveying a message of politics through images does not alone make an essay—or else we would have to speak of advertisements or political posters as essays. Both the Franju and the Vertov films seem (to use Vertov's label) “song-like,” rather than essayistic.

2. The text must represent a single voice. It may be either that of the director or screenwriter, or if collaborative, then stitched together in such a way as to sound like a single perspective. A mere collage of quoted texts is not an essay. There is nothing wrong with lots of citations or quotes in an essay (think of Montaigne), so long as a unified perspective is asserted around them. I know that Walter Benjamin used to fantasize writing an essay composed wholly of quotes, but he never got around to it, and even if he had, it would not be what draws us to Benjamin, which is his compelling, tender voice and thinking process. When I read an Anthology Film Archives calendar description of an “essay-like” Japanese Super-B in which “some words are taken from Dostoevsky, others from Susan Sontag, Rimbaud, Bob Dylan, creating a string of overlapping images that ultimately build into an innate image,” I don't even have to see it to know that it is not my idea of an essay-film.

3. The text must represent an attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem. I am not sure how to test this criterion; but I know when it's not there. For instance, Jonas Mekas's haunting text in *Lost, Lost, Lost* functions like an incantatory poem, not an essay.

By now it should be clear that I am using the term “essay film” as a description, not an honorific; there are great cinematic works that do not qualify as essay-films, and highly flawed ones that do.

4. The text must impart more than information; it must have a strong, personal point of view. The standard documentary voice-over that tells us, say, about the annual herring yield is fundamentally journalistic, not essayistic. Nor is Luis Buñuel's mischievous *Land Without Bread*, which parodies the faceless, objective documentary perspective while refraining from giving us Buñuel's own private thoughts about Las Hurdes, an essay-film. The missing element becomes immediately apparent when we contrast the film with Buñuel's lovely, idiosyncratic autobiography, *My Last Sigh*.

5. Finally, the text's language should be as eloquent, well written, and interesting as possible. This may seem less a category than an aesthetic judgment. Still, I include it because you would not expect to find, in a collection of the year's best essays, a piece written in condescendingly simple, primer diction; therefore you should not expect to hear such watered-down language in an essay-film. That such wonderful writers of the thirties as Hemingway and Dudley Nichols should have, in attempting to reach the masses, used so cramped and patronizing a discourse in their narratives for Joris Ivens's *The Spanish Earth* and *The 400 Million*, when they could have written genuine essays, seems a sadly missed opportunity.

Those who regard the cinema primarily as a visual medium may object that my five criteria say nothing about the treatment of images. This is not because I mean to depreciate the visual component of movies; quite the contrary, that is what drew me to the medium in the first place, and will always hold me in thrall. I concentrate here on the value of the text, not in order to elevate words above visuals, or to deny the importance of formal visual analysis, but only because I am unconvinced that the handling of the visuals per se dictates whether a work qualifies as an essay-film. I will say more about the relationship between sound and image in this genre later. For now, permit me to look at a few examples.

My first glimpse of the centaur that is the essay-film was Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955). While watching it in college I became aware of an elegance in Jean Cayrol's screenplay language that was intriguingly at odds with the usual sledgehammer treatment of the Holocaust:

Sometimes a message flutters down, is picked up. Death makes its first pick, chooses again in the night and fog. Today, on the same track, the sun shines. Go slowly along with it . . . looking for what? Traces of the bodies that fell to the ground? Or the footmarks of those first arrivals gun-bullied to the camp, while the dogs barked and searchlights wheeled and the incinerator flamed, in the lurid decor so dear to the Nazis?

The voice on the soundtrack was worldly, tired, weighted down with the need to make fresh those horrors that had so quickly turned stale. It was a self-interrogatory voice, like a true essayist's, dubious, ironical, wheeling,

and searching for the heart of its subject matter. “How [to] discover what remains of the reality of these camps when it was despised by those who made them and eluded those who suffered there?” Meanwhile Resnais’s refined tracking shots formed a visual analogue of this patient searching for historical meaning in sites now emptied of their infamous activity.

It may sound grotesque to say this, but I was more delighted with Cayrol’s heady use of language than I was depressed by the subject matter—which in any case I knew all too well from growing up in Jewish Brooklyn. What stuck in my mind for years was that voice-over phrase: “The only sign—but you have to know—is this ceiling scored by fingernails.” That “but you have to know” (*mais il faut savoir*) inserted so cannily in mid-sentence, thrilled me like an unexpected, aggressive pinch: its direct address broke the neutral contract of spectatorship and forced me to acknowledge a conversation, along with its responsibilities.

A similar *frisson* occurred when, some years later, I was watching an otherwise conventional documentary, [Jan] Nemeč’s *Oratorio for Prague*, about the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968. As the visuals displayed Russian tanks advancing on the crowd, the narrator said something like (I am paraphrasing from memory): “Usually we do not know where to pin the blame for massacres; we invoke large historical forces and so on. This time we do know who gave the order to fire. It was Captain —,” and the camera zoomed in on a Soviet Army man’s head. Again I felt sort of an impudent tweak. Not that I had any idea who this Russian officer was, but I loved the sudden way the civilized elegy for Prague Spring was ruptured, and we were catapulted into that more basic Eastern European mentality of tribal scores to settle, long memories, and bitter humor: that Russian pig may have mowed us down, but we hereby name him and show his face—just in case the millennium of justice ever arrives. I later identified that atypically malicious human voice on the commentary as an essayistic intrusion.

There are essayistic elements that color certain films by Chris Marker, Alexander Kluge, Jon Jost, Ralph Arlyck, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Joris Ivens, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dušan Makaveyev, Jean-Marie Straub, Yvonne Rainer, Woody Allen, Wim Wenders, Hartmut Bitomsky, Orson Welles, Ross McElwee, Robb Moss; Alain Resnais’s shorts, [Federico] Fellini’s *Roma*, Michael Moore’s *Roger & Me*, Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston*, Tony Buba’s *Lightning over Braddock*, Morgan Fisher’s

Academy Leader, [Jean] Cocteau's *Testament of Orpheus*, Louis Malle's *My Dinner with André*, Jonathan Demme's *Swimming to Cambodia*, and I'm sure many others that I've forgotten or overlooked. By no means will I be able to discuss all these in the limited space allotted. By zeroing in on a handful, I hope to convey a sense of the potentials and pitfalls of the form, as well as weed out the true essay-films from those that have merely a tincture of essayism.

The one great essayist in the film medium is Chris Marker. *Letter from Siberia* (1958), *The Koumiko Mystery* (1965), and *Sans Soleil* (1983) are his purest essay-films, though it seems that he has an inveterate essayistic tendency that peeps out even in his more interview-oriented documentaries, such as *Le joli mai*, or his compilation films, such as *Grin Without a Cat*. There is a tension in Marker's films between the politically committed, self-effacing, left-wing documentarist style of the thirties/Ivens tendency, and an irrepressibly Montaignesque personal tone. He has a reputation for being elusive and shy—not the best qualities, on the face of it, for a personal essayist—and yet, perhaps because he evolved so diverse and complicated a self (ex-Resistance fighter, novelist, poet, filmmaker), he can emit enough particles of this self to convey a strong sense of individuality and still keep his secrets. He also has the essayist's aphoristic gift, which enables him to assert a collective historical persona, a first-person plural, even when the first-person singular is held in abeyance. Finally, Marker has the essayist's impulse to tell the truth: not always a comfortable attribute for an engagé artist.

A film such as *Letter from Siberia*, which seems at first the sympathetic testimony of a Western fellow-traveler to the Soviet bloc, ends by coiling us in one contradiction after another. What keeps it on the Left is the good-humored, rather than sinister, tone in which Marker unveils the problematic aspects of Siberian life. In a characteristically witty passage, Marker interprets the same footage three different ways, based on three separate ideological positions, thus demystifying the spurious objectivity of documentaries, albeit with a lighter touch than that with which this operation is usually performed. The sequence also points to one of Marker's key approaches as a film-essayist, which is to meditate on the soundtrack, after the fact, on the footage he has shot. In Marker there is often a pronounced time-lag between the quick eye and the slow, digesting mind, which tracks—months or even years later—the meaning of what it has

seen, and this delay accounts for a certain nostalgia for the escaping present and a melancholy over the inherently receding reality of photographed images. It is like that passage in *Tristes Tropiques*, in which Claude Lévi-Strauss laments that the traveler/anthropologist always arrives too early or too late. In Marker's case, his camera arrives in time to record events, but his mind and heart take too long to catch up, not appreciating events sufficiently in the moment.

This time delay also allows Marker to project a historical understanding onto otherwise bland or neutral footage. The most dramatic instance of this occurs in the medal-bestowing ceremony in Cape Verde, Africa, shown in *Sans Soleil*. A year later, Marker tells us on the soundtrack, the president would be deposed by the man he is pinning a medal on. As he explains that the army officer thought he deserved a larger reward than this particular medal, we have the chilling sense that we are watching a bloody tragedy like *Macbeth* unfold at the moment the idea first crossed the upstart's brow. But as Marker tells us elsewhere in the film: "Ah well, history only tastes bitter to those who expect it to taste sugar-coated."

Sans Soleil is Marker's masterpiece, and perhaps the one masterpiece of the essay-film genre. How ironic, then, that Marker chooses the fictive strategy of a woman's voice (Alexandra Stewart's) reading passages from the letters of a friend, Sandor Krasna. This Krasna fellow is obviously a lightly fictionalized stand-in for the author, like Lamb's Elia. The film was assembled mostly during the seventies, a period when Marker was part of a political commune and preferred to downplay his auteurial signature (the line "Conception and editing: Chris Marker," buried in the long list of credits, is the only indication that it is his film), which may partly explain the diffident whimsy of hiding behind "Krasna." On the other hand, putting his comments in the third person has the distancing effect of giving a respect and weight to them they might not have commanded otherwise. As Stewart reads passages from Krasna's letters, prefacing them with "he once wrote to me" or "he said," the effect is almost like a verbal funeral portrait. Marker appears to be anticipating and celebrating, with mordant relish, his own death, projecting a more mythical figure of himself in the process.

"He wrote: 'I've been around the world several times, and now only banality interests me. On this trip I've tracked it like a bounty hunter.'" Place and homesickness are natural subjects for the essay-film: *Sans Soleil*

is a meditation on place in the jet age, where spatial availability confuses the sense of time and memory. Unlike Wim Wenders, who keeps whining (in *Tokyo Ga* and elsewhere) that every place is getting to look like every other place—an airport—Marker has an appetite for geography and local difference; his lament is that, if anything, he feels at home in too many places. Particularly drawn to Japan, he visits his favorite Tokyo haunts, and the narrator reflects: “These simple joys he had never felt on returning to a house, a home, but twelve million anonymous inhabitants could supply him with them.” Marker/Krasna is a man of the crowd, who revels in anonymity; a romantic who in San Francisco visits all the locations Hitchcock used in *Vertigo*; a collector of memories (“I have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering”) who explicitly associates recollecting with rewriting.

Marker’s earlier Japanese film, *The Koumiko Mystery*, can be read as a sort of poignant power struggle between a lively young woman living in the present and a middle-aged filmmaker determined to turn her into past and memory through the process of infatuation. He sucks on her vitality, he “rewrites” her by meditating on her filmed image, thereby, perhaps, possessing her and her mystery in the only way he can.

Sans Soleil, a larger work, is about everything but the proverbial kitchen sink: time, emptiness, Japan, Africa, video games, comic strips, Sei Shōnagon’s lists, pet burials, relics, political demonstrations, death, images, appearances, suicide, the future, Tarkovsky, Hitchcock, religion, and the absolute. What unites it is Marker’s melancholy-whimsical, bacheloric approach to the fragments of the modern world, looking at them moment by moment and trying to make at least a poetic sense of them. “Poetry is born of insecurity,” he says, “and the impermanence of a thing,” at which point we see a samurai sword fight on television.

Given Marker’s sterling example, and the video access “revolution,” and with more and more conceptual artists and defrocked academics taking to Portapak and cheap movie rigs, I half-expected to see a whole school of essay-films develop in the seventies and eighties. Not only did the technical potential exist, but a distribution circuit of underground venues, colleges, and museums was in place, promoting “personal cinema” as an alternative to the commercial product. But the essay-film never really arrived. What took its place, instead, was an explosion of films that

incorporated essayistic throat-clearings as but one of many noises in an echo chamber of aesthetic cross-reference that ultimately “subverted,” to use current jargon, the very notion of a single personal voice.

It was the bad luck of the essay-film that, just as its technical moment arrived, the intellectual trends of the hour—deconstruction, post-modernism, appropriation art, the new forms of feminism and Marxism retrofitted with semiotic media criticism—questioned the validity of the single authorial voice, preferring instead to demonstrate over and over how much we are conditioned and brainwashed by the images around us. Not that these points are invalid, but they mute the essayistic voice: for if the self is nothing but a social construct, and individuality a bourgeois illusion intended to maintain the status quo, then the hip, “transgressive” thing to do is satiric quotation, appropriation, and collage.

Some of the bright, experimental young filmmakers, such as Abigail Child, Laurie Dunphy, and Anita Thatcher, produced “found footage” films, which mocked the patriarchy by deconstructionist editing. Others such as Trinh T. Minh-ha made what I would call “text films” (*Reassemblage*, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*), which surrounded a subject such as colonialism or oppression of women through a reshuffling of voices and doctored footage. Steve Fagin’s videos on Lou-Andreas Salomé and Flaubert’s *Bouvard and Pécuchet* used [Hans-Jürgen] Syberberg-like puppet stagings, with results that were intriguing, campy, and elusive. DeDe Halleck and Anthony McCall dismantled and slyly reenacted Freud’s Dora case in such a way that the filmmakers’ politics were never in doubt, but their own interpretation of the case remained unclear.

These films are frightfully intellectual and effective up to a point in circling their chosen themes; and yet the last thing any of their creators would do is tell us directly, consistently what they actually think about their chosen subject.

A recent “collage film” by Yvonne Rainer, *Privilege* (1990), is a case in point: it mixes dramatic scenes, found footage, fake interviews, written texts, documentary sequences, and so forth, in a stimulating, braided exploration of menopause and racism. Jonathan Rosenbaum, defending this film in the *Chicago Reader*, wrote:

Approached as a narrative, Yvonne Rainer’s sixth feature takes forever to get started and an eternity to end. In between its ill-defined borders,

the plot itself is repeatedly interrupted, endlessly delayed or protracted, frequently relegated to the back burner and all but forgotten. . . . Yet approached as an essay, *Privilege* unfolds like a single multi-faceted argument, uniformly illuminated by white-hot rage and wit—a cacophony of voices and discourses to be sure, but a purposeful and meaningful cacophony in which all the voices are speaking to us as well as one another.

Much as I sympathize with Rosenbaum's position, he is almost saying that all you have to do is recategorize some plotless stew as an essay and everything immediately belongs. Even essays have plots! Now it so happens that I admire Rainer's film, but I still cannot bring myself to accept a "cacophony of voices and discourses" as an essay. When I left the theater I was still unsure what exactly Rainer's argument was about menopause, or what she was trying to tell me about the relation between it and racism, other than that both involved feeling like an outsider. She would probably say, "I'm not trying to tell you anything, I'm trying to get you to think." Fine; so does an essay, but an essay also tells us what its author thinks.

Jon Jost is another independent filmmaker who has experimented on and off with essayistic elements. I recently checked out Jost's *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes* (1972–1974), which the filmmaker himself refers to as an "essay-film," and found it insufferably irritating. In part my reaction is to Jost's solemn, humorless, self-hating, tediously lecturing persona. Granted, all essayists have the option to bring out the obnoxious aspect of their personality, but they usually balance it with *something* charming; in Jost's case I wanted to hide under the seat every time he came on screen. Still, if he had made a true essay-film I could have applauded. But instead he created one more hybrid collage, with Vietnam atrocity stories and nightly-news broadcasts quoted simultaneously for ironic effect; with dictionary definitions suggesting something or other about linguistics; with fulminations against imperialism; cinema vérité interviews of his friends and lover; and large, smugly self-reflexive dollops informing us that this was a movie, as if we didn't know. Jost's auto-biographical passages when he addresses the camera suggest the most potential for an essay-film; but he makes such vague, unprobing statements about his life or relationships—dismissing his parents in one sentence apiece as a war criminal and a cipher, respectively—that the self-analysis comes off as evasive and shallow. Perhaps all this is intentional; a self-portrait of an

unlikable fellow. It finally seems to me, though, that Jost has not really attempted to understand himself, but simply subsumed his self-portrait in larger and more forgiving sociohistorical categories. (I am told that Jost redeemed himself with a much better essay-film called *Plain Talk and Common Sense*. If so, I suppose I look forward to being proved wrong.)

Clearly, the chief influence on early Jost, and indeed on most independent filmmakers who have selectively used essayistic maneuvers only to abandon or undercut them, is Jean-Luc Godard. Now, Godard may be the greatest film artist of our era, I will not dispute that. But strictly considering the development of the essay-film, his influence has been a mixed blessing. The reason is that Godard is the master of hide and seek, the ultimate tease. Just when you think you've got him, he wriggles away. When he whispers observations in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, how can we be sure those are really his opinions? He is too much the modernist, fracturing, dissociating, collaging, to be caught dead expressing his views straightforwardly. (This raises an interesting side issue: to what degree is the modernist aesthetic itself inimical to the essay? Certainly the essay allows for a good deal of fragmentation and disjunction, and yet it keeps weaving itself whole again, resisting alienation, if only through the power of a synthesizing, personal voice with its old-fashioned humanist assumptions.)

Godard has often used the word "researches" in describing his filmic approach, particularly after 1968. "Researches" implies a scientific attitude, enabling Godard to present, say, deadpan ten-minute shots of an assembly line, ostensibly invoking, through "real time," the tedium that will encourage us to empathize with the factory worker. (That it does not, alas, but only makes us impatient with the screen, illustrates what I would call the fallacy of real-time magic thinking.) Generally speaking, "researches" is a good term for Godard's nonfiction efforts, not "essays." The two possible exceptions are *Ici et Ailleurs* (1974) and *Letter to Jane* (1972).

Ici et Ailleurs (*Here and Elsewhere*) is both Godard's surprisingly sincere effort to reflect on the frustration of making a movie about the Palestinian struggle, and a typically modernist attempt "to weave a text and to tear it to pieces, to build a fiction and to ruin its pretensions" (André Bleikasten). Two voices, a "He" and a "She," chase each other on the soundtrack, saying things like: "Too simple and too easy to divide the world in two. Too easy to simply say that the wealthy are wrong and the

poor are right. Too easy. Too easy and too simple. Too easy and too simple to divide the world in two.” Godard is here using the Gertrude Stein method of incantatory repetition and slight variation to create a cubist experience of language. It is effective in making us contemplate whether a truth is no less valid for being simple. But I would hardly call the text, with its blurted slogans undercut by verbal arabesques, an attempt at reasoned essayistic discourse.

Letter to Jane, on the other hand, is a closely reasoned, if nasty, provocation by two male-bonded ingrates, Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, against the female movie star who so generously collaborated with them on their otherwise unbudgetable feature, *Tout Va Bien*. There is something so preposterously unfair about their impersonal, didactic language as Godard and Gorin, like thought-police interrogators, critique the supposedly neocolonialist, ethnocentric angle of Jane Fonda’s head as she appears to listen sympathetically to a Vietnamese peasant. *Letter to Jane* does open up new possibilities for essay-films, though, by audaciously resisting any pressure to dazzle the eye (the visuals consist mostly of the Fonda news-paper photo, with a few other stills thrown in), and allowing the voice-over to dominate unapologetically. Also, *Letter to Jane* solves one of the key problems of essay-films, what to do for visuals, by making semiotic image-analysis its very subject. The result is, like it or not, an essay-film. And, for all its Robespierrean coldness, I mostly like it, if only because of its unshakable confidence in the power of expository prose.

Godard’s ex-partner, Gorin, went on to develop a much more truly personal-essay film style in his own features *Poto and Cabengo* (1982) and *Routine Pleasures* (1985). In *Poto and Cabengo* Gorin takes as his departure point a seemingly sensationalistic true story about two sisters who invent their own way of speaking and turns it into a meditation on language acquisition. Just as Joan Didion and other New Journalism-trained essayists injected themselves into the story, so Gorin’s narration inserts his own doubts and confusions about what sort of film he is trying to make, thereby interrogating not only himself but the assumptions of the documentary genre. While it has become a cliché of the New Documentary to make the difficulty of getting the necessary footage the gist of the finished film, Gorin brings to this device a flexible, self-mocking voice (the expatriate filmmaker with the French accent, too smart and lazy for his own good) that is very engaging. In *Routine Pleasures* he dispenses entirely

with a news “hook,” cheekily alternating between two things he happened to take footage of, toy-train hobbyists and painter-film critic Manny Farber, and trying to weave a connection between these unrelated subjects (something about re-creating the world ideally?), if for no other reason than to justify his having spent European television-production money. The result is a perversely willed, unpredictable piece about the thin line between art and hobbyism (the film itself seems a demonstration of this), in which we learn still more about Gorin’s inertial, seductively intelligent personality. By drawing closer to himself as a subject, however, he raises the ante of our expectation: for instance, having acknowledged Farber as his mentor, Gorin’s discreet refusal to be more candid about Farber’s personality and the dynamics of mentorship leaves one disappointed. In both features, Gorin seems hot on the trail of the essay-film, but is still too coy and withholding about sharing the fullness of his thoughts.

One of the natural subjects for personal essay-films is movie making itself, since it is often what the filmmaker knows and cares about most. There is already a whole subgenre of essay-films about the Movie That Could Have Been, or Was, or Could Still Be. Pasolini’s *Notes Toward an African “Orestes”* (1970) is a sort of celluloid notebook into which the filmmaker put his preliminary ideas about casting, music, or global politics for a project that never came to pass. Maybe by shooting these “notes,” he used up the enthusiasm that might have gone into filming the classic itself. Given the murkiness of his *Medea*, I would just as soon watch an essay-film of Pasolini thinking about how he would do an *Orestes* in Africa as actually view the finished product. The opening sequences are promising: he casts by shooting passersby in the street, telling us, “This young man could be Orestes”; shows a newsreel of an African military parade, saying “These could be Greek soldiers”; and conjectures hypothetical locations: “This could be the camp for the Greeks.” He delivers ambiguous touristic impressions, such as “The terrible aspect of Africa is its solitude, the monstrous form that Nature can assume.” He tells himself, “The protagonist of my film . . . must be the People,” and keeps circling around the question of a chorus. So far so good. But then the film abandons these thoughts for ten minutes of Gato Barbieri noodling around in rehearsal, and an awkward, staged discussion in which Pasolini asks a group of puzzled African exchange students how they feel about the *Oresteia*.

What makes *Notes Toward an African "Orestes"* so tantalizing and frustrating is that a narrator of the intellectual and moral stature of Pasolini lets only slivers of his mind show through. Were he to have written an essay on the same subject, he would surely have struggled harder to pull his thoughts into focus. (Pasolini could be a very compelling and persuasive essayist.) The final collage-form seems dictated clearly by the footage available at editing time, rather than any carefully evolved effort to understand. J. Hoberman sees it otherwise: "*Orestes* is a movie that requires an active viewer, the deconstructive narrative demands that you put Pasolini's film together in your head." I am all for the active viewer, but this seems to me letting Pasolini off the hook. "Deconstructive" should not become an all-purpose excuse for presenting unresolved, thrown-together footage.

A much more satisfying essay-film about the process of movie making and what might have been is Orson Welles's *Filming "Othello"* (1978). This brilliant, if rarely seen, self-exegesis consists, for the most part, of Welles seated with his back to a television monitor, talking to the camera in order to have, as he puts it, a "conversation" about the making of *Othello*. Conversation is, of course, the heart of the personal essay tradition; Welles could hardly be naïve on this point, having claimed that he read Montaigne every day. He was certainly steeped in the French master's undulating, pungent discourse.

A famous raconteur and compulsively watchable actor, Welles through his own charisma solves the sticky problem of what to do about visuals in an essay-film, by simply filling the screen with himself talking. Suddenly we are face to face with our essayist, rather than hearing a dis-embodied voice. Cutaways to sequences of *Othello* (reedited), a relaxed luncheon discussion of the play between Welles and actors Michael MacLiammoir and Hilton Edwards, and footage of Welles addressing a Boston audience, provide sufficient visual variety to his talking torso.

What is so refreshing about his talk is that he is speaking in an honest, maximally intelligent way about things he loves, Shakespeare and filmmaking. This Welles bears little resemblance to the arch poseur of late-night talk shows. Indeed, the audience is privileged to eavesdrop on a genius of the dramatic arts as he shares his thoughts and doubts about one of his most important productions. He is both musing to himself and seeming to dictate an essay aloud (though it was probably written

out beforehand). On the other hand, he is also giving a performance, and we cannot help but judge him simultaneously as an actor, the way he whips his head from side to side or raises his eyebrows. Our awareness of the contrivance behind this seemingly artless conversation has been enhanced by Jonathan Rosenbaum's research on the making of *Filming "Othello"*: apparently it was shot over a number of years, with changing television crews operating under Welles's tight direction.¹

Welles tells us about the vicissitudes of filming *Othello*: how he was approached by an Italian producer who said "We must make *Othello*"; how he had originally planned to shoot in a studio with fluid long shots and long takes, but after the Italian producer went bankrupt he was forced into improvised location shooting all over the map and quick editing to cover the shifts; how he had to hammer sardine cans into armor; and other war stories. He tells it exotically, "like a tale from Casanova," careening back and forth in his chronology, getting ahead of himself, digressing from meaty Shakespearian analysis to anecdote to critical response. "There is no way to avoid these—lapses into autobiography," he apologizes, as he begs our pardon later for rambling and failing to cite negative reviews. These apologies help to establish trust and rapport, in the classical manner of the personal essayist.

Vlada Petric notes that, after reciting soliloquies of both Othello and Iago, as "a kind of compensation for the fact that the sound in the original print is poor," Welles "admits that his Othello 'does not do full justice to the play'; nevertheless he claims that the film is among his favorite works. . . . 'I think that I was too young for this part, and I wish I could have done it over again.'"² The present film is, in a sense, the "doing it over."

Welles's other so-called essay-film, *F for Fake* (1975), is much less successful as such, largely because Welles seems more intent on mystifying and showing off his magician-Prospero persona than in opening his mind to us. I am never convinced that Welles is working hard to say all he can on the subject of counterfeit art; he is so taken up with a glib defense of artifice that he forgets to convey his own sincerity, something an essayist must do. He would rather have our tepid agreement that all art is a kind of lie than move us. Academic film critics, who overrate cinematic self-reflexivity and attention to the narrative "frame," adore the cheap joke he pulls on us when he promises that everything in the next hour will be true, then makes up some cock-and-bull story toward the end, without

having told us the sixty minutes were up. Still, I'm grateful for *F for Fake*, because its florid, windbag Welles makes me appreciate all the more the wonderfully civilized, humane Welles of *Filming "Othello."*

Before he died, Welles was planning to make yet another cinematic self-analysis, *Filming "The Trial."* If you count in earlier Welles projects with essayistic elements, such as *Portrait of Gina* and *It's All True*, it is clear that he had become seriously devoted to the essay-film. Welles said himself in a 1982 interview: "The essay does not date, because it represents the author's contribution, however modest, to the moment at which it was made."

It could be said that all first-person narration tends toward the essay, in the sense that, as soon as an "I" begins to define his or her position in and view of the world, the potential for essayistic discourse comes into play. First-person narration in film is complicated by the disjunction between the subjective voice on the soundtrack and the third-person, material objectivity that the camera tends to bestow on whatever it photographs, like it or not. This tension has been cunningly exploited by the filmmakers who are drawn to the first person, such as Robert Bresson, Joseph Mankiewicz, and Woody Allen. First-person narration in movies often brings with it a bookish quality, partly because it has so often been used in movies adapted from novels, but also because it superimposes a thoughtful perspective, looking backward on the supposed "now" of the film. Even an *I Walked with a Zombie* begins to seem studied and literary the moment we hear Frances Dee's narrative voice orienting us to events that began in the past.

First-person narrative also awakens the appetite for confession. Think of the strange accents of Meryl Streep's Isak Dinesen in the first *Out of Africa* voice-over: we wait for the shaky self-protectiveness of that voice to break down, become more unguarded, and the remainder of the film plays cat-and-mouse with this confessional promise (largely broken, it turns out).

One good place to start looking for shards of the essay-film might be movies with first-person narrators. Particularly autobiographical films, like Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* and *Backyard*, Michael Moore's *Roger & Me*, Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* and *Sink or Swim*, Ralph Arlyck's films, Tony Buba's *Lightning over Braddock*, Wim Wenders's

Lightning over Water and *Tokyo Ga*, Cocteau's *Testament of Orpheus*, and Joris Ivens's *Story of the Wind*.

Just as the diary is rightly considered a literary form distinct from the essay, so diary films such as *Sherman's March* and *David Holzman's Diary* obey a different structure than essay-films by following a linear chronology and reacting to daily events, rather than following a mental argument. Still, there are many overlaps between the two, as McElwee's thoughtful, digressive narrator in the wonderful *Sherman's March* (1986) demonstrates. Here McElwee plays with self-irony, ostensibly bidding for our sympathy while asking viewers to judge his bachelor persona as rationalizing and self-absorbed. Indeed, the last quarter of the film turns into a contemporary morality play in which the narrator relinquishes his power of judgment to his friend Charlene, who becomes the voice of wisdom and vitality, telling him what he is doing wrong with women. This pat turn-about does provide a conclusion, but it also reinforces the suspicion that McElwee wants us to read his "Ross" the way we would a fictional, self-deluding character.

Use of the first person invokes the potential for an unreliable narrator, a device we usually think of as reserved strictly for fiction; essayists from Hazlitt to Edward Abbey have toyed with a persona balanced between charm and offensiveness, alternately inviting reader closeness and alienation. The difference is that essayists keep the faith with their narrators, while McElwee finally leaves "Ross" hanging out to dry. It is an effective, even purgatively ego-slaying strategy, but it undermines the work's identity as an essay-film: however deluded he may be, the essayist must have the final word in his own essay.

Michael Moore's *Roger & Me* (1989) promises at first to be a model essay-film. The filmmaker sets up, in the first twenty minutes, a very strong, beguiling autobiographical narrator: we see his parents, the town where he grew up, his misadventures in San Francisco cappuccino bars. Then, disappointingly, Moore phases out the personal side of his narrator, making way for a cast of "colorful" interviewees: the rabbit lady, the evicting sheriff, the mystic ex-feminist, the apologist for General Motors. True, he inserts a recurring motif of himself trying to confront Roger Smith, GM's chairman, but this faux-naïf suspense structure becomes too mechanically farcical, and in any case none of these subsequent appearances deepen our sense of Moore's character or mind.

It is as though the filmmaker hooked us by offering himself as bait in order to draw us into his anticorporate capitalist sermon. The factual distortions of *Roger & Me*, its cavalier manipulations of documentary verisimilitude in the service of political polemic, have been analyzed at great length. I still find the film winning, up to a point, and do not so much mind its “unfairness” to the truth (especially as the national news media regularly distort in the other direction), as I do its abandonment of what had seemed a very promising essay-film. Yet perhaps the two are related: Moore’s decision to fade out his subjective, personal, “Michael” seems to coincide with his desire to have his version of the Flint, Michigan, story accepted as objective truth.

It must also be said that, unlike a true personal essayist, Moore resists the burden of self-understanding, electing to ridicule the inanities of the rich while not being hard enough on himself. The issue is not whether *Roger & Me* betrays the essay-film, a form that barely exists and that Moore may have no conception of. The real question is why filmmakers find it so difficult to follow a train of thought, using their own personal voice and experience to guide them. In Moore’s case, there seems to be a more pressing political agenda. But another reason could be the huge difference between writing about and filming oneself. Filmmakers usually choose that career with the expectation that they can stay behind the camera, and I suspect that immense reticence or bashfulness may set in once a filmmaker who has taken center screen as the governing consciousness and main performer of an autobiographical film realizes how exposed he or she is. (And this exposure may far exceed what a literary essayist feels. Hence the dance of coyness and retreat, mentioned earlier in regard to Gorin.)

Roger & Me also raises the question of to what extent an essay-film can welcome and ingest interviews while still being true to its essayistic nature. At what point will the multiplicity of voices threaten a unified presentation of “the personal views of the author”? Of course, a film can be composed entirely of interviews and still exhibit a personal vision—Errol Morris’s or Marcel Ophuls’s documentaries, for example. But a personal vision is not necessarily a personal essay. Errol Morris’s works, eccentric and personal as they are, do not seem to me essay-films. We can only guess what he is thinking as he exhibits the weird human specimens in *Vernon, Florida*, or *Gates of Heaven*, and our not knowing how we are

supposed to interpret them is precisely the ambiguous point. Similarly, other nonfiction movies with essay flavorings, such as Marker's *Le joli mai* or [Jean] Rouch and [Edgar] Morin's *Chronique d'un été*, employ a degree of interview material that would seem, at least in my mind, to tip the scales away from the essay-film and toward the documentary.

The relationship between documentary and essay-film is uneasy at best. They are often mistaken for each other; frequently, a work starts off as an essay-film and then runs for cover in the protective grooves of the documentary. At times, however, they behave like two different beasts.

When Michael Moore made a splash with *Roger & Me*, he was at pains to tell reporters, somewhat churlishly, that he hated most documentaries and the standards of ethical documentary procedure. He also left the impression that he had invented a whole new type of movie, instead of acknowledging that there were other autobiographical filmmakers such as McElwee, Buba, and Arlyck who had gotten there first.

To my knowledge Ralph Arlyck is, besides Marker, the one consistent essay-film maker. Arlyck, whose last two movies, *An Acquired Taste* (1981) and *Current Events* (1989), were both shown at the New York Film Festival (and hardly anywhere else), reported he was once on a panel discussion and described himself as a maker of essay-films, at which point some industry producer said with an incredulous sneer, "You mean like—*Thoreau*?" After that, Arlyck has been leery of using the term "essay-film," which may be even more box-office poison than "documentary."

An Acquired Taste is, in fact, a hilarious half-hour personal essay about the filmmaker's lack of commercial success, his jealousy and career envy, as seen against the American dream of rising to the top. Arlyck pokes fun at his pathetic go-getter attempts: there is one excruciating scene in which we watch him type out a grant application. "Increasingly I feel like the Ferdinand the Bull of filmmaking," he concludes. He prefers to stay home, play with the kids, and make mild little films, while his wife flies off to France to defend her doctoral thesis. The Arlyck character comes across as a likable schlemiel, cousin to Woody Allen—not necessarily because he is influenced by Allen but because both are drawing from the same well of urban Jewish self-deprecating humor. (Indeed, listening to Woody Allen's digressive, epigrammatic narrators in films such as *Annie Hall*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, or his third of *New York Stories*, I have often thought that with a little push Woody could have ended up a natural essay-film

maker—to the great chagrin of his bankbook. Perhaps his most original trick has been to smuggle contraband essayism into the fiction film.)

Arlyck, meanwhile, unabashedly and essayistically sticks to a single subject and presents his personal views about it. His feature-length *Current Events* tackles the question of how an ordinary individual should respond to the problems of the planet. It is essentially a film about a veteran of sixties' protests—an over-the-hill ex-hippie, his sons call him—twenty years later, reflecting on the meaning of political commitment in the face of overwhelming world need and his own ideological skepticism. Since the subject is so much weightier than career vanity, the tone is more serious, and Arlyck strays farther from home, interviewing people whose persistent commitment to doing good he finds exemplary—if impossible for him to imitate. He always brings it back, like a good personal essayist, to his own daily experiences, the examination of his own conscience. And there is the same intact Arlyck persona: the independent filmmaker and family man, puzzled, ineffectual, sardonic, decent, and good-humored.

Of late, many women filmmakers have been making autobiographical films, using family memoirs as a springboard for personal reflection. Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* (1990), even more than her earlier *The Ties That Bind* (1984), is particularly noteworthy, in its complex, harrowing exploration of her relationship to her father. Though the film resembles a structuralist film-poem as much as an essay, Friedrich certainly demonstrates the possibility of making essay-films from a feminist perspective.

Another strong essay-film (or rather, videotape) is Vanalyne Green's *A Spy in the House That Ruth Built* (1989)—exemplary in its personal exploration of a subject (baseball), in the singularity of its first-person text, and in its self-mocking humor and elegant language. Green weaves entertaining connections between the national pastime, erotic fantasies, and the family romance. Here she is plotting her wardrobe for a shoot at the ball-park:

I wanted to go as a tramp, to look as if my head just left the pillow, and the gentle touch of a fingertip on my shoulder would topple me back into bed, where I would lie, framed seductively by the finest cotton and pastel pink sheets, smelling simultaneously of adult sex and a newborn baby's powdered bottom. . . . But how not to abandon that other part of myself—the adult woman with the twelve-page vita—while a child inside

me was willing to whore her soul for a minute of eye contact with big Dave Winfield?

The visuals show us a witty assemblage composed of baseball paraphernalia, brief interviews, and comically homemade, modest visual tropes. If the text seems wrenched at times into a too-programmatically feminist line, Green recognizes the danger and stops herself, saying: “The more rhetoric, the less I said about me.” In the end, she manages to say a lot about herself, in a manner that is broadly generous, forgiving, and very appealing.

I began by pointing to the rarity of essay-films, without explaining why this was. Let me try to do that now.

First, there is the somewhat intractable nature of the camera as a device for recording thoughts: its tendency to provide its own thoughts, in the form of extraneous filmed background information, rather than always clearly expressing what is passing through the filmmaker’s mind. True, the filmmaker may also register his thoughts through editing; but this does not remove the problem of the promiscuously saturated image.

Second, there may be, as Stanley Cavell has suggested, a sort of resistance on the part of motion pictures to verbal largesse. Screenplays today employ skeletal dialogue, following the received wisdom that the screen cannot “sop up” much language. Whether this is because of an inherent property in the medium, or because its limits have never been sufficiently tested (think of the novelty of [Éric] Rohmer’s *My Night at Maud’s* when it first appeared—a real “talkie!”), the amount of rich, ample language a film can support remains uncertain.

Then there are commercial considerations: just as essay collections rarely sell in bookstores, so essay-films are expected to have little popularity; and films, after all, require a larger initial investment than books. Still, this uncommercial aspect hasn’t exactly stopped the legion of experimental filmmakers, whose work often takes a more esoteric, impenetrable form than would an intelligently communicative essay-film.

Another reason has to do with the collaborative nature of the medium: it is easier to get a group of people to throw in with you on a fictional story or social documentary or even a surrealist vision, than to enlist their support in putting your personal essayistic discourse on screen.

Of course, many independent filmmakers receive grants to make 16mm or video works that are ostensibly personal, and that they shoot or assemble alone; why don't *they* make more essay-films? I suspect there is a self-selection process attracting certain types of people into filmmaking as an art form: they revere images, want to make magic, and are uncomfortable with the pinning down of thoughts that an essay demands. You would probably stand a better chance of getting a crop of good essay-films if you gave out cameras and budgets to literary essayists and told them to write their next essay for the screen, than if you rounded up the usual independent filmmakers and asked them to make essay-films.

I anticipate a howl of protest: if what you are after is a polished literary text, why not simply write an essay? Why make a film at all? Don't you understand that the film medium has certain properties of its own? Yes, I do understand, but I continue to believe that it is worth exploring this underused form, which may give us something that neither literary essays nor other types of films can.

It seems to me that three procedures suggest themselves for the making of essay-films: (1) To write or borrow a text and go out and find images for it. I do not necessarily mean "illustration," which casts the visual component in a subordinate position. The images and spoken text can have a contrapuntal or even contradictory relation to each other. In Edgardo Cozarinsky's *One Man's War* (1984), the text, based on the late Ernst Jünger's diary as an officer in Hitler's army occupying Paris, is juxtaposed with archival footage from the period. The result is a stimulating clash between the ironic sensibilities of a left-wing émigré filmmaker and a displaced reactionary aesthete. But this is not really an essay-film, because Cozarinsky undercuts Jünger's words without providing a record of his own thoughts. (2) The filmmaker can shoot, or compile previously shot, footage and then write a text that meditates on the assembled images. This is often Marker's approach. (3) The filmmaker can write a little, shoot a little, write a bit more, and so on—the one process interacting with the other throughout.

I do not know whether these processes, chance, or the immaturity of the genre are to blame, but so far, almost none of the examples I would consider essay-films have boasted superlative visuals. Serviceable, yes, but nothing that could compare with the shimmering visual nobility of a dramatic film by [Kenji] Mizoguchi, [Michelangelo] Antonioni, or Max Ophüls.

The one exception I know of is *Night and Fog*, a case in which the separation between visual stylist (Resnais) and screenwriter (Cayrol) may have helped both images and text to reach the same level of artistic ripeness. Even when a great cinematic stylist like Welles tries his hand at an essay-film, the visuals are nowhere near as interesting as those in his narrative features. *F for Fake* suffers from too much François Reichenbach, who shot most of its documentary material, and *Filming "Othello"* is a conventional-looking, talking-heads production made for German television. Marker employs a visual style that is notationally engaging and decentered (and occasionally even mournfully beautiful, as in *Le joli mai*, when he had the budget for better cameramen); but for the most part, his visuals lack the syntactical rigor and elegance of his language. Arlyck's texts have considerable complexity and charm, but his visuals remain only one cut above the usual neutral documentary or hand-held cinema vérité. It is almost as though when the part of the brain that commands a sophisticated rational discourse springs into action, the visual imagination becomes sluggish, passive, and less demanding.

Here it might be argued by some that the power of cinematic images springs from the unconscious mind, not from rational thought processes—that you need access to the irrational, the dreamscape, to make visually resonant films. I wonder. So much of film theory is prejudiced in favor of the oneiric that I doubt if I have the courage to take on these biases. All I know is that many of the film images that move me most reflect a detachment, serenity, or philosophical resignation toward the wakened world that I can only think of as rational. I do not want to sound too dualistic by implying that essays are written only with the rational mind; certainly I am aware in my own writing of tapping into unconscious currents for imagery or passion. But I still say that the rational component predominates in the essay, which is a form par excellence for the display of reasoning and reflection. So too should be the essay-film.

I am suddenly aware of many larger questions that my discussion may have failed to confront, and of my inability as a mere scribbler to answer any of them. Questions like: What *is* thinking? What is rationality? Is it possible to think exclusively in visual terms, or exclusively in language, without images? Will there ever be a way to join word and image together on screen so that they accurately reflect their initial participation in the arrival of a thought, instead of merely seeming mechanically

linked, with one predominating over or fetched to illustrate the other? Finally, is it possible that the literary essay and the essay-film are inherently different—the essay-film is bound to follow a different historical development, given the strengths and limitations of the cinematic medium? Have I been doing an injustice to the essay-film by even asking it to perform like a literary essay?

Look: it is perfectly all right if, after having read this, you decide to call a collage film like [Dušan] Makavejev's *WR*, or a duet in which the filmmaker disclaims agreement with the spoken text, like Cozarinsky's *One Man's War*, or a symphony of interviewed voices like Marcel Ophüls's *The Sorrow and the Pity*, or a dream vision like Brakhage's mythopoetic *Faust*—essay-films, just so long as you understand that you are using the term "essay" in a way that has very little relation to the traditional, literary meaning of the term.

I think this sudden frequency with which the term "essay-film" is being optimistically and loosely invoked in cinematic circles is not surprising. Right now, there is a hunger in film aesthetics and film practice for the medium to jump free of its genre corral, and to reflect on the world in a more intellectually stimulating and responsible way. When a good film with nonfiction elements comes along that provokes thought, such as Rainer's *Privilege*, it is understandably hailed as an essay-film. And it may turn out in the end that there is no other way to do an essay-film, that the type of essay-film I have been calling for is largely impractical, or overly restrictive, or at odds with the inherent nature of the medium. But I will go on patiently stoking the embers of the form as I envision it, convinced that the truly great essay-films have yet to be made, and that this succulent opportunity awaits the daring cine-essayists of the future.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Orson Welles's Essay Films and Documentary Fictions: A Two-Part Speculation," in *Discovering Orson Welles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 129–145.
2. Vlada Petric, "Filming 'Othello,'" *Film Library Quarterly* (1980).

10

THE POLITICAL IM/PERCEPTIBLE IN THE ESSAY FILM

Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*
(1996)

NORA M. ALTER

The essay's innermost formal law is heresy. Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which is orthodoxy's secret and objective aim to keep invisible

—THEODOR ADORNO¹

Once more, but in a different sense, filmmaking has to go underground, disperse itself, make itself invisible. . . . Only by turning itself into "writing" in the largest possible sense can film preserve itself as [what Harun Farocki calls] "a form of intelligence."

—THOMAS ELSAESSER²

Just as weapons and armor developed in unison throughout history, so visibility and invisibility now began to evolve together, eventually producing invisible weapons that make things visible.

—PAUL VIRILIO³

INTRODUCTION

Harun Farocki's *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1989)⁴ is an essay film that articulates, as its genre tends to do, the formal and aesthetic with the historical and

political, in this case in the context of modern—increasingly postmodern—mass media, technoculture, and technowarfare. On the one hand, *Bilder* is a specifically West German leftist response to events and trends of the 1980s; on the other, it projects us both back to the perennial problem of the relation between “vision and visuality” and forward into an uncertain future dominated by technical developments—developments such as the digital image manipulation and synthesis recently dubbed “Scitex” and “the reconfigured eye”⁵—that render age-old questions about the nature of representation and truth as philosophically relevant as ever *and* as increasingly obsolete technologically. Located on shifting boundaries between the modern and the postmodern, *Bilder* thus addresses aesthetic and formal issues that are transhistorical (which is not to say ahistorical) in that its critique moves across time and changing historical conjunctures. It remains to be seen what the *specifically* political valence of this project is, how heterodox it might be, what its limitations are.

Farocki’s essay film is a technically and ideologically overdetermined work that covers a lot of conceptual and historical ground in an hour and a quarter. It is an extended investigation into the nature of *vision* and *visuality* in relation to how modern technologies produce images and how we are to perceive and interpret them from a phenomenological point of view. I am taking “vision” to mean “sight as a physical operation” and “visuality” to mean “sight as a social fact.” This duality corresponds roughly to the ancient distinction between “nature and culture,” reread as “datum of vision and its discursive determinations.” As Hal Foster notes, however, both sets of distinction are relative: “vision is social and historical too, and visuality involves the body and the psyche.”⁶ A third key term must be added here: the Heideggerian category of *Umsicht* or visibility, which refers to the field of precognitive, prereflective “circumspection,” within which viewers find themselves.⁷

There are only two extensive analyses of *Images of the World*. [Of course, since this essay was published over twenty years ago, it has become one of the most written about films by Farocki.] The first, by Thomas Keenan, relates it to Heideggerian visibility.⁸ Converted into psychoanalytic terms, visibility may also be viewed as seeingness (*voyure*)—an apparently inaccessible category imagined to be anterior to the determining “split” between “gaze and look.”⁹ In one of Lacan’s more succinct formulations, following Heidegger’s work and Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and*

the Invisible, “I see only from one point” (a look), “but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (the gaze).¹⁰ Like visibility, seeingness is the never quite visible enabling condition of this radically unsutured split. It is this Lacanian framework that informs the second extensive analysis of *Images of the World*, by Kaja Silverman.¹¹

The field on which to interpret *Images of the World* is currently occupied by Heidegger and Lacan. It is estranged from the dominant paradigm of German film studies: namely, an eclectic sociological and historical approach that might on first glance seem closer to Farocki’s own intellectual formation. My thesis is that to grasp *Images of the World*—indeed, any essay film—adequately, we need to subtend a fourth term to this discussion: *the political in/visible and in/audible* that moves stealthily beneath, within, and around vision, visuality, and visibility or seeingness.

Visibility, or seeingness, provides *Images of the World* with the ontological precondition that anything *can* be seen, or that *anything* can be revealed and/or concealed, can *be* visible and/or invisible. This includes any possible “image of the world” or “inscription of war.” Farocki’s addresses that issue albeit more empirically than theoretically.¹² It interrogates specific photographic processes of image-making and the surrounding disciplines that make use of these images: fine art, engineering, architecture, artisanal and assembly-line production, city planning and urban renewal, military science and practice. In that sense, Farocki’s “world” resembles what Fredric Jameson calls “the geopolitical aesthetic” of the late capitalist world system, which is never perceivable as totality except allegorically.¹³ At the same time, *Images of the World* focuses on what I call “the political in/visible,” with additional attention to and manipulation of “the political in/audible.” In fact, the film’s formal and political achievement as well as its limitations reside precisely in the tension between in/audibility and in/visibility—hence im/perceptibly.

The “in/visible” is perhaps best captured in an enigmatic remark by Louis Althusser:

what classical political economy does not see, is not what it does not see, it is *what it sees*; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is *what it does not lack*; it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is *what it does not miss*. This oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but *the sight* itself.¹⁴

Althusser specifically means that “classical political economy” both sees (perceives) and does not see (acknowledge) the determining but not fully representable role of labor power and class struggle in history. This perspective is applicable to Farocki’s essay film also as it figures the impact of the political economy on himself as an avant-garde, independent filmmaker and cultural worker on the left. Even when *Images of the World* draws links between “vision and politics,” we must expect that significant *economic* determinations may remain im/ perceptible. All this is part of what Adorno called the constitutive *Vexierbild* or picture puzzle of political economy: namely, that workers are increasingly unable to perceive *that* they are workers.¹⁵ Furthermore, if “the political unconscious” is *unconscious*, and needs intervention “to lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts,”¹⁶ then the political im/perceptible must exist in un/canny relationship to the limits of the human sensorium. In Adorno’s terms, “the *Vexierbild* is a good-natured reprise of the serious vexation perpetrated by every art work. Like art it hides something while at the same time showing it.”¹⁷ What is perceptible in some respects remains simultaneously imperceptible in others, and this very im/perceptibility has specific political causes and consequences for production and reception. Farocki’s film shows that people can look without really seeing. Is this failure conscious or unconscious, natural or cultural, physical or psychological?

Finally, the essay film as practiced by Farocki takes up the challenge of Adorno’s thesis that, in an age of the persistent and irreversible “methodological” reduction of reason to scientism and instrumentality, “in the realm of thought it is virtually the essay alone that has successfully raised doubts about the absolute privilege of method.”¹⁸ Paradoxically from an Adornoan perspective, Farocki expands “the realm of thought” within an audio-visual mass medium—film—by employing techniques of *sub rosa* persuasion.

FROM ESSAY TO ESSAY FILM

The historical necessity for the essay film is commonly said to have been first seen in 1948 by Alexandre Astruc, who argued that the fate of the

filmic avant-garde hung in the balance.¹⁹ Actually, however, the Soviets had been making film essays for years, and German avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter had called in 1940 for a type of postdocumentary filmmaking that would, in effect, broach the problem of the im/perceptible. By making “problems, thoughts, even ideas” visible, he sought “to render visible what is not visible.” He dubbed the resulting film genre “essay,” since “also in literature ‘essay’ means dealing with difficult themes in generally comprehensible form”—albeit, in Dadaist Richter’s case, this desire for accessibility meant freeing film from “the depiction of external phenomena and the constraints of chronological sequence.”²⁰ Richter’s term has been adopted only comparatively recently (in discussions in the early 1980s of the work of Chris Marker, a self-described “essayist”);²¹ generally essay films have maintained more balance between feature and documentary than Richter’s own practice implied.

Astruc, promoting his notion of *caméra-stylo* [camera-stylus], argued that filmmakers must

break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language. . . . The cinema is now moving towards a form which is making it such a precise language that it will soon be possible to write ideas directly onto film²²

. . . in other words, *the materialist inscription of words on images of the world*. Actual inscription on celluloid became but one—overly literalizing—means of realizing Astruc’s ideas but other forms of inscription became possible. Institutionally, the 1979 Hamburg declaration of German filmmakers provided a somewhat belated opening for the German essay film by calling for an end to the artificial separation of “the feature film from the documentary . . . films that reflect on the medium (in a practical way as experiments) from the narrative and commercial film.”²³

Today, the essay film is commonly described as a genre or medium of film production and consumption located in the interstices of “documentary versus feature,” “narrative fiction versus historical record,” “truth versus fantasy.” Whatever defining secondary features the essay may have qua genre, a basic one remains that it is precisely *not* a genre, since it strives

to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint. Like “heresy” in the Adornoan literary essay, the essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, is self-reflective and self-reflexive. It also questions the subject positions of the filmmaker and audience as well as the audiovisual medium itself—whether film, video, or digital-electronic.²⁴ The essay film is as international as it is interdisciplinary.²⁵

The essay film can be grasped as an audiovisual *performance* of theory and criticism executed within and by the filmic text, thus producing a productive and/or inhibiting resistance to scholarly discourse, since it appears already to have done the latter’s work for it. Doubtless all films require us to resist becoming a mere *Sprachrohr* for the filmmaker’s own position (even or especially when we are in ideological agreement), but this resistance becomes especially crucial with the essay film because—almost by definition—it offers the appearance of its own self-criticism, threatening to silence the critic’s voice in advance. As a result, essay films, including Farocki’s, demand particular techniques of “reading between the lines” to expose a political im/perception—a level of signification in excess of what the filmmaker intended. (In Farocki’s film, this “reading” requires resistance to a theoretically informed and highly controlling/controlled female voice-over.) If, as Adorno noted of the written essay, “nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it,”²⁶ then the filmed essay shows and tells us that we can view and hear a feature film *as* a documentary, a documentary *as* a feature. So it is that, as “a form of intelligence” (Farocki’s preferred term for the essay film), *Images of the World*—particularly and specifically in its political aspect—asks to be actively co-produced by its audience.

VISION AND ITS OTHERS

Images of the World appeared in 1988/1989, on the eve of German reunification and the imagined end of the cold war. It was not Farocki’s first essay film, rather a culmination of rich experiences as an independent filmmaker, writer, and activist. He was born in 1944 and trained as a filmmaker in Berlin—in a class attended also by Ulrike Meinhof. Many of

his films (feature, documentary, and essay) problematize technologies of visual representation and reproduction,²⁷ generally exposing the view inculcated by mass media and contrasting them with a more independent coverage of the same events.²⁸ Farocki's films thus address the differences and similarities between what might be called "visual public sphere" and "visual private sphere"—a type of filmmaking informed by both Benjamin's critique of "mechanical reproducibility" and critical theory's exposure of the totalitarian aspect of "enlightenment."

The material circumstances surrounding the production of Farocki's films are significantly different from those, say, of Wenders, Herzog, or other comparatively better-known and commercially successful filmmakers who are not working under extreme economic constraints. This difference explains something about Farocki's technique. For, as an independent avant-garde leftist working on the periphery of the German and European film-subsidy system, he has little choice but to recycle material that he has produced for his paying customers, including German industry as well as television (though some of his made-for-TV shows are not broadcast).²⁹ Financing his essay films by making traditional "industrial documentaries," he participates—critically—in what is called *Verbundsysteme*, stating—not without irony—in a 1975 issue of *Filmkritik*:

Following the example of the steel industry . . . I try to create a *Verbund* with my work. The basic research for a project I finance with a radio broadcast, some of the books I use I review for the book programmes, and many of the things I notice during this kind of work end up in my television features . . .³⁰

. . . and eventually in his essay films. This mode of filmic production has important implications not merely for the material practice of filmmaking—that is, the multiple economic determinations on him as cultural worker—but also for the im/perceptible political points made by specific films, perhaps most notably *Images of the World*.

Viewed from that perspective, Farocki's film is structured not only visually but "musically" in addition to the sound track, in the sense that each social practice depicted is associated with specific images that recur in more or less rhythmic fashion and thematic variation. For instance, at the beginning, in the middle, and near the end of *Images of the World*

appears the same sequence of a Hanover water-research laboratory. This reiterated sequence, which might seem unmotivated on its own, is integrated in the structure of the film as a whole. In fact, the film has remarkably few really unmotivated sequences—quite an achievement for a film montaged so extensively from ready-made, commissioned documentary images. And we will see that the Hanover sequence turns out to be especially significant.

The editing technique echoes Farocki's thematic in the way that "technological vision" relates to "natural vision." Do the latter compliment and/or resist one another?³¹ Farocki is aware that the camera lens often gives us information that we normally do not see, *in spite and because* of its very visibility. One of the most striking examples in *Images of the World* involves a 1944 Allied photograph of IG Farben in Poland where the death camp Auschwitz was *shown* and yet had not been *seen* until 1977 by the CIA.³² To arrive at this image, Farocki takes us rhythmically through a complex montage of seemingly unrelated sequences: the work of Alfred Meydenbauer (the inventor of scale measurement by the use of photography); photographs taken by SS officers in Auschwitz; others taken in 1960 by French soldiers of unveiled Algerian women; drawings of the camp made by an inmate, Alfred Kantor; a Dior model being made up in Paris; an art school class; and relatively high-tech computer-generated images, automated industrial production lines, and flight simulators—all in addition to the aforementioned water-research laboratory in Hanover and the aerial photograph of IG Farben/Auschwitz.

Images of the World's image track generally suggests that—whether scientific, military, forensic, or aesthetic—the historical purpose of photography has been not only to record and preserve, but to mislead, deceive, and even to destroy: that is, to aid yet also to obfuscate vision. In other words, to be in/visible. This thematic aspect of the film is itself problematic (intentionally or not) since film in general, and in particular *this* film, is subject to the same visual regime as photography. It, too, must deceive and obfuscate—at the level not only of sight but sound.

Farocki's narrative is spoken (ventriloquized) by a tonally "objective and neutral" female voice-over, in both the German and the English version. Why a woman's voice? Why is it often accompanied by the minimalist tinkling of a piano? One notes that often during the film a "fictional and subjective" narrative is superimposed upon the "documentary and

objective” photographic facts. One question raised by *Images of the World* as essay film is whether this “inscription” (*Inschrift*) is wholly under control in the re/presentation of women.

GENDER/ED TROUBLE

Three other sequences in addition to the photo of IG Farben/Auschwitz could be noted. In each case the photographed subjects/objects are women. The first sequence has drawn by far the most critical attention in analyses of the film.³³ It should be first looked at as a silent image, without accompanying female voice-over narration, then with it.

The voice-over:

The woman has arrived at Auschwitz; the camera captures her in movement. The photographer has his camera installed, and as the woman passes by he clicks the shutter—in the same way he would cast a glance at her in the street, because she is beautiful. The woman understands how to pose her face so as to catch the eye of the photographer, and how to look with a slight sideways glance. On a boulevard she would look in the same way just past a man casting his eye over her at a shop window, and with this sideways glance she seeks to displace herself into a world of boulevards, men, and shop windows.³⁴

Silverman’s gloss is worth citing at length:

This text is at first shocking in its imputation to the Jewish woman and her Nazi photographer of viewing relations which we associate with “normality” and which seem unthinkable within a context like Auschwitz. However, one of the primary functions of this sequence is to stress that although the male subject is at most a privileged “functionary” of the camera/gaze, the latter is defined as a masculine extension through a whole confluence of institutional, discursive, and representational determinations. At least within the West, the same determinants posit the female subject as the specular object par excellence. Given how overdetermined these relations are, there would seem to be no context—even

one as given over to death as Auschwitz—within which they could not be somehow inscribed. . . . To object to the commentary for imputing meaning to these two photographs which was not available to the camera, and which cannot be historically documented, is to overlook another crucial feature of *Bilder's* interrogation of the visual field—its discourse upon the human look.³⁵

Thus Silverman returns to the constitutive Lacanian distinction between vision, visibility, and visibility, in this case between *camera/gaze* and *human look*. The human look may or may not resist that gaze in its struggle to extricate itself from the vertiginous levels of *méconnaissance* in the Imaginary—to negotiate the traps of socialization set in the Symbolic, with the limit imposed by the Real as that which, for Lacan, “resists symbolization absolutely.”³⁶ In order to explore the possibility of “the resistant look,” Silverman wants to suggest that the look of this one Jewish woman *does have political (gendered) value* when combined with the narrative voice which contributes an interpretation that, she admits, is not necessarily “in” the photograph. But rather than say anything more specific about this “resistant act,” its ethic, and its precise epistemological location (if not “in” the image, then is it “in” the voice-over, “in” us viewers, or somewhere else?), Silverman shifts theoretical and observational gears to suggest that Farocki’s film generally, and this image specifically signals a new tendency in her work (and *mutatis mutandis* the strict Lacanian model) from a primarily psychoanalytic problematic to its articulation with issues of cultural and historical difference.

It is striking that Keenan, in his article on *Images of the World* with the intriguing title “Light Weapons,” independently reprints the same narrative voice-over segment as does Silverman. For Keenan, the key point is that the image and its commentary are immediately preceded by the click of a shutter, one of the few times in the film where, quite literally, “the light goes out in *Images of the World*”: the screen goes black. This emphasis on “the cut and the darkness that precedes it” is crucial for a neo-Heideggerian point of view, because the cut stands in for “the darkness against which an image, a photograph or a film, finds its possibility.” For it is here that such possibility is “brought into the event of the film itself.”³⁷ Keenan takes his conceptual point of departure from Heidegger’s

thesis in “The Age of the World Picture” (1938) that, contrary to public opinion, shadow is not merely the absence of light but rather

a manifest, though impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light. In keeping with this concept of shadow, we experience the incalculable as that which, withdrawn from representation, is nevertheless manifest in whatever is, pointing to Being, which remains concealed.³⁸

The upshot, for Keenan, is not as abstract or apolitical as it may sound.

In effect, Keenan is doing for Heideggerian film analysis what Silverman is doing for Lacanian: both use *Images of the World* to push their respective theoretical orientations into a more historical direction. For Keenan, the task is to redirect fundamental ontology into a crucial hermeneutic question posed by Farocki’s film: “how does one *read* a blur” when, as in the case of the photo of IG Farben, nothing less than life and death of innocent people hangs in the balance.

Arguing that the “blur” (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) is what “denatures” an image, “rendering all its constituents ‘suspicious,’”³⁹ leads Slavoj Žižek to provide a possible key to the political in/visible in Farocki’s inscription of war:

The ground of the established, familiar signification opens up; we find ourselves in a realm of total ambiguity, but this very lack propels us to produce ever new “hidden meanings” . . . The oscillation between lack and surplus meaning constitutes the proper dimension of subjectivity. In other words, it is by means of the . . . spot that the observed picture is subjectivized: this paradoxical point undermines our position as “neutral,” “objective” observer, pinning us to the observed object itself. This is the point at which the observer is already included, *inscribed* in the observed scene—in a way, it is the point from which the picture itself looks back at us.⁴⁰

All the photographs filmed by Farocki do indeed “look back at us,” implicating us in them, as Benjamin or Lacan might say. And it should go without saying that one of the main determinations on the Allies’ failure to see the horror of Auschwitz “in” the comparatively “natural,” “familiar,” and “idyllic” IG Farben was precisely *ideology*. Yet this point—which

articulates some of the ways that the economic base is occluded by the superstructure—has all but dropped out of Silverman’s or Keenan’s work in a way that it may *not* have dropped out of the work of Farocki. For him, ideology appears in/visible in the tensions between vision, visibility, and visibility—and one might add, with Žižek, “subliminally anamorphic” or, with Adorno, “puzzled.”

Returning to the Allies’ failure to see Auschwitz’s camp, the practical consequence of *méconnaissance* was nothing less than *horrific* for millions. On the one hand Farocki might agree with Heidegger that to “get the picture” means “to be in the picture” (*im Bild sein*), and thus always already “inscribed” in images.⁴¹ After all, Farocki’s narrator says as much in his film, as does its very title. On the other hand, however, it is rather less likely that Farocki would buy into the radically antihumanist impulsion of the Heideggerian project. In any case, I think Farocki may have had in mind something politically *specific* that is being overlooked by at least some Lacanian and Heideggerian approaches.

Of course, at stake is not a more *accurate* description, or “truth,” of the SS photograph of the Jewish woman, but rather the search for *alternative* and *more precise* narrative possibilities that may be otherwise occluded from sight. Keenan’s conclusion is at once just and insufficient:

Farocki seems to understand what it means for the camera to be part of the equipment of destruction, indeed for the destruction to be in a certain sense impossible without the camera. This is what he calls *aufklärung*: no bombing without reconnaissance, certainly, but also no annihilation without the record of what has been accomplished.⁴²

But what about *Farocki’s* film, to which this same theory presumably can *also* be applied? What exactly does *it* “destroy” and yet simultaneously “make visible”? What kind of “light weapon” might *it* be? And what might gender have to do with it?

The second sequence I want to analyze occurs early in the film, then is repeated several times. It is a series of photographs of unveiled Algerian women taken in 1960 by a French soldier, Marc Garanger. Farocki films himself leafing through the photobook where they are collected. Sometimes his face is directly behind the book in which, changing POV, we see the face of one woman in particular, revealed and unveiled again by Farocki’s hand.

The disembodied female voice-over asks

How to face a camera? The *horror* of being photographed for the first time. The year 1960 in Algeria: women are photographed for the first time. They are to be issued with identity cards. Faces which up till then had worn the veil.⁴³

Then there is a third sequence, further toward the end, in which Farocki focuses on a female prisoner ostensibly “smiling” in a group of inmates walking, perhaps to their death.

The accompanying voice-over:

Among the shaven heads, a girl who *smiles*. In Auschwitz apart from death and work, there was a black market, there were *love stories* and resistance groups.⁴⁴

Yet, just as the Algerian women do not necessarily “look horrified,” this woman does not *necessarily* “smile.” To “sentimentalize” these women in this way is really akin to “sentimentalizing” the death camps by stating—without further comment—that there were “love stories” there. Is Farocki here directly contradicting his earlier statement in *Images of the World* that “the success of the TV series ‘Holocaust’—which aims to depict vividly suffering and dying . . . turns it into kitsch”?⁴⁵ He seems at risk, in these three voice-overs involving women, of producing precisely such “kitsch,” of reproducing the problematic in/visibility he exposes in his account of the IG Farben/Auschwitz photographs. What is now at issue explicitly—and hence self-reflectively—is more engendered than is military surveillance. Still, why does Farocki include such a potentially “sentimental” narrative *and* ascribe it to a female voice? Perhaps he does so—or can be interpreted to do so—precisely to disrupt any assumption we might have that *we* know what these images mean.⁴⁶ By spotlighting the tension between the visual and the audible, he makes alternative narratives—opposed narratives even—possible and perhaps necessary.

Keenan passes over the Algerian women in silence, whereas Silverman does view them but only to fold them into post-Lacanian theory of the look and gaze, specifically a rather homogeneous “colonial gaze.” What gets short shrift, in both cases, is further political specificity.

The photos in question were taken during the Algerian war (as Silverman also notes). In fact, the women (actually Berbers) were photographed by the military police because they are suspected criminals, or, more precisely, “terrorists” carrying bombs. Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 pseudo-documentary, *Battle of Algiers*,⁴⁷ had dealt sympathetically with a similar theme when showing Algerian women in the Casbah who disguise themselves as “Europeans” so that they may pass through French checkpoints to plant bombs in the “European city.” More than “Algerian,” however, the faces in Farocki’s film are primarily the face of the enemy, actual or potential: *fatales* beyond being *femmes*.⁴⁸ By editing, Farocki links these singularly *unhorrified* faces to present-day *German* police photographs of women suspects (in one particular instance, a composite photo bears an uncanny resemblance to Ulrike Meinhof), or men disguised as women, and then back again to the two photographs of women in Auschwitz. Whether “Jew,” “Algerian,” or “German,” these are all “enemies” to somebody. They are *also* all females, it is true. But primarily they raise the problem of facing an in/visible enemy in a world of violence and terror—though a world that has been historically and culturally *en/gendered* predominantly in and as a male sphere. At once female and hostile, the “inappropriate/d other” seems to be particularly dangerous when it surfaces not where one expects it, but where one does not. We also begin to grasp why the German police photograph of a woman is then computer-enhanced into a male face. It is almost as if the police, in addition to visualizing various possible disguises, morphs the suspected female “terrorist’s” face into a male’s in order better to identify it *as* the enemy other—traditionally a male military other. For, according to Son-tag and Virilio, to photograph is—potentially—to kill.

However, it is women in Farocki’s film—as in the actual *Battle of Algiers* and in the movie *Battle of Algiers*—who carried bombs. And women had done so earlier in Auschwitz, as Farocki tells us presently. The fact that the Algerian women are shown unveiled may be related to the veil’s role as a major symbol of the pre- and postcolonial and/or Islamic oppression of women. But the veil also renders the wearer publicly invisible, in some cases safe, even as it makes her sexually mysterious, at least to some.⁴⁹ In that sense, it would seem that Farocki wanted to link the veil motif with another group of women terrorists—that of Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof—and so to protest against the relentless branding by the mass

media of these women as “whores,” “lesbians,” “PLO-trained,” and so on.⁵⁰ Such an overdetermined layering of the enemy body in terms of a suspect “female” and “oriental” sexuality seems to cut across several cultures and times.⁵¹ Today a similar problematic of veiling and unveiling emerges in the so-called *Vermummungsgesetz*—the prohibition of veils or masks in German demonstrations and, in France, schools. The specter of *anyone*, perhaps *women* especially, as potential terrorists who might be called in/visible is haunting now for many people, male *and* female.

But there is still more about Farocki’s women. Three rhythmically inserted sequences show the same image of a series of handwritten numbers on a slip of paper. On the first two occasions, we glimpse what turn out to be false leads, linking the numbers with military reconnaissance or electronic image manipulation. The numbers flash on the screen without voice-over commentary, but the visual context locates them semantically, even if we do not yet see their precise historical meaning. Only near the very end of the film is this series of numbers explained *retroactively* (i.e., *after* we have begun to assimilate them in/visibly) by the female voice-over as

coded messages from Auschwitz prisoners who belonged to a resistance group. They set the date for an uprising. . . . With explosive devices made from powder that women had smuggled out from the Union Munitions factory, they set fire to the crematorium.⁵²

Without these women, such terrorism and resistance would simply not have been possible. They did what the combined might of Allied bombers *could* not—or *would* not—accomplish.⁵³

Thus it is that women are allowed access—into history and into Farocki’s film—precisely because they are in/visible. But is this point problematized or is it reinforced by the female voice-over? Silverman’s analysis in *The Acoustic Mirror* of the role of the female voice in feature films is helpful.⁵⁴ She calls for a critique of “the classic cinema’s rigorous ‘marriage’ of voice to image,” and analyzes the “ironic distance between the female voice and her filmic ‘stand-in.’”⁵⁵ On these grounds, the voice-over in *Images of the World* would be “a voice ‘apart,’ in both senses of that word—a voice which asserts its independence from the classic system, and which is somehow a part of what it narrates.”⁵⁶ As critics have

pointed out, German male directors have often used a *male* voice-over to undermine female characters and women's issues.⁵⁷ For B. Ruby Rich, the male voice-over "takes on the guise of a metacharacter, offered up unproblematically for audience identification, smoothing over the real contradictions of the film's form in order to displace attention upon false contradictions taken to represent impossible obstacles to political consciousness or action."⁵⁸ On the other hand, however, switching the gender of the voice-over does not *necessarily* solve the problem.⁵⁹ Our specific question is then whether the female voice-over in *Images of the World* renders any more "acceptable" some of Farocki's seemingly hyperexploitative visual images. A naked black woman drawn mainly by men; a Dior model made up by a man; the photo of a woman "window shopping" in Auschwitz surely are no more palatable when a woman's voice-over does not itself critique what is seen and said.

Part of the problem in *Images of the World* is that Farocki's audible woman is never made visible: she is literally disembodied *and* is ventriloquizing for a Farocki whose hands, at least, *are* visible in the film. It seems that the problematic of the political in/visible-cum-in/audible is not wholly under Farocki's conscious control, but rather is part of his own political unconscious. One also notes that the accompanying soft piano music acts in tandem with this voice more as a suture than rupture: a way of *seaming* the movie together in terms of its *seeming* gendered content or *semes*. As in a Hollywood feature film, the non-diegetic music in *Images of the World* signals moments of special significance, producing an "acoustic mirror": in this case, replication of audiovisual, acutely en/gendered "montage."

Gender aside, montage plays a key role in *Images of the World*. When Keenan asserts that "it is not a film of montage, of cutting or sequencing,"⁶⁰ he limits his interest to the Heideggerian tension between contingent existential images "in the world" (commonly representable and represented) and the more properly ontological image "of the World" (in the strictest sense eluding all representation and representability). Likewise, Silverman, with her primary focus on the Lacanian gaze, has little motivation to consider *Images of the World* in terms of editing. Yet Farocki states quite unambiguously, in an interview with Silverman, that the basic difference between Soviet and American film lies in the treatment of montage:

Montage for the Soviets meant the juxtaposition of ideas. For the Americans it meant instead the juxtaposition of narrative components. . . . Soviet montage is very out of fashion these days. Only advertisements and political films use it.⁶¹

Farocki's own essay film as "a form of intelligence" might then be expected to follow, in its use of montage, not only the example of explicitly leftist films (especially Eisenstein's "intellectual montage") but also the most powerful medium of consumer capitalism: that is, advertising, the supreme power of which "in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them."⁶² But, if Farocki's "neo-Soviet" use of montage helps account for his film's "intelligence," then what *exactly* are its in/visible and in/audible counter-cultural politics?

POLITICAL IN/VISIBILITY, IN/AUDIBILITY

This final question about *Images of the World* is articulated by one of the many leitmotifs Farocki incorporates into his film: the series of images of camouflage and concealment that evoke the coexistence of two in/compatible worlds, one visible, the other invisible. This problematic jibes easily with the film's explicit discourse on what is visible and what escapes detection. Thus the Allies failed, within the regime of *visibility*, to see at the level of *visuality* precisely what they had photographed at the level of *vision*: namely, the death camp of Auschwitz in the immediate vicinity of IG Farben. Or: veils conceal the identities of Algerian women from the male gaze; European women wear make-up to beautify their appearance for the same gaze; buildings and landscapes are camouflaged during wartime in order to avoid destruction; and so on. Yet this entire discursive level is really only *thematic*. In a film centered so much on concealment and disguise, we also ought to ask ourselves what *Farocki* himself is hiding. What is *his* camouflaged political text? It is well known in political rhetoric that, if one *talks about* the existence of hidden esoteric meanings, then a good possibility exists that one is putting one's money where one's mouth is, that one is not merely constating but also *performing* an act of political im/perceptibility.⁶³

Farocki is a political filmmaker with a history of situationist activism,⁶⁴ and *Images of the World* both conceals and reveals a strong censure of present-day Germany—a censure directed not merely against its Nazi past, and against the Allies’ irresponsible inaction, but also against postwar development. Hints can be perceived in the remark by the narrator that “after the war the IG Farben company took another name, as some SS men also did.”⁶⁵ This is what classical rhetorics called “sigetics,” the argument from silence. What are these other names, and why does Farocki fail to mention them? One reason may be pragmatic. Working under considerable financial constraints, Farocki uses parts of other projects⁶⁶—film clips from technological films or documentaries—to finance his essay films, including in *Images of the World* the clip of the Dior model being made up. Farocki’s own text thus owes its carefully sequenced montage to all these literally manufactured images. To name what IG Farben has turned into—a rather small “secret”—might be disingenuous, counterproductive, even economically suicidal for films of the *Verbundsystem* heritage.

But there is more, of course. Farocki’s own reference to advertising montage, dialectically related to Soviet film practice, signaled already a more general strategy.⁶⁷ Surely he is aware that in contemporary neo-capitalism, technology and industry have so pervaded the public sphere that it is virtually impossible to avoid them—and their im/perceptibility. As Jameson has pointed out, what in modernist times counted as self-reflection and auto-referentiality tends to become today, in the postmodern condition, the way in which “culture acts out its own commodification.”⁶⁸ *Images of the World*, too, acts out cultural commodification, but it also works to subvert it, much as Adorno had claimed the role of the written essay to be. When Farocki’s viewers are told that IG Farben now flies under another name, they are invited to find out what that name is, if they don’t know it already; or, if they do, to wonder why this ostensibly public knowledge is not named or nameable here. Actually, three major companies have evolved out of IG Farben: Bayer, Hoechst, and, most interesting, BASF—for the last produces the kind of videotape on which one can view and hear *Images of the World*. These names, an anthropologist might say, are the “public secret” that lies at the basis of all social mimesis: in/audible and in/visible.⁶⁹ Farocki’s film is thus itself an act of understated—im/perceptible—resistance, since as he himself puts it in a recent essay, in the face of the increasingly global “development in production techniques,” which “excludes me and shuts me

out,” “my only means of defense is to make films on this topic. I make films about the industrialization of thought.”⁷⁰

Which returns us once again to the question [of] what the *explicit* political message of this essay film might be, and to its final warning as “documentary,” arguably located in the penultimate image sequence of the film. Rhetorically speaking, this is an effective location for such a message, since the beginning or end would be too obvious. Commentators on texts produced under censorship, such as Leo Strauss, theorize that most explicit political messages are concealed rarely at the more easily visible positions but rather somewhere nearby. Farocki’s female voice-over sends the following message:

In 1983, as the number of atomic weapons in the Federal Republic of Germany was to be increased again, Günter Anders recalled the failure to bomb Auschwitz and demanded: the reality must begin: “The reality must begin. That means: the blockading of all entrances to the murder installations which permanently persist must be equally persistent. Let us destroy the possibility of access to these weapons.” To the atomic weapons.⁷¹

This is also part of Farocki’s own message. But, let me stress, it is not only thematically but also *formally* and *aesthetically* concealed in a code, almost exactly like the numbers used by the Auschwitz resistance group.⁷² It, too, calls for the destruction of train lines, this time the tracks leading to the atomic weapons placed by the Allies in Germany, especially by the United States (the country co-responsible for *not* bombing the death camps). In fact, in an earlier article by Farocki in the journal *Documents*, in which part of this just-cited text is contained, he says as much. But, in this essay film, this political message is at once made most explicit and most in/audible and in/visible when Harun Farocki shows his own hand literally *inscribing* (à la Astruc), with a crayon or pen, his political message onto the drawing made by inmate Alfred Kantor of a locomotive bringing prisoners to their death in Auschwitz.

Farocki shows himself writing two times, albeit at an angle that renders it harder to discern: “Block the Access Routes!” This is the first version of what might be called “political anamorphosis” in *Images of the World*, and it is not entirely fortuitous that Farocki depicts his inscription at an angle—making it somewhat harder to see yet still visible. In that

sense, the essay film, *Images of the World*, is itself the “inscription of war,” alluded to in its title: a more or less concealed, more or less im/perceptible handbook about how to combat superior nuclear might, much as *Battle of Algiers* was viewed as a handbook for waging underground urban war.

To be precise, Farocki’s film proposes a double war of position and maneuver. Tactically and immediately: Blockade the trains! The second form of warfare *in and as* essay film is more strategic and long-term. It involves a subliminal anamorphosis that is independent of perspective: The images showing the use of hydro-power, in opposition to nuclear power. This is the underlying reason for the otherwise inexplicably recurrent and redundant image of the Hanover water-research laboratory with its accompanying female voice-over. If Farocki believes that labs such as the Hanover plant, given enough financial and public support, will come up with alternatives to nuclear energy, this is a remarkable acknowledgment of science and technology in a film—ostensibly—critical of vision and visibility, images and inscriptions. With regard to most of the other companies for which Farocki must make industrial documentaries, he is employing the *Verbundsystem* against itself, attempting to accomplish, with an eye on the military–industrial complex of capitalism, what the Situationists might have called its *détournement*, Brecht its *Umfunktio- nierung*.⁷³ Not far away, I conclude, is the im/perceptible affirmation of direct action up to and including what others would call “terrorist.”

On a more general note, articulating film theory to a historically (and especially politico-economically) specific paradigm, and to its roots in the essay as defined by Adorno, we can thus supplement (not replace) the viewing/listening formations represented by a type of Lacanian psychoanalysis, a type of Heideggerian philosophy, and by Farocki himself. As for the latter, paradoxically, his attempt to use subliminal anamorphosis *contradicts* the “enlightenment” aspect of his project, which demands complete disclosure. Much of his ultimate political strategy thus remains obscure. When Elsaesser noted in 1983 of Farocki’s work that “film as a form of intelligence is Farocki’s own guerrilla war,”⁷⁴ he declined to make any more explicit or specific the form such warfare might take, either in Farocki’s work or more generally in cinematic practice, criticism, and theory. Other critics have followed suit.

Filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha is especially attuned to the aesthetic, economic, and historical as well as to the (sexual) political.

She writes in 1990 about documentaries as one might write about an effective essay film:

A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction. It does not work to conceal or exclude what is normalized as “non-factual,” for it understands the mutual dependence of realism and “artificiality” in the process of filmmaking. It recognizes the necessity of composing (on) life in living it or making it. Documentary reduced to a mere vehicle of facts may be used to advocate a cause, but it does not constitute one in itself. . . . Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and, when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but rather empties it, decentralizes it.⁷⁵

The dual task of criticism, I believe, is on the one hand to resist *overly* “stabilizing” the meaning of an essay film like Farocki’s *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, to “reduce” it to its advocacy. But on the other hand it is equally important to resist the *over* “decentralization” of (possible) political messages that could thus become ineffective—and in *that* sense im/perceptible. In spite and because of its multi-layered and self-reflective quality, I think this essay film, at least, can produce a comparatively decidable political message.

NOTES

This essay was written in 1994; as such, it reflects a certain tendency in film theory at the time. If I were to write it today, it would necessarily be different. However, I have decided to leave it intact as it introduced already in the mid-1990s several texts, such as that by Hans Richter, that had hitherto been unknown to an English-reading public.

1. Theodor W . Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1:23. [see chapter 4, this volume].
2. Thomas Elsaesser, “Working at the Margins: Two or Three Things Not Known About Harun Farocki,” *Monthly Film Bulletin* 50, no. 597 (1983): 269–270.
3. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (1984; New York: Verso, 1989), 71.
4. *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, directed by Harun Farocki (Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 1988–1989), 16 mm color, 75 minutes. The English

- voice-over has been transcribed with slight variations as Harun Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*," *Discourse* 15 (1993): 78–92.
5. Brian Winston, "The Documentary, Scitex and Harry," in *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), chap. 2; William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).
 6. As Hal Foster also notes, "vision" and "visuality" are both interrelated and significantly separate terms (preface to *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster [Seattle: Bay, 1988], ix).
 7. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), 116. For the original, see "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege* (1938; Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1972).
 8. Thomas Keenan, "Light Weapons," *Documents* 1–2 (1992): 147–158.
 9. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (1973; New York: Norton, 1981), 82.
 10. *Ibid.*, 72.
 11. Kaja Silverman, "What Is a Camera?, or: History in the Field of Vision," *Discourse* 15 (1993): 3–56, reprinted, with minor changes, as "The Gaze," in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 125–162.
 12. As noted by Silverman, recent work by Jonathan Crary on what he calls "techniques of the observer" helps clarify aspects of Farocki's *Bilder*, as well as do Lacanian and Heideggerian approaches to it. Crary problematizes, by historicizing, not only ahistorical theories of the ways viewers and viewing are constructed but also contemporary "attempts to theorize vision and visuality [that] are wedded to models that emphasize a continuous and overarching Western visual tradition." Crary argues that "during the first decades of the nineteenth century a new kind of observer took shape in Europe radically different from the type of observer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," that this paradigm shift had much to do with technologies leading up to and including photography, and that "concepts of subjective vision, of the productivity of the observer, pervaded not only areas of art and literature but were present in philosophical, scientific, and technological discourses" (*Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990], 25, 6, 9). A new viewing subject, an embodied vision, was produced. Precisely such an embodied viewer is the subject and object of Farocki's film.
 13. Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
 14. Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (1965, 1968; London: NLB, 1970), 21. This remark also figures prominently in Martin Jay, "Lacan, Althusser, and the Specular Subject of Ideology," in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 329–380. But whereas Jay uses Althusser's text to buttress his thesis that "a plurality of scopic regimes" ought to replace his (problematic) claim that recent French thought has "denigrated" vision, my own inclination is to use Althusser's remark more simply as a salutary warning against our assuming that we *have* seen what we *think* we have seen. And I argue that this is Farocki's warning as well.

15. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974), 193–194.
16. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 20.
17. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedmann, trans. C. Lenhardt (1979; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 178.
18. Adorno, “Essay as Form,” 9.
19. Alexandre Astruc, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Style,” in *The New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed. Peter Graham (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 17–23. See further Astruc, *Du stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo: Écrites (1942–1984)* (Paris: L’Archipel, 1992).
20. Hans Richter, “Der Filmessay: Eine neue Art des Dokumentarfilms,” in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992), 197–198.
21. Birgit Kämper, “*Sans Soleil*—ein Film erinnert sich selbst,” in *ibid.*, 33–59.
22. Astruc, “Birth of a New Avant-Garde” 18, 19. The actual inscription of words on celluloid images raises the interesting epistemological question of whether we are to understand images or words as preexisting the other, or rather as bi-conditionally producing a new, third term—perhaps a “dialectical image” in the sense debated by Adorno and Benjamin. Astruc did not deal adequately with this question, nor have many essay films. On Benjamin’s and Adorno’s different understandings of the dialectical image, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), esp. 209–215, 219–222.
23. “The Hamburg Declaration,” in *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices*, ed. Eric Rentschler (1979; New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 4. Particularly important to the development of the German essay film was the West German journal *Filmkritik*, co-edited by Farocki, especially issues published in 1983 and 1984.
24. From its inception, film theorists and practitioners have followed the example of the written essay (dating back at least to Montaigne and Bacon and extending to De Sade, Leopardi, Nietzsche, Adorno, Benjamin, Lukács, and Barthes), which entails resisting the temptation to situate the essay in stable generic terms. The essay has also been described as being not merely “between” other genres but even as their repressed *Urform*. See, for example, Réda Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. Pat Fedkiew (1986; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Because it is a genre that resists closure, tends to be non-linear in argumentation, and often is openly personal, it has been perceived as particularly well adapted to feminism. See Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman, eds., *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). In addition to the writings of Astruc, important German works on the subject include Blümlinger and Wulff, eds., *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen*; and Hanno Möbius, ed., “Versuch über den Essayfilm: Filme von Chris Marker, Alexander Kluge, Hartmut Bitomsky,” special issue, *Augenblick* 10 (1991).
25. In addition to Marker and Godard, its makers include Derek Jarman, Kidlat Tahimik, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, as well as, in the German-speaking world, Hartmut Bitomsky, Werner Herzog, Alexander Kluge, Elfi Mikesch, Ulrike Ottinger, Rosa von Praunheim, Helke

Sander, and Wim Wenders. I do not mean to imply that this is a homogeneous group. For example, Farocki and his group around the avant-garde journal *Filmkritik* explicitly took their distance, in theory and in practice, from Wenders, Herzog, and Kluge.

26. Adorno, "Essay as Form," 4.
27. His earlier films include *Etwas wird sichtbar* (*Before Your Eyes: Vietnam*, 1982), which looks at how the Vietnam War was represented and spectacularized by the mass media, and *Wie man sieht* (*As You See*, 1986), which stresses that the viewer must always read between the lines of images. More recent are *Leben-BRD* (*How to Live in the Federal Republic of Germany*, 1990), a playful critique of self-help groups and the opposition they face, and a year later *Videograms einer Revolution* (*Videograms of a Revolution*), in which Farocki compares CNN media coverage of the Romanian revolution with home videos taken by Romanians at the time of the upheaval.
28. Thomas Elsaesser provides a context for this problem of advocating an oppositional or in "It All Started with These Images"—Some Notes on Political Filmmaking After Brecht in Germany: Helke Sander and Harun Farocki," *Discourse* 7 (1985): 96.
29. Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 82–83.
30. Harun Farocki, "Notwendige Abwechslung und Vielfalt," *Filmkritik* 224 (1975): 368–369, also cited in Elsaesser, *New German Cinema*, 82–83.
31. As Hitchcock used to insist, there is an irreducible difference between the circular field of the human and camera eye, on the one hand, and the rectangle of the celluloid and screen frame, on the other. See "I Wish I Didn't Have to Shoot the Picture: An Interview with Alfred Hitchcock," in *Focus on Hitchcock*, ed. Albert J. LaValley (1966; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972), 22–27.
32. This photograph—or one out of the same series—is on display in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Actually, though Farocki does not mention it, there were several photographs of IG Farben/Auschwitz: "Allied photorecon aircraft made it to these targets less than two dozen times between 4 April 1944 and 14 January 1945 [and] half of those missions also coincidentally got cover of the death camps—a few frames in each of eighteen roles of film" (Roy Stanley, *World War II Photo Intelligence* [New York: Scribner, 1981], 346, also cited in Keenan, "Light Weapons" 149).
33. At least it has drawn the detailed attention of Silverman and Keenan—the first, and to date only, extended treatments of *Bilder*. This same image, framed by Farocki's hands, also appears as the cover of Michael Renov, ed., *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993), though neither Farocki nor *Bilder* is mentioned in the book.
34. Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder der Welt*," 86.
35. Silverman, "What Is a Camera?" 39, 42.
36. Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire*, book 1, *Les écrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 80.
37. Keenan, "Light Weapons" 151.
38. Heidegger, "Age of the World Picture," 154, also partially cited in Keenan, "Light Weapons," 147.
39. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 91.
40. *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

41. Heidegger, "Age of the World Picture," 129–130.
42. Keenan, "Light Weapons," 151. Certainly this is not a particularly original observation on the part of either Keenan or Farocki. See, for example, the extensive treatment of this articulation of war and cinema in Virilio, *War and Cinema*, which Keenan cites only in passing and Silverman not at all. Too, there is the infamous case of *Life* photographer Ron Haeberle, who asked that GIs hold their fire for an instant at My Lai, so that he could snap his picture of the victims before they were murdered. He was rewarded with a Pulitzer Prize. For this and similar incidents, see Susan D. Moeller, *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). A not dissimilar problematic has been recently addressed from a very different angle in Rémy Belvaux's pseudo-documentary *Man Bites Dog* (1992), in which the film crew assigned to "document" the everyday life of a serial killer eventually "participates" in stealing money to finance the film and in raping a victim.
43. Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder der Welt*," 80 (my emphasis).
44. *Ibid.*, 90 (my emphasis).
45. *Ibid.*, 81.
46. This more or less un/decidable and im/perceptible effect is further enhanced by an ever-so-slight tinkling of classical European piano music in the background. Viewing Farocki's treatment of the Algerian women, this musical sound track weaves its way in and out here, too, as if to recall not only the history of the cinema (i.e., silent films without audible verbal interpretation and/or misinterpretation) but also the subliminal hegemony of the—here aural—"West" over the—here visible—"Orient." This would be an ironic reversal of Trinh T. Minh-ha's remark, following Foucault, that in the West the power/knowledge effect resides primarily in the visual. See Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The World as a Foreign Land," in *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 189.
47. *Battle of Algiers*, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, screenplay by Franco Solinas (Algeria, France, and Italy: Igor Films, 1966). It had a huge impact when it appeared, and was censored in many countries.
48. For an important psychoanalytic approach to the femme fatale in cinema, see Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
49. For the classic work on the intricate dialectic between repressive and liberatory aspects of "native cultures" in the context of revolutionary situations generally and in Africa specifically, see the work of Frantz Fanon, including *The Wretched of the Earth*, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1978). On the ambivalent attraction to and fear of veiled women, see the ongoing work of Doane, beginning with "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," in *The Sexual Subject: A "Screen" Reader in Sexuality*, ed. John Caughie and Annette Kuhn (New York: Routledge, 1992), 227–243, and *Femmes Fatales*.
50. For a detailed investigation into representations and constructions of terrorism in German culture and cultural theory, see Matthew T. Grant, "Critical Intellectuals and the New Media: Bernhard Vesper, Ulrike Meinhof, the Frankfurt School, and the Red Army Faction" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1993).

51. In literature, the image of the Vietnamese woman as being simultaneously a prostitute and a terrorist is a common theme internationally. See Nora M. Alter, *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
52. Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder der Welt*," 92. One of these women was Roza Robotka, whose photograph in the Holocaust Memorial Museum claims she was responsible for smuggling out the explosives that resulted in the October 7, 1944, demolition of a small part of the Auschwitz crematorium. She was executed for her "crime" on January 1, 1945.
53. This issue has by no means been settled; indeed, in the Holocaust Memorial Museum it is raised once again with the supporting evidence of letters by members of Jewish organizations addressed to British and U.S. heads of state, pleading for the bombing of the camps and the train lines—the rejections of these demands is also displayed.
54. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
55. *Ibid.*, 168.
56. *Ibid.*, 131.
57. See, for example, the analysis of Alexander Kluge's mis/use of male voice-over in Miriam Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to *Germany in Autumn*," *New German Critique* 24–25 (1981–1982): 36–56, where Hansen argues that the status of Kluge's male narrator is never radically questioned. See further, building on this argument, B. Ruby Rich, "She Says, He Says: The Power of the Narrator in Modernist Film Politics," in *Gender and German Cinema: Feminist Interventions*, ed. Sandra Frieden et al., vol. 1, *Gender and Representation in New German Cinema* (Providence, R.I.: Berg, 1993), 143–161.
58. Rich, "She Says, He Says," 151.
59. Various male directors other than Farocki use—wittingly or not—a female voice-over to deflect possible criticism expressing feminist perspectives. Indeed, this has become something of a trend in recent documentaries, exemplified by the English version of Ray Müller's *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (1993).
60. Keenan, "Light Weapons," 147.
61. Harun Farocki and Kaja Silverman, "To Love to Work and to Work to Love—A Conversation About *Passion*," *Discourse* 15 (1993): 63.
62. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (1944; New York: Continuum, 1972), 167.
63. See, for example, Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
64. Elsaesser, *New German Cinema*, 82.
65. Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder der Welt*," 87.
66. When Farocki intercuts *Bilder* with the long sequence of this woman being "made up" (in all senses) and also, in effect, being disguised, his female voice-over comments: "women paint themselves to be beautiful"—even though a man is clearly doing the work. See also Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder der Welt*," 88. There are other possible interpretations. For example, it can be read as an allusion to a scene in Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* when Algerian militants make themselves up as Europeans and then plant bombs.

67. We might also be reminded in this same regard of the 1929 dictum of Dziga Vertov: "Kino-eye is the documentary cinematic decoding of both the visible world and that which is invisible to the naked eye" ("From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed., with introduction, Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 87).
68. Jameson, *Geopolitical Aesthetic* 5.
69. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), esp. 83–86. Taussig argues that "the 'origins' of mimesis lie in art and politics and not in survival," and that mimesis in effect is the "nature" that cultures use to produce second nature so as to maintain various types of social control, including by means of public secrets and various forms of aesthetic semblance. For Adorno, "under the essay's gaze second nature recognizes itself as first nature," in part because "the essay has something like an aesthetic autonomy that is easily accused of being simply derived from art, although it is distinguished from art by its medium, concepts, and by its claim to be a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance" ("Essay as Form," 5, 20). I argue that the essay film as practiced by Farocki attempts to continue this properly enlightenment tradition by bringing it up to technocultural speed, whatever the limitations may be.
70. Harun Farocki, "The Industrialization of Thought," *Discourse* 15 (1993): 77.
71. Farocki, "Commentary from *Bilder der Welt*," 92.
72. Harun Farocki, "Reality Would Have to Begin," trans. Marek Wieczorek, Thomas Keenan, and Thomas Y. Levin, *Documents* 1–2 (1992): 136–146, first published as "Die Wirklichkeit hätte zu beginnen," in *Fotovision: Projekt Photographie nach 150 Jahren*, ed. Bernd Busch, Udo Liebelt, and Werner Oeder (Hanover: Sprengle Museum, 1988). This text, written about the same time as Farocki made *Bilder*, contains much of the basic narrative text of his film. Farocki starts it off with a quotation from Anders ("reality would have to begin"), and then immediately offers the following commentary, which is later dropped from the film version:

Nuclear weapons stationed in the Federal Republic of Germany arrive by ship in Bremerhaven where they are put on trains, whose departure time and destination are kept secret. About a week before departure, Army aircraft fly the entire length of the route and photograph it. This status report is repeated half an hour before the train is to pass, and the most recent set of images is compared with the first set. Through their juxtaposition one can discern whether any significant changes have occurred in the interim. If, for example, a construction vehicle has recently been parked along the tracks, the police will drive to or fly over the spot to investigate whether it is providing camouflage for saboteurs. Whether such sabotage has been attempted is not made public. (136)

73. On Brecht and Farocki as different but also related types of political artist, see Elsaesser, "It All Started with These Images."
74. Elsaesser, "Working at the Margins," 270.
75. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning," in *When the Moon Waxes Red*, 41.

11

ESSAY QUESTIONS

(2003)

PAUL ARTHUR

From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore: Paul Arthur gives a crash course in nonfiction cinema's most rapidly evolving genre.

Clarity, Simplicity, Transparency! An alternative credo for the French Revolution? No, a partial list of traditional documentary's first principles. Those principles have gotten a solid thrashing of late as nonfiction filmmakers embellish otherwise forthright accounts with MTV-style cutting and graphics, revive the forbidden practice of dramatic reenactment, and—perhaps worst of all—allot to themselves the kind of on-screen face-time usually reserved for box-office stars. Whether the directorial turn is Nick Broomfield acting like Sam Spade with a boom mike (*Biggie & Tupac*), Agnès Varda posing as a figure in a famous painting (*The Gleaners and I*), or Michael Moore slogging his massive ego through benighted backwaters (*Bowling for Columbine*), an increasing number of documentarists are refusing to play the vaunted fly-on-the-wall. The myth that “actuality” should not only dictate but totally subsume any subjective discourse or overt aesthetic design—the long-standing realist ideal of “styleless style”—is being challenged with some success by this recent onslaught of essay films.

Galvanized by the intersection of personal, subjective rumination and social history, the essay has emerged as the leading nonfiction form for both intellectual and artistic innovation. In contrast to competing genres

(the PBS historical epic, the updated vérité portrait, the tabloid spectacle), the essay offers a range of politically charged visions uniquely able to blend abstract ideas with concrete realities, the general case with specific notations of human experience. The filmmaker's onscreen presence—like similar gestures by New Wave directors, an acknowledgment that what goes on in front of the camera bears the imprint of a distinct shaping sensibility behind it—is not in itself an infallible guide for tagging this notoriously tricky form, but it reminds us that a quality shared by all film essays is the inscription of a blatant, self-searching authorial presence. Admittedly, some prominent essayists—Harun Farocki, Harmut Bitomsky, Patrick Keiller—are far from household names. Nonetheless, it's helpful to remember that the essay has been around for 50 years—Jean Rouch's *Les Maîtres fous* (1955), Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), and Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1958) are crucial milestones—and has been an occasional source of inspiration for the likes of Welles, Godard, [Raúl] Ruiz, and Herzog.

Starting as a trickle during the sixties, the essay gathered speed through the seventies before bursting into a recognizable international phenomenon in the last 20 years. In truth, "recognizable" is a bit misleading, since definitions and inclusionary criteria have been briskly contested when they aren't hopelessly capricious. For some, the ambiguous critical status of the essay film is refreshing—who needs more constraining cinematic formulas anyway? Yet as unholy alliances between fiction and nonfiction continue to mutate across the landscape of television and publishing, it's important to prevent documentary's bracingly heterogeneous field from being collapsed into an ahistorical lump, wherein *COPS* and *Survivor* carry the same cultural meaning as, if rather more economic clout than, say, Frederick Wiseman's *Domestic Violence*. Distinctions between Wiseman's work and the way essays such as *Bowling for Columbine* function are, predictably, more nuanced but just as essential.

MIND OVER MATTER

As a self-consciously liminal category, what makes a film "essayistic"? Everyone recognizes a literary essay when they see one: applying the

formal attributes of writing to cinema is another matter. Among other differences, since film operates simultaneously on multiple discursive levels—image, speech, titles, music—the literary essay’s single determining voice is dispersed into cinema’s multi-channel stew. The manifestation or location of a film author’s “voice” can shift from moment to moment or surface expressively via montage, camera movement, and so on. Given nonfiction’s long-standing reticence about asserting personal “opinions” or other markers of subjectivity, it’s not surprising that few documentarists actively embrace the label, while still fewer adopt the essay as their sole domain. On the other hand, various films conventionally classified as ethnographies or portraits—starting with *Les Maîtres fous* and continuing through Herzog’s poignant *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1972) to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* (1982)—are best understood in their family resemblances to other essays. Leaving aside exceptions like Marker’s three-hour *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977, 1993), most essays are sub-feature-length, some as short as 15 minutes, making both distribution and critical evaluation a persistent struggle. Consequently, the smattering of previous attempts to define or historicize the essay’s parameters—in particular by Michael Renov and Phillip Lopate—are inconclusive and tend to diverge on issues such as the necessity of spoken narration or irony versus sincerity.

As with other elusive genres, enumerating what it is *not* can be a useful jumping-off point. For starters, essays are not constructed around public personalities or the rehearsal of discrete events. Nor do they narrate the past from a neutral perspective following strict chronology, the domain of classical documentaries or contemporary spinoffs by Ken Burns and company. Instead, essays tend to blend several clashing time frames that layer what we think of as literary “tenses.” The impression of formal admixture is often extended by borrowing idioms from *vérité*, poetic, or social-problem films. As with literary essays, essay films may segue between separate styles, tones, or modes of address. In doing so, they fracture epistemological unities of time and place associated with documentary practices from John Grierson and thirties New Deal tracts through sixties *vérité*. The binding aspect of personal commentary is typically constituted by voiceover narration enhanced by musical selections, editorial as well as factual intertitles, and is often reinforced by compositional devices. When spoken narration is either subdued or absent, other traces of authorial

presence may replace direct speech; Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1973) is punctuated by lengthy intertitles. On the other hand, a number of Farocki's films eschew foregrounded narration altogether.

It's tempting to cite the deployment of found footage and collage as endemic to the essay, given the multitude of films that rely on juxtapositions of archival images and present-tense commentary. However, if essays are not invariably heterogeneous in materials, their segmental and sound-image relationships tend to entail collision or dialectical critique. The emphasis is on converging angles of inquiry rather than historical nostalgia or pastiche. It follows that essays are infused with found footage yet resist the urge to flaunt or fetishize images from the past. Conventional political docs like *Union Maids* (1976) or *The Atomic Cafe* (1982) celebrate the existence of vintage footage while essays prefer to gnaw at the truth value, cultural contexts, or interpretative possibilities of extant images.

This raises the crucial question of "authority," how nonfiction film signals its fidelity to, or unimpeachable view of, an identifiable reality. In this sense, the portrait, serial interview, city symphony, travelogue, and other species behave more or less alike in their insistence on continuity, mastery, and closure. Essays typically pile up a series of stylistically diverse fragments—"discursivity" in the original meaning—whose individual codes seem familiar, yet when bunched together subvert documentary's privileged, transparent aura of control. That is, essays confound the perception of untroubled authority or comprehensive knowledge that a singular mode of address projects onto a topic. Which does not imply that the brunt of argument in essay films is inevitably confused—although it may be—but that the rhetorical focus is at once directed outward to concrete facts and inward to a realm of mercurial reflection. Argument must proceed from one person's set of assumptions, a particular framework of consciousness, rather than from a transparent collective "We."

Keeping in mind their refusal of a privileged, universal stance, it is no surprise that the majority of essays cast themselves as oppositional, interrogating received wisdom or status quo ideologies from left perspectives. Further, a significant number of women (Agnès Varda, Yvonne Rainer, Jill Godmilow, Ngozi Onwurah) and artists of color (Marlon Riggs, Patricio Guzmán, John Akomfrah, Raoul Peck) have adopted the essay as an instrument of creative struggle. Nonetheless, there is no a priori reason

why essays cannot accommodate less radical views, the case perhaps in Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992).

In his *Dictionary* of 1755, Samuel Johnson construed the written essay as “a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition.” Although his definition might take some serious flak from fans of Theodor Adorno or Walter Benjamin, Johnson does point to a couple of salient conundrums. Essays are distinctly process-oriented; they are rhetorical journeys in which neither an exact route nor a final destination is completely spelled out. Of course, documentaries in general frequently discover themes and structures after the fact, as a result of culling accumulated footage in the editing room. The essay, however, assumes that what it tells us and the order in which it is communicated could have taken an entirely different route, that it is one of several possible versions of the same concept. It delights in quirky arcs of logic, sudden digressions, unexpected epiphanies, pauses for self-reflection. In the finest examples, that which remains “indigested,” or at least not totally consumed, are its conditions of cinematic enunciation: how meaning is created, by whom, under what social or historical circumstances. To be sure, not all essays are directly reflexive; nonetheless, a formidable cadre ranging from Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Letter to Jane* (1972) to Bitomsky's *B-52* (2001) actively probe or, alternatively, allegorize the manner in which film's capacities and limitations inflect the conduct of factual inquiries.

The conjunction of language and image, fundamental to film grammar, is a key ingredient of the essay film. In some sense all great essays are about complex relationships between words and pictures, the mechanisms by which speech can annotate, undermine, or otherwise change the signification of what we see—and vice versa. For instance, spoken commentary matched to a piece of found footage splits our perception of time, superimposing past and present to emphasize historical gaps or tonal clashes inherent in the visual-linguistic interface. When we hear someone reminiscing over supposedly illustrative file footage, we are encouraged to ignore, in the name of seamless narration, possible discrepancies between a speaker's account and accompanying visual evidence. Essays tend to exploit rather than smooth over such contradictions. Tension also surfaces because images are commonly perceived as products of a third-person, “objective” observer, while speech contains a first-person subjective undertow. The point is that essays hold up for scrutiny precisely

those conventions that other documentary genres suppress and, in that sense, fuel meta-critical speculation on nonfiction cinema's blind spots.

ROOTS AND BRANCHES

Jean Cayrol's celebrated narration for *Night and Fog*, probably the only essay enshrined in the cinematic canon, more than justifies the film's reputation as the essay form's *locus classicus*. Critics have noted that Cayrol's script, in concert with Hanns Eisler's dissonant score, instills an uncanny emotional intensity by yoking gruesome death-camp imagery with lyrical speech. Lulling the viewer with a nuts-and-bolts review of the development and operation of Nazi camps, Resnais then shifts gears—alternating archival images with present-tense tracking shots of Auschwitz—accelerating a recognition of the absurdity of any artwork trying to “sum up” the Holocaust. Statements such as “There is no use even describing what went on here” and “There's nothing left to say” limn the failure of language *and* image to offer a fully intelligible portrayal of events. Lurking behind this failure is the suggestion that Resnais's method implicates himself and, by extension, the medium in the horrors he documents. A portion of the footage was shot by SS officers and Nazi functionaries as an adjunct to brutal procedures of classification and dehumanization. Thus, the collecting of images exists alongside piles of eyeglasses, hair, silverware, and, finally, corpses as by-products of the manufacture of death. In a sense that is what the photographic process does: turn living entities into objects. *Night and Fog* is haunted by the possibility that Resnais and anonymous Nazi cameramen participate in kindred practices, albeit with antithetical goals. Resnais's achievement is to steer clear of polemic or arrogant self-reference while forging a link between two historical moments in order to expose, to remember, scattered traces of a *photographic* legacy that official European culture was at pains to ignore.

Against-the-grain narration had been around since Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1933): Resnais himself utilized the technique previously in *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956). Leaving aside Cayrol's innovative contribution, *Night and Fog* stands as a pivotal essay on several grounds: the disturbing mixture of blunt camp footage and elegiac landscape shots;

the theme of historical memory; the relation of public memory to movie images. Twisting Adorno's well-known admonition that after Auschwitz the writing of poetry should be impossible, it is only after the Holocaust—our era's litmus test for the role of individual testimony in collective trauma—that essay films acquired a distinct aesthetic outline and moral purpose. War and remembrance—more broadly, the suffering of civilians under brutal dictatorships—would become an important touchstone in the development of the essay, treated with reflexive urgency in Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989), addressed as a geopolitical lever in Paul Yule's *After Auschwitz: The Battle for the Holocaust* (2001), hailed as media event in Marcel Ophüls's *The Troubles I've Seen* (1995), and freighted with bitter personal irony in Guzmán's *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997). In each case, as in Godard's magnificent *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989–1996), historical comprehension is mired in contradictions around the mediation of catastrophe by moving images.

It is hardly coincidental that the film cultures most responsible for nurturing the essay are France and Germany. With Fassbinder as a prominent exception, it is not far-fetched to claim that postwar German cinema was shaped by constant dialogue with the prerogatives of essay films. Along with Herzog, Farocki, and Bitomsky, discursive tendencies in Alexander Kluge and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg had an impact on the evolution of the form. Directors celebrated for their fictional output produced occasional essays (Wim Wenders's *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, 1991), and strange hybrids materialized from obscure precincts (Helmut Costard's *A Little Godard*, 1978). On the fringes of an already iconoclastic group, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's "Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene"* (1972) confirms a peculiarly Germanic taste for blending cultural politics with formal rigor. Taking advantage of a TV contract to make a standard artist's bio, Straub/Huillet transform Schoenberg's 1930 musical composition for an unproduced film into a dialectical argument on artistic responsibility and capitalist barbarism. At one level, they supply visual and spoken "accompaniment" to the music by contextualizing it within personal reactions to the triumph of fascism. A scathing letter from Schoenberg to Kandinsky is read, rejecting the painter's invitation to join the Bauhaus in order to avoid increasing persecution of Jews. Schoenberg's humanist diatribe is then countered with a materialist text by Brecht dissecting the role of

capitalism in support of fascist aggression. Spurning the temptation to leave the argument safely confined to the past, the film abruptly cuts to library footage of a bombing mission in Southeast Asia. At the very end, shots of a recent newspaper article reveal the acquittal of Nazi architects tried for complicity in mass murder.

In the course of a densely austere 16 minutes, *Introduction* covers an amazing amount of territory. Straub/Huillet affirm a modernist heritage of social consciousness epitomized by two preeminent artists who, like themselves, went into voluntary exile, and whose refusal to insulate creative activity from political concerns implicitly models a directive for artists during the Vietnam War. Bolder than the handful of American antiwar essays—Nick Macdonald's *The Liberal War* (1972) and Jon Jest's *Speaking Directly* (1974) among them—*Introduction* offers a critically unsung instance of a biting essayistic voice cobbled together entirely by quotation.

Like any cultural practice, the essay film was affected by a combination of internal and extra-cinematic factors. By the seventies, robust currents in Anglo-European intellectual thought provided a kind of theoretical cover for the intersection of first-person discourse and the analysis of social ills. New models for researching and writing history, from Michel Foucault's archaeology to the material focus on everyday life by the Annales school of historiography writers, burnished the idea of re-creating a "usable past" for groups traditionally excluded as historical subjects. Meanwhile, post-structuralist philosophy was busy dismantling idealized notions of the individual ego, along with the romantic cult of authorship, while feminism and minority initiatives pounded away at traditional bastions of white male privilege. In this light, Godard's *Six fois deux* (1976), Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen* (1977), Gorin's *Poto and Cabengo* (1981), along with Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) examine processes by which language creates—and deforms—social identities. Tenets such as the personal as political, quotation as antidote to the fetishization of originality, or the fragment as ineluctable stale of human consciousness and expression served to validate diverse impulses floating around the still-amorphous essay format.

One result of the haphazard assimilation of critical theory was a renewal of irony and even humor as tactics in documentary rhetoric. An early instance of the essay's growing insouciance, Ruiz's *Great Events and Ordinary People* (1978) takes as its nominal theme political attitudes in a Paris neighborhood on the eve of an election—interweaving late news

broadcasts, an intrusive narration that keeps subverting its own professed goals, and man-in-the-street interviews repeated with baffling variations. Lurching into sarcastic tangents, it mocks vérité practices—with potshots at Marker's *Le joli mai* (1963)—as it flips utopian ideas about citizenship upside down. The philosophical position that everything we knew of the world is already secondhand, derived from shopworn ideological nostrums, creates palpable openings for the essay's characteristic gesture of anti-authoritarian recoding.

A recent beneficiary of the satirical approach to essay-making is American avant-gardist Craig Baldwin. His *Tribulation 99* (1991), a hysterical history of postwar U.S.–Latin American relations conveyed through a thick collage of B-movie clips and mock-serious narration, is a lesson in the perils, and potential rewards, of movie classification. Paralleling the intensification of documentary agendas during the late sixties, the typically introverted profile of avant-garde filmmaking began to acquire a political edge, led by the influential work of Yvonne Rainer and a younger generation including Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich, and Ken Kobland. Each has produced films that share recognizable features with the nonfiction essay. Indeed, as the pairing of Ruiz and Baldwin implies, one way to think about the essay film is as a meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses.

NOW VOYAGERS

The dramatic increase in essay production since the early nineties has introduced a host of exciting new filmmakers, bristling with fresh ideas and often ensconced in unfamiliar locales. The evils of rampant consumerism and its partnership with mass media are exposed in Sut Jhally's *Dreamworlds* (1991) and *Advertising and the End of the World* (2000), while Susan Stern's *Barbie Nation* (2000) ricochets between critique of gender stereotypes and admiration for a pioneering businesswoman. In a similar vein, the dire consequences of economic globalization are portrayed in Stephanie Black's *Life and Debt* (2000). Rustin Thompson's *30 Frames a Second* (2000), and Raoul Peck's stunning *Profit and Nothing But* (2001). There have been novel takes on the seemingly moribund

travelogue—Patrick Keiller’s *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997)—and scintillating investigations of race, including Marlon Riggs’s posthumously completed *Black Is, Black Ain’t* (1995).

Easily the most accomplished current essayist, and possibly the best unheralded contemporary filmmaker, is Czech-born, Germany-based Harun Farocki. A former film critic and performer in Straub/Huillet’s *Class Relations* (1983), he is a maverick among mavericks, placing a wryly minimalist stamp on the anatomy of class relations under late capitalism. Across nearly 20 nonfiction gems, Farocki cultivates a studiously deadpan formal repertoire—long takes and mechanical camera movements—and a central fascination with simulated experience and commodity fetishism. Imagine a tryst between Andy Warhol and a Marxist Frederick Wiseman. Like the former, Farocki makes us aware of the process of image formation and the ritualized behavior of social actors. With Wiseman he shares a knack for lurking behind the scenes to demystify seemingly transparent institutional—or in Farocki’s case, corporate—protocols. Burrowing into a concealed nest of often maddeningly comic exchanges between objects and human automata, he discovers an intricate drudgery whose public face is desire, beauty, and power.

An Image (1983) makes the shooting of a *Playboy* centerfold as sexy as a day spent flipping burgers. In *The Appearance* (1996), a pompous advertising pitchman delivers a 45-minute campaign prospectus to an association of opticians that sounds like Immanuel Kant riffing on eyewear aesthetics. *How to Live in the Federal Republic of Germany* (1990) delivers a devastating critique of a society bent on leeching spontaneity and accident from every conceivable encounter, from midwifery to conflict resolution to stripping. As in his other films, the critique of robotic—in Jean Baudrillard’s term, “hyperreal”—social relations springs not from subjective commentary but from the shrewd arrangement of blankly observed scenes. *Still Life* (1997) has a double axis anchored by theorist Kaja Silverman’s voice-over disquisition on seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. Insights into the mystified status of represented objects like fruit or clothing are interspersed with live-action shots of commercial photographers laboriously composing images for magazine ads. Of three sequences involving beer, a platter of cheese, and an expensive wristwatch, the finicky persistence of a Laurel and Hardy team of Frenchmen, handling their lumps of *fromage* like crown jewels, is a masterpiece of witty observation.

As a sort of postscript to the celebration of recent trends, a few words about possible pitfalls to the essay approach seem in order. Contrary to the parade of giddy highlights offered thus far, the designation “essay” is intended less as an honorific than as a descriptive term. To be sure, the creation of a felicitous balance between personal musings and external events is far from automatic; for example, in Ross McElwee’s *Time Indefinite* (1994) a necessarily uneasy dynamic is smothered by energy-sapping solipsism. On the other hand, failure to carve out enough space for contradiction and self-questioning can result in heated didacticism, a problem in Thom Andersen and Noël Burch’s *Red Hollywood* (1996). The popular reception of Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* is cause for both hope—that future documentaries might garner a decent theatrical release—and dismay. Going beyond the autobiographical thrust of *Roger & Me* (1989), *Columbine* satisfies basic criteria of the essay form, including a discernible subject and a segmental, discursive line of inquiry. As such, it is not the comic shtick, the rhetorical division between jerks and hipsters, or the self-aggrandizing treatment of personal tragedy that truly disturbs. Judged solely as a well-publicized entry in a heady climate of essayistic confrontations with power, Moore’s film regrettably lacks the will to view itself as not just part of the solution but as part of the problem. That is, it avoids the intuition of its own complicity common to exemplary works in the genre.

12

THE ELECTRONIC ESSAY (1995)

MICHAEL RENOV

The essay's innermost formal law is heresy.

THEODOR W. ADORNO, "THE ESSAY AS FORM"

Much has been written on the status of the essay and from innumerable perspectives: philosophers have principally sought to position the essay in relation to knowledge, while literary theorists have struggled with definitions, typologies, and exegeses of this ever elusive writerly mode. It is perhaps appropriate to begin my own account of the video essay in the manner of evocation, with Adorno's sense of the heretical establishing the prevailing tone. The essayistic—I prefer the adjectival usage despite Barthes's protestations ("a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death")¹—is the undoer of dualist hierarchies; it is the stuff of paradox. For Spanish philosopher Eduardo Nicol, the essay is "*almost* literature and *almost* philosophy,"² while Walter Pater and Adorno have deemed its approach "methodically unmethodical."³ For Georg Lukács, citing the elder Schlegel, the essay was an "intellectual poem,"⁴ while for Réda Bensmaïa, the essay is atopic, eccentric, in short, an "impossible" genre.⁵ The essayistic emerges as a kind of limit text, akin to Barthes's invocation of the writerly. It is also a projective screen for many of its commentators, supplying a discursive arena well suited to their vision. For Jean-François Lyotard, the essay is postmodern; for Adorno, "the essay is what it was from the beginning, the critical form par excellence . . . it is critique of ideology."⁶ But more than that, Adorno can claim, a few pages later, that "the essay approaches the logic of music, that stringent and yet aconceptual art of transition, in order to appropriate for

verbal language something it forfeited under the domination of discursive logic.”⁷ For R. Lane Kauffmann, the essay— given its “antinomian” character (“poised between literature and philosophy, art and science, holding the antinomies of imagination and reason, spontaneity and discipline, in productive tension”)—is “the most adequate form for interdisciplinary research and writing.”⁸ In an epoch in which ideas such as hybridity, non-identity, contingency, indeterminacy, the reflective, the interdisciplinary, the transient, and the heterotopic (pedigreed essayistic characteristics all) resonate both with prevailing theoretical paradigms and with vast sectors of social life, the essay deserves the renewed critical attention it has begun to receive.

In true essayistic fashion, then (for indeed, the essay must “reflect on itself at every moment”),⁹ let me place my own intentions tactlessly on trial and in so doing challenge my own appropriative gesture.¹⁰ To what end do I propose a critical convergence of video and the essayistic? It would not go well simply to aver that video has yet to sustain for itself an adequate theorization (which it hasn’t) or to suggest a kind of ontological inevitability to the rendezvous between video and essay, given Adorno’s aphoristic reminder that “the essay abandons the royal road to the origins, which leads only to what is most derivative—Being, the ideology that duplicates what already exists.”¹¹ Instead it is my intention to suggest the fruitfulness of initiating a critical encounter between the electronic medium and the essay form. I will further argue for the appropriateness of the encounter based on grounds that are historical, theoretical, and tropological, with particular attention given to the temporality of self-in-scription in Godard’s *Scénario du film “Passion”* (1982).

Everything attests to the fact that video is more deeply rooted in writing than is cinema.

RAYMOND BELLOUR, “VIDEO WRITING”

While the convergence of video and essay has received little direct attention, there are a number of writings that posit a discursivity for video congruent with the essayistic. In his analysis of esteemed video artists such as Gary Hill and Bill Viola and the Japanese poets Shuntarō Tanikawa and Shūji Terayama (authors of *Video Letter*, a brilliant exchange of

electronic missives), Bellour deploys a notion of writing to which any commentator of the essay might aspire: "Writing is conceived here as a particular type of image, fragmented, intermittent, a network of raw significations that allows the image to become unstuck from itself without, for all that, causing it to lose its seductive force."¹² In a lengthy interview/ dialogue between Bellour and Viola, the specificity of video is much at issue. Video is contrasted with film in that the latter is composed of "frozen, discrete moments," whereas video is, according to Viola, "a living, dynamic system, an energy field. . . . It's sort of like a light is on when you come into the room. It's all there already. . . . You see the effects of your actions on the image while you are carrying them out."¹³ Viola has spoken of his work in certain of his video pieces as "sculpting with time" (with partial fields of past- and future-tense images keyed over present-tense material); indeed, video's real-time potentialities proved immensely attractive to 1960s kinetic sculptors and performance artists who saw in the emergent electronic medium an opportunity to expand their vernacular.

In his interview with Viola and elsewhere, Bellour has insisted on a certain corporeality that characterizes video in contrast to film. The *paluche* minicamera developed in France is the quintessence of this alleged connectedness of artist's body and creative praxis; abandoning the viewfinder, the videomaker "thinks with the hands." In his discussion of a Gary Hill installation, *Crux* (1983–1987), Bellour describes the use of five monitors reproducing "the partial images from five cameras attached to the author-actor's body: two on his feet, two on his hands and one at his waist, aimed toward his face."¹⁴ Perhaps the corporeality of video is a residue of its performative, installation-based infancy. Over the years, video art making has increasingly been forced to depend on the reproducible artifact made possible by institutional support (Hill and Viola are among the few video artists still able to produce large-scale installations). And yet even in single-channel tapes such as Viola's *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986), the video apparatus remains capable of evoking the shock of sensation even if the condition of nonreproducibility (for Peggy Phelan and other theorists of performance, the *sine qua non* of the phenomenon) no longer obtains. Interestingly, Phelan has pointed to essayistic writing such as Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* as precisely the kind of literary endeavor that seeks to do the impossible—preserve the unreproducible. This she calls "the act of writing toward

disappearance,” in contrast to the act of writing toward preservation, noting that “the after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself.”¹⁵ If the videographic essay can be said to induce a similar kind of aphanisis of the subject (a fading or sense of self-dissolution consistent with the experience of subjectivity), perhaps it is due in part to its genealogical ties to performance.

But my intention is not to make claims for video’s defining properties, an activity that Marita Sturken has characterized as video’s “ticket of admission to modernist art theory.”¹⁶ Rather, I wish to suggest that video has, from its mythic inception via the early 1960s antiart installations of Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, retained an attachment to the performative and the corporeal that is historical and is distinct from the cinema. All commentators of video’s history acknowledge the impact of its first-generation practitioners—the painters, sculptors, and conceptual, body, and performance artists who lent institutionalized credibility to a nascent medium (e.g., Paik, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, Lynda Bengalis, and Peter Campus). The work of these artists inspired Rosalind Krauss in an early and infamous essay to suggest that “most of the work produced over the very short span of video art’s existence has used the human body as its central instrument” and that narcissism could be generalized as *the* condition of the whole of artists’ video.¹⁷

Beginning with Montaigne, the corporeal self has been the linchpin of essayistic discourse: “I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics.”¹⁸ When Montaigne writes that “no man ever penetrated more deeply into his material or plucked its limbs and consequences cleaner,” or begins “Of Vanity” with mention of an acquaintance who was so self-obsessed that he placed on display at his home “a row of [his] chamber pots, seven or eight days’ worth,” since “all other talk stank in his nostrils,” the bodily emerges as an intransigent, inescapable source of self-knowledge.¹⁹ For Roland Barthes, the body is nothing less than the *mana-word*, the “word whose ardent, complex, ineffable, and somehow sacred signification gives the illusion that by this word one might answer for everything.”²⁰

Marshall McLuhan hyperbolized that television was an extension of the central nervous system, but it has been independent videomakers who have demonstrated the medium’s capabilities to write *through* the body, to write *as* the body. Durable, lightweight, mobile, producing instantaneous

results, the video apparatus supplies a dual capability well suited to the essayistic project: it is both screen and mirror, providing the technological grounds for the surveillance of the palpable world, as well as a reflective surface on which to register the self. It is an instrument through which the twin axes of essayistic practice (the looking out and the looking in, the Montaignean “measure of sight” and “measure of things”) find apt expression. Eduardo Nicol’s description of the literary essay (“a theatre of ideas in which the rehearsal and the final performance are combined”)²¹ discovers grounds for its amplification in video’s real-time capabilities. In this regard, I will focus on one videographic figure in particular.

The inclusion within the video image of a monitor, even if obliquely or inconsequentially framed, in which the artist’s self-semblance is reinscribed affords both viewer and producer access to a perpetual inter-weaving that is the essay’s textuality (“lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web”).²² The *mise en abyme* effect of the inset self-image-in-process is an enunciative trait available to the electronic, but not the cinematic, essay; through it we are reminded that the body of the artist is literally at stake through these constructive secretions and that the unfolding has real-time implications. It is as Viola has stated: “You see the effects of your actions on the image while you are carrying them out.”²³ Such a potentiality is entirely consistent with the essayistic as described by Max Bense:

This, then, is how the essay is distinguished from a treatise. The person who writes essayistically is the one who composes as he experiments, who turns his object around, questions it, feels it, tests it, reflects on it, who attacks it from different sides and assembles what he sees in his mind’s eye and puts into words what the object allows one to see under the conditions created in the course of writing.²⁴

In *Scénario du film “Passion”* (1982), Jean-Luc Godard engages in just such a critical operation with his object, his film *Passion*, completed only months before. *Scénario* functions as a kind of prolegomenon for the film, akin to a book’s introduction, which, though placed in the beginning, can only be written last. Godard does, as Bense suggested, turn his object around, test it, reflect on it, attack it from all sides. His desire is to

create *Passion*'s pre-text, a scenario to be seen as it is written, one that can attest to his intentions as well as their enactment. To this end, Godard employs video, a medium whose density of sound and image tracks can be scrupulously re-layed as he sits before the editing console and as we watch. The primary space of the tape's realization is a small editing room in which a large blank screen ("le plage blanche" after Mallarmé) faces Godard at the controls. The most favored camera placement is at the videomaker's back so that we share his view of the dazzling white screen. But because *Scénario* repeatedly replaces this scene or overlaps it with a second image source—frequently from the film about which Godard speaks—we see both what lies before the maker (tabula rasa as incitation) and the future anterior that he describes. This bizarre temporality has been described by Lyotard:

The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an event; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (*mise en oeuvre*) always begins too soon. *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).

It seems to me that the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern, while the fragment (*The Athaeneum*) is modern.²⁵

But such a scheme—the stark, present-tense studio occasionally inhabited by the lush specter of the future anterior—could install a kind of illusionist hierarchy in which the materially constituted scene (a performative Godard hypothesizing, narrating, and gesticulating before the screen) would be superseded by the “magical” composite image that he calls forth. This is not the case owing to the inclusion in the studio location of three monitors offering miniaturized, angled, and partially obscured versions of the larger composite image that we are ourselves watching. As Godard's hand moves to the fader switch, we see both the in-studio gesture (an act of labor) and its result (the displacement by, or super-imposition of, another, seemingly Imaginary, cinematic scene). The monitors, even as they produce a vertiginous of images, paradoxically provide a kind of double anchorage—in the present tense of the

productive process and in a space traversed both by a socially constructed Symbolic and by a register of sounds and images redolent of the Godardian Imaginary.

I would argue that these multiple, involuted textual articulations produce an essayistic effect resembling that which critic André Tournon has adduced to Montaigne's *Essays*: "The reader, however, is confronted with an uneven textual surface, broken in places and wound around itself like a Möbius strip—'Nous voyla embourbez' . . . [There we are stuck in the mud]."²⁶ I would also argue that the density of *Scénario*'s discursive presentation results from the canny but rather minimalist use of video's capabilities in a manner consistent with Maureen Turim's early and influential analysis:

What is special about video is its ability to move between different image registrations, to perform these shifts in coding. By splitting the image or superimposing images, video can present different views or temporal instances simultaneously. Each of these views may already be a "processed" image, that is, an image transformed by a process of shifting graphic values and codes or representation. . . . The results are images that challenge and train human perception.²⁷

The essayistic, a mode to which Godard has long been habituated, reveals itself as ideally suited to the videographic apparatus. Video's potential for textual "thickness," its facility in shuttling between or keying in diverse image sources, can ably serve the essay's discursive goals. Numerous critics have noted that the essay's value is derived from the dynamism of its process rather than its final judgments ("The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict . . . but the process of judging")²⁸ and from the richness of its textuality ("Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are inter-woven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture").²⁹ Video's process orientation and its tendency toward discursive density are deeply consonant with the essayistic project.

But if we return to Tournon's evocation of the Möbius strip as analogue to essayistic textuality and to its realization in the *mise en abyme* structure of the monitored self-image, we discover the extent to which

descriptions of the essay as the heretical, the impossible, discourse mirror contemporary theorizations of subjectivity itself. In a brilliant essay on the tensions within psychoanalysis between scientific explanation and hermeneutics, Slavoj Žižek writes of Lacan's obsession with topological models of "curved" space in the 1960s and 1970s (the Möbius strip, the Klein bottle, the inner eight, etc.).

Such a "curved" surface-structure is the structure of the subject: what we call "subject" can only emerge within the structure of overdetermination, that is, in this vicious circle where the cause itself is (presup)posed by its effect. . . . In order to grasp the constitutive paradox of the subject, we must therefore move beyond the standard opposition between "subjective" and "objective," between the order of "appearances" (of what is "for the subject") and the "in-itself."³⁰

The "bizarre temporality" of *Scénario du film "Passion,"* in which the videographic pretext produces the already written, Lyotard's future anterior, evokes the conditions of traumatic memory as described by Žižek: "This paradox of trauma *qua* cause, which does not pre-exist its effects but is itself retroactively 'posited' by them, involves a kind of temporal loop: *it is through its 'repetition,' through its echoes within the signifying structure, that cause retroactively becomes what it always already was.*"³¹ This is so because the trauma is, in Lacanian terms, of the order of the Real and can gain entrance to the signifying chain only through its eruption in language; this "primordially repressed" traumatic kernel, this remainder, this object "which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier," can never effectuate its causal power in a direct way. "In short," writes Žižek, "the real is the absent cause which perturbs the causality of symbolic law. On that account, the structure of overdetermination is irreducible: cause exercises its influence only as redoubled, through a certain discrepancy of time-lag, that is, if the 'original' trauma of the real is to become effective, it must hook onto, find an echo in, some present deadlock."³² The Real thus returns to the place in which it never ceased to be. But it is a return with a difference, because now, rather than haunting the subject as an unsymbolizable shard of experience, it is rendered articulate. The temporal logic of this articulation, however, challenges the regime of the discursive order into which it enters.

To review: Godard's video can be characterized as enacting a paradoxical temporality in which anticipated effects (the film that the tape as scenario or pre-text serves to image forth) are at the same moment past causes (a residue or remainder from Godard's experience of the film). Through its instantiation of the future anterior, *Scénario du film "Passion"* displays an uneven temporal surface; like the Möbius strip, it is neither one nor two, a model incapable of being seen "at a glance," a structure altogether consistent with the essayistic. In terms derived from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the images from *Passion* that, owing to their specular, even dreamlike, quality, we have previously aligned with the Imaginary register (with the visibly produced, present-tense footage staunchly Symbolic) now become the traumatic, "Real" kernel of experience reentering the discourse whose source it has always already been. This uncanny object that is Godard's *Scénario* echoes the constitutive disposition of the subject itself. More than that, it is the site at which a model of subjectivity, the potentialities of essayistic discourse, and those of videographic inscription momentarily converge.

While there is a great deal more to be said on behalf of the appropriateness of the encounter between the essayistic and video (particularly with regard to video's current and global utilizations at the technological low end), I have chosen to focus on certain aspects of Godard's *Scénario du film "Passion"* to examine in detail some tactical as well as epistemological issues that arise. This excursus into a single text offers illustration of the correspondences between certain textual features of the essayistic and some recent theorizations of the subject (Lyotard, Lacan, Žižek), correspondences that find particularly acute expression in the video essay. In the spirit of these proceedings, I close with the acknowledgment of my uncertainty toward the present analysis. After nearly a decade of study, I am more daunted by my object than convinced by my formulations of it. I find some solace in the ministerings of Adorno as set forth in his *Minima Moralia*:

When philosophers, who are well known to have difficulty in keeping silent, engage in conversation, they should try always to lose the argument, but in such a way as to convict their opponent of untruth. The point should not be to have absolutely correct, irrefutable, water-tight cognitions—for they inevitably boil down to tautologies—but insights which cause the question of their justness to judge itself.³³

NOTES

1. "He is troubled by any image of himself, suffers when he is named. He finds the perfection of a human relationship in this vacancy of the image: to abolish—in oneself, between oneself and others—adjectives; a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death" (Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Hill and Wang, 1977], 43).
2. Quoted in R. Lane Kauffmann, "The Skewed Path: Essaying as Un-methodical Method," *Diogenes* 143 (1988): 66.
3. Pater's statement of the essay's "un-methodical method" serves as the epigraph to Kauffmann's "Skewed Path," 66; Theodor Adorno's pronouncement appears in "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1:13 [see chapter 4, this volume].
4. Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), 18 [see chapter 1, this volume].
5. Réda Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. Pat Fedkiew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 96, 98.
6. "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. . . . It seems to me that the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern, while the fragment (*The Athaeneum*) is modern" (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], 81). See also Adorno, "Essay as Form," 18.
7. Adorno, "Essay as Form," 22.
8. Kauffmann, "Skewed Path," 68.
9. Adorno, "Essay as Form," 22.
10. The essay has, since Michel de Montaigne, been understood to be judgment "in apprenticeship and on trial" (*Essays*, trans. Donald M. Frame [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958], 611). Tobias Wolff has noted of the personal essay that "it doesn't reward authorial discretion, self-effacement, the arts that conceal art. Nor does it reward any of the civic virtues: tact; polish; reasonableness; noble, throat catching sentiment; correct posture" (introduction to *Broken Vessels*, by Andre Dubus [Boston: Godine, 1991], xiii).
11. Adorno, "Essay as Form," 11.
12. Raymond Bellour, "Video Writing," trans. Alison Rowe, in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (San Francisco: Aperture and the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1991), 435.
13. Raymond Bellour, "An Interview with Bill Viola," *October* 34 (1985): 100–101.
14. Bellour, "Video Writing," 427.

15. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 148.
16. Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History," in *Illuminating Video*, ed. Hall and Fifer, 119.
17. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (1976), reprinted in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John G. Hanhardt (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop and Peregrine Smith Books, 1986), 179–180.
18. Montaigne, *Essays*, 821.
19. *Ibid.*, 611, 721.
20. Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 129.
21. Quoted in Kauffmann, "Skewed Path," 74.
22. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 64. Barthes's metaphor of the essayistic text as a spider's web occurs earlier in Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1944–1947), but with a crucial and informative difference. For Adorno, the spider's web is a site of textual accretion rather than subjective dissolve:

Properly written texts are like spiders' webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm. They draw into themselves all the creatures of the air. Metaphors flitting hastily through them become their nourishing prey. Subject matter comes winging towards them. The soundness of a conception can be judged by whether it causes one quotation to summon another. Where thought has opened up one cell of reality, it should, without violence by the subject, penetrate the next. It proves its relation to the object as soon as other objects crystallize around it. In the light that it casts on its chosen substance, others begin to glow. (*Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott [London: Verso, 1974], 87)

- This position is reinforced in the later "Essay as Form" (1954–1958), in which, for essayistic writing, "the fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture" (13).
23. Bellour, "Interview with Bill Viola," 101.
 24. Quoted in Adorno, "Essay as Form," 17.
 25. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 81.
 26. André Tournon, "Self-Interpretation in Montaigne's *Essays*," in "Montaigne: Essays in Reading," ed. Gérard Defaux, special issue, *Yale French Studies* 64 (1983): 62.
 27. Maureen Turim, "Video Art: Theory for a Future," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: University Publications of America, 1983), 134.
 28. Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," 18.
 29. Adorno, "Essay as Form," 13.
 30. Slavoj Žižek, "Is There a Cause of the Subject?" in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 103.
 31. *Ibid.*, 102.
 32. *Ibid.*, 101.
 33. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 70–71.

13

THE ESSAY FILM

Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments

(2009)

LAURA RASCAROLI

THEORISING THE ESSAY: HERESY, FORM, TEXTUAL COMMITMENTS

All these attempts at defining the essay film are productive, in that they identify a number of characteristics that are undoubtedly relevant; and, principally, the two primary markers of the form—reflectiveness and subjectivity. However, they also diverge in some substantial ways, perhaps due to that “heretical” factor that we recognise in the literary essay first and, consequently, in its cinematic versions. While the heretical aspect of the essay should be respected, and an over-theorisation of the form avoided, it is important to understand why certain films produce in the spectator the impression of watching an essay, as opposed to a documentary, a fiction, a poem, a travelogue or an experimental film.

At the level of textual commitments (which can be summarised as follows: “I am going to share with you my personal line of reasoning on this topic”), an essay is the expression of a personal, critical reflection on a problem or set of problems. Such reflection does not propose itself as anonymous or collective, but as originating from a single authorial voice; as Arthur writes, “a quality shared by all film essays is the inscription of a blatant, self-searching authorial presence.”¹ This authorial “voice” approaches the subject matter not in order to present an ostensibly factual

report (the field of traditional documentary), but to offer an overtly personal, in-depth, thought-provoking reflection.²

At the level of rhetorical structures, in order to convey such reflection, the filmic essay decidedly points to the enunciating subject, who literally inhabits the text. This enunciator is embodied in a narrator, who (although never un-problematically or unreflexively) is close to the real, extra-textual author. The distance between the two is slight, as the enunciator represents the author's views, and the narrator is her spokesperson (even when hiding behind a different name, or multiple personae, or when problematising the existence of the subject itself). The essay's enunciator may remain a voice-over or also physically appear in the text, and usually does not conceal that she is the film's director. As examples of these strong enunciators, and in order to further clarify my claims, in the course of the following three chapters I will examine a film by Chris Marker, in which the director briefly appears as himself in voice-over (and includes a shot of his hand), but also speaks extensively through a diegetic, fictional female narrator; two films by Harun Farocki, in which the filmmaker speaks in voice-over either directly, or through an extra-diegetic narrator, and—in one of the two films—shows parts of his body (his hand, the back of his head); finally, two films by Jean-Luc Godard, in which the director appears in person, but also uses an array of both real and fictional diegetic narrators. All these texts, although in idiosyncratic ways, point to the enunciating subjects in an extraordinarily strong (although never unproblematic and straightforward) manner; the authors inscribe themselves in the films, and play roles that position them as the source of the act of communication, and as essayists: they are filmmakers, researchers, film editors, intellectuals, lecturers. I have suggested, however, that the relationship between narrator(s), enunciator and author is never unproblematic or unreflexive; indeed, the essay is a field in which the author problematises and questions not only her subject matter, but also her authorship and her subjectivity. I will suggest, and try to demonstrate by analysing specific films over the following chapters, that authorship in the essay film is interstitial; it is played, indeed, in the liminal spaces between the empirical author and his or her textual figures.³

One could argue that fiction cinema and documentaries may also present strong or overt enunciators, who speak through a narrator (who can

be either internal or external to the narration). In the essay film, however, this choice is structural rather than occasional (as is, instead, usually the case of fiction cinema); and is personal and individual, rather than social and collective (as often happens in traditional documentaries).⁴ Furthermore, and this is a fundamental point, the enunciator addresses the spectator directly, and attempts to establish a dialogue. The “I” of the essay film always clearly and strongly implicates a “you”—and, for me, this is a key aspect of the deep structures of the form. “You” is called upon to participate and share the enunciator’s reflections. It is important to understand that this “you” is not a generic audience, but an embodied spectator. The essay film constructs such a spectatorial position by adopting a certain rhetorical structure: rather than answering all the questions that it raises, and delivering a complete, “closed” argument, the essay’s rhetoric is such that it opens up problems, and interrogates the spectator; instead of guiding her through emotional and intellectual responses, the essay urges her to engage individually with the film, and reflect on the same subject matter the author is musing about. This structure accounts for the “openness” of the essay film.

Writing about the CD-ROM *Immemory* (1997) by Chris Marker, Raymond Bellour touched on the question of the essay film, and rightly pointed to the importance of the presence of the spectator and of the dialogical structure that I just described:

Still one thing is sure: the subjectivity expressed here with such force and such ease does not only stem from the power to say “I,” of which Marker makes immoderate use. It springs from a more general capacity: the viewer is always taken as a third party to what he sees, through what he hears. Marker’s formula is exchange, in the elective modes of conversation and correspondence. But since he does not believe in the communication under which our epoch agonises, he knows that the only real exchange resides in the address, the way the person who speaks to us situates himself in what he says, with respect to what he shows.⁵

Bellour’s brief but persuasive reflection attracts our attention to two important aspects of the essay’s textual structures: the person who speaks must situate herself in what she says, must display her own subjectivity, and take a risk; and must address the person who watches, who is

hence invited to enter into a dialogue. Of course, this dialogue is achieved textually—in the negotiation of the embodied spectator with the text. The spectatorial position is not that of a generic audience; it is not in the plural but in the singular—it is the position of a real spectator, who is directly and personally addressed and summoned. For instance, as Bellour again notices, by varying the mode of address (as well as by giving the right to speak, the right to the image, to an extraordinary mass of people), Chris Marker is able to speak to the single spectator:

In this way the different persons of the verb can circulate even more fluidly through *Immemory* and through all his texts, as well as the commentaries and voices of his films: I, you, he, she, one, we, they, returning finally to “I.” This fluidity implies knowing how to address oneself in order to move toward others, and knowing how to touch the other of each one who becomes involved. Beyond humanism, it is a gift of alterity, guaranteed perhaps by an ethos of reserve.⁶

Bellour's comments have been prompted by a CD-ROM—a text normally thought to instigate a different, more active type of viewing experience than that produced by a film; however, the author extends them to Marker's entire cinematic work. This move is, in my opinion, fully justified, not so much because the interactivity of a CD-ROM is, ultimately, always limited to the possibilities offered and prearranged by its author, but because Marker, in his films, attempts to approximate precisely the same type of direct and involved spectatorial experience achieved by the CD-ROM. My claim is that this same attempt characterises essayistic cinema as a form.

The structure of the essay film (as well as of the literary essay), in other words, is that of a constant interpellation; each spectator, as an individual and not as a member of an anonymous, collective audience, is called upon to engage in a dialogical relationship with the enunciator, hence to become active, intellectually and emotionally, and interact with the text. The spectatorial position is in the singular, because the genuine essay film raises problems and asks questions, and does not offer clear-cut answers; as suggested in an already quoted passage by Montaigne, the essayist writes not in order to “pretend to discover things, but to lay open my self.”²⁷

INTERPELLATION THROUGH THE GAZE: CHRIS
MARKER'S *SANS SOLEIL* (1983)

The essayist does not pretend to discover truths to which he holds the key, but allows the answers to emerge somewhere else, precisely in the position occupied by the embodied spectator. The meaning of the film is created via this dialogue, in which the spectator has an important part to play; meanings are presented by the speaking subject as a personal, subjective meditation, rather than as objective truths. It is this subjective move, this speaking in the first person that mobilises the subjectivity of the spectator. As Christa Blümlinger has put it, the representation of social reality becomes an expression of the subjectivity through which it is mediated: self-reflexivity is the condition through which the essayist develops his considerations on the world.⁸ The author's personal reflection asks to be either shared or rejected by the viewer. Indeed, implicit in the essay structure is the tentative assumption of a certain unity of the human experience, which allows two subjects to meet and communicate on the basis of such a shared experience. The two subject positions, the "I" and the "you," determine and shape one another.

This structure is likely to generate a more personal spectatorial experience than that of a fiction film, which—even when it is the autobiographical product of a strong auteur—rarely addresses the spectator directly, and as an individual; or of a traditional documentary, in which the public may not be addressed overtly, or else may be addressed as the anonymous audience constructed by the position of generalised authority taken up by the enunciator. Or, even, of the spectator of a diary, a notebook or a travelogue film, who might have the impression of being let into the private monologue of the enunciator with himself/herself.

Some of the critical contributions explored above maintain that voice is all important in the essay film, and that only films with extensive voice-over are essays; some suggest that this feature is not absolutely necessary. The fact is that, while the author's voice is the literary essay's obvious, required prerequisite, the cinema is able to express authorial subjectivity at different levels. As Arthur rightly argues,

since film operates simultaneously on multiple discursive levels—image, speech, titles, music—the literary essay's single, determining voice is

dispersed into cinema's multi-channel stew. The manifestation or location of a film author's 'voice' can shift from moment to moment or surface expressively via montage, camera movement and so on.⁹

This complicates matters, but does not take away from the injunction that the essay film is the expression of a single, situated authorial "voice" that enters into a dialogue with the spectator. If this dialogue can be achieved via purely visual means, in other words if the enunciator is able to convey an argument and enter into a dialogue with the spectator through images unaccompanied by commentary, we can call that an essay film. However, I argue that the spectator might not easily experience that film as an essay, in the same way in which she might enter into a dialogue with a film that uses both visual and verbal language.

THE INSCRIPTION OF SUBJECTIVITY IN THE ESSAY FILM: VOICE-OVER, INTERPELLATION AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Central to the essay film, the authorial presence can be achieved at different levels, and through various techniques. For instance, to borrow Bill Nichols's categorisation of the documentary, the enunciator is most evident in the "expository" mode, in which we find a "voice-of-God" commentary directed towards the viewer. Here,

the authoring presence of the filmmaker is represented by the commentary and sometimes the (usually unseen) voice of authority will be that of the filmmaker him- or herself. . . . In other cases such as the evening news, a delegate, the anchorperson, will represent a broader, institutional source of authority.¹⁰

The enunciator is also evident, although in a different way, in Nichols's "interactive" documentary mode, in which the filmmaker's presence in the film is apparent and synchronous to the filming, rather than superimposed in post-production. However, this mode frequently employs interviews, in which only the interviewee is seen; in these cases, "the

filmmaker is neither seen nor heard, allowing the witnesses ‘to speak for themselves.’”¹¹ At times, “intertitles may provide the other half of the ‘dialogue’ rather than a voice-off. . . . Although this tactic places the filmmaker ‘on screen,’ in the two-dimensional space of the graphic intertitles, a sense of absence remains.”¹²

The presence-absence of the enunciator is a key point of the essay film. The inscription of the author can be very direct, for instance by making the filmmaker’s body visible and his or her voice audible. Other times, it can be more indirect, for example through the use of a narrator/spokesperson, or of inter-titles, or of musical commentary, camera movements and the like. However, I have argued that one of the key features of the essay film is the direct address to the receiver; voice-over is the most simple and successful way of producing such an address.

It is necessary here to consider that, within documentary theory, the pervasive presence of a voice-over, a frequent and characterising marker of the essay film, has often been accused of producing an authoritarian discourse, and of superimposing a specific, particular reading on the pure truthfulness of the visuals. Stella Bruzzi, commenting on such widespread critical response, has argued that “the negative portrayal of voice-over is largely the result of the development of a theoretical orthodoxy that condemns it for being inevitably and inherently didactic.”¹³ In other words, “We have been ‘taught’ to believe in the image of reality and similarly ‘taught’ how to interpret the narrational voice as distorted and superimposed onto it.”¹⁴ In particular, Bruzzi draws attention to the fact that Bill Nichols, in his categorisation, adopts a negative definition (the “expository mode”) for documentaries with prevailing voice-over and, chronologically and qualitatively, describes this mode as the oldest and most primitive. Within this category, as Bruzzi notices, Nichols includes documentaries with formal, open and poetic modes of exposition, hence very diverse films that are only held together by their adoption of the formal element of voice-over. Bruzzi is persuasive when she reminds us that voice, in documentary practice, is often and simply “an economic device able to efficiently relay information,” rather than used for “telling people what to think”;¹⁵ and that voice can also be used as an ironic or a polemical tool.

The use of voice in an essay film can be all these things—it can be contrapuntal or ironic or polemical, as well as a means to convey information. It is also, first and foremost, a privileged tool for the author’s articulation

of his or her thought (in conjunction with sound and image), and hence a prime location of the author's subjectivity, as well as the main channel of the enunciator's address to the spectator. However, owing to its overwhelmingly negative reception in documentary studies, the use of voice-over remains a questioned technique. Furthermore, such a blatant expression of authorial subjectivity obviously raises a whole series of issues, which can be only briefly touched upon here, and that go under the umbrella of the poststructuralist critique of concepts of authorship. These factors potentially cast a shadow of authoritarianism on the essay film. And yet, I will claim the opposite; as Lopate reminds us, "Adorno, in 'The Essay as Form,' saw precisely the antisystematic, subjective, nonmethodic method of the essay as its radical promise, and he called for modern philosophy to adopt its form, at a time when authoritative systems of thought had become suspect"¹⁶

The accomplished essay film confounds issues of authority; and it is precisely because of its liberal stance that it is particularly relevant today, when the radical problematisation of the existence of objective, permanent, fixed viewpoints on the world has produced the decline of grand narratives and of the social persuasiveness of the myths of objectivity and authority. Unsurprisingly, for Lyotard "the essay . . . is postmodern, while the fragment . . . is modern."¹⁷ The essay is, in fact, a "genre of absence,"¹⁸ in which "there is no truth, just truth-making."¹⁹

THE PLACE OF THE ESSAY FILM

It is important to state one more time that heresy and openness are among the essay film's key markers. Its positioning at the crossroads of "documentary, avantgarde, and art film impulses" Arthur suggests,²⁰ as I have claimed, that we must resist the temptation to overtheorise the form or, even worse, to crystallise it into a genre. It being informal, sceptical, diverse, disjunctive, paradoxical, contradictory, heretical, open, free and formless, the essay truly is the post-modern "matrix of all generic possibilities."²¹ The essay is a field of experimentation and idiosyncrasy, to the extent that we can accept Edgar Morin's comprehensive outlook: "Talking of essay film, I would rather refer to the attitude of he who attempts

(*essai*—essay, but also attempt) to debate a problem by using all the means that the cinema affords, all the registers and all the expedients.”²²

I suggest, therefore, that we think of the essay as a mode, which is defined by the above-discussed textual commitments and rhetorical strategies; and explore the ways in which this mode is appropriated, manipulated, interpreted, modified and reinvented by filmmakers and videomakers. Experimentation and idiosyncrasy are intrinsic to a form that is always and necessarily unique and original. The first episode of Aleksandr Sokurov’s television series *Dukhovnye golosa* (*Spiritual Voices*, 1995), for instance, is an essay that uses a fixed, single shot lasting approximately forty minutes, and extensive voice-over from the director himself, who muses about Mozart. Chris Marker’s *Level Five* (1996) mixes instead documentary subject matter and fictional characters; its enunciator is principally embodied into a female narrator, who ultimately proves to be a computer image, an avatar. Almost completely devoid of voice-over, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Notre musique* (*Our Music*, 2004) combines documentary and fiction, re-enactments of real events, imaginary figures and social actors; the enunciator is in the text as Jean-Luc Godard the director, but also uses various narrators and various visual means to formulate his line of reasoning. The first film has been alternatively bracketed as a television programme, as a documentary and as a video installation; the second as a documentary, as a fiction and as an essay film; the third exclusively as a fiction (but its fictional status is, in truth, problematic). Each embraces the textual commitments and rhetorical strategies of the essay film, but articulates them in infinitely diverse ways.

To identify what essay is not might help to further enlighten my definition of essay film. Take the case of Harun Farocki; whereas his *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1989) is truly and thoroughly an essay film, other works, such as *Ein Bild* (*An Image*, 1983), *Die Schulung* (*Indoctrination*, 1987) or *Die Bewerbungen* (*The Interview*, 1996), seem to me to be far better described as authorial documentaries. As we will see in more detail in the following chapter, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* presents a narrator, a spokes-person of the enunciator, who expresses herself through extensive voice-over; her speech is the vocal part of a thought-provoking reflection articulated through words and images, sound and montage. The enunciator is also physically present in the text

as Harun Farocki the filmmaker/researcher (who, however, is never fully in view); because of this double presence and this self-reflexive split, the essay's authorship is played in the interstices between narrator and enunciator. Interpellation is extensively used to involve the spectator in a dialogue with the film, which is simultaneously reflective and subjective, open and experimental.

INTERPELLATION THROUGH WRITTEN TEXT:
HARUN FAROCKI'S *IMAGES OF THE WORLD*
AND *THE INSCRIPTION OF WAR* (1989)

The other three films are nonfictions made for television. *An Image* is the record of the preparations and shooting of a photograph for German *Playboy*, *Indoctrination* is the examination of a week-long seminar on rhetoric and communication for executives, and *The Interview* looks at seminars aimed at preparing candidates for job interviews. None of the three films employs voice-over. All three reveal the personal position of their author on a topic, a position that can be inferred by a number of means through which the enunciator intervenes on the documentary material. The films' titles, for instance, and in particular the first two, are telling: "an image" and "indoctrination" add the depth of a commentary to the subject matter. The first attracts our attention to the disproportion between the photographer's painstakingly detailed preparatory work and the outcome of "one image"; hence, to the constructedness of any image, to the hidden, elaborate process of creating a shot that must appear as natural as possible. The second title adds a definite spin on what we see: it is an appraisal that clarifies the position of the filmmaker, which is unambiguously critical. It also suggests that the author sees this seminar (and we ought to see it too), and the corporate mentality it stands for, as manipulation, brainwashing and frightening propaganda.

Other means are also employed by the director to convey his position in these films, especially montage; one could argue, for instance, that in *Indoctrination* Farocki selected only those moments of the seminar that were particularly telling, and that revealed the manipulation of the participants into espousing the logic of corporate business. As for *An Image*, the

choice of focusing on the photographer and his assistants rather than on the naked model (as well as the decision to not show the final product of their efforts) conveys the filmmaker's ideological position. However, it is not easy to maintain that these films are essays. Despite the mythical goal of total objectivity that has accompanied the documentary for decades, it is important to acknowledge that, to use Bruzzi's words, "all documentaries, because the product of individuals, will always display bias and be in some manner didactic."²³ All documentaries make an argument; even those that attempt to make their argument look like the pure observation of an unaltered reality—and yet, we do not call them all essays. *An Image*, *Indoctrination* and *The Interview* are documentaries, presenting factual images in a way that both informs us of certain realities and comments on them. They are quite overtly authorial; the sophistication of the films, the control of the image and the use of montage, all suggest a coherent, strong cinematic project and vision of the world. At times, the enunciator comes to the fore, by using a title, a cut, the juxtaposition of two shots; but we, the spectators, do not necessarily feel summoned and engaged in a continuous dialogue with a filmmaker/essayist.

Take now a very different and familiar example: the documentaries of Michael Moore, which have frequently been labelled as essays, for instance by Paul Arthur.²⁴ It is obvious that Moore's films are the product of an overt first-person author. Think, as an example, of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which has a strong enunciator, unambiguously identified with the film's real author, who is by now a well-known public figure. This enunciator is embodied in the film in various ways, and most evidently through a narrator (Moore's own clearly identifiable voice-over dominates the film), but also via other means, including the use of irony (which is expressed, for instance, by contrapuntal musical commentary, the choice of humorous archival images and the use of sequences from fiction cinema). Moore is in the film simultaneously as enunciator, as narrator and as character—and all these figures directly identify with the extra-textual author. This seems to agree with one of the main stipulations of the essay. Moore occupies the image constantly, as voice, bodily presence or commentary; hence, we can easily agree that he is a strong enunciator, and that his film is very personal. However, there are two clear differences with the essay film. The first is that Moore does not problematise his authorship, which is not subjected to self-searching scrutiny; his subjectivity is accepted,

as a plain fact, and his self as a perfectly knowable entity. The second is that he does not present his subject matter as a subjective reflection on a problem, but as an objective investigation of factual events. Indeed, his is a work of reportage, in the tradition of the American “muckraking” investigative journalism, which is “hard-hitting in tone, often well rooted in fact, and at times brutal in its exposure of venality and corruption”;²⁵ a tradition in which frequently the journalist writes in the first person, and becomes a personality. His voice-over commentary is intended for a generic, broad audience; it is not a dialogue, in which the single spectator is called upon to participate in the reflection and in the construction of meaning in an idiosyncratic way that may well be different from that of any other member of the audience.

In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, spectators are asked to follow the facts, to watch and listen, and progressively discover an objective truth, to which the author holds the key. The film’s rhetorical structure is that of journalistic exposé, in which the reporter investigates a topic and discovers scandal, corruption or controversy and aims to convince the audience of their historicity and factuality. The ambiguity, which may persuade critics to talk of essay, lies in the fact that, precisely the opposite of Montaigne’s essayist, Moore “pretends to discover things” together with the spectator. The text, however, is not open, but closed: at all times, the spectator is clearly told where to be, what to feel, how to react, what to find out, what to believe. For instance, contrapuntal music is used to induce us to laugh at George W. Bush’s intellectual paucity; sentimental music is adopted to make us participate emotionally in the despair of families of the victims of 9/11. If we want to consider first-person journalistic reportage as essay, then *Fahrenheit 9/11* is an essay; however, if we think of an essay according to the lines explored above, it is not.

While basing my analysis on the parameters I have established here, in each of the three chapters that follow that form the first section of this book, dedicated to the domain of the essayistic in the cinema, I will test and problematise the boundaries of my definition of essay film. I will indeed always stress the necessity of its heresy, and try to keep the classification fluid; for the essay film, ultimately, is an open field of experimentation, sited at the crossroads of documentary, art film and experimental practices. As Corrigan has rightly argued, however, “despite overlappings, this genre of filmmaking needs to be distinguished from a documentary

tradition and an avant-garde/experimental one.”²⁶ Although sitting at a crossroads, the essay film occupies its own place.

NOTES

1. Paul Arthur, “Essay Questions,” *Film Comment* 39, no. 1 (2003): 59 [see chapter 11, this volume].
2. Here, and in the following pages, I use the term “voice” in the sense of the author’s subjectivity and not of “voice-over” (although voice-over can be one of the means through which a subjective stance is expressed).
3. Catherine Lupton is close to this idea when she calls the voice-over of the essay film “heteroglossic,” on the basis that the essay undermines the authority of the singular, omniscient, voice-of-God documentary narrator

by-multiplying the speaking selves or personae who provide the commentary, by deferring or displacing what they have to say into assorted forms of reported speech—such as the letter, the quotation, the recollected saying or conversation—by asserting their fictional or, at least, ontologically ambiguous status with respect to actual people (including and especially the filmmaker), and by fomenting indeterminacies, tensions and disagreements among them. (“Speaking Parts: Heteroglossic Voice-Over in the Essay Film” [paper presented at the conference “Der Essayfilm: Ästhetik und Aktualität,” Leuphana University, Lüneburg, November 29–December 2, 2007])

4. For a more thorough discussion of these points, see the introduction.
5. Raymond Bellour, “Le livre, aller; retour/The Book, Back and Forth,” in *Qu’est-ce qu’une Madeleine?* ed. Laurent Roth and Raymond Bellour (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1997), 111.
6. Ibid.
7. Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, 3rd ed., trans. Charles Cotton (London: Printed for M. Gillyflower et al., 1700), 254.
8. Christa Blümlinger, “Lire entre les images,” in *L’Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Murielle Gagnebin (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2004), 56.
9. Arthur, “Essay Questions,” 59.
10. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 37. For a detailed engagement with the question of voice-over in documentary in general, and in the essay film in particular, see chapter 2.
11. Ibid., 54.
12. Ibid., 55.
13. Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 47.
14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 50.
16. Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film," in *Totally, Tenderly, Tragically: Essays and Criticism from a Lifelong Love Affair with the Movies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 282 [see chapter 9, this volume].
17. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.
18. John Snyder, *Prospects of Power: Tragedy, Satire, the Essay, and the Theory of Genre* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 151.
19. Ibid, 200.
20. Arthur, "Essay Questions," 62.
21. Réda Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, trans. Pat Fedkiew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 92.
22. Quoted in Giovanni Maderna, "Film saggio: Intervista a Edgar Morin," in *Filmmaker 5 doc*, ed. Silvano Cavatorta and Luca Mosso (Milan: Edizioni A&M, 1996), 4 (author's translation).
23. Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 36.
24. Arthur, "Essay Questions."
25. Ellen F. Fitzpatrick, "Introduction: Late-Nineteenth-Century America and the Origins of Muckraking," in *Muckraking: Three Landmark Articles*, ed. Ellen F. Fitzpatrick (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 1994), 1.
26. Timothy Corrigan, "The Cinematic Essay: Genre on the Margins," *Iris: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound* 19 (1995): 89.

14

OF THE HISTORY OF THE ESSAY FILM

Vertov to Varda

(2011)

TIMOTHY CORRIGAN

[Chris] Marker's *Letter from Siberia* and André Bazin's prescient characterization of that film the same year as an "essay film" are key historical markers in the emergence of the essay film from the literary and photographic heritage that preceded it and the postwar culture in which it developed. Despite the historical and mythic importance of this 1958–1959 moment, however, there is a specifically cinematic history that precedes it, embedded in the evolution of documentary and avant-garde cinemas during the first half of the twentieth century. Both the subject matter and the formal innovations of these earlier traditions, set against the dominance of narrative film, partially anticipate the more pronounced innovations of essay films. Equally important, though, are the social and institutional changes that create new frameworks for a critical reception that would help distinguish the essay film and its address in the second half of the twentieth century. By the 1940s, a dynamics of an interactive reception of ideas, associated with the documentary and avant-garde films of the preceding decades, would dovetail with numerous other sea changes in film aesthetics and technology, as well as with larger shifts in post-World War II culture and epistemology, to introduce, most visibly and pervasively in France, the practice of the essay film. That practice has continued to evolve into the present day where it assumes an increasingly important place in global film culture.

As it develops in and out of those documentary and avant-garde traditions, the history of the essay film underlines a central critical point: that the essayistic should not necessarily be seen simply as an alternative to either of these practices (or to narrative cinema); rather it rhymes with and retimes them as counterpoints within and to them. Situated between the categories of realism and formal experimentation and geared to the possibilities of “public expression,” the essay film suggests an appropriation of certain avant-garde and documentary practices in a way different from the early historical practices of both, just as it tends to invert and restructure the relations between the essayistic and narrative to subsume narrative within that public expression. The essayistic play between fact and fiction, between the documentary and the experimental, or between non-narrative and narrative becomes a place where the essay film *inhabits* other forms and practices, in the way Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests when she notes that the facts contained in her essay film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) are the fictions of its stories. Or, to adopt Barthes’s phrasing about his own essayistic writing, the essay film *stages* film forms, from narrative to documentary, as a way of feeding knowledge “into the machinery of infinite reflexivity.”¹ The essay and essay film do not create new forms of experimentation, realism, or narrative; they rethink existing ones as a dialogue of ideas.

Two well-known films that might be considered a rhyming frame within the history of the essay film are Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967). Together they represent two very different versions of “city symphony” films, one a celebrated epitome of that type of early documentary and the other an adaptation of it that confirms the historical centrality of the essay film. For many, the preliminary signs of the essayistic in Vertov’s film are evident in the film’s opening announcement that it is “an excerpt from the diary of a cameraman” and in Vertov’s description of his role in the film as a “supervisor of the experiment,” creating a cinematic language that would express the energy and social dynamics of the modern city. In part, the film is a documentary of a composite city in Russia (with footage from Moscow, Kiev, Odessa) and in part, it is a reflexive celebration of the power of cinematic vision.²

Integrating these two movements, *Man with a Movie Camera* begins with the awakening of a cinema theater as seats magically open to

welcome spectators and the awakening of the city as a woman's eyes open and the cameraman begins his dawn-to-dusk drive around town filming an immense activity, filled with the movement of automobiles and trams, workers and athletes, factories and shops. The reflexivity that links the mechanistic energy of the cameraman and the documentary reality of the city is what of course associates the film, for many viewers, with essay films. This is the activity of a constructivist vision, made especially apparent in the celebrated sequence that links shots of a seamstress at work and the film's editor, Elizaveta Svilova, at her editing table where she examines several images of faces and selects certain ones to insert into a crowd sequence: here film mimics daily life, and both film and human activity have the capacity to actively impact life through their work. Through this shared activity, the aim and power of *Man with a Movie Camera* is to transform the multiplicity of different individuals and social functions into a harmonized whole that transcends those vibrant differences. Graphically dramatized by the different shots that superimpose a human eye and the camera lens, Vertov's "cinema eye" (*kino-glaz*) overcomes the limitation of subjective human visions by integrating them within the larger objective truths of life (*kino-pravda*).

Between 1968 and 1972 Godard, with Jean-Pierre Gorin, would reestablish the historical connection with Vertov when they formed the Dziga Vertov Group, a collective aiming to reanimate some of Vertov's political and aesthetic goals. This occurs, appropriately, just after the period when Godard begins consistently to describe himself as a film essayist.³ *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* thus suggests connections and differences across the large historical divide between the 1920s and 1960s, specifically as this film inherits, inhabits, and adjusts the experimental and documentary strategies of *Man with a Movie Camera* into more contemporary essayistic perspectives.

In Godard's fictional documentary as city symphony, the Paris of *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* becomes the doubled "her" of the city and the character Juliette Janson and then doubled again when she is also identified as the actress Marina Vlady. Superimposed public and personal realms, Paris and Juliette intermingle, and continually define and redefine each other as subject and object, while the character Juliette and the actress Vlady open a pronounced gap within the primary subjective identity within the film. In this Paris, commercialism, imperialism, and

materialism are the cultural dominants that twist relationships to the point that prostitution becomes a viable employment option for Juliette, whose other self works as a conventional high-rise housewife. Just as Juliette's private and public experiences are stunningly divided, the private and public spaces of Paris (bedrooms, cafes, streets) likewise become separate zones, which unlike Vertov's city spaces, never geometrically fit together, visualized by the film not as a musical montage but as graphically demarcated *mise-en-scènes*.

As the title indicates, the film is an epistemological project about ideas and knowing, but embedded within that suggestion is the somewhat ironic awareness that modern knowledge is shaped and frustrated by fragmented and reified subjects within a landscape of acquisition, enumeration, and accumulation. While Vertov's film could be described as a mesmerizing and harmonizing integration of social subjects and public life, Godard's film becomes explicitly about the difficulty of trying to express oneself and to think through this modern, always mediated, world. As one character remarks "we often try to analyze the meaning of words but are led astray. One must admit that there's nothing simpler than taking things for granted." As a project that attempts to think and know modern life through a exaggeratedly subjectivized whispering voice-over, a politics of semiotics pervades the film, mapping the world of the city and the self of Juliette as products of signs and symbols which need constant interpretation if language has any promise of mediating and humanizing the divide. Yet, ubiquitous ads and slogans abound as the pervasive filter that continually short-circuit or detour this possibility of a humanizing bond or link with the city and other people, so that expression itself, like Godard's whispering voice, becomes absorbed by the public places that surround it. Toward the conclusion of the film, over a 360-degree pan of the exterior walls of her apartment complex, Juliette reflects on her frustrated efforts to know the visibility of her world through a semiotics of self expression that recalls the blur between verbal and visual expression that distinguishes the essay film from its literary precedents: "you could say it can't be expressed in words, but I feel that my facial expression has meaning." Indeed, just as Juliette continually engages in a semiotics of naming objects around her, the voice-over names and describes Juliette in terms of the framing ("she moves left") that addresses the viewer and her conscious and unconscious entrapment in a semiotic field of space and language.

Juliette famously observes to her son that “language is the house where man lives,” and in an often cited sequence, a close-up focuses and re-focuses on a cup of coffee, swirling with foam, while Godard’s voice-over commentary reflects, “Maybe an object is what permits us to relink, to pass from one subject to the other, therefore to live in society.” Or, in the context of essayistic skepticism, maybe not.

While the use of montage in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* recalls Vertov’s film, Godard’s film sharply juxtaposes urban scenes of construction and deconstruction with interior shots and close-ups of private lives to create multiple levels of interaction in a city permeated by too many sounds and images and without the overarching experiential harmony of *Man with a Movie Camera*. Self and other become reduced in their mutual isolation and objectification, while this postwar man with the movie camera constantly signals his awareness of his own isolated position within the industrial language he exposes. Wryly articulated with essayistic intertitles (taken from titles of actual essays published by Gallimard in a collection called *Ideas*) such as “Eighteen Lessons on Industrial Society,” Godard’s encounter with this new city can only claim a tentative and temporary position: “Since I cannot tear myself from the objectivity that crushes me nor from the subjectivity that exiles me, since I am permitted neither to lift myself to being nor fall into nothingness, I must listen, I must look around me more than ever at the world, my likeness, my brother.” While Vertov celebrates the possibility of a new documentary truth through the cinema, Godard’s film inhabits that utopia as a significantly more essayistic, “improvised” truth: skeptical, provisional, self-critical, a cinema that accepts its continually frustrated struggle to think the world through language. It becomes a self-described “experiment” in which the viewer, along with Godard himself, watch his “thinking aloud,” not within the narrative or documentary coherence of a film but as “an attempt at a film.”⁴

Essays describe and provoke an activity of public thought, and the public nature of that subjective experience highlights and even exaggerates the participations of their audience, readers, and viewers in a dialogue of ideas. More than other literary or representational practices, even the most personal of essays speak to a listener who will validate or trouble that personal essayistic voice, and the more immersed that voice is in its exterior world the more urgent the essay becomes in embedding and

dispersing itself within the public experience and dialogue it desires. From Montaigne's implied epistolary address to his lost friend and interlocutor Étienne la Boétie to Jacob Riis's hortatory public lectures and photographs of the New York tenements for philanthropic audiences, the essay presses itself as a dialogic and reflective communal experience, stretched between the intimate other of self and the public Other that surrounds a self. In this sense, one of the chief defining features of the essay film and its history becomes eliciting an active intellectual response to the questions and provocations that an unsettled subjectivity directs at its public.

From the very beginning of film history, films sketch these essayistic predilections as the transformation of personal expression into a public debate and ideational dialogue. These terms become isolated and explored especially in certain documentary and avant-garde movements of the 1920s and then dramatically re-articulated with the advances of sound as a destabilized voice in the 1930s and early 1940s. With post-World War II cinema, these tendencies would grow into a distinctive dialectic that both underpins and parallels the more prominent tradition of the narrative art cinema, subsumed within a more dominant play of ideas.

As part of what I'll call a precursive history of the essay film, early film reception regularly elicits not only a dynamic audience interactivity but one frequently based in the kind of pedagogical response associated with essays, reformulated cinematically as the scientific lectures or travelogues.⁵ Even after narrative cinema begins to take shape and dominate film culture in the first decade of the twentieth century, many films continued to insist on the capacity of movies to address audiences with the intellectual and social imperatives associated with lectures, social pamphlets, and other essayistic formats. A 1909 review of D. W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat*, about the capitalist exploitation of the wheat trade, aligns it explicitly, for instance, with an intervention in the public domain associated with editorials and essays: "The picture . . . is an argument, an editorial, an essay on a vital subject of deep interest to all. . . . [yet] No orator, no editorial writer, no essayist, could so strongly and effectively present the thoughts that are conveyed in this picture. It is another demonstration of the force and power of motion pictures as a means of conveying ideas."⁶

By the 1920s, the possibilities of an essayistic cinema become articulated most clearly in the work of Sergei Eisenstein and other filmmakers in the Soviet cinema, while certain avant-garde films also experiment with

the blending of formalist and documentary aesthetics in ways that foreshadow the essay film. Film historian Román Gubern claims that in 1922 Benjamin Christiansen “inaugurated the formula for the essay film with his admirable *Haxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages*” in its combination of documentary and fiction, realism and fantasy.⁷ More often noted are Eisenstein’s early references to the essay film and his desire to make Marx’s *Capital* into a political and social science argument on film. In April 1928, he writes: “The content of CAPITAL (its aim) is now formulated: to teach the worker to think dialectically.”⁸ By the late 1920s and early 1930s, documentary films, often intersecting with avant-garde traditions in films such as Alberto Cavalcanti’s *Rien que les heures* (1926), Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, and [Jean] Vigo’s *A propos de Nice*, likewise anticipate and adumbrate the structures and terms of the essay film that would make its decisive appearance in the 1950s.⁹

The advent of synchronized film sound in the late 1920s and early 1930s has, as many historians point out, a massive impact on documentary film and, less obviously, on the key formation of a contrapuntal voice, a voice that would inform the gradual formation of a particular essayistic address in the cinema as a modulating inquiry into the reality of images. From Paul Rotha’s multiple, heteroglossic voice-over presentations to the multiple uses of voice-over as a lyrical, ironic, or polemical commentary, the voice of the subject becomes an engagement with facts. Recognizing this mobility in the documentary voice even at this early stage, Bruzzi has countered tendencies to homogenize and standardize the range and movement of these voices by examining the vocal flux of *Land Without Bread* (1933), *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945), and numerous other documentaries: “the reductionism that has plagued discussions of documentary’s implementation of voice-over,” she notes, “lies in the persistent refusal to either acknowledge any differences between *actual* voices or to distinguish between very different uses of the voice within the documentary context.”¹⁰

Looking forward to the postwar essay films, this mobilizing of the documentary voice foreshadows the more definite play with an even more mobile and self-reflexive linguistics and documentary voice as a drama of subjectivity enmeshed in the world. Writing about Rotha at this time, John Grierson calls for the integration of three different methods within documentary films, the last especially anticipating the essayistic voice:

“a musical or non-literary method,” a dramatic method, and “a poetic, contemplative method.”¹¹ As the essay film comes more clearly into historical view, one of its most distinguishing features becomes then, as Humphrey Jennings’s films would demonstrate, its foregrounding of its literary heritage in the material performance of language as part of its encounter with the dominance of a public culture of visual technology, significantly replacing a narrative voice with the essayistic voice of the commentator.¹²

Besides the formal experimentations that overlap documentary and experimental practice, as important in these precursive years are the institutional and social contexts which begin to locate a place for film that draws out the public and dialogic potential of these films, most prominently seen in the ciné-clubs that begin to spring up around the world and especially in France in the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout its literary history and thereafter, the dynamics of reception have been a distinctive dimension of the essay and its dialogic intervention in a public sphere, and the historical evolution of a specific kind of audience is crucial to its filmic practice, anticipating what Rascaroli has noted as central to a definition of the essay film: a “constant interpellation” whereby “each spectator, as an individual and not a member of an anonymous, collective audience, is called upon to engage in a dialogic relationship with the enunciator, to become active, intellectually and emotionally, and interact with the text.”¹³ In the 1920s, the ciné-clubs become central vehicles in the formation of this dynamic and of an audience for whom film was less about entertainment than a forum for debating aesthetic and social issues and experiences. Louis Delluc, along with Leo Moussinac, Germaine Dulac, and Ricciotto Canudo, is commonly credited with establishing the ciné-club movement in Paris, beginning with Club des Amis du Septième Art (CASA), and the equally important arm of those clubs and their debates, magazines such as *Ciné Club* and *Cinéa*.¹⁴ Primarily associated with the evolution of the *film d’art* movement in France, these specialized clubs became a gathering place for artists and intellectuals, and forums for movies about ideas, ideas about film, ideas about the social and expressive powers of the movies.¹⁵ In the beginning of this cultural and institutional shift, Jean Epstein’s 1921 commentary “Bonjour Cinema” rather excessively insists on the distinguishing possibility of a cinematic “photogénie” to create and think ideas in a new way. The cinema, he says, is “a product twice distilled. My eye presents me with an idea of a form;

the film stock also contains an idea of a form, an idea established independently of my awareness, a latent, secret but marvelous idea; and from the screen I get an idea of an idea, my eye's idea extracted from the camera's; in other words, so flexible is this algebra, an idea that is the square root of an idea."¹⁶ Paralleling the cultural, social and intellectual activity of the French ciné-clubs, British writers and filmmakers embrace similar refashioning of film reception. The founding editor of *Close Up*, known as Bryher, claims in "How I Would Start a Film Club" that the primary goal of these clubs is "to build up an audience of intelligent spectators."¹⁷ Or, as Harry Potamkin puts it in 1933, "the film club is to the audience generally what the critic is to the spectator; that is, the film club provides the critical audience,"¹⁸ which for Potamkin has both an aesthetic and a social dimension, with the latter the more important, as vehicles for the kind of intellectual and educative dialogue that the essay film would soon make its priority.

By the 1950s, the Cinémathèque française, founded by Henri Langlois in 1936 with filmmaker Georges Franju, becomes the most important product of the ciné-club tradition (specifically the Cercle du Cinema) and ushered in changes and new directions in the spectatorial dynamics of these clubs, changes that would provide the defining structure of essayistic cinema. In 1947 the International Federation of Ciné-Clubs was established, and by 1955 a European confederation of Cinéma d'Art et d'Essai help to shape what is sometimes called "advanced European art cinema"—theaters that programmed more innovative and experimental films, often aided by tax rebates. Kelly Conway has summed up how these reshaped ciné-clubs in the 1950s promote their own specific form of essayistic dialogue:

The ciné-club attempted to form spectators in very specific ways: through its diverse programming, through film education internships, and, above all, through the *débat*, the post-screening discussion. . . . The ciné-club did not aspire to replace the commercial cinema in its members' lives or to promote a renaissance in experimental filmmaking, as had the 1920s ciné-clubs. Instead, the post-war ciné-club invested in the formation of an active, educated viewer"¹⁹

That is, as signs of larger institutional and aesthetic changes, the ciné-clubs would stage and inhabit the possibility to rethink any film practice

according in the formation of spectatorial formation that would come to define the essay film.²⁰

As part of a broader historical trend, the films of Humphrey Jennings stand as creative summaries of some of these early moves toward essayistic structures and anticipations of the more definite essay films that would follow the war, balancing documentary representation with a pronounced subjective chord that consistently calls out for dialogic and ideational reflection. Associated both with the surrealist tradition that defined the interior explorations of his early work and later with John Grierson's documentaries for the General Post Office and the Mass-Observation project, initiated with Tom Harrison and Charles Madge, Jennings made a series of films through the 1940s which bear the marks of both movements and which concomitantly lean conspicuously into the essayistic forms that are about to enter definitively into film history. Organized in 1937, the Mass-Observation project, for example, turned some of the principles of ethnographic observations of other cultures to filming everyday experiences in England, whose traces appear in Jennings's *Listen to Britain* (1942) and, as John Caughie has noted, "whose observations of the everyday were not so far removed from surrealism as one might suppose."²¹

Listen to Britain is a montage of daily experiences in England during the war: a man on his way to work, schoolchildren playing, soldiers waiting for a train, and so on. References to the war are unmistakable but muted: the businessman carries an air-raid helmet, a sign points to an air-raid shelter, and many concertgoers wear military uniforms. With its power to permeate spatial divides, sound, notably the signature radio announcement "This is London Calling," becomes an aural call for community throughout the film (and possibly U.S. participation in the European war), dramatized with scenes of entertainers performing, a Royal Air Force band's afternoon concert, and a performance of Mozart's 17th Piano Concerto by Myra Hess in the National Gallery. In each case, the film draws attention to the power of sound and music to unite the audience through its expressive qualities. In the extended second sequence especially, the concentration of the interplay between the music, the audience's enraptured attention, and the cut-away to windows being bricked up (presumably in the concert hall) suggests Jennings's slightly surrealistic twist on a war documentary. Here, actual images of war in process give way to the more important identification and solicitation of

the responsive undercurrents of community and camaraderie that those events require, prominent undercurrents that follow the soundtrack of the concert into the streets of London, armament factories, and then the countryside. This play between expressive sound and a collage of public images anticipates the essayistic in both its restraint and its dispersion of a communal expressivity into the crisis of public life. For Jennings, music and voice initiate the public dialogue that redeems individual hardship. More importantly, sound as expression here does not so much support or illuminate the pressures of the war experience but rather remains tautly in tension with them. Far from registering faith in a reality under siege, the fragile sound and music become an expressive measure of longing, recollection, irony, and hope.

In his analysis of *Listen to Britain*, Jim Leach identifies the particular “unsettling” effect of this film as it wavers between propaganda and poetry, between a public gaze and a private eye, between personal and impersonal styles that results in a distinctive “ambiguity” whose “refusal to impose meanings implies both a respect for the personal freedom of the spectator and an awareness that meanings are always complex and plural.”²² Enacting a form of what Nichols has called “social subjectivity,” the film creates a montage of fragile connections with individuals, classes, peace and war, and various cultural practices that, while tentatively destabilizing the public myth of “a people’s war,” also celebrate it. As the film asks the audience “to listen” “the pull between sight and sounds adds to the fragility of the film’s discourse”²³ and so elicit an “alertness in the spectator, who is asked to reflect on the experience of unity within difference.”²⁴

Another Jennings film made during World War II, *A Diary for Timothy* (1945), continues this early exploration of the essayistic but with considerably more emphasis on subjectivity, the temporality of a public history, and a resulting skepticism about the voice and mind of the public individual that will emerge in the coming years. With commentary written by E. M. Forster, the story of Timothy Jenkins, born five years after the British entry into World War II, opens with BBC broadcast reporting Allied advances in Europe. The film cuts to a row of bassinets and the cries of a newborn baby: “It was on the 3rd of September, 1944, you were born. . . . You’re in danger, Tim, for all around you is being fought the worst war ever known.” Intercut with shots of mother and newborn and shots of urban rubble and planes flying overhead, this is “total war,” involving

all England but here focused on the child as subject. Through this child subject, the film becomes less about wartime crisis than an impending postwar world where, as the commentator later remarks, it will be “Back to everyday life . . . and everyday danger.”

With a familiar voice replacing the traditional voice of God of earlier documentary commentary, the film orchestrates movements between the past, the present, and the future, spread across the four different social and subject positions of a miner, a farmer, a railway engineer and a wounded RAF pilot, but addressed to the just-born child. (“All these people were fighting for you, although they didn’t exactly know it”). The fissures between time periods (as when the farmer shows his family a film of five years ago when they were clearing the fields) and the anxious relation between experience and knowledge becomes an open question: over the image of a baby buggy, he remarks about these temporal intensities of the present, “you didn’t know, couldn’t know, and didn’t care.”

Here too sound in the form of the voice-over, radio broadcasts, and musical concerts figure again in bridging public events and the individual of the community. Hess’s Beethoven’s *Appassionata* Sonata is interwoven with a radio account of soldiers’ hardships in Europe and images of a London with bombed buildings being repaired by roofers. Drifting through these sounds and music, the commentator (Michael Redgrave) has little of the clarity or certainty that mark earlier documentaries, as he notes the newly lit streets had become more cheerful, “unless there were bombers around” or, over an air-raid siren, he hopes “you’ll never have to hear that sound, Tim.” As a central signal of the essayistic, the combination of the ironic and the future conditional characterizes even Christmas as a reminder of “death and darkness, death and fog, death across those few miles of water,” “the day all children ought get to be happy.” A conversation about a V-2 rocket before a blast is heard becomes a prophetic encounter where the massive anonymity of death after World War II would confront the shaky possibilities of knowledge: where and when the rocket will hit elicits only “I know not” and “do you know?” against a surrealist pan of mannequins faces topped with hats.

Most significant, the second-person address of the film stands out here as a distinguishing redirection that would inform, explicitly or implicitly, the address of later essay films. That address becomes a combination of warning and hope directed at both the child Timothy and the spectator

inhabiting that newborn position, proleptic subjects still to be formed and so, with a critical irony, implored to think about the future. The wavering voice-over observes that “It’s a chancy world” in which a miner’s accident becomes one small indication that a postwar climate will bring new dangers and demands. Yet these new repercussive demands of postwar life in England, with the unemployment, broken homes, scattered families, will also be a positive sign of the concomitant demands of a new public subjectivity: it will be “even more dangerous than before because now we have the power to choose, the right to criticize and even to grumble.” For the new child and spectator, this is indeed “something else for you to think over,” and only through a strenuous reflection on the past and present as they are documented in the film and as they reshape the future can the presiding questions of the film be answered by the spectator child: “What are you going to say about it, and what are you going to do? . . . Are you going to make the world a different place?”

While many films before 1940 belong to the heritage of the essay film, my contention is that important historical distinctions must be made in order to demonstrate the significant achievements of this practice as it comes into its own. In this regard, the 1940s are the watershed years for the essay film, a period when many of its defining structures and trends begin to coalesce and the term “essay” becomes distinctly and more commonly associated with certain films. During this period, these films also begin more clearly to define themselves and their address according to my tripartite structure of subjectivity, public experience, and thinking. From 1940 to 1945 the essay film reconfigures notions of realism (and documentary representation) outside both narrative and earlier documentary traditions and asserts the intellectual and conceptual mobility central to an essayistic tradition. Just as a confluence of historical forces begin to appear, the French “filmology” movement associated with Gilbert Cohen-Seat takes shape in the 1940s, claiming the cinema as the singularly most prominent social force in postwar society and thus requiring serious academic study of, especially, how spectators understand and think through movies.²⁵ Also in the early 1940s, André Malraux delivers his lecture “Esquisse d’une psychologie du cinéma” arguing “the possibility of expression in the cinema.”²⁶ And, in 1940, artist and filmmaker Hans Richter writes a prophetic essay titled “The Film Essay” attempting to describe a new practice evolving out of the documentary tradition but

which, instead of presenting what he calls “beautiful vistas” would aim “to find a representation for intellectual content,” “to find images for mental concepts,” “striving to make visible the invisible world of concepts, thoughts, and ideas,” so that viewers would become “involved intellectually and emotionally.”²⁷ Together these three moments announce and identify an increasingly consistent new direction in film practice that embraces and transforms the literary and photographic heritage of the essay as a way to create films about rethinking the self as a function of a destabilized public sphere.

Most pervasively, the 1940s represent an epistemological foundation of the essay film for reasons that reach beyond the cinematic. As Paul Arthur has noted, it was only “after the Holocaust—our era’s litmus test for the role of individual testimony in collective trauma—that essay films acquire a distinct aesthetic outline and moral purpose.”²⁸ The crisis of World War II, the Holocaust, the trauma that traveled from Hiroshima around the world, and the impending Cold War inform, in short, a social, existential, and representational crisis that would inform and galvanize an essayistic imperative to question and debate not only a new world but the very terms by which we subjectively inhabit, publicly stage, and experientially think that world.

No wonder that Alain Resnais’s 1955 *Night and Fog* and its eerie encounter with the concentration camps becomes an early and widely recognized example of the essay film. As a documentary unable to adequately document the reality it seeks, it drifts through horizontal tracks, punctuated by archival stills, across the “peaceful landscapes” and “ordinary roads” that surrounded Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen. Despite the “semblance of a real city” constructed as concentration camps, this is “a society developed, shaped by terror.” In this encounter with the trauma of history, the commentator fumbles and stumbles through a kind of inadequacy structured as a kind of dialogue between the images of Resnais and the literary voice-over script of Jean Cayrol, a survivor of the camps: “it impossible for us to capture what remains. . . . The daily activities and signs no description, no shot can retrieve. . . . We can only show you the outside, the husk.” As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis so perceptively notes, this film is a “constructive forgetting,” a struggle to express the inexpressible that culminates in a coda that crystallizes what I would call the essayistic address: here the interlocutory direct address of the I-You voice-over changes dramatically to We and so demands an “active engagement” bonding the filmmaker

and viewer in the responsibility to rethink history.²⁹ A landmark film in the early history of the essay film, *Night and Fog* reminds us that, as Resnais observes in 1962, postwar new wave cinema “is less a new wave of directors . . . and more a new wave of spectators.”³⁰

In postwar France, perhaps the best known pronouncement on the cinematic possibilities that would lay the groundwork for the essay film is Alexandre Astruc’s 1948 “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo.” Here, the key terms of the essay film move from the background of earlier film practices to the foreground in a way that definitely emphasizes a new direction that would dramatize cinematic subjectivity as an intellectual enterprise moving beyond narrative and traditional documentary models but, unlike the so-called first avant-garde, capable of incorporating those models:

To come to the point: the cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the other arts have been before it. . . . After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or the means of preserving the images of an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. This is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of the caméra-stylo (camera pen). This metaphor has a very precise sense. By it I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language. . . . It can tackle any subject, any genre. The most philosophical meditations on human production, psychology, ideas, and passions lie within its province. I will even go so far as to say that contemporary ideas and philosophies of life are such that only the cinema can do justice to them. Maurice Nadeau wrote in an article in the newspaper *Combat*: “If Descartes lived today, he would write novels.” With all due respect to Nadeau, a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Méthode* [*sic*] would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily.³¹

These claims for personal expression on film would immediately be made technologically viable with the arrival of portable lightweight camera technology, introduced as the Arriflex system in Germany in 1936 and as the Éclair 35mm Cameflex in France in 1947. Appropriately, these different “caméra-stylos” would also feature reflex viewing systems linking the pragmatics of filmmaking with the conceptual reflexivity of the emerging essay film, its exploration of subjectivity, and its “idea of the cinema expressing ideas.”³² Especially attuned to the technological terms of this new cinema, Astruc, in his less well known “L’avenir du cinéma,” even foresees its electronic future: “Nothing allows us to foresee what television will be become, but there is a good chance that it will contribute to the creation of a new cinema that will be able to be addressed more to the intelligence,”³³ for like the development of lightweight 16mm cameras in the 1940s, “tomorrow television is going to increase exponentially the possibilities of expression in the cinema.”³⁴

This relation between mobile technology, economics, and the essayistic underlines the distinct historical forces that come into play during these formative years and suggests a larger point that remains a critical undercurrent throughout the longer future of the essay film: that the power of essay may be significantly tied to a representational agency that emphasizes its ephemerality rather than permanency, which in turn may illuminate its notable prominence and success today. As with the early history of the literary essay and its connection with new forms of production and distribution, lightweight camera technologies of the postwar years through the 1960s and the Portapak and videotape revolution after 1967 (and later the Internet and digital convergences of today) significantly encourage and underpin the active subjectivity and public mobility of the essay film that begin with the claims and practices of the essayistic in the 1940s. Based in technological, industrial, and commercial shifts, a paradoxically public intimacy of address and reception has followed the essay through eighteenth-century coffee houses and pamphlets and nineteenth-century lecture halls and journals to the film festivals and college art cinemas that define the essay film in the postwar years to the specialized television distribution of Germany’s ZDF, central Europe’s Canal+, Britain’s Channel Four, and other cable and television venues that have often been the commercial vehicles for contemporary essay films. (As part of this evolving context, the changing economic demands of documentary

filmmaking in recent years, including the rising costs of archival footage, music, and other copyrighted materials, might also be seen as part of this history of industrial and commercial encouragement for the less costly personal perspectives and source materials of the essay film.)

That those cinematic foundations in the 1940s and 1950s are originally so largely French (just as the theoretical foundations of Benjamin, Adorno, and others are largely German) should help explain the prominent place of the French New Wave (and later the New German Cinema) in exploring the essay film from 1950 through the 1970s. Within the historical context of postwar French cinema, moreover, several prominent historical and critical touchstones—regarding auteurism, cinema vérité, and the literary heritage of the French New Wave—emerge which not only inform French films of this period but also carry over into the extended global and contemporary practices of the essay film. In addition to Astruc's writings, several specific films, documents, and trends signal and support this relationship and highlight broader practical and conceptual shifts, as this practice evolves through the 1950s into the 1960s, creating a historical and cultural context in which, by the mid-1950s, the term "essai cinématographique" is in frequent use in France.³⁵ In these defining years, these possibilities become articulated specifically through the potential of the "short film" to provide a freedom from the restriction of the authority of an emerging auteurism and from the documentary truth of cinema vérité, as well as the organizational principles of film narrative, all remade as a conceptual "sketch" capable of releasing a distinctive subjectivity as a public thinking. More exactly, a specific group of films and the contemporaneous or subsequent critical reception of them become flashpoints in the formation and recognition of essayistic practice during this period: Alain Resnais's 1948 short film *Van Gogh*; Jacques Rivette's 1955 essay for the *Cahier du cinéma*, "Letter on Rossellini," with its characterization of *Paisa*, *Europa '51*, and *Germany, Year Zero* and especially the 1953 *Viaggio in Italia* as seminal essay films; and, finally, Georges Franju's 1948 *Le Sang des bêtes* and especially his 1951 *Hôtel des Invalides*, as seen by Noël Burch as prototypes for an essayistic cinema of ideas.

Appearing the same year as Astruc's proclamation of a new kind of cinema that can express ideas, Resnais's *Van Gogh* is serendipitously emblematic of a short essay film that works as both a portrait and a critical commentary, a film less about painting than about the grounds for a

cinematic expression that engages, questions, and reflects on a painterly style while evading narrative formulas and conventional documentary strategies. Bazin would rightfully insist that this film has little to do with popularizing a painting and a painter but rather it announces a particular “aesthetic biology” that adapts the painting as a cinematic textuality, re-creating “not the subject of the painting but the painting itself” as a textual “refraction.”³⁶ Godard would go even farther to claim for it an inventiveness and historical importance that points to a new filmic practice:

If the short film did not already exist, Alan Resnais would surely have invented it. He alone gives the impression that it is in his eyes something other than a short film. From the unseeing and trembling pans of *Van Gogh* to the majestic tracking shots of *Styrene* what is it, in effect, that we see? A exploration of the possibilities of cinematographic technique, but one so rigorous that it outstrips its own purpose, and without which the young French cinema of today would simply not exist. From *Van Gogh* onwards, a movement of the camera gave the impression that it was not simply a movement of the camera but an exploration of the secret of this movement. A secret which André Bazin, another solitary explorer, also starting from scratch, by a moving coincidence discovered at the same time but by different means.³⁷

By 1953 this filming degree zero would produce the “Group of Thirty,” a body of filmmakers that would include Resnais, Marker, Varda, and Astruc and which would revitalize the short film as the grounds that would encourage essayistic practices. As François Porcile notes, the short film in this postwar context describes an incipient practice which instead of suggesting juvenilia describes an exploratory energy that liberates it as a kind of testing of both expression and address: “Next to the novel and other extensive works, there is the poem, the short story or the essay, which often plays the role of the hothouse; it has the function of revitalizing a field with fresh blood. The short film has the same role. Its death will also be the death of film, since an art that ceases to change is a dead art.”³⁸ At this point in history, the short film offers especially a form of expression whose concision necessarily puts that expression under material pressure as a fragmentary testing and provisional engagement with a subject whose incompleteness insists it is an artistic and intellectual

activity in process. The significance of the short draws also attention to what Guy Fihman, in exploring a philosophical and scientific background of the essay that begins with René Descartes, argues is one of the seminal features of the essay and essay film: innovation and experimentation,³⁹ possibilities that would attract both young and established filmmakers to return to the short film as a liberating break from narrative cinema.

Reconfiguring the implications of the short film in April 1955, Jacques Rivette's essay "Letter on Rossellini" identifies a trend that also can define longer films as cinematic drafts or sketches. In these films, he argues, "the indefatigable eye of the camera invariably assumes the role of the pencil, a temporal sketch is perpetuated before our eyes,"⁴⁰ and specifically in Rossellini's *Paisa*, *Europa '51*, and *Germany, Year Zero*, there is "the common sense of the draft. . . . For there is no doubt that these hurried films, improvised out of very slender means and filmed in a turmoil that is often apparent from the images, contain the only real portrait of our times; and these times are a draft too. How could one fail suddenly to recognize, quintessentially sketched, ill-composed, incomplete, the semblance of our daily existence?"⁴¹ For these films, and most recognizably for Rivette *Viaggio in Italia* (1953), the model "is the essays of Montaigne," and "*Viaggio in Italia* . . . , with absolute lucidity, at least offers the cinema, hitherto condemned to narrative the possibility of the essay."⁴² "For over fifty years now," he continues, "the essay has been the very language of modern art; it is freedom, concern, exploration, spontaneity; it has gradually—Gide, Proust, Valéry, Chardonne, Audiberti—buried the novel beneath it; since Manet and Degas it has reigned over painting, and gives it its impassioned manner, the sense of pursuit and proximity." For Rivette, in these films "a film-maker dares to talk about himself without restraint; it is true that Rossellini's films have more and more obviously become *amateur* films; home movies."⁴³ Here "home movie," "amateur," "pursuit," and "proximity" assume, I'd argue, those particularly positive values associated with an essayistic foregrounding and dramatization of the personal, a transitional, barely authorized, and relatively formless shape of personal subjectivity; the replacement of a teleological organization with a activity defined by the object itself; and a productively distorting overlapping of subject and object.⁴⁴

The "sketch" as a historical prototype and marker of the essayistic thus becomes the vehicle for a public subjectivity in the process of thinking or

what Burch would later describe as the intelligent mediation of conflicting ideas. In his *Theory of Film Practice* and its concluding discussion of nonfictional filmmaking, Burch describes two contemporary models as the film essay and the ritual film. For the former, he identifies Georges Franju's 1948 *Le Sang des bêtes* and especially his 1951 *Hôtel des Invalides* as breakthrough films. These "active" documentaries "are no longer documentaries in [an] objective sense, their entire purpose being to set forth thesis and antithesis through the very texture of the film. These two films of Franju are *meditations*, and their subjects a *conflict of ideas*. . . . Therein lies the tremendous originality of these two films, which were to cause nonfiction film production to take an entirely new direction."⁴⁵ For Burch in the late 1960s, Franju becomes "the only cinematographer to have successfully created from pre-existing material films that are truly essays," and his heritage becomes especially visible in Godard's essay films of that period, such as *My Life to Live* (1962) and *Masculine, Feminine* (1966) where an "element of intellectual spectacle" announces this distinctive "cinema of ideas," long ago dreamt of by such dissimilar filmmakers as Jacques Feyder and Eisenstein.⁴⁶

In December 1962, referring to his beginnings as a writer for *Cahiers*, Godard, perhaps the most renowned and self-professed film essayist, would extend and to a certain extent canonize this alternative history of the art cinema by noting the bond between the critical essayists writing for *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Positif*, and other French film journals in the post-war years:

All of us at *Cahier [du cinéma]* thought of ourselves as future directors. Frequenting cine-clubs and the Cinematheque was already a way of thinking cinema and thinking about cinema. Writing was already a way of making films, for the difference between writing and directing is quantitative not qualitative. . . . As a critic, I thought of myself as a film-maker. Today I still think of myself as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in novel form or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them.⁴⁷

Explicitly drawing on the tradition of Montaigne and implicitly dramatizing with each film that central problem of thinking through our daily and

public experience of signs, sounds, and images, Godard characterizes his work during this period as that of an experiential improviser and a thinking critic, working to transport the logic of essayism to longer films such as *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967) and *La Chinoise* (1967).

While these prominent French currents leading from Montaigne through Marker, Bazin, and Godard describe perhaps the central path in the history of the essay film, the international foundations of that history, extending from Griffith and Eisenstein through Richter and Jennings, has extended itself, since the 1970s. This transnational arena has proliferated across many new wave cinemas and various film cultures around the world, including filmmakers like Glauber Rocha, Wim Wenders, Chantal Akerman, Nanni Moretti, Johan van der Keuken, Peter Greenaway, Patrick Keiller, Su Friedrich, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and many others. If these filmmakers and their films have commonly been associated with an auteurist notions of coherent expressivity and narrative art film, they and others have consistently returned to short films (well after the essayistic testings of early films), while at the same time often describing their longer work as essayistic. In this alternative culture of the essayistic, expressive authority of the auteur gives way to a public dialogue that instead tests and explores the fissures within auteurist subjectivity by subjugating narration experimentation, and documentation to thought.

The films of Agnès Varda provide an almost unique map of the historical movement of the essay film from its association with French cinema of the 1950s through its continued growth and expansion into the digital present. Since her 1958 *L'Opéra mouffe*, a sketch of Rue Mouffetard seen through the eyes of a pregnant woman, and the 1962 *Cléo from 5 to 7*, her fictional sketch of a singer wandering Paris for roughly two hours of real time and film time, Varda has worked the terrain of the essay films across numerous projects, including *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991) and the remarkable *The Gleaners and I* (2000). As a most appropriate recollection of the heritage and investment of the essay film in the ciné-club tradition, Varda follows *The Gleaners and I* with another film, *Two Years Later* (2002), a film that solicits and incorporates viewers and participants in the first film as part of a dialogic rethinking of that first essay film.

The Gleaners and I is a series of sketches, a collage of short films constructed, first, as a meditation on gleaning. Describing the activity of collecting the surplus left after fields have been harvested, the idea of gleaning

expands and contracts through the film, as it triggers other associations, concepts, and debates. In the heritage of its literary and cinematic predecessors, the film proceeds digressively, spinning and turning the experience of gleaning as an idea that moves from the agricultural and the psychoanalytic to the aesthetic and political. Topics such as “The Origins of Gleaners” and “Gleaners Today” guide the course of the film as it wanders the fields and cities of France and its histories, and moves according to the seemingly haphazard and associative ways of many essays, between specific experiences and general observations, between similarities and dramatic differences: about the politics of waste and hunger in regulating the modern gleaners, about urban gleaners and supermarket garbage, about the gleaning of art objects and the art of gleaning. At one point the film concentrates on a group of homeless young people in Prades prosecuted for picking through the garbage at a supermarket. Presenting the different points of view on the incident—those of the supermarket manager, the judge, and the young gleaners—Varda notes “each experiences it differently.” Gleaning becomes in fact a crystallization of experience as a seemingly endless source of expression, such as that of “The Gleaning Chef,” Edouard Loubet, “the youngest chef to have earned 2 stars in the Michelin Guide,” in a kitchen where gourmet food is prepared and little is wasted. Later, an exposition of trash cans in Paris and an educational workshop on junk and recyclables together become a disquisition on “Art from Trash” and “Where Does Play End and Art Start?”

Ultimately gleaning becomes defined here as a shifting identity dependent on and defined by the surplus and waste of the world, an identity that creates unique social bonds that drift through the flux of public life rather than inhabiting a position within that life, an identity built of fragments and transience. Abandoned furniture and other objects become homes like “the Ideal Palace of Bodan Litnanski” constructed of old broken dolls and other found objects, and lost souls (alcoholics, the jobless, and dispossessed who find food and friendship by drifting through streets and fields). Relationships, such as that between M. Plusquelles and his homeless friend Salomon, is a gleaned friendship (recalling perhaps Montaigne and de la Boétie), a bond tentatively made like the gourmet meals they fashion from the chicken and rabbit they pick from the trash. Alain is a dietician of refuse who in turn devotes himself to teaching the immigrant refuse of France. Quite appropriately in the midst of her travels, Varda

stumbles unwittingly on the renowned Jean Laplanche, psychoanalytic theoretician and wine master of a vineyard, who suggests, in a reflection on reaping and death, time and age, fruition and meaning, that the connection between gleaning and subjectivity is an attempt “to integrate the Other above the ego . . . an anti-ego philosophy to show how man first originates in the Other.” Here gleaning, like the essayistic identity, is a parasitically productive activity, a subversion or rejection of the authority and primacy of subjectivity and selfhood, enunciated by a language that fails to offer any stable place or meaning—even for auteurist self-portraits.

If gleaning is an essayistic activity, essayistic art and filmmaking become kinds of representational gleanings. Throughout the film, numerous paintings and painters crystallize the art of gleaning, like Louis Pons who appears flipping through a book of his paintings whose compositional “junk” becomes a “cluster of possibilities . . . each object gives a direction, each is a line.” But the primary subject of this metaphoric shift is Varda herself: posed beside Jules Breton’s painting *The Woman Gleaning*, Varda notes of this famous image of a woman in a field of wheat that “there’s another woman gleaning in this film, that’s me,” happy as she says at another point, “to drop the wheat, and pick up my camera,” a small digital *caméra-stylo* that intensifies the subjective fragments of this contemporary woman with digital recordings of a fleeting world. For Varda and this essay film, representational gleaning moves across the cinematic image, and specifically her digital camera, allowing a continual sketching of the self as it dissolves in the world, specifically as a mounting meditation on the drafting of self against the vanishings of time. In one sequence, one of Varda’s hands films the other hand as trucks pass in the background, allowing her “to retain things passing.” In another, Varda’s reflection in the car mirror precedes a series of shots of that hand opening and closing like a lens on images of different trucks speeding by on the road. “This is my project: to film with one hand my other hand,” she remarks. For in this fragmentation of the self in a passing world, the film sketches the passing and loss of self grasping at the world, as a thing in the world: “To enter into the horror of it. I find it extraordinary. I feel as if I am an animal. Worse yet, an animal I don’t know.”

The Gleaners and I is not, then, simply an essay film about a community of individuals who live off the refuse and leavings of society; rather it quickly becomes also a subtle, sophisticated reflexive meditation on

the terms of the essayistic and its film practice. In this case, the essayistic becomes about the struggles to think the self within a field of death and passing, where images of self become redeemed only as a gleaned excess from the world. Over close-ups of garbage, Varda says “I like filming rot, leftovers, waste, mold, and trash,” and, appropriately, she visits a mini-museum in the vineyard consecrated to former owner, Étienne-Jules Marey, inventor of the chronophotography, the “ancestor of all movie makers” and a pioneer in the study of temporality and change in animal motion. Like the horror of seeing a self as an animalistic other in the world outside, Marey’s imagistic time studies oddly anticipate Varda’s own digital images whose “effects are stroboscopic”: later the film captures close-up fragments of Varda’s eye while her hand holds a small mirror, creating a stroboscopic montage of pieces of herself within the image. Scanning across the pages of the technical handbook for her digital camera, the film returns to medium close-up of Varda who places her hand over the lens of the camera recording her. There follows a series of superimposed close-ups and then a decentered close-up of her combing her hair and then her hand, as she comments, “for forgetful me, it’s what I’ve gleaned that tells where I’ve been.” As the concluding sequences makes clear, *The Gleaners and I* is ultimately a moving sketch that gathers souvenirs of a self, extended through a disembodied hand, fractured through rapidly passing and dying images, and left to drift into the world of others.

A sequel to *The Gleaners*, *Two Years Later* is an ingenious recollection and technological rehabilitation of the ciné-club tradition that fostered Varda’s work in the 1950s and early 1960s, as it engages in a dialogue with individuals filmed in *The Gleaners* and others responding to the first film.⁴⁸ In a sense, *The Gleaners* becomes a public souvenir which inspires and generates more souvenirs as expanding arguments, reflections, representations, and ideas, becoming a cinematic forum for the dialogic debates, discussions, and differences that the essayistic invites and opens. Equipped again with her digital *caméra-stylo*, Varda re-creates the dialogic dynamic that the essay film inherited from the ciné-club format, now incorporating those responses in a way that rethinks and remakes the first film through the comments and criticism of its audiences. It begins with a screen of thumbnails of images from *The Gleaners and I*, and propels itself through the questions “What effect does a film have? What reaches the filmgoer?” Responding to one curious fan letter

(made from an airline ticket jacket), Varda visits Delphine and Philippe in Trentemoult who “transform everyday life” by salvaging objects from the markets and streets. For them, “Seeing this film was like a rebirth. . . . We had come from the death of a friend, and this film put us back in touch with ourselves, with life. . . . that’s what life’s about, learning to adapt.”

Particularly inventive in this second film is Varda’s return to subjects and people from earlier films. As an ironic reversal of that earlier historical path whereby *Cahiers du cinéma* critics, like Truffaut and Godard, later become filmmakers, now those filmed individuals become the critics of the film. Indeed what may be most essayistic about this second film is how it expands outward the questions and issues of the first film to larger or different questions and issues. Gradually, the film distinctly shifts from commentary about the first film to ideas about social and political issues and relationships between people, as it regenerates active subjects within the world through the centrifugal spin of the essay toward public life. A painting seen in the first film has now been reborn in the public eye; the tumultuous relationship of “Claude M” and Gislain’s life has grown more stable and secure; and thanks to the dialogue inspired by *The Gleaners*, Varda can “think of myself” differently. Typical of but more extensive than many of the returns in this film, Varda revisits “Alain F., market gleaner, newspaper seller, teacher,” who has followed the impact of *The Gleaners* and has become part of a public discussion of the film, one in which he is unabashedly critical (and conventionally mistaken, I’d say) in his response to Varda’s “self-portrait”: “I think the film is well done. It has reached a lot of people, but I think your self-portrait is not well done . . . unnecessary.” Just as a large concluding section of this film follows Alain into the streets of Paris to run a marathon, the movement of the film is decisively into the public area where Varda casually and quietly sketches the passing public, derouting the camera’s point of view into order to capture fragmentary voices: “I walk slowly but often, sometimes with the camera pointing down to record the voices of people who don’t want to be filmed.”

The response of the film and the responses in the film become variations on essayistic knowledge. Serendipitously for my purpose, the second film contains a card from Chris Marker with a drawing of his famous cat Guillaume and a memory of his CD-rom *Immemory* in which there is a painting of gleaners following a tank and picking through blood.

Images of gleaners then proliferate: [William] Lubtchansky's "chromo-gleaners," embroidered gleaners, advertisement gleaners, stamp gleaners, "gleaners of stardust," and on and on through a representational catalogue of seekers after knowledge and meaning in the wake of the world's destruction, loss and passing. Even Laplanche returns as well to remind us that the subject of "psychoanalysis is gleaning": "we pay attention to things that no one else does—what falls from speech. . . . The analyst is also in a state of poverty . . . poor in knowledge." In the same spirit, a newspaper interviewer and later Varda's daughter suggest that the many fragmentary close-ups of hands and other body parts remind them of Varda's *Jacquot de Nantes*, a film about her dead filmmaker-partner and an emotional connection which Varda claims had been visually recollected without thinking when she filmed *The Gleaners*: "I refilmed on myself what I had filmed of Jacques Demy . . . how we work without knowing." In the end, it is precisely this essayistic work without knowing which produces the desire to know and think through these films. As *Two Years Later* dramatizes so powerfully, essayistic ideas about self and others should return, remade, as a dialogic knowledge that comes back from other views and viewers.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture, College de France," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 463–464
2. It is important to recall that the idea of a "documentary film" was hardly currency in 1929.
3. For a relatively early discussion in English of Godard as essayist, see Louis D. Giannetti, "Godard's *Masculine-Feminine*: The Cinematic Essay," in *Godard and Others: Essays on Film Form* (Rutherford, N.J. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 19–59.
4. Jean-Luc Godard, "One Should Put Everything into a Film," in *Godard on Godard*, trans. and ed. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 238–239.
5. André Gaudreault and Germain Lacasse, eds., "Le bonimenteur de vues animées/The Moving Picture Lecturer," special issue, *Iris: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound* 22, no. 15 (1996); Rick Altman, "From Lecturer's Prop to Industrial Product: The Early History of Travel Films," in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 61–76.
6. Quoted in Tom Gunning, "A Corner in Wheat," in *The Griffith Project*, ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 3:135. As Gunning points out, these are "films that 'mean something,' picture-sermons that 'help those who see them,' [are] phrases [that] encapsulate the narrative ambitions of Griffith in 1909" (*ibid.*). Not coincidentally,

a significant amount of writing about film in this era, from Vachel Lindsay to Béla Balázs, suggests that films of all types offer the possibilities for replicating and initiating thought and social action.

7. Román Gubern, "Cent ans de cinema," in *Historia general del cinema*, vol. 12, *El cine en la era del audiovisual* (Madrid: Catedra, 1995), 278.
8. Sergei Eisenstein, "Notes for a Film of 'Capital,'" trans. Maciej Sliwowski, Jay Leyda, and Annette Michelson, *October 2* (1976): 10.
9. At the center of precursive essay films are larger debates about the mass cultural status of the movies and its social and intellectual potential as a representational confrontation between the technological image and language as expression. If film form has always reflected modernist concerns with spatial fragmentation and temporal motions, according to some historians, early association with mass culture tended to undermine film's radical potentials for subjective expression and interpretation and reshape them as realist transparencies or later versions of propaganda films.
10. Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 51. Bill Nichols suggests four documentary styles or structures in the use of voice in "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 17–30: direct address or commentary (voice of God or expository), transparency (observational), interview oriented (interactive), reflexive, and performative.
11. John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 155.
12. For a discussion of the critical dialogue between American documentaries and a literary culture in the 1930s, see Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
13. Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 36 [see chapter 13, this volume].
14. Vincent Pinel, *Introduction au Ciné-club: Histoire, théorie, pratique du Ciné-club en France* (Paris: Ouvrières, 1964).
15. Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), chap. 3.
16. Quoted in *ibid.*, 244. In 1924, in "The Expressive Techniques of the Cinema," Germaine Dulac also identifies the film experience with a kind of thinking and thought: "What is more mobile than our psychological life with its reactions, its manifold impressions, its sudden movements, its dreams, its memories? The cinema is marvelously equipped to express these manifestations of our thinking" (quoted in *ibid.*, 310).
17. Bryher, "How I Would Start a Film Club," in *Close-Up, 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 292.
18. Harry Potamkin, "The Year of the Eclipse," in *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*, ed. and comp. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Teachers College Press, 1979), 220.
19. Kelly Conway, "A New Wave of Spectators': Contemporary Responses to *Cleo from 5 to 7*," *Film Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2007): 38, 41.

20. The directors of the essayistic *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, are also the authors of "Towards a Third Cinema," in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, with Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St.Martin's Press, 2011), 925–939. It is one of the best known and most political re-articulation of the ciné-club tradition as a forum for active debate, social thought, and political action.
21. John Caughie, "Humphrey Jennings," in *The Encyclopedia of European Cinema*, ed. Ginette Vincendeau (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 231.
22. Jim Leach, "The Poetics of Propaganda: Humphrey Jennings and *Listen to Britain*," in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 157.
23. *Ibid.*, 164.
24. *Ibid.*, 159.
25. The definitive study of this movement is Edward Lowry, *The Filmology Movement and Film Study in France* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985).
26. André Malraux, *Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 14.
27. Hans Richter, "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Art des Dokumentarfilms," in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992), 195 [see chapter 6, this volume]. An excellent discussion of Richter's career and work and its relation to the avant-garde is Nora M. Alter, "Hans Richter in Exile: Translating the Avant-Garde," in *Caught by Politics: Hitler Exiles and American Visual Culture*, ed. Sabine Eckmann and Lutz Koepnick (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 223–243.
28. Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions," *Film Comment* 39, no. 1 (2003): 61 [see chapter 11, this volume].
29. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "Documenting the Ineffable: Terror and Memory in Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog*," in *Documenting the Documentary*, ed. Grant and Sloniowski, 215.
30. Quoted in Conway, "New Wave of Spectators," 38.
31. Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Style," in *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999), 159. Compare André Bazin's comments in "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema":

[I]n the silent days, montage evoked what the director wanted to say; in the editing of 1938, it described it. Today we can say that at last the director writes in film. The image—its plastic composition and the way it is set in time, because it is founded on a much higher degree of realism—has at its disposal more means of manipulating reality and of modifying it from within. The film-maker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelist. (*What Is Cinema?* ed. and trans. Hugh Gray [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967], 1:39–40)

32. Astruc, "Birth of a New Avant-Garde," 159.

33. Alexandre Astruc, "L'avenir du cinéma," *Trafic*, no. 3 (1992): 153 [see chapter 7, this volume].
34. *Ibid.*, 154.
35. It is worth saying again that the so-called Left Bank of the French New Wave (Marker, Resnais, Varda, and others) figure more naturally in the formation of the essay film because of their consistent interest in film's interdisciplinary connections with literature and the other arts, yet a wide range of other filmmakers, inside and outside France, respond to the possibilities of the essay films.
36. André Bazin, "Le Journal d'un curé de campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in *What Is Cinema?* 1:142.
37. Jean-Luc Godard, "Take Your Own Tours," in *Godard on Godard*, 115.
38. François Porcile, *Defense du court métrage* (Paris: Cerf, 1965), 19. These in turn anticipate one of the most fertile and productive forums for the essayistic and its relation to the sketch: anthology films, such as *Far from Vietnam* (1967) and *Germany in Autumn* (1978).
39. Guy Fihman, "L'essai cinématographique et ses transformations expérimentale," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Murielle Gagnebin (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2004), 44–45. Indeed, these two dimensions align the essay film with that important other literary precedent, the British essayist Francis Bacon, whose pithy essays counterpoint Montaigne at about the same point in history but pursue a more scientific inquiry into the ethics of living.
40. Jacques Rivette, "Letter on Rossellini," in *Cahiers du Cinéma. The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 194. As a theoretical marker of the essay film's relation to the short film and the larger issue implied, Jacques Aumont's study of "the film sketch" reminds us of this representational overlap between the temporality of the nineteenth-century essay and a temporality in the cinema engaged by the essayistic cinema of the 1950s. Around 1800, significant changes in the status of the image as "sketch" specifically anticipates photography and film: "the crux of these changes may be dated to the period between 1780 and 1820, when a veritable revolution occurred in the status of the nature sketch: the ébauche, an attempt to register a reality predetermined by the project of a future painting, gave way to the étude, an attempt to register reality 'just as it is' and for no other reason" ("The Variable Eye, or the Mobilization of the Gaze," in *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, ed. Dudley Andrew [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997], 232–234).
41. Rivette, "Letter on Rossellini," 195.
42. *Ibid.*, 199.
43. *Ibid.*, 196.
44. Rivette's positive description of Rossellini's film as an amateurish "sketch" within a neo-realistic tradition again calls attention to and importantly differentiates the essay film from its contemporaneous counterparts found in cinema vérité (and later American direct cinema), documentary practices so central to the essay film that inform the essays film and act as a platform for its distinctions. An often voiced dissatisfaction with these two traditions coincides with the foregrounding of the essay film. There is, for instance,

Godard's remark about Richard Leacock's direct cinema: "There's no point in having sharp images if you've got fuzzy ideas. Leacock's lack of subjectivity leads him ultimately to a lack of *objectivity*. He doesn't even know he's a *metteur-en-scene*, that pure reportage doesn't exist" (quoted in Richard Roud, *Godard* [New York: Doubleday, 1968], 139).

45. Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 159.
46. *Ibid.*, 162. See also Paul Arthur, "The Resurgence of History and the Avant-Garde Essay Film," in *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 61–73.
47. "Interview with Jean-Luc Godard," in *Godard on Godard*, 171.
48. Conway first recognized this connection between the cine-clubs and *Two Years Later* in "New Wave of Spectators."

15

THE CINEMA AND THE ESSAY AS A WAY OF THINKING (2011)

RAYMOND BELLOUR

When, a long time ago, in 1963, I attempted, for the first time, to make two evaluations of the importance of the essay in cinema or, as Adorno might have put it, of the essay as a filmic form, I ignored the existence of the short article published on the subject by Hans Richter in 1940, “Der Filmessay. Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms,” which might have been the first one to formulate explicitly and publicly this idea of an essay film (even if everybody knows today that, as early as 1927, Eisenstein, dreaming of a possible filmic adaptation of Karl Marx’s *Kapital*, was characterizing some moments of his previous films, *Stachka* (*Strike*, 1925) and *Oktyabr* (*October*, 1928), as a series of “essays”—one knows also that [Béla] Balázs commented on the term and the idea in his *Der Geist des Films*). I discovered this article by Richter much later, in the book *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen* by Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff, edited from the conference organized in 1991 in Vienna which had a large film programme.¹ There I met the essayist filmmaker Harun Farocki for the first time. This event might have been the first one devoted so strongly to the essay film (shortly after two magazine special issues in 1989 and 1991, in the United States and in Germany, respectively).²

In 1963, my main references for conceiving the idea of an essay film were the two seminal essays by Alexandre Astruc: “Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde: La caméra-stylo” (*The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo*), the better known of the two, published in March 1948 in

L'Écran français, and the more radical and developed “L'avenir du cinéma” (The Future of Cinema), published a few months later in *La Nef*.³ At this time, when they most deserved to be read, I was not a good enough reader of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, and I ignored a text which would become famous for a new consciousness of cinema: the “Lettre sur Rossellini” (Letter on Rossellini) by Jacques Rivette, which developed in a most personal and provocative way what had first been expressed by Astruc’s two texts.⁴

I was using Astruc’s formulations to qualify a group of filmmakers known as the “Groupe Rive Gauche,” a most informal group consisting of Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Agnès Varda. In order to conceive the first issue of the film magazine *Artsept* (in the spring of 1963) with some friends in Lyon, we added to these three names those of Armand Gatti, Henri Colpi, Jean Cayrol and Claude Durand, because those writers and filmmakers had various working, friendly and inspirational relationships with Resnais, Marker and Varda. We called this issue, and my long introductory text, “Un cinéma réel.” With those words we intended to qualify a form of cinema, which thanks to the deepest mediation of artistic means, was introducing a most radical consciousness of reality. This was very close to the way in which, three years earlier, André S. Labarthe had tried, in his *Essai sur le jeune cinéma français* (*Essay on Young French Cinema*), to characterize this new French cinema more generally by using the expression “un mixte fiction documentaire” (a mixture of fiction and documentary).⁵ And this was the way in which, inspired by Marker’s statement “I am an essayist,” in my article I introduced the term *essai* as a general equivalent for this “cinéma réel” which I was trying to circumscribe. For example, I wrote: “This passionate attention to reality, rough or transposed into the document, this attention to memory as a vision of culture, which develops through a specific attention to language—if one has to suggest a general idea to summarize its various forms and embody this idea in a word, I would say *essai*.”⁶ I quoted Astruc, prophesying a new future for cinema: “Its language is neither that of fiction, nor that of reports, but the language of the essay.”⁷

The same year, writing a little book on Alexandre Astruc for the collection “Cinéastes d’aujourd’hui,” I reformulated this notion of “cinema essay,” illustrating it with literary references (such as André Breton’s *L’Amour fou*, Paul Nizan’s *Aden-Arabie*, Michel Leiris’s *L’Age d’homme*, Henri Michaux’s *Un barbare en Asie*), and by comparing the essay film to the various types

of films subsumed under the general idea of fiction (as novel, tale, epic, theatre). And I underlined the paradox of Astruc's position, having been the prophet of the essay film years before and then becoming, at the end of the 1950s, the perfect incarnation of the fiction film director and of the idea of *mise-en-scène*, as it was developed in *Cahiers du cinéma*, largely as a result of the "politique des auteurs" appealing to a new understanding of classical American cinema.⁸ In doing this, I was right on some levels. But I was also wrong in respect of the deep ambiguities specific to those two texts by Astruc, but mainly the second—ambiguities which have not been underlined enough. This is because, on the one hand, Astruc was fully developing the metaphor of the "caméra-stylo" and the competition in which the filmmaker could enter with the free subjectivity of the writer: "So there we are, what are we waiting for, what do we believe in: the camera in the right pocket of the pants, the recording on an image-sound strip of the meanders and of the slow and frenzied unfolding of our imaginary world, the film confession, essay, revelation, message, psychoanalysis, obsession, the machine to read the words and the images of our personal world."⁹ Reading those lines, one believes that one is hearing Jonas Mekas as well. But, on the other hand, we must be careful about the names of the filmmakers whom Astruc gives as the prophets of such a development of cinema: [Jean] Renoir, mainly, and Orson Welles, [Robert] Bresson and [Roberto] Rossellini. That's to say the main figures of modern cinema, for whom, as Astruc writes, "each technical choice refers to a worldview. All are filmmakers who are not so easy to qualify as authors of essay films, and who are generally considered mainly as fiction filmmakers (at least for their work at the time)—except if we try to understand in a larger way what has been implied by Astruc's formulation on the future language of cinema: "neither that of fiction, nor that of reports, but the language of the essay."¹⁰ Words through which one can already guess Godard's famous maxim about the film which must always become the documentary of its own fiction.

Some repeated sentences, running like a thread through Astruc's two articles, put us on the path of the essay film's most ambiguous approach. They concern the main claim of a new closeness between the cinema and the thought, one, which implies that the filmmaker becomes equal not only to the writer or the painter, but even to the philosopher. Cineastes know that famous moment in the "Caméra-Stylo" essay when Astruc

claims that “a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16 mm camera and some film and would be writing his philosophy on film; for his *Discours de la méthode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily.”¹¹ Let us dream how Astruc, very close to Jean-Paul Sartre at this time (to whom he devoted a sensitive film much later), could ever think that *L'Être et le Néant* [*Being and Nothingness*] might have become a film. And let us come back to the leitmotif of the two articles, about cinema and thought, which justifies in a way this extreme utopia by which film might not only be considered equal to the highest forms of expression, but would also one day become their ideal synthesis.

Film as thought, cinema as thought: this is exactly what Deleuze will claim, almost forty years later, when he recognizes in modern cinema, partly through the same film authors chosen by Astruc, what he calls a direct image of thought. This image is different from the image of thought built by philosophy but also shows a virtual identity with it. What I find interesting in Deleuze's strategy, to connect it with that of Astruc, is that in the name of cinema as thought Deleuze takes, among many others, two noteworthy positions. First, a sort of negative one: he is completely indifferent to the essay as a category; he just does not need it. But he also shows no interest in the type of works which have been most commonly considered to be essay films, let's say [those of] Chris Marker or Johan van der Keuken. And second, this time positively, through the logic of thought that he brings out in cinema, he considers the large world of fiction film as well as what is traditionally considered more as documentary (for example, Jean Rouch and Pierre Perrault), and then specifies the latter with the concept of tabulation to integrate it into the reversibility of the real and the imaginary which defines the crystal image. And this seems to me somehow, as paradoxical as it may seem, to be very similar to the early intuition of Astruc, transcending, in the idea of the essay as thought, both fiction and what he calls reports and through which we hear documentary.

You may ask where I am trying to go with these historical, logical and paradoxical considerations. Merely toward the relative impossibility of any rigorous characterization of the essay in general and the essay film in particular, even if intuitively and practically one can easily and usefully use the category, in its vague and general opposition to the fiction film and to the documentary pure and simple—if this actually exists.

I will do that in the following two ways. One, largely empirical but revealing, and I hope useful for the public outside of France, will be to follow carefully not the detail of the arguments—that would be too much—but at least the main suggestions which come out of the most recent book, I suppose, concerning the essay film. It was published in France with the title *L'Essai et le cinéma* in 2004, and was derived from a conference held in Paris one year earlier.¹² The second way, inspired by the practical clues derived from the first, will be to insist once more, in a more abstract way, on the impossibility of any type of satisfactory classification of genres, the essay among them. This is a problem for which I shall try to offer a mediating, although still unsatisfactory, suggestion.

But, as a second short prologue, I would like to mention the fascinating ambiguities, which also emerge from an article that Thomas Tode has devoted to Johan van der Keuken, an article which has been published in the book based on the Viennese conference, and which by chance has been translated into French. Tode insists on the theoretical experience that, for van der Keuken, has come out of his shooting with blind people. From the discontinuous perception of space proper to blind people, which the term “hole” expresses best, van der Keuken has built what Tode calls an “artistic utopia.”¹³ And, writing that “one must use the fragmentary aspect of film to enlarge the field of our imaginary,” Tode quotes the filmmaker at length:

Fragmentation, as it appears in the actual conception of montage, does not necessarily result from a fragmentation inherent to the mechanical structure of film, but corresponds to the trials and errors of consciousness, which effectuates movements of comings and goings between the different layers of reality. Following the example of the corners, the holes, the hollows and the irregularities of a given space that one discovers by trial and error, the temporal fragments of a film correspond to the holes and the irregularities of a temporal experience, which are created by our different states of consciousness.¹⁴

And in such a way, Thomas Tode infers from repeated considerations of van der Keuken along those lines, as well as by recalling Eisenstein's views and the treatment of some sequences of *Oktyabr* (*October*, 1928), that here lies the essence of the essayistic gesture: in this capacity of opening,

which allows it “to show a similar element through its different facets.”¹⁵ But who does not see, even without having recourse to the easy connection between the various facets and the crystal image, that such a process of fragmentation and recursivity of space and time is precisely in every possible way at the core of the experience of modern cinema in general, or of the modern experience of film, as Deleuze for example has so strongly insisted upon? So the only significant difference that sets the essay film apart from the fiction film would be to invoke for the former the existence of a pre-existing reality as opposed to the constructed reality of the latter, an opposition which comes back to the old, always strong but insufficient opposition between fiction and documentary.

And this may be the reason why, in the book *L'Essai et le cinéma*, so many films of different genres or kinds or types are in turn invited to qualify the reality of the essay film or, more vaguely, the presence of the essay in cinema, or even the characterization of the essay as cinema itself, as the very open title given to the book suggests. And this is underlined by one of the two editors of the book when she tries to summarize the various positions at work throughout this book: “[T]hose formulations are shifting from the affirmation of the experimental dimension of the cinematic essay to a postulation, claimed by someone like Rossellini, of a ‘droit à l’essai’ (the right to essay or the right to try) inside of the fiction film where the meaning of the term is diluted, when becoming, paradoxically, a necessary reference of the cinephilic modernity.”¹⁶

So you may understand all the more why it proves almost impossible to summarize in any satisfactory way the 18 contributions gathered in this book. Let us just say first that, as can be expected, Montaigne remains the basic reference for those who try to adopt a historical or literary perspective of definition. He is followed in some cases, classically also, by Musil and Adorno, and mainly, more unexpectedly, by Jean Starobinski, who happened to publish, in 1985, an essay about the essay after he was given the European Essay Prize. So the title of his text, “Peut-on définir l’essai?” (Can One Define the Essay?)¹⁷ has naturally become a kind of motto for such a compendium.

Globally, we can say that three types of positions are represented, sometimes in a way that shifts within the same text.

A first series of texts is trying to define the floating logic of this indefinable genre. For example, Alain Ménil, adopting the double inflexion of

Musil and Adorno to locate the film essay possibly “between utopia and heresy.”¹⁸ Or José Moure, bravely attempting a very frontal but sensitive “Essai de définition de l’essai au cinéma” (Attempt to Define the Cinematographic Essay), and distinguishing between five main features: the connection between materials, mainly cultural; the instauration, through a thought in action, of new relations between those materials; an auto-reflexive writing process; the inner presence of the essayist, addressing himself as well as his/her audience; and finally, a dialogic mode of communication.¹⁹ A special mention may be given, in this first series, to the contribution of Christa Blümlinger, a contribution which is actually the translation of the text that she had written for the conference in Vienna and the book she had co-edited years ago. This text has indeed the classical virtue of being early. Conceived when relatively few writings on the subject existed, it tried to circumscribe the floating but consistent logic of the genre, distributing the most blatant examples (Marker, Godard, Duras, Kluge, the Welles of *F for Fake*, the Pasolini of *La Rabbia*, etc.), around some central terms: “figures of thought,” “the writing of the ‘I,’” “circuits of images,” “redoubling and reconnection.” All those terms are more or less unified by the idea of a “new legibility,” which is expressed by the title of the text: in German, “Zwischen den Bildern/Lesen” (Between the Pictures/ Reading).²⁰ One can never insist enough on the determining function of language in any consideration of the film essay. Paradoxically but logically, it is Deleuze, in his ignorance of the essay film problematic, who has best defined this transformation in the nature of the image in modern cinema, as well as in a modern reading of cinema: when the image, as he insists, is supposed to be mainly *read not seen*.

And this explains why and how a second series of texts in the book is expanding not exactly the notion of the essay film, but of the essay as cinema, if one can put it that way. A transition between the two positions seems to be managed by Cyril Neyrat. Rambling fairly well through the work of Godard, he finally tries to elaborate a condensed formula: “The confrontation of a thoughtful and modelling subject with this weighing of piled-up and stratified space and time, when such a confrontation is not recovered by the Aristotelian fiction or by the myth of the objective record of the real, this is the cinematographic essay—it’s what cinema is.”²¹ But, more openly, such a way of seeing, or of seeing/reading, is best represented by the opening lines of the text by Fabienne Costa: “The ‘cinematographic

essay' is neither a category of films nor a genre. It is more a type of image, which achieves essay quality. Every great film approaches the essay as soon as it questions the cinematographic form, as soon as the specificity of cinema is touched, made sensitive as a formulation of the eternal and stimulating question 'What is cinema?', a filmic echo of the famous 'What do I know?' of Montaigne."²² So Fabienne Costa can gather four films as different as it is possible to be—*Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) by John Ford, *Du soleil pour les gueux* (2000) by the young French filmmaker Alain Guiraudie, *Palombella Rossa* (1989) by Nanni Moretti, *Le Bassin de J. W.* by João César Monteiro (1997)—in order to elaborate this sophisticated position through some specific chosen moments in those films, which I am not going to detail here. Such a position has been pushed to its extreme by Jean Durançon in his "Droit à l'essai."²³ This time, the most classical figures in film history, such as Fritz Lang, Kenji Mizogushi, Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Renoir, Josef von Sternberg or Robert Bresson, are put together with "the most high-profile essayists of our time"—Jean-Daniel Pollet, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, André S. Labarthe, Luc Moullet or Harun Farocki—and so many films in which the "droit à l'essai" is more or less merged with the supposed reality of the essay film.

The third series of texts just pushes this movement still more to the extreme, until the notion of the essay and that of the essay film may only either invade everything or dissolve. It is the case, on the one hand, that Claire Mercier considered (this is her title) "The Scenario of Fiction as Philosophical Essay," and grounded her argument on *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932) by Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack.²⁴ And, on the other hand, Guy Fihman argues, based on the scientific connotations of the term "essay" in the complete title of the most famous book by Descartes (*Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking the Truth in the Sciences, Augmented by The Dioptric, The Meteors and The Geometry Which Are Essays of This Method*), in such a way that he can, through those questions of physics and optics, find a correspondence with some works of experimental cinema, for example *Arnulf Rainer* by Peter Kubelka.²⁵

Finally, I cannot really include in any of those three types—but cannot resist mentioning it either—the extraordinary convoluted contribution of Jean-Louis Leutrat, which ends this precious volume. Entitling his text "A Transformed Essay" (to bring the game of rugby into the cinematographic

and literary field, as a “try” is also an *essai* in French), Leutrat finds an essayistic dimension and value in the formal model of the distich, of which he gives the most varied examples in literature and film. And he takes his argument so far that he includes in this series of works the discourse of criticism itself as a form, through a detailed analysis of the interconnections linking two books by Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* and *History, the Last Things Before the Last*.²⁶ All of which gives a lot of grist to the mill for reconsidering the essay.

This too long and too short evocation that continues all through this very significant book requires no further comment. The only thing which may be said briefly is that, taken as a whole, all those texts, by underscoring various processes of abstraction, seem to relativize strongly the gap between the pre-existing reality (which is the traditional object of documentary) and the constructed reality (which is the supposed privilege of fiction).

My second way will be far shorter. One may have remarked that through the first series of contributions in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, an implicit confusion was at work between two genres, in literature as in film: the essay and the *self-portrait*. This problem is so insoluble that Michel Beaujour, in his both seminal and almost definitive book, *Miroirs d'encre (Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait)*, has made the *Essais* of Montaigne the formal model of the literary self-portrait as it has developed in the form of a specific genre from the sixteenth century to the present day.²⁷ What Beaujour defines all through his book as the self-portrait corresponds exactly to the most inspired definitions of the essay by Montaigne, Musil, Adorno, Starobinski or Max Bense (who must never be forgotten for any characterization of the essay) as well as by Astruc, Rivette or Marker from the point of view of cinema—that is to say, in the most general terms, when the word “essay” is used not only to define a category of non-fiction books in the publisher’s catalogues, but also as this unfathomable experience of writing and filming that we are dealing with.

This confusion between the self-portrait and the essay is only one crucial example of a larger problem, which has concerned many literary theorists for centuries, but increasingly over recent decades. Almost all of them, having developed many sophisticated arguments, have finally concluded that any coherent type of classification of the literary genres is impossible. This, for example, is the conclusion of Gérard Genette in his

implacable and rather humorous little treatise *Introduction à l'architexte*.²⁸ This final scepticism of Genette is shared in the book by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?*, with a partly new set of arguments somehow linked with analytical philosophy.²⁹ Furthermore, the collective volume *Théorie des genres* proves that there are American and German equivalents of such essays—except for the humour of Genette, which is a purely French national product.³⁰

So this is how one can shift from the impossible classification to the impossible definition. But this does not prevent anyone, I suppose, from using the word “essay” as well as the word “self-portrait,” those words, which nevertheless both glitter from the power they get from their obscurity.

So how can one cope practically, which means also theoretically, with such a problem? I can finally mention what I have been confronted with, on two occasions in particular, in my personal working experience.

The first time was when I was trying to evaluate and describe the increasing reality of the self-portrait by developing video art (for the big collective volume “Video” I edited with Anne-Marie Duguet in 1988).³¹ My concern was twofold. Firstly, thanks to the model provided by Michel Beaujour’s book, I wanted to show how it was possible to shift from the impossibility of autobiography in cinema, an argument which had been developed by the American poet Elisabeth Bruss, to the possibility of the self-portrait in order to understand better a very rich and varied body of works at the junction of “authors’ films” and avant-garde or experimental cinema. Secondly, and most importantly, I was trying to evaluate how deeply the use of the new video technology and the creation of video art were opening up new possibilities for the audio-visual self-portrait. I did not insist, then, on the dimension of essay that some of those works presented as well (for example, *Les Nouveaux Mystères de New York* [1976–1981], by Jean-André Fieschi, is also an essay on cinema and childhood; *The Looking Glass* [1981], by Juan Downey, is also an essay on mirrors and representation; and Vito Acconci’s *The Red Tapes* [1976] is also an essay on the United States).³² Neither did I use the word “essay” explicitly in this case when I finally came to Godard, as a way of naming the dual dimension of documentary and reflexion which has always been incorporated into his work, and also of evaluating the transformation that video and television had introduced into his work. I preferred the words “lesson,” “rhetoric of persuasion,” and “encyclopaedia.” That was because my main

concern was the self-portrait. And at this time, when Godard had not yet realized his *JLG/JLG: Autoportrait (de décembre)* (1994), none of his works could genuinely be called a self-portrait. More and more of them, however, were looking to some extent like one, moulding a kind of constant self-portrait; many of them were moving, I tried to say, “toward the self-portrait.” So I thought it more exact and more useful to say that there was (the nuance is difficult to translate into English) “*de l’autoportrait*” in this work.³³ This implies that we should consider the self-portrait as a quality or as a substance, such as water or air or light, and by the way possibly in constant variable proportion.

And the same thing can be done with the essay. More than essays proper in Godard’s work, there is more or less *de l’essai* or “essay,” constantly mixed with a dimension of *self-portrait* on the one hand, and *fiction* on the other. And in each work the proportions of the elements embodying those positions vary, establishing the inner singularity of each work. And this can be the task of a precise criticism: to evaluate those proportions and their constant variations, as well as their mixing with other genres and sub-genres, rather than trying desperately to classify in a too abstract way with the help of categories which, however useful they may be either conceptually or for practical life and for library indexes, always prove to be as partially wrong as they seem to be right. At that level, to speak of *essayistic film* as it appeared as a subtitle for the book *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen* is itself more careful than to say overtly: *an essay film*.

Just to take, as a footnote, the most elementary example from the work of Chris Marker, it is the way not to oppose *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sans Soleil* (1982) too simply as a fiction film and an essay respectively, since *La Jetée* is also an essay on memory and *Sans Soleil* a fiction reworking the genre of the letters novel.

I was confirmed in that feeling, and in this way of thinking—and this is the second time, as I mentioned earlier—when I worked for twelve years on the critical edition of the complete works of the French writer Henri Michaux (three volumes in the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade). It is almost impossible, in this very singular and, at this level, exemplary work, to establish any clear distinction of genres. And not only between prose and poetry, but also between the three fundamental positions of *fiction*, *self-portrait* and *essay*. Things are working in such a way through all his

texts that they feature the constant interaction of those three basic trends. Michaux has a word to describe this fluctuation between those levels, which work through the space of a whole book or a whole text because they work also from page to page and even from sentence to sentence: the word “passages,” which is also the title of one of his most crucial books. And it happens that by a chance which also has its logic, the best evaluation of this book has been written by Max Bense,³⁴ who has also written one of the best essays imaginable on the essay as a way of thinking.

So I'll stop here, because there is no end, except for the timing, to such an evaluation.

NOTES

1. Hans Richter, “Der Filmessay: Eine neue Art des Dokumentarfilms” (1940), in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992), 195–198 [see chapter 6, this volume].
2. Michael Renov, “History and/as Autobiography: The Essayistic in Film and Video,” *Framework* 1 (1989): 6–13.
3. “L’avenir du cinéma” was reprinted in *Trafic*, no. 3 (1992): 151–158, and both were reprinted in Alexandre Astruc, *Du stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo: Écrites (1942–1984)* (Paris: Archipel, 1992), 324–336 [see chapter 7, this volume].
4. Jacques Rivette, “Letter on Rossellini,” in *Cahiers du Cinéma. The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 192–204.
5. André S. Labarthe, *Essai sur le jeune cinéma français* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1960).
6. Raymond Bellour, “Un cinéma réel,” *Artsept* 1 (1963): 20 (my translation; the following quotes from all French sources are my translations, too).
7. Astruc, “L’avenir du cinéma,” *Trafic*, 155. It seems that by “reports,” Astruc means the news and documentaries in general.
8. Raymond Bellour, *Alexandre Astruc* (Paris: Seghers, 1963), 34–36.
9. Astruc, “L’avenir du cinéma,” in *Du stylo à la caméra*, 336.
10. *Ibid.*, 332.
11. Alexandre Astruc, “Naissance d’une nouvelle avant-garde: La caméra-stylo,” in *Du stylo à la caméra*, 325.
12. Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Murielle Gagnebin, eds., *L’Essai et le cinéma* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2004).
13. Thomas Tode, “Démontage du regard définitif,” in “Johan van der Keuken,” special issue, *Images documentaires*, nos. 29–30 (1997–1998): 38–39, 41.
14. Johan van der Keuken, “Die Wahrheit 24 × pro Sekunde,” in *Abenteuer eines Auges. Filme, Fores, Texte* (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld, 1992), 36.

15. Sergei Eisenstein, cited in Thomas Tode, "Demontage des definitive Blicks," in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen*, ed. Blümlinger and Wulff, 160.
16. Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, "Un art de l'équilibre," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 9.
17. Jean Starobinski, "Peut-on définir l'essai?" in *Cahiers pour un temps* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985), 185–196.
18. Alain Ménil, "Entre utopie et hérésie: Quelques remarques à propos de la notion d'essai," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 87–126.
19. José Moure, "Essai de définition de l'essai au cinéma," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 25–39.
20. Christa Blümlinger, "Zwischen den Bildern/Lesen," in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen*, ed. Blümlinger and Wulff, 11–31.
21. Cyril Neyrat, "L'essai à la limite de la terre et de l'eau," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 170.
22. Fabienne Costa, "Les rejetés de la jetée: Va et vient et bouts d'essai," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 183–189.
23. Jean Durançon, "Droit à l'essai," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 227–233.
24. Claire Mercier, "Le scénario de fiction comme essai philosophique," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 69–86.
25. Guy Fihman, "L'essai cinématographique et ses transformations expérimentales," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 41–48.
26. Jean-Louis Leutrat, "Un essai transformé," in *L'Essai et le cinéma*, ed. Liandrat-Guigues and Gagnebin, 237–249.
27. Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).
28. Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l'architexte* (Paris: Seuil, 1979). One is struck, for example, by the fact that the "essay" is not even present among so many genres and sub-genres interconnected in the extraordinary "rose of genres" or "wheel of genres," conceived in the 1920s by the German theoretician of aesthetics Julius Petersen.
29. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).
30. Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov, eds., *Théorie des genres* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).
31. Raymond Bellour, "Autoportraits," in "Video," ed. Raymond Bellour and Anne-Marie Duguet, special issue, *Communications* 48 (1988): 327–387, reprinted in Raymond Bellour, *L'Entre-Images* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1990), 270–337.
32. In a general way, the development of video and especially of new technologies has also contributed to the spread of the essay, through a more or less close relationship with the self-portrait. See, for example, Ursula Biemann, ed., *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (Zurich: Voldemeer, 2003).
33. Bellour, "Autoportraits," 336.
34. Max Bense, "Ästhetik und Metaphysik einer Prosa," preface to Henri Michaux, *Passages/Passagen* (Esslingen: Bechtle, 1956).

16

THE ESSAY FILM

From Film Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form?

(2015)

THOMAS ELSAESSER

After more than a decade of increasing academic attention, a consensus is beginning to emerge that seems to confirm that essay films “are films which reflect their own representational mode, are more likely to develop an idea than narrate a story, and at times produce intellectual and philosophical works that are a form of thought or at the very least, they stimulate thinking. . . . Categories that need to become the focus of discussion in the essay film are association, analogy, fragment, constellation, proportion, topology, hybridity and deconstruction.”¹ This quotation, which comes from the introduction to a collection of essays on the essay film, tries to be inclusive and broad, but rather than follow its lead and explore the suggested categories, I begin with a brief summary of what conventionally constitute the features that distinguish the essay film from the documentary, the fiction film, the found-footage film, and the compilation film, even as essay films tend to overlaps and intersects with all of them.

The essay film is considered to be more “subjective” than the documentary, because its relation to the evidentiary ground of documentary is looser, more speculative, and more suggestive. As a consequence, its relation to veracity and verification (i.e., truth-seeking) is more ambiguous, and its declarative tone more ironic, self-deprecating, or even deliberately deceptive. These aspects are part of what we term the essay film’s subjectivity, and “subjectivity” is part of its appeal, its special status as a film practice, short of being a genre in its own right.

The essay film differs from the feature film—even the auteur film, also often praised for its subjective point of view—by being less beholden to, or dependent on, “narrative.” Hence the often stated maxim that in the essay film “theme substitutes for plot,” and that *argument* and *association* prevail over *anticipation* and *narrative momentum*. Hence also the connection of the essay film with idea of “meditation” and “introspection,” and the inevitable reference to Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, and Francis Bacon as the literary fathers of the essay film. But as Christy Wampole, a literary scholar, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece from May 2013, entitled “The Essayification of Everything”: “The essayist samples more than a D.J.: a loop of the epic here, a little lyric replay there, a polyvocal break and citations from greatneses past, all with a signature scratch on top. . . . But this is the force of the essay: it impels you to face the undecidable. It asks you to get comfortable with ambivalence.”² This, with equal plausibility, could be—and has been—said of the essay film as well. Indeed, what we have been witnessing in the past decade or so is the “essayification of the documentary.”

The essay film can be like a found-footage film in that it accommodates and even welcomes a certain heterogeneity of materials and moods, of topics and temporalities, of locations and levels of reference. Yet it distinguishes itself from found-footage and compilation film by having a stronger singular voice: it can be assertive and personal, even autobiographical, but it is also not afraid to question its own status or challenge its own authority.

As the initial quotation confirms, essay films are driven by a structure of thought, however apparently hidden or at first glance imperceptible this thought-process may be. To that extent, even the disparity of sources and the assemblage of heterogeneous elements generally results in an order or a sequential logic that is less a matter of *compilation* and more the result of *composition*. Two sets of metaphorical descriptions prevail: one taken from fabric and texture, the other from music and melody. That is, the essay film can assume montage-form, with modular units, a patchwork of separate motifs quilted together by way of contrast or even clash. Or the essay film deploys a themes-and-variation approach, where voices and motifs weave in and out, stay in the background, or are allowed to come to the fore. For instance, both Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) (often claimed as an early essay film) and Harun Farocki’s

Wie Man Sieht (As You See, 1986) compare filmmaking to weaving: one by emphasizing the stitching together of film strips to form patterns and make connections, while Farocki aligns the mechanization of the Jacquard weaving loom with the turn to automation in general, and—via the IBM punch cards and player-piano sound performance—links “the regularity of the weave” with the substitution of the hand by the eye, thus suggesting that the eye becomes a tactile organ, but also that images and sounds come under operational regimes that link the automatism of the photograph with calculating machines and computational programming. More specifically, the tactile-textural qualities of the essay film have also been explored by writers like Laura Marks and Antonia Lant. As to the musical analogy, one can think of *Handsworth Songs* (1986), made by John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective, and one of Britain’s outstanding contributions to the essay film.

To the three characteristics—subjectivity, associative logic, heterogeneity—we can thus add a fourth: reflexivity, a feature also frequently attributed to the essay film. Its specific type of reflexivity can be identified with cinematic modernism, albeit in a slightly different configuration, as a type of recursiveness, where images are able to comment on themselves, or where voice and image are in a dialogue with each other, in mutual interaction or fruitful tension. Such recursive dialogism emphasizes the ways the essay film can enact strategies of displacement, irony, plurivocality that the more conventional documentary might avoid, in order not to blunt a political message, weaken an activist agenda, or jeopardize an air of impartial neutrality. A classic of the political documentary, for instance, such as Luis Buñuel’s *Land Without Bread* (1933), might therefore, retroactively, be a candidate for the essay film, because of its sardonic irony, its sound and image counterpoints, thus resolving a long-standing debate over the generic identity of *Land Without Bread* as a documentary, a parody of a documentary, or an essay in surrealist anthropology.³

Now that the essay film is gaining ground also outside Europe, in Latin America and Africa, where traditionally documentaries were expected to be hard-hitting instruments of political advocacy, supporting specific causes, exposing social evils, or act as militant weapons in political struggles—think Argentinean “Third Cinema” or Brazil’s “Cinema Novo”—the adoption of the looser and more reflexive form of the essay film may be an indication, not necessarily that these struggles have been won,

but that a more pensive tone or melancholy mood now reflects the state of politics and personal engagement also in the countries of the Southern Hemisphere. Or it may simply indicate that the faith in the cinema as a tool for bringing about political or social change has given way to a more sober assessment of its true potential as a means of thoughtful observation and personal testimony. Elsewhere, in the Middle East and Asian countries, the essay film's constitutive ambiguity can act as a cunning circumvention of censorship by practicing strategic obliqueness. And in Francophone Africa—for example, Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso—docufictions have mingled with the essay film by drawing on the narrative and dialogical resources of popular mythologies or the trickster figure, in order to infuse a note of satire into political statements and autobiographical memoirs.

Mentioning Francophone countries is also a reminder that the essay film was first developed as a deliberate break with propagandistic non-fiction films after World War II, by auteurs who belonged to the French *nouvelle vague*, such as Alain Resnais's *Statues Also Die* (co-directed with Chris Marker; 1953) and *Night and Fog* (1955); Marker's personal travelogues like *Letter from Siberia* (1957), *Sunday in Peking* (1956), and *Sans Soleil* (1983); Agnès Varda's meandering ruminations, from *Daguerréotypes* (1975) and *MurMurs* (1981) to *The Gleaners and I* (2000) and *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008); and, of course, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, whose *Letter to Jane* (1972) pioneered another iconic essay-film prototype, conveying a strongly political message while conducting an exemplary "politics of the public image."⁴

In the case of Marker, whose *Sans Soleil* (1983) is still, after more than thirty years, the high-water mark of the mode, the essay film combines an outward journey, often beyond the borders of Europe, with an inward, interior journey: *Sans Soleil* travels into the past as it is present in and to the present, exploring the nature of memory and its affinity with trauma, and tries to penetrate into the dark heart of (French) colonialism. It leads Marker—as a political-ethical response—to the "open" encounter with the other (often women, absorbed in their work, or comatose crowds in trains or on ferries, thereby hinting at a degree of passivity or level of acceptance of their fate that today may strike us as more poetically just than politically correct). For instance, how do we know whether the Cap Verde people gathered at the Fogo quayside are "waiting patiently like

pebbles”? A lovely image, but did Marker ask them how they felt? If there are sometimes hints of Orientalism in Marker, more typical are his own observational patience in *Le joli mai* (1963) and his solidly internationalist political commitments: think of *Le fond du l'air est rouge* (*A Grin Without a Cat*, 1977, 1993), in which the compilation-film format finds itself reborn as essay film, thanks to the modulation of irony into biting satire, and biting satire into flashes of anger and barely suppressed rage against the world's injustices, while still investing hope in solidarity and appealing to mankind's better angels to take responsibility for a common destiny and a shared humanity.

Marker has also always sought to challenge any purported self-evidence we might want to invest in the documentary image, when one thinks of the different voice-overs in *Letter from Siberia*, commenting on the same street scene. He deconstructs the conventions of the documentary perhaps a little less fiercely or stridently than Godard did in his essay films from the Dziga Vertov period in the 1970s, but Marker did so no less insistently, in a more gentle and ironic vein, foregrounding the filmmaker as a figure and a subject, who is finally no more trustworthy than the television reporter or photo-journalist out to capture a story, and to that end using the gamut of rhetorical tricks, montage effects and persuasive techniques available to any “man (or woman) with the camera.”

More recently, Kevin B. Lee has made a video-essay about the essay film, in which two of the characteristic features outlined earlier stand out: the essay film as a subjective mode, and the essay film as representing a particular form of reflexivity. Lee puts it in terms that emphasize the contrast of the essay film compared with Hollywood picture making: what we need are “Thoughts as Stories, Consciousness as Spectacle, and Ideas as Stars,” which leads him to define the essay film “as Portrayal of the Mind.”⁵

Lee's video essay is a punchy and graphic way of sketching out the territory of essay film as a form of thinking, by turning inward and reflexive the properties of the Hollywood blockbuster. But Lee also has in mind that the essay film is a way of purging or purifying, of filtering and refining what he sees as the flood of images that surround us, bombard us, or into which we willingly immerse us, in our media-saturated everyday environments. So he goes on to ask: “if we are submerged in the flood of sounds and images, can we somehow use them to stay afloat?”⁶

But should or could essay films be the life rafts or rescue missions that save us from drowning? Considered as a response to the postmodern “everything goes” attitude, to simulation and make-believe, the essay film inscribes itself in those avant-garde moments of dissent and resistance that, since the 1920s, have used formal means in order to change our habits of perception, and make us critical of images, to the point of cinophobia. If the essay film takes up this agenda, it is, however, with a crucial difference: rather than oppose representation with a medium-specific materiality, subvert narrative flow by anti-narrative polemics (as in the structuralist films of the 1970s), or call for un-pleasure to break the spell of specular seduction (as was the case of a certain film theory), the contemporary essay film is more likely to adopt Joseph Conrad’s motto: *in the destructive element immerse*—that is, develop, through the essay film, more tactical ways of suspending referentiality, highlighting the constructedness of images, be open to semantic play and to some of the means of the fiction film, even consider reenactments, while still able to highlight bias in representation in the mainstream media.⁷

Yet seasoned practitioners of the essay film also recognize that today’s digital media tools have turned many of their consumers and users into more savvy, cynical, or skeptical pro-users and producers, who can give as good as they get, when it comes to making images circulate (i.e., when they “go viral”). Contemporary users of digital cameras are skilled at attributing to still and moving images that special kind of performativity of authenticity and evidence that now attaches itself to videos shot with cell phones, or to repurposed surveillance footage: whether documenting police brutality and civilian casualties in war zones, political demonstrations and public protest, or merely furry animals and funny mishaps. But YouTube videos are by and large not counted among essay films, even though this may be another moving-image practice from which the essay film needs to be explicitly distinguished and differentiated. For if our criteria of the essay film are subjectivity and heterogeneity, a non-narrative patchwork structure and an associative logic, then, for instance, the live RSS feed of our Facebook friends may well qualify as a collectively authored—in turns illuminating, irritating, thoughtful, autobiographic, and, in any event, potentially never-ending—essay-film.

Just such a seasoned essayist is Kodwo Eshun, member of the London-based Otolith Group (together with Anjalika Sagar), whose work tries to take up certain traditions of reflexive political filmmaking and carry it into the art world and gallery spaces. Their *Otolith I* (2003), nominated for the prestigious Turner Prize, has “a feeling of wistfulness that permeates the film, particularly in the narration relating to images of the 2003 anti-[Iraq] war protests [in London] (‘a protest for the right to protest, as if that might stop the war happening’), it is in the tradition of Chris Marker’s melancholy science fiction, or, what amounts to the same thing, in his political critique of the present.”⁸

Eshun, the guerrilla activist on the battlefield of images and representation, wants to hone and spike his definition even of the essay film, by distancing himself from some of the characteristics listed earlier. He says: “For me the essayistic is not about a particular generic fascination with voice-over or montage. [Rather] the essayistic is dissatisfaction, it is discontent with the duties of images and the obligations of sound; it is dissatisfaction with what we expect a documentary to do.”⁹

This draws perhaps an unexpectedly sharp dividing line between the documentary and the essayistic, where the “essayistic” is now identified as a stance, an irritation, a frustration that not only rebels against the presumed authority of the documentary, its forensic aspirations to truth seeking, or its moral self-righteousness (“duties” and “obligations”), but perhaps also refuses the kind of public sphere that the documentary has in recent years begun to occupy: after all, the documentary has undergone a remarkable reinvention since the 1980s, leaving behind voice-over commentary, but also abandoning fly-on-the-wall *cinéma vérité* and in-your-face direct cinema, extending the spectrum and range from Errol Morris’s reenactments in *The Thin Blue Line* (1989) and *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) to Werner Herzog’s carefully crafted persona in documentaries like *Grizzly Man* (2005) and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), and from Michael Moore’s polemical docu-pamphlets like *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) to Joshua Oppenheimer’s controversial *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2015), relying on flamboyant reenactments and, if necessary, taking seriously the perspective (and trauma) of the perpetrators.

Without addressing directly these shifting boundaries between different kinds of documentary—to which we might add the documentaries

that take on the big themes of globalization, such as Hubert Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004), Erwin Wagenhofer's *We Feed the World* (2005), and Noël Burch and Alan Sekula's *The Forgotten Space* (2010)—Eshun's primarily negative definition of the essayistic is, I think, symptomatic of a more general sense of dissatisfaction. Such discontent is targeted at these boundary-crossing documentaries, some of which now tend to sensationalize their subject matter, either because they want to shake us awake—such as Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006)—or because they are pressured by their backers, who are usually television broadcasters mindful of the ratings—think Andrew Jarecki's recent HBO series *The Jinx* (2015). Yet doubts and dissatisfaction with the documentary now begin to seep into the essay film itself, which, after all, has been enjoying remarkable success as an especially supple form of filmmaking that can shape-shift from film festivals to art spaces, from television to installations, and from online streaming portals like Netflix and Hulu to the Wild West of YouTube and Vimeo.

This very capacity of the essay film to adapt and to morph, to be flexible and open, to be both a sponge and a probe, has no doubt contributed to its popularity, both as a practice of choice for filmmakers and now as a topic for teaching and research, for books and, indeed, conferences. In this sense, the amorphousness of the category is its strength, as it lowers the bar for entry, on one side of the divide—that is, for digitally literate amateurs—and it raises the bar for professionals, if the essay film is indeed contemporary cinema as its most philosophical. This, in turn, reflects the need for films that cannot be pigeonholed, especially when they want to be strategic interventions in a very fluid field of pressing global issues and an urgent need to speak up, be heard, and express one's concerns. The essay film, in other words, is *symptomatic*—first of all, as a placeholder for all the politics and topics that need to find a strong voice and usually do not, in the crowded arena of a globalized world, everywhere in turbulence and transition.

Second, it is symptomatic for the changes in technology that allow anyone with the desire to bear witness or manifest critique in the public realm to easily pick up a digital camera as turn to the typewriter or pick up a pen. Yet quite paradoxically, the essay film as an increasingly familiar filmic form may also have encouraged writers to develop a type of literary equivalent of the essay film, thereby inverting the usual genealogies that

start with the literary essay, and then derive from it the cinematic essay, a pedigree that may not be as historically accurate or analytically helpful, even if names like Montaigne and Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno do help to ennoble and legitimate a bastard cinematic practice. As an example of a writer who has been affected by the essay film I would cite here W. G. Sebald, whose meandering narratives—*The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*—are neither novels nor travelogues, neither memoirs nor scholarly treatises on obscure topics, and yet they are also all of the above.

Sebald was a writer who profoundly reflects the cinematic imaginary, in part because he remained so resolutely outside the cinema in his life. Not unlike Roland Barthes, who became most discerning “on leaving the cinema,” Sebald always maintained a skeptical stance toward the cinema, and I suspect it was because films put him in the position of having to choose between the role of the voyeur and the role of the eyewitness, both of which for Sebald normalized and naturalized a state of passive participation in the spectacle of disaster or harm, from a false proximity that permitted moral indifference. By contrast, the ear—and thus the act of listening—represented a less “cold” contact with the world: the ear is more vulnerable, cannot protect itself from sudden shock, and therefore does not succumb so readily to the optical pleasures of disinterested curiosity.

From these considerations, one might begin to construct a film essayistic poetics of Sebald’s works, revolving as they do around one major topic: how to give a voice to human beings, whom the circumstances of their lives or, more often, the terrible history of the twentieth century had scarred into almost irrecoverable silence. The question, then, becomes how to get closer to human beings as subjects, to listen to them, while actually lending *to* them his—that is, the writer’s—own voice, in much the way that Marker proceeds in *Sans Soleil*. Sebald’s many acts of camouflage and disguise testify to the difficult task of finding a silent presence and a floating tense for his first-person narrators that transforms them into listeners: qualified to speak authentically about the “pain of others” and to do so in images, which have the power to make the reader also into a viewer. This seems to me one way to interpret the photographs and postcards placed so strategically between the pages of Sebald’s books. Neither illustrating the text, nor separating themselves entirely from it, they invite the chance encounters and sudden discoveries between text and image that are also the hallmark of so many essay films.

Indeed, if one studies the images in sequence, especially in *The Rings of Saturn*, one becomes aware of certain visual motifs repeating themselves, morphing into and transforming one another, telling their own kind of story—parallel to the text or even in counterpoint to the text. After what I said about Sebald and cinema, one can think of his image-sequences as the equivalent or even the reenactment of that pre-cinematic device called *Daumenkino* (flip-book): a small picture book one rapidly thumbs through in order to make the still images reconstitute the illusion of movement. In this sense, Sebald translated “cinema” back into his books, expecting the attentive (or casual) reader to “rediscover” the cinema, as if he had to invent it once more, for his own purposes of *imaginative recall*.

What made me acutely aware of Sebald’s proximity to the essay film was actually an essay film about Sebald: Grant Gee’s *Patience (After Sebald)* (2011). Gee’s film attempts to translate Sebald’s working method—his mannerisms and his peripatetic, associative, and digressive writing style—into film, by trying to strike a balance between rendering this style in another medium (mimetically enacting rather than illustrating *The Rings of Saturn*) and documenting (through superimposing “talking heads” and voice-over commentary) the enormous impact and life-changing experience that his work has been for writers and artists.

Many of the voices in the film—visual artists, architects, writers, illustrators, theater directors, composers, publishers—seem to want to emulate Sebald, to the point of physically living inside Sebald’s melancholy sensibility, as if they are inexorably drawn into experiencing the world through his eyes and senses, which is to say, the magic flow of his words and syntax. Some readers take the Sebald texts as the basis for works of their own, part homage, part act of identification, even over-identification: as if his books were not so much fictions or the fruits of painstaking archival research, but physical realities in their own right that one can inhabit and possess, can take into one’s body and even make part of one’s own life and autobiography. It is this mirroring of cinema into book and book into topography, and topography into art installation, that suggests that it might be worth following more closely this inverse genealogy that I am here proposing, where a writer, who keenly observed how a cinematic imaginary had taken hold of and reshaped the culture at large, managed to fashion from it a uniquely literary idiom that readers instinctively recognize as belonging to our age.

Sukhdev Sandhu makes a similar point:

Essay film-makers commonly foreground the process of thought and the labor of constructing a narrative rather than aiming for seamless artifacts that conceal the conceptual questions that went into their making. Incompletion, loose ends, directorial inadequacy: these are acknowledged rather than brushed over. . . . Essay films exploit this freedom and possibility, exulting in the opportunity to . . . draw on ethnography, autobiography, philosophy and art history. . . . Their roaming or tentacular approach to structure can be seen as a kind of territorial raid. . . . It's certainly striking how many essay films grapple with landscape and cartography: Patrick Keiller's *London* (1994) uses a fixed camera, a droll fictional narrator named Robinson and near-forensic socio-economic analysis to explore the "problem" of England's capital. . . .

Essay films sometimes exhibit a quality of vagrancy and drift, as if they are not wholly sure of what they want to say or of the language they need to say it, which may stem from their desire to let subject matter determine—or strongly influence—filmic form. Here, as in the frequent willingness to blur the distinction between documentation and fabulation, the essay film has much in common with "creative non-fiction." The literary equivalents of Hartmut Bitomsky, director of a mysterious investigation of *Dust*, and of Patricio Guzmán whose *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010) draws on astronomy, to chart the poisonous legacies of [Augusto] Pinochet's coup d'état in Chile, are writers such as Sven Lindqvist, Eduardo Galeano and Geoff Dyer. Perhaps it's no coincidence that one of the most celebrated modern creative non-fiction authors was the subject of an equally ruminative, resonant essay film—Grant Gee's *Patience (After Sebald)* (2011).¹⁰

Nonetheless, not all is well with the essay film, and the form is symptomatic also in another, more problematic way: as a specific ideology of contemporary art and labor, creativity and subjectivity. If Eshun keeps his critique local and tries to reposition the essayistic in line with the political, as defined, for instance, by Jacques Rancière's ethics of dissensus (as opposed to consensus), there exist other even more polemical and, above all, more wide-ranging and radical critiques of the essay film. Among these, the most challenging analysis of the essay film that I know

comes from Hito Steyerl, herself an erstwhile practitioner of the essay film, such as *November* (2004) and *Lovely Andrea* (2010). Revisiting her films and her writings, Steyerl asks by way of critical self-interrogation:

[H]as the essay as form been replaced by the essay as conformism? Or to put it more carefully: has the essay become a dominant form of [post-] narrative in times of post-Fordist globalization?

This would imply that the essay as form has transformed its historical role, as described by Theodor W. Adorno in 1958.¹¹ . . . Adorno assumed that the essay as a marginalized and often dismissed form of narrative would challenge the coerced identity, [but the essay film] runs parallel to the post-Fordist coercion of difference, mobility, extreme flexibilization, and distracted modes of attention, whose ideal subjectivity is hybrid and supple. . . . If Adorno's coerced identity corresponds to the age of the assembly line, contemporary essays also reflect the "copy and paste" ideologies of new global chains of production, which constantly integrate and juggle surprising new elements.¹²

Based on the contrast between Fordist and post-Fordist production methods, but where (beyond Adorno) one can also recognize several of the analytical points familiar from Gilles Deleuze's *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, Steyerl's argument directs our attention to a possible homology and synchronicity between neo-liberal forms of industrial organization and creative forms of artistic production, such as the essay film, so that the loosening of the narrative causal chain into a more associative string of observations and events parallels the loosening of the disciplinary hierarchies on the factory floor or in the open-plan office, which may appear to be liberating and empowering the worker, but in fact merely shifts the burden of control and discipline from the organization to the individual, imposing on him or her an impossible demand of self-motivation as self-discipline, and appearing to reward self-exploitation by calling it entrepreneurial initiative, or even creativity—as in creative industries: an apparent oxymoron that Adorno no doubt would have relished picking to pieces.

Yet one may ask: Is such a parallel between post-Fordist work practices and management styles and post-narrative essayistic filmmaking more than a polemically suggestive metaphor? Or, put differently: Does

this homology not risk the Marxist pitfall of correlating too directly the economic base with the ideological superstructure? After all, film historians have for some time now been arguing whether classical Hollywood—the old dream factory—was ever organized along Fordist assembly-line principles or, on the contrary, whether Hollywood—with its mix of technological innovation, capitalist risk management, strategic deployment of creative resources, rationalization, and economies of scale—has not always practiced a version of post-Fordism, so that Steyerl's argument about film forms reflecting modes of production either might not apply at all or should in the first instance apply to Hollywood feature films. There, it might help explain the differences between classical Hollywood narrative and post-classical narrative, such as one encounters it in multi-strand films by Robert Altman and Paul Thomas Anderson, in network narratives like *Babel* (2006) and *Crash* (2004), in forking-path films like *Sliding Doors* (1998), looped films like *Groundhog Day* (1993), and several of the films by Christopher Nolan and David Fincher.

This is a valid point, but it does not invalidate Steyerl's argument; in fact, it can even strengthen it. For just as the pressures of a globalized entertainment industry, such as successfully servicing worldwide audiences, with their different cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, has left its mark on Hollywood's business model and film genres, and just as the need for blockbusters to be both self-contained and part of franchises, to both play on the big screen and repay playing as a DVD, to function as a linear narrative while transposable and transportable also into a multiple-choice game structure: just as all these seemingly contradictory constraints have put special demands on screenwriters and directors, and spawned new subgenres like the puzzle film and mind-game film, so a similar set of potentially conflicting and incompatible pressures has also been affecting the products of the independent sector, traditionally defined as the art-house circuit and the film-festival networks. If we assume that film festivals used to live from auteur films, national cinemas, and documentaries depicting life from all parts of the globe, and that this was their "Fordist" phase, then their post-Fordist phase would start when festivals like Cannes and Venice began *creating* auteurs and new waves rather than *discovering* them. It started when the many festivals that now take place not just in Europe, but in every country on earth, are obliged to compete with one another for world premieres and exclusives,

and therefore either engage in a “race to the bottom” concerning quality, or are forced to ensure their own supply chains: either by “growing” their own talent (through development funds, talent campuses, and other incentives, often to filmmakers from small countries who have been to international film schools) or by talent scouting in cinematically underdeveloped countries like Vietnam and Myanmar, Zimbabwe, the Congo, and Tunisia.

Conversely, on the part of filmmakers, they too have had to adapt their strategies: given that the vast majority of films made in the world today never receive theatrical distribution outside the festival circuit, and instead have to rely on television and the DVD market for any kind of exhibition (and often not even that in their own countries), it is not surprising that such filmmakers hedge their bets and try to enter that other network, receptive to their work, that has grown in parallel to the film-festival circuit: the contemporary-art circuit. Contemporary-art museums have proliferated at least as spectacularly as have film festivals in recent decades, and for similar reasons: cultural tourism and city branding, the expansion of the global middle classes and their adoption of Western entertainment habits, which now include museum outings. The peculiarity of contemporary-art museums (as opposed to the more traditional museum of modern art) is that (1) they tend not to have major in-house collections, but depend on either commissioning new works or buying in curated shows; (2) they tend to be much more receptive to moving images, be they in the form of screening films or hosting video installations; and (3) their shops tend to be a more prominent feature, where exhibition catalogues, tasteful souvenirs, kitsch marketed as pop, and DVDs seductively tempt the visitor. This, in turn, has generated an expanded market for filmmakers, with an increasing number of crossover artists between film festivals and art biennials, making work that fits different categories and suits such multi-purpose venues: from art-house films to installation art, from full-length feature films to experimental shorts and travelogues; we all know the names: among an older generation, there are Chantal Akerman and Abbas Kiarostami, Harun Farocki and Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs and Anthony McCall. Among a younger generation: Sam Taylor Wood and Sophie Calle, Tacita Dean and Ejia Liisa Ahtila, Isaac Julien and Steve McQueen, Omer Fast and Pierre Huyghe, Kidlat Tahimik and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Fiona Tan and Shelly Silver. Most of them

are established artists who have moved either from the festival circuit to the gallery space or from the gallery space back into the movie theatre, sometimes even big time, when we think of Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and Sam Taylor Wood's *50 Shades of Grey* (2015). Some see themselves as filmmakers who occasionally moonlight as installation artists (e.g., Abbas Kiarostami), and others call themselves "artists who make films" rather than filmmakers (e.g., Tacita Dean).

As mainstays in the contemporary-art-museum circuit, these filmmaker-artists have also had to learn how to address global audiences, while still making site-specific works (Pipilotti Rist at MoMA, Tacita Dean at Tate Modern); they have had to learn how to construct mini-narratives or produce associative montages that can play as a loop and hold audiences who walk in and out at random (Omer Fast, *The Castings* [2007]) and *Continuity* [2012]) or can be watched in isolation on a monitor with individual headphones or be projected in a black box in HD quality and stereo sound (Agnès Varda's *Les veuves de noirmoutier* [2006] and *Les plages d'Agnès* [2008]). Under such divergent circumstances, does not the essay film offer itself as the perfect vehicle to unite and reconcile all these demands? Does not the essay film represent the ideal compromise form, loose in structure or fragmented, but rich in connotations and suggestive analogies? Does not the essay film both *symbolize* and *symptomatize* the material circumstances and economic conditions of its own historical possibility? It is in this sense that Steyerl's argument—beyond its clearly polemical intent—captures some very important features of the essay film in its contemporary manifestation, at the threshold of fame (for its maker) and the cusp of its usefulness (for contributing to the public sphere of critical debate).

But I think one can even go one step further and argue that the essay film has at least one further function within the globalized image cultures about which Steyerl speaks, in that the emphasis on "subjectivity" in the essay film is itself symptomatic of an additional critical feature of contemporary media culture: what I would call "distributed subjectivities." By this I mean that the subjective voice that speaks in the essay film is not necessarily an *auteurist* voice in the classical sense, but one that camouflages itself across another (as in Shelly Silver's *What I'm Looking For* [2004]), even as it speaks in its own persona (e.g., Agnès Varda as the widow in *Les veuves de noirmoutier*, Omer Fast in *The Castings*, Harun Farocki's hands in *Images of the World and Inscription of War* [1989]). Alternatively, it is

one that lends itself to marginalized, neurotic, abject, or scarily ordinary protagonists, as in Eija Liisa Ahtila's videos such as *If 6 Was 9* (1995). Such essay films both recycle stereotypes from feature films (in Ahtila's case, they seem to come out of the deadpan, talking-past-each-other scenes of Aki Kaurismäki's feature films) and mimic the distributed subjectivities we encounter on the Facebook feed that I mentioned earlier or on a dating site, as in the case of Silver's *What I'm Looking For*.

The fact is that these distributed subjectivities, in their very impulse to be seen and heard, to expose themselves and to crave contact, do not express themselves as free individuals, but reflect on or respond to demands that come from society, whose exacting claims, however, they have internalized, to the point of naked desperation. This downside of distributed subjectivities is well illustrated in a video installation by Elisa Giardina Papa, from 2011, called *Need Ideass!?! PLZ!!*. The demands so strongly emanating from the videos like a black hole sucking out these teenagers' energy and vitality are the demands to be creative, to be active, to be interactive, to be outgoing, and to be popular among one's peers—which is to say, to be part of the imagined community “out there.” These characters all have something in common—ideas please!—and yet they do not form a community in any real sense, nor do they constitute a network. They are nomads, and yet their pleas of “PLZ!!” belong to our society, in that these are only the more honest and maybe even courageous manifestations of precisely those pressures that Steyerl is referring to, when she speaks of the “post-Fordist coercion of difference, mobility, [and] extreme flexibilization.”

Where do we then stand with the essay film, in the contemporary conjunction, which is already a transnational and globalized one, wherever it manifests itself and however local it presents itself? Part of my argument has been that the essay film derives its most strategically useful functions and its current popularity from the very vagueness and indeterminacy we have been trying so hard to limit, narrow down, or circumscribe. We may have to flip the problem and not look to define the form of the essay film, but the contexts and conditions that have led to this form. I have therefore emphasized the different ways the essay film is symptomatic: symptomatic of our global socioeconomic system and our transnational arts and entertainment business, whose structural features are very similar, regardless of whether we speak of Hollywood, Shanghai art fairs,

Cannes film festivals, or Venice Biennales. In all these sites, the essay film is symptomatic.

In relation to politics, the essay film is a placeholder, especially for the kind of politics it inherited from the activist and agitational documentary of the 1960s and 1970s, with its internationalist perspective and its investment in liberation struggles and postcolonial nationhood in different parts of the world. These politics the essay film preserves in attenuated form, inserting a more personal perspective and a more reflective self-examination of the images that a filmmaker can convincingly send into battle.

In addition, the essay film is symptomatic of certain changes in technology—notably the lowering of the bar for entrance into filmmaking, thanks to cheap high-quality digital cameras and easy-to-use editing software. But the essay film is also symptomatic of changes in society and our concept of the social, where the “social” is now understood not in terms of social units such as the family, the tribe, the religious community, the nation, but is figured in terms of globally mediated social networks, on-line chance encounters, and stochastic series, notably the “friends of friends” connectivity of Facebook, and other “x degrees of separation” phenomena of associative relatedness. Steyerl, who with *November* and *Lovely Andrea* has made two of the most riveting, multilayered, transnational, transgressive, autobiographical, global-political, feminist-activist, reflexive-philosophical essay films ever, is merciless on her assessment of the contemporary essay film:

The multiple and heterogeneous forms of essay [film]s . . . closely mimic the various formations of a contemporary brand of capitalism based on the compulsory manufacturing of difference, custom-tailored niche markets and flexible and modular forms of production. [These] essays, with their mix of different levels of address, their stupefying combination of contradictory materials and amazing ambivalence, their combination of the arcane and profane, of the affective and the reflexive, are no longer the exotic “other” of a drab and repetitive social reality. They now look uncannily similar . . . to a zapping spree with a voice-over, or maybe just to a Sunday afternoon remix contest on YouTube.¹³

The social media, in other words, superficially display some of the same features that we have identified in the essay film, leading to the difficult

question of whether there is such a thing as a crowd-sourced essay film of distributed subjectivities (a sort of actor-network essay film), or whether we have to retreat into such classical categories as the auteur, or the autonomous work, in order to maintain the position of the essay film as “*documentary plus*” (for festivals and biennales), rather than let the essay film slide into “*documentary-light*” (of MUBI and Vimeo).

Yet such a reintroduction of the criteria borrowed from the art cinema and the art world, in order to prop up the philosophical credibility of the essay film, runs counter to another symptomatic feature, the one that Steyerl was at pains to emphasize: its structural homology and system conformity with the globalized creative industries run along post-Fordist production lines, where the essay film represents the perfect compromise product for the dual-purpose filmmaker, obliged to serve a minimum of two masters—the film-festival circuit and the art-world circuit—and, if she is unlucky, finds herself spreading her work like confetti on the YouTube self-service outlets.

Finally, as a more hopeful version of the essay film’s symptomatic character, the essay film has established itself as a quality brand that can even revitalize literature, as I have argued in the case of Sebald. Its (partly retroactive) genealogical pedigree of inspired and inspiring practitioners—among them Sergei Eisenstein and Luis Buñuel, Hans Richter and Orson Welles, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alexander Kluge, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda and Jean Luc Godard, Harun Farocki and Hartmut Bitomsky, Ross McElwee and Shelly Silver, Patrick Keiller and Grant Gee—can act as a kind of Platonic ideal, to which every essay film, wherever it is made, and whoever makes it, can aspire to, measure itself against, or rebel against and try to overturn. This, of course, would canonize the essay film, stabilize even its indeterminacy, institutionalize its unruliness, make it teachable, and thereby make it safe. Whether this is what a collection of essays inadvertently brings about, and whether such higher recognition value would be a service to its practitioners or simply provide the creative industries with another marketable commodity, is a question I cannot answer, but it is one that battles in my mind against that other, equally strong feeling: that precisely because we now have something approximating a canon, with its masters and masterpieces, the real journey of discovery and thus the real adventure of the essay film have only just begun, and we have been privileged, as passionate writers about this form of cinema, to cheer it on its way.

NOTES

1. Sven Kramer and Thomas Tode, "Modulationen des Essayistischen im Film," in *Der Essay-Film: Ästhetik und Aktualität*, ed. Sven Kramer and Thomas Tode (Konstanz: UVK, 2011), 11–12
2. Christy Wampole, "The Essayification of Everything," *New York Times*, May 26, 2013, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/the-essayification-of-everything/?_r=0.
3. For a summary of the debate, see Jeffrey Ruoff, "An Ethnographic Surrealist Film: Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*," *Visual Anthropology Review* 14, no. 1 (1998): 45–57.
4. Jonathan Dawson, "Letter to Jane," *Senses of Cinema*, March 2002, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/cteq/letter-2/>; John Bresland, "Hanoi Jane, Mon Amour," *TriQuarterly*, July 16, 2012, <http://www.triquarterly.org/essay/hanoi-jane-mon-amour>.
5. Kevin B. Lee, "The Essay Film: Some Thoughts of Discontent," *Sight & Sound*, August 2013, British Film Institute, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/video-essay-essay-film-some-thoughts>.
6. Ibid.
7. Noah Baumbach's *While We're Young* (2014) is a fictional essay exploring—across three generations of documentarians—the fine line between documentary, essay film, and documentary fiction.
8. Sukhdev Sandhu, "Vagrancy and Drift: The Rise of the Roaming Essay Film," *Guardian*, August 3, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/aug/03/rise-essay-film-bfi-season>.
9. Nina Power, "Waiting for the Future," *frieze*, March 2010, http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/waiting_for_the_future/.
10. Sandhu, "Vagrancy and Drift."
11. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2000), 91–112 [see chapter 4, this volume].
12. Hito Steyerl, "The Essay as Conformism? Some Notes on Global Image Economies," in *Der Essay-Film*, ed. Kramer and Tode, 101–110 [see chapter 19, this volume].
13. Ibid.

IV

FILMMAKERS ON THE ESSAYISTIC





Video still from Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*. (Courtesy of the artist)

17

PERFORMING BORDERS

Transnational Video

(2003)

URSULA BIEMANN

Performing the Border (1999) is a video essay that describes a particular place, a desert city on the U.S.–Mexico border. Juarez City is located in a free trade zone that has been installed along the entire frontier for assembly operations of the U.S. industry. There are hundreds of sterile plants in this town where Mexican women solder the chips for our digital culture. It is a transnational zone that has turned the Mexican rural living condition into a high-tech slum life for millions. In this type of zone, the colonial slave has been transformed into a post-Fordist robot, cranking out chips in a steady flow. We are aware that transnationalism has created particular conditions under which production for the global market takes place. Among those conditions is the fact that women workers have to build their own shacks into the desert sand when they move to work on the border, that the young female workforce is gradually replaced when their eyesight is consumed from doing the precision work, and that many women workers prostitute themselves on weekends because their wage is not enough to survive, not even in the slum. Transnationalism is a very gendered condition. But this is not what this chapter is going to be about.

Instead I want to focus on the notion of the “Zone” in transnationalism and how this zone corresponds to the kind of places or non-places created in essays. I would like to relate the transnational characteristics of

this video genre to the free trade zone and propose a metaphorical and a material reading of the term “transnational.”

Not unlike transnationalism, the essay practices dislocation; it sets across national boundaries and continents and ties together disparate places through a particular logic. In the essay, it is the voice-over narration that ties the pieces together in a string of reflections that follow a subjective logic. The narration in the essay, the authorial voice, is clearly situated in that it acknowledges a very personal view, a female migrant position, a white workers’ position, a gay black position, etc.—and this distinguishes it from a documentarian voice or a scientific voice. The narration is situated in terms of identification, but it isn’t located in a geographic sense. It’s the translocal voice of a mobile, traveling subject that doesn’t belong to the place it describes but knows enough about it to unravel its layers of meaning. Alone to gather information and facts is hardly of interest, for the essay doesn’t believe in the representability of truth; the essayist intention lies much rather in the reflection about the world and the social order, and it does that by arranging the material into a particular field of connections. In other words, the essayist approach is not about documenting realities but about organizing complexities.

This very quality makes the audio-visual essay a suitable genre for my investigation of a subject matter like globalization. In this debate, many issues around economy, identity, spatiality, technology and politics converge and are placed in a complicated relationship to one another. The attempt to draw these layers together leads inevitably to the creation of an imaginary space, a sort of theoretical platform on which these reflections can take place and be in dialogue with each other. In every work, essayists install this kind of space. We can think of it as an imaginary topography, on which all kinds of thoughts and events taking place in various sites and non-sites experience a spatial order.

Performing the Border addresses questions around international labor division, migration and the sexualization of female bodies in the global economy; it traces the spatial inscription of gender relations into a post-industrial setting; it discusses the connection between the racialized body and high technology; it exposes the urban pathology in the public sphere and describes the construction of borders both in a metaphorical and a material sense. All these relations that characterize

the underlying order of this post-urban border space speak about global forces that are much bigger than the place itself. This lousy little border town is the unassuming non-place across which the many multidirectional strings of meaning can be narrated. Some of the relations are more visible than others. In fact, many processes are increasingly abstract and unrepresentable and couldn't be captured by documentary practices alone. I'm particularly interested in the spatial idea of this field of connections and associations created in the artistic form of the essay that extends the meaning of a particular place beyond its documentable reality, and to think about the politics of this videographic space. In *Performing the Border*, the essayist geography and the transnational geography converge. And they both become apparent as artificial constructs.

The export-processing zone is a well-defined zone that doesn't operate according to the ordinary social rules; it's a place in a state of exemption where civil realities and national regulations are largely suspended in favor of a special corporate arrangement. Foucault calls such formations Heterotopias—other spaces that are located outside of the ordinary social regulations, in deviation from the norm. At the same time, Heterotopias represent a counter position in that they reflect and comment precisely on how the normative society functions: psychiatric clinics, prisons, and military schools. Brothels and colonies are extreme types of Heterotopias. In any case, Heterotopias are particularly telling sites and unlike Utopias, which are essentially unreal, these are real, effective spaces. We can think of the free trade zones as being heterotopian.

What characterizes the logic of transnationalism? The concept is usually associated with displaced labor, global media networks, liberated markets, footloose capital and, let's say, an ambiguous relation to borders. Borders are simultaneously transcended and reinforced, and the digital technology plays a central role in both dispersing globally and protecting the national definitions of territory. The positive image is the idea that along with this dispersal goes a state of being adrift, in flux and utterly mobile; we seem to be able to be in several places at once. It's no longer the image of the traveler who strolls through the world but a multi-present subject connected to various professional and personal sites in time. This prompts us to reconsider the meaning of place and location. The essayist audiovisual practice has long been experimenting with

imagining topographies that connect simultaneous but disparate events in various geo-social places. It has anticipated the state of adriftness; it has anticipated the virtual space.

But with all this hype about mobility, it could be interesting to look at the role of the body in both the transnational zone and the essayist space. In the documentary tradition, reality is attached to a body; the camera focuses on the experiencing body, the social actor, in that sense it is a historical body. In fiction, on the other hand, the body represents a narrated figure; it is a narrated body. But in the essay, the bodies are not instrumentalized in either way; they do not have to perform representative functions. On the contrary, in their self-reflexive way, the essayist bodies contribute to constructing other things. In this event, they construct borders. It is through the movement of bodies that the border gets constituted, as Berta Jottar says. And because these particular bodies that cross the border are racialized and gendered, nationalized and economic, the border becomes not a neutral construct in the process but one that is marked by these very relations. In *Performing the Border*, then, the body doesn't become the carrier of narration or history, but actively constructs borders, traces geographies and performs transnational principles. It is always doing something extra to what it's saying.

So if we can say that the concept of the transnational is actually an interesting one that has brought positive qualities to the lifestyle of many here in the advanced world, we also have to recognize that this immaterial condition is powered by the labor of actual people who happen to be located south of the border. When the general trend is to represent globalization in images of free and enhanced mobility of people, this video is an attempt to embody and localize the virtual and digital culture in a particular transnational site. The figure that emerges is not the jet-setting business elite or the skate-boarding computer nerd who retires at age 30; it is the Mexican female cyborg who is linked to her workbench by an electric discharge cable and returns to her shack without running water or electricity at night. This image stands in a reversed analogy and in a critical dialog with those other, more glamorous images that circulate in magazines.

Even if this video is an attempt to bring in a complementary, missing information, it does not claim to enter the real, or to be more truthful

than corporate representations. It opens up another artificial, discursive space that is equally disconnected from the real on both the visual and the sonic level. Slow motion, tinting, distortions and intense layering turn the images into discursive elements, rather than the depiction of facts. More importantly, perhaps, the original sound is deleted to a large extent, and replaced by an electronic sound carpet. The material space is thus technologized, dislocated, dematerialized and prepared for a different reading. The reading I propose isn't committed to documenting a slice of Mexican life; the voice-over argues and speculates, turns theoretical or poetic. The voice is always the same, but the text is patched together from many different sources. It isn't a homogeneous voice that speaks as an "I." There is no particular subject behind the narration, even though this narration is highly subjective. It speaks from a particular position that I could describe as that of a feminist, white cultural producer who is in the process of moving from a Marxist to a post-colonial, post-Fordist, post-humanist place and trying to figure out how to transpose old labor questions into a contemporary aesthetic and theoretical discourse in a globalized context.

The performative aspect of the transnational space and borderlands plays a central role in the video. Once we embrace the concept of performativity, we are tempted to apply it to most everything we previously conceived as stable and fixed. When we once thought of borders as unmovable political boundaries that will change their meaning only through pacts or military interventions, performativity allows us to envision them radically different. The focus is shifted away from a fixation on the dividing forces of power toward the multiple and diverse social construction of space, a construction that takes place through the repetitive act of ordinary people as well as global players. This approach assumes a more complex and decentralized view of power. Apart from deconstructing efforts, it simultaneously grants the movement of people and the circulation of signs real effectiveness. The idea that borders are socially formed and performed is not only inspiring, it truly enhances the agency of artists, writers and video makers since it highlights their involvement in the symbolic production as a performative act of "doing border" if we wish to adapt Judith Butler's notion of "doing gender" to this geographic act.

One of the main questions I have pursued in my work during the last years, then, is how human trajectories and the traffic of signs and visual information form particular cultural and social landscapes and eventually inscribe themselves materially in the terrain. It is not by coincidence that *Performing the Border* opens with a shot from inside a car moving through the Mexican desert. In the off, border artist Berta Jottar comments: “You need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real; otherwise you just have this discursive construction. There is nothing natural about the border; it’s a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people, because without the crossing, there is no border, right? It’s just an imaginary line, a river or just a wall . . .” In this shot I was filming the woman driving the car, and thus I became a part of the unfolding road narrative as Bertha speaks about the U.S.–Mexican border being a highly performative place. It is a place that is constituted discursively through the representation of the two nations and materially through the installation of a transnational zone in which different national discourses get materialized in an ambivalent space at the fringe of two societies. It is through the movement of bodies that the border gains meaning. “They are crossing in English, in Spanish, in Spanglish, with a U.S. passport or jumping, as a tourist, a migrant, a middle-class woman, or a domestica. There are all these different ways of crossing and that’s how the border gets rearticulated, through the power relationships that the crossing produces. Because it’s not just this happy crossing,” Berta comments over dreamlike, overexposed images of people in rubber boats floating across the Rio Bravo.

There is a particular figure roaming the border that stands for the artificial and pathological quality of the transnational space where identities are collapsing: The Serial Killer. In the essay, this figure transports deeply metaphorical significations of the clash between bodies, sexuality, and technology, while being simultaneously a real existing fact. Between 1995 and the writing of this text in 2002, close to 350 women have been killed in Juarez according to a similar pattern.

According to Mark Seltzer’s extensive literary analysis on serial sexual violence, a common psychological denominator of the killers lies in the undoing of identity to the point of becoming a non-person, the desire to blend into the social and physical environment.¹ There is a strange

permeability of bodies and the urban environment in Juarez, where the habitat blends into the natural surroundings and the built reality blurs with the unpaved roads. The crime often happens at dawn, when the distinction between night and day is unclear and the boundaries between the private houses, the unpaved streets, and the desert around it are undistinguishable. There are large areas like this where the nominal division between public and private is blurred, in part because the public is nothing more than private improvisation. In the early morning hours, a great number of women cross through these widely undefined spaces on their way to the maquiladoras, in transit between private and work space, between desert and urban. The assimilation materialized not only in architectural and structural measures but also in more immaterial things such as corporate and social regulations of gender or the particular criminal profiles of a public sphere.

We have to acknowledge that when we enter the realm of image production, we face a range of different problems than when we approach the same issues of gender and globalization from an activist perspective. The question that emerges is: How can a video, rather than simply arguing against global capitalism and affirming rigid gender identities, reflect and produce the expansion of the very space in which we write and speak of the feminine? There is a need to investigate the interplay between the symbolization of the feminine and the economic, material reality of women. I would locate my work as a video maker in that zone. Even if video as a medium promises to be of great use for activist work, I don't see its main purpose so much in catalyzing direct social change, nor would I reduce it to a mere contribution to an ongoing discourse. I see its primary potential in the mediation between the two, as an effective intervention in the performative act of representation. The process of videographic re-signification of difference, the opening up of grey zones and the writing of counter-geographies all take place between the images and our lives, somewhere between the limitations of representation and the political or simply existential struggles.

NOTES

This text was first published in 2003 in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, a book compiling the lectures and presentations of the three-day conference of the same name that I organized for the Zurich University for the Arts, held at the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art in Zurich in 2002.

1. Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

18

PROPOSAL FOR A TUSSELE (2007)

JEAN-PIERRE GORIN

DISQUIET

To gather fifty-seven films under the title *The Way of the Termite: The Essay in Cinema, 1909–2004* is, to say the least, a prescription for controversy. The list is bound to irritate or to infuriate, and with every showing its revocability will be most likely pointed out. The choice of this or that film will be contested, derided or even heckled, and a dozen other titles will be deemed unjustly forgotten. The historical panorama will be held haphazard and lacunary, the result of eclectic taste rather than of proper scholarship. More likely than not, the hecklers will be right; and yet the brouhaha, wherever it takes the viewers of this retrospective, will be in keeping with the notion of the essay itself. There is, as essayist Elizabeth Hardwick pointed out, no “serenity of precision” to the term.¹ She was referring, of course, to the essay in literature, opposing this shape-shifter to the relative formal stability of fiction or poetry. Things get even more difficult when it comes to the cinematic essay. We know or we pretend to know what fiction or documentary is, and we live a content viewer’s life inside this dichotomy that seems as old as the confrontational staging of Louis vs. Georges, Lumière vs. Méliès, in the wax museum of film histories. Introduce the notion of the essay, and this certitude is blown to bits. Here is a form that seems to accommodate the two sides of that divide at the same time, that can navigate

from documentary to fiction and back, creating other polarities in the process between which it can operate. Nothing too different here from literature, except that in the mercantile world of cinema such radical refusal of allegiance to genres, such attention paid to the individuality of expression, to expressiveness unfettered, seems far more impolite than in literature. It is as if, to quote and to adapt Hardwick, “freedoms [had] been exercised, freedoms [almost] illicit in the minds of some [viewers], freedoms not so much exercised as seized over the border.”² However modest the film essayists, they will always be condemned to the arrogance of their modesty. Theirs is a claim that whim can and should be exercised, an assertion that style and personal manner are paramount and can be proposed to the viewers’ pleasure in a radical ignorance of the sacrosanct strictures of commerce. They come in all sizes, shapes and hues—and they will continue to do so. Fictions always conjure up the image of the studio and documentaries thrive in institutional contexts. They both speak of molds, recipes and enshrined constraints. The essay in film as in literature is not “a closed shop.”³ How can one even attempt to draw its floor plan, sketch its history and catalog the idiosyncratic products that appear in its inventory? The hecklers will be right.

THE BLACK HOLE

One could hope to go through the maze of that shop by clinging to the Ariadne’s thread of literature. That anyone would want to write an essay let alone film one is always astonishing. Like their literary counterparts, film essays seem to be here to help us understand that the subject matter is what matters to the subject. At the core of all essays is an interest in something that matters to the ones who decide to write them or to give them a cinematic existence, an interest so intense that it precludes the possibility of naming it simply and efficiently, of filming it in a straight line, so to speak. At the core of the essay is something so charged that it prompts the existential necessity not to talk about it but to talk or film around it. Without this black hole the essayist’s gait (and the gait precedes and conditions the essayist’s voice) cannot exist. And there lies the strange paradox of the essay: that in the end we will have learned less about the thing that

prompts it than witnessed the declension of its importance to the one who talks about it. And in that lies the strange exchange that links the essay to its readers or viewers: we get summoned not by the thing itself but by the dance it imposes upon the one who finds the compulsion to talk about it, in words or in words, images, sounds and music. We might be indifferent to what prompts any of the fifty-seven films that compose this retrospective; but we can't ignore the restlessness with which they dance around their own premise. The essay reveals style as a form of compulsion that matches and opens us up to our own. Hardwick, again speaking about the literary essay: "Essays are addressed to a public in which some degree of equity exists between the writer and the reader."⁴ Change the word "reader" for the word "viewer," and this economy remains the same.

THE ARIADNE'S THREAD CUT

Yet if the reader has time on his hands, the viewer has none. On the page the argument always begs to be interrupted, read again, savored, retraced and understood anew. The literary essay more clearly than the novel or even the poem hints at the fact that readings that do not set up a second, a third, an *n*th repeat do not qualify as true readings. Can one read any page of Montaigne without interrupting oneself often in mid-phrase and retracing one's steps? This stutter consecrates his writing as viaticum. We know from it that we will have to carry him in our backpack, and that we will never be finished with him. Replace the name Montaigne by the names Emerson, Hazlitt, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Rilke, whatever your fancy. The results will be the same: whoever pretends to read them in one sitting is either lying or confusing them with Alexandre Dumas. Films, as we know, live another life entirely. In the darkness of the theater in which they are meant to be seen, we cannot interrupt their flow, let alone retrace it. Their images are less appearances than disappearances, each inexorably leaking into another, their sounds passing to sounds. Fiction has always had an easy relationship with this flow. Its characters thrive in its temporality. Essay films, in contrast, are always in battle with their own. In an essay film, the status of an image, the status of a sound, be it a voice, a noise or a few chords of music, radically differs from the status

the same elements tend to occupy in a fiction film or in a documentary. It is not that more is at stake, but something definitely different. There is linearity to the chronologies of fiction (however scrambled the order of their presentation) and to the factual exposition of documentaries (however complex the realities described) that do not put in question the nature of the film image and its flow. But a film essay seems to be endlessly engaged in operations that try to stop or divert this flow and redirect it upon itself. The image in an essay film never passes through; it revisits itself, and it resists its own temporality and passing. This resistance can take the form of an untouched recurrence or a reframing by sound. The success of a great essay film may well be its thousand and one ways of resisting time, of delaying it. Scheherazade dwells in the palaces the film essayists build.

SCHEHERAZADE, ENGINEER

The essay films are thus condemned to playfulness. Their need to delay pushes them constantly outside of themselves. Film fictions and documentaries are dreams of concentration and coherence, whether achieved or not. The space in which they unfurl is always dense. They are sedentary and praised for it. Film essays are engaged in other sets of operation altogether. They are nomadic and often looked upon suspiciously because of it. For them, dissemination is the rule, and the building of ever-opened networks of associations always imposes itself as their ideal. Fictions and documentaries tend to nail it down, while film essays tend always to riff on it. Invention is not necessarily the rule of this game. The essay film does not labor toward the creation of a *sui generis* image as do fiction and documentary. It feels perfectly at ease quoting, plundering, hijacking, and reordering what is already there and established to serve its purpose. And it feels perfectly at ease doing that twice or three times over, so that the same elements switch into new configurations. It is the rhizomatic form par excellence, forever expanding and finding no better reason to stop than the exhaustion of its own animating energy. The essay is rumination in Nietzsche's sense of the word, the meandering of an intelligence that tries to multiply the entries and the exits into the material it has elected (or by which it has been elected). It is surplus, drifts, ruptures, ellipses and

double-backs. It is, in a word, thought, but because it is film it is thought that turns to emotion and back to thought. The strange thing is that as such it flirts with genres (documentary, pamphlet, fiction, diary . . . you name them) but never attaches itself to one. It flirts with a range of aesthetics but attaches itself to none. It is, in both form and content, unruliness itself, “termite art” and not “White Elephant art.” I am, of course, borrowing from Manny Farber, and borrowing wholesale. Listen to Farber, and forget he might just be speaking about Laurel and Hardy, as the words stick even tighter to the film essayists: “They seem to have no ambitions toward gilt culture but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn’t anywhere or for anything. . . . The most inclusive description of [their] art is that, termite-like, it feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating conditions of the next achievement.”⁵

TERMITE(S)

Let’s take a few steps *Du Côté de Farber*. It is common for all who analyze the essay form to insist that without an I there is no essay. It is, of course, in the domain of evidence. And yet it mucks up the field. The autobiographical, the diaristic, the confessional that come with the pronoun do not necessarily an essay make. And to take a step back and tag the essay film to a persona that would appear in filigree of the utterances of an I does not necessarily help either: the field fractures itself along the lines of a typology endlessly refined. Let me risk a hypothesis. What seems at work here in this invocation/celebration of the I is a pusillanimity that does not want to separate the film essay from its laurelled literary kin. The advantage of bringing the Farber quote into the debate is that it takes the I out of the equation and aggressively replaces it with the instinctual energy of a bug that prompts generally more a call to the nearest exterminator than the celebration of an aesthetic. And what if after all the essay film gained its stripes, its independence from this unsightly association? What if we had essay films less for the fact that a nominative singular pronoun spoke in them and less for the fact that a type of persona could emerge as a watermark of that discourse than for the fact that in certain films an

energy engaged and redefined incessantly the practice of framing, editing and mixing, disconnecting them from the regulatory assumptions of genres? The tentativeness of the film essay would be then only accessorially the tentativeness of a soul confronting itself with the world to become the tentativeness of a practice confronting itself with the system of rules and regulations that shape it, and questioning them. The film essay not as illustration of the endless shimmer of the soul and a delivering of everything “a prancing human voice is capable of” (Susan Sontag) but as experience of the capacity of the Id of cinema to show itself through the practice and the manipulations of filmmakers compelled to map however tentatively new territories.

THE ID

Maybe in the end we should reconcile ourselves to the fact that the film essay is not a territory and that it is, like fiction and documentary, one of the polarities between which films operate. An energy more than a genre. And it might well be cinema’s last irreducible. You find it, arguably, at the origins of cinema with *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), but a few years later [D. W.] Griffith laments the fact that cinema has turned away from filming “the rustle of the wind in the branches of the trees.” Twenty years and ten days that shook the world pass, and you see it triumphant in [Dziga] Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929); but a few trials later you feel the Stalinist boot heavier by the day on its neck in *Enthusiasm* (1931) and *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934). You think it is done and over with when the oppressiveness of commercial cinema rules, but it reappears under the guise of [Jean-Marie] Straub and [Danièle] Huillet’s *Too Early, Too Late* (1981), [Chris] Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983), or [Jean-Luc] Godard’s *Puissance de la parole* (1988). As soon as you wonder if it is after all just an über-Western mode, it becomes Asian with [Nagisa] Oshima’s *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (1977), [Kidlak] Tahimik’s *The Perfumed Nightmare* (1977), or [Apichatpong] Weerasethakul’s *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). And when you want to keep it there it bounces back to the Middle East or South America . . . This is, of course, a fairy tale hurriedly told. One fact remains though: however dire the circumstance, the essayistic

energy remains alive in the margins, an Id that haunts cinema. It is never more alive than when the times are more repressive and the dominant aesthetics occupy more squarely the middle of the road. In short, it might just be a perfect time to think about it.

ENVOI

And now it is time to conclude. Retrospectives are often paeans. This is anything but. It would be to betray the essayistic energy to have attempted it. Some of the films have been gathered evidently for reasons of taste, but not all of them. Some films are here for the argumentative bounce they might produce. They are lines of force that crisscross a field. They are here to provoke and to contradict assumptions. They are here to have their right to be present violently contested as much as celebrated. Risks were taken, and no apologies will be offered for the fallout; compromises were made, and they will be assumed. From the push and pull that is curating emerged something as extensive, unruly, contradictory as the essayistic energy it set out to explore. A proposal for a tussle.

September 11, 2007

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Hardwick, "Its Only Defense: Intelligence and Sparkle," *New York Times*, September 14, 1986.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Manny Farber, *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, exp. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998).

19

THE ESSAY AS CONFORMISM?

Some Notes on Global Image Economies

(2011)

HITO STEYERL

When I recently looked at a book I had written, I had a strange impression. Every essay in it behaved like an autonomous, self-sufficient and well-adapted subject, which could again be networked and coupled with almost anything else. Or to phrase it more decisively: all those essays collected in that book seemed like perfect neoliberal subjectivities. You could drop them in almost any context and they would start fending for themselves, making connections, communicating from scratch. They tried to contain the contradictory, blend the incongruous and sample it seamlessly. I started wondering: Has the essay as form been replaced by the essay as conformism? Or to put it more carefully: Has the essay become a dominant form of narrative in times of post-Fordist globalization?

This would imply that the essay as form has transformed its historical role, as described by Theodor W. Adorno in 1958.¹ In the age of the factory, the assembly line and their standards of identity, Adorno assumed that the essay as a marginalized and often dismissed form of narrative would challenge the coerced identity, which was—according to Adorno—the mandatory form of being in the industrial age.² But since these conditions have dramatically changed, at least within contemporary cultural industries, the essay as form no longer necessarily meddles with standardized and homogeneous identities. Instead, it runs parallel to the post-Fordist coercion of difference, mobility, extreme flexibilization, and distracted modes of attention, whose ideal subjectivity is hybrid and supple.³ Its

compilation mirrors contemporary global forms of production, which efficiently and effortlessly combine geographically fragmented objects and competing frazzles of labor. If Adorno's coerced identity corresponds to the age of the assembly line, contemporary essays also reflect the "copy and paste" ideologies of new global chains of production, which constantly integrate and juggle surprising new elements. While Adorno was clearly referring to written essays, his descriptions today might apply to more general modes of production—among many other things, they might also be applicable to contemporary visual production within globalized image circuits. A certain part of essayistic filmmaking might also express the new ambiguities of a global mode of production, which has turned essayistic itself.

The essay as form has adapted rather well to globalization. It offers specificity, but beyond local academic or artistic codes. It is more often than not transnational (rather lumpen cosmopolitan); it is unaffiliated, radically independent, but also mobile, and can be integrated into newer and newer chains of meaning and different contexts. It offers flexible techniques of montage; it is closely nestled against social habits of multitasking, which alternate the most diverse activities and materials, and it reflects fragmented time, which is relentlessly divided into ever-shorter attention spans. Forced mobility, widespread freelancing, and commission-oriented authorship turn essays into monads (more precisely: copy-and-paste monads), which reflect their own fragmented and dispersed conditions of production. This mode of production also at times benefits a certain superficiality: as Siegfried Kracauer pointed out, the surface offers least resistance because it is least consolidated.⁴ Phenomena of the surface can be coupled and uncoupled easily; they are linked to technologies of mass reproduction—a tendency also noted in a completely different context by Fredric Jameson when he described postmodernism as an era without depth, as "emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality."⁵

The multiple and heterogeneous forms of essays thus closely mimic the various formations of a contemporary brand of capitalism based on the compulsory manufacturing of difference, custom-tailored niche markets and flexible and modular forms of production. Essays, with their mix of different levels of address, their stupefying combination of contradictory materials and amazing ambivalence, their combination of the arcane and

profane, of the affective and the reflexive, are no longer the exotic “other” of a drab and repetitive social reality. They now look amazingly similar to the collaged daily schedule of any contemporary working mom, to a zapping spree with a voiceover, or maybe just to a Sunday afternoon remix contest on YouTube.

OPTICAL CONNECTIONS

But has the essay really lost any ability to play a critical role? No—its critical impact has just shifted to a different level. The question now is: Can the form of the essay also enable connections between people and objects, which go beyond the flexible and efficient conjunctions typical of post-Fordist capitalism? Is its discontinuous and heterogeneous form still capable of providing alternative forms of vision, knowledge and grounds for discussion? Obviously it is. The globe-girdling chains of production which characterize capitalist globalization can be reconstructed (or deconstructed) in order to enable alternative, non-commercial forms of communication—“visual bonds,” as [Dziga] Vertov once called them, articulating shared speech and vision.⁶ In this case, the production of essays creates different links of people, images and sounds. They represent different constellations of technology, spectators and various audiovisual materials, disruptive movements of thought and affect which possibly undermine the status of images and sounds as mere commodities.

On the one hand, the form of the essay is very close to capitalist techniques of globalization. But it also has the potential to create different “visual bonds.” Besides the capitalist media assembly lines, there are alternative audiovisual economies. They coexist with media mainstreams, and are usually dependent on them, but they could also be based on barter, theft or appropriation. They defy the measures of the market, and its way of counting and extracting value. Retracing the trajectories of concrete images and sounds might give us a more precise view of those different linkages within digital globalization.

Here are a few examples of particular images, which were integrated into some of my films. How were they intercepted, and where did they come from? In one early film of mine, called *The Empty Centre* (1998),

just one other film was cited (Hanns Schwarz, *Der Einbrecher* [1930]). I was able to access it because the library at my film school had been videotaping TV broadcasts for the last 15 years, and I politely asked the owners for the right to reproduce a tiny section of this video for noncommercial purposes. The request was granted and this was more or less the only legal process through which I ever acquired any piece of material. This process represents the hegemonic way of handling copyrights and circulating images. People pay for media content, consumption and production, and property is reproduced and affirmed. But not only image content is being reproduced; above all, so too is the principle of ownership as such, the notion of genealogy, origin, individual authorship and belonging, and consequently also notions of national culture and cultural memory. All of these ideas are reinforced by the standard procedure for exchanging and circulating images.

With the next film, the subject matter got a bit more complicated. In the video *November* (2004) I used many rare images. Some of these were literally passed on from hand to hand such as a VHS tape of a recording by a Kurdish satellite TV station, but also a battered NTSC tape of the situationist film *La dialectique peut-elle casser les briques* (1973) by René Viénet. The trajectory of this material is quite complex: Viénet had appropriated an entire Hong Kong martial arts flick originally named *The Crush* (directed by Doo Kwang Gee and Lam Nin Tung [1972]). He added Maoist subtitles to it and thus transformed the story of a single Chinese kung fu fighter saving a school full of Koreans under Japanese colonial oppression into a situationist narrative about the fight of proletarians against bureaucrats. While the original color version in 35 mm featured the original Chinese soundtrack with new French subtitles, a later version was dubbed in French, subtitled in English, letterboxed, and transferred to B/W video.⁷ A VHS tape of this version was given to me by a Viennese friend and archivist, who apparently got it from an American colleague via a Hamburg-based film historian. The tape was so worn down that it was impossible to transfer it into any other format. So I ended up filming the quote I needed from the TV screen, and if one looks closely at this image, one sees a faint mirror image of myself and the camera in the image—a trace of a quite difficult transfer, a material imprint of the film's complicated journey. The quote from *Can Dialectics Break Bricks* condenses a richly layered history of translation, alteration,

appropriation and recontextualization within the most diverse media economies. It is almost impossible to assign any geographical provenience to this material, let alone authorship. Who is the author of this work? The Chinese directors of the visual track, the French director of the audio track or the anonymous person who transferred the film to black and white video? To whom does the work belong? Or to ask this question in relation to my own film *November*: Who is the author of my work? Where did appropriation of this film start, and where does it end? The image in question (which actually shows a wandering fighter) became in itself a wandering rebel defying and challenging traditional notions of authorship as well as ownership, genealogy and origin.

Any notion of national culture of cultural memory will invariably pale to irrelevance when confronted with this multilayered film, which translates an Asian colonial conflict into a class conflict resonating in an entirely different context.⁸ And although *Can Dialectics Break Bricks* is originally not an essay film, the ways in which its pictures travel clearly map out alternative visual bonds between people all over the world.

While working on *November* in 2004, I thus tapped into various types of self-organized audiovisual circuits, which during this period (prior to platforms like YouTube or Ubu) almost manually sustained the circulation of critical imagery by passing on bootlegged VHS tapes; on the other hand, there was also a rising tide of trash videos which were sold and distributed online at rapidly declining cost. The reason for this sudden availability of material was the introduction of DVDs. Video rental stores around the world decided to get rid of their VHS stocks, which brought down prices and created a secondary video market, which could be used for archive purposes. At least two types of audiovisual economies were thus involved in creating *November*: one was based on a self-organized notion of the common; the other was a new type of low-fi capitalist image distribution which, for the first time, enabled the large-scale privatization of home videos and created some kind of digital no-man's-land where films kept being ripped and reedited. But while the example from *November* shows how globalization and digitalization deterritorialized audiovisual material and made it more accessible for audiences and independent producers, another example also proves that these new forms of distribution and reproduction made some existing materials more vulnerable to profit-based and even nationalist exploitation.

RETERRITORIALIZING AUDIOVISUAL FLOWS

Working on the video *Journal No. 1* (2007) made this last aspect dramatically clear: most of the feature films quoted in this essay film about an old film reel lost in the Bosnian war had a complicated and transnational afterlife as home videos. Many of these movies had been produced at the Sutjeska film studios on the edge of Sarajevo, which were destroyed around 1993 because they happened to be located right on the front line. While the local archives, where prints had been stored, were largely ruined, some of the films produced there started interesting careers when downsized from 35 mm to digital formats. One example is the film *Bitka na Neretvi* (Veljko Bulajić [1969]), a blockbuster partisan war epic, which was marketed in home video and DVD form in more than ten different national versions with two different soundtracks and countless dubs.⁹ Almost every version has a different length and edit, in accordance with respective national politics and tastes. While the longest version (the original Yugoslav one) is 175 minutes long, the shortest one (from Russia) is only 78 minutes long. In between were several American versions as well as German, Spanish, Italian and other versions, all of which were different and which seem to have evolved out of an initial East European and West European version.¹⁰ The climax of variation is reached in a DVD release, which features four different post-Yugoslav versions of *Bitka na Neretvi*: Slovenian, Bosnian, Croat and Serb. The edit this time is identical, so one would expect at least four different sets of subtitles in order to legitimate different national versions. But three of the four versions do not subtitle the local language at all, thus implicitly acknowledging that differences between Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian are too marginal to necessitate subtitles. One wonders why different versions are being made if they turn out to be almost identical? One possible answer lies in the creation of new national markets. Actually the only crucial difference between the Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian versions is the fact that only the Serbian version is licensed and the other two are pirated (all on the same DVD). The creation of markets for intellectual property produces new boundaries between sounds and images, or new national brandings of audiovisual material. The transformation and constant reinvention of *Bitka na Neretvi* in newer and newer national (video and DVD) formats prove

that techniques of the essay, such as the recombination and sampling of sounds and images, can be reterritorialized and whole films pulled apart and remixed according to capitalist and national interests.

But the remixes of another of the Yugoslav movies quoted in *Journal No. 1* also prove the contrary. It had an astonishing career when it was sold to China in the 1980s. The partisan film *Valter brani Sarajevo* (Hajrudin Krvavac [1972]) became the most successful foreign film in China and its main actor, Bata Živojinović, became tremendously popular. While this displacement in itself did not challenge the status of the film as an audiovisual commodity, which could be invested with new national forms of identification, now—following the development of web-based platforms—reproduction and distribution of this movie take on completely different forms. Ripped DivX versions of *Valter brani Sarajevo* are circulating on informal web clients like Pirate Bay, where a user offers a homemade combination of the image of a Chinese DVD with the original Serbo-Croatian soundtrack for free download. Sampling, reediting and compilation—classical techniques of the essay—are thus used for commercial and nationalist purposes and overall flexibilization; they can also be readapted for retranslation and individual reappropriation of audiovisual material, thus contesting its control by nation and capital.

This increase in alternative audiovisual economies also had a dramatic impact on one of my newer films, *Lovely Andrea* (2007), whose archival material was all downloaded through p2p file-sharing networks. P2p networks, which essentially connect individual computers to each other in order to facilitate file sharing, represent a rather recent and unofficial image circuit, which nevertheless circulates huge amounts of audiovisual material free of charge and offers access to much rare material such as essay films. In this way, the former private networks based on friendship and mutual interests are being replaced by anonymous ones, which connect unprecedented numbers of people. According to Wikipedia, more than 12 million people are connected to a p2p network at any moment, and when the servers of the most popular torrent tracker, Pirate Bay, were temporarily closed in 2006, total web traffic in Sweden dropped by 20%. But although those platforms are based on visions of common and sharing, the influence of capital and national interests on them is still considerable, as can be seen in the amount of commercial operations and lawsuits against hosts like YouTube. Those networks represent both

platforms for a fragile new common interest and battlegrounds for commercial and national interests, and they contain experimental and artistic material, but also incredible amounts of porn, conspiracy theory and hate tirades. Many of them are almost free of any regulation, which in turn also enables fascist propaganda. They are ambivalent phenomena, but in any case they represent formidable new possibilities for essayistic production. On these platforms, visions of the common are entangled with their capitalist (and sometimes nationalist) lookalikes just as the form of the new essay film is hopelessly intertwined with post-Fordist technologies of flexibility. The two look similar; they are dependent on each other but still function differently.

A CONFLICT IN MOTION

One could summarize the difference between these types of circulation by coming back to Dziga Vertov's famous claim for a "visual bond," which would link the workers of the world with each other.¹¹ He imagined a sort of communist visual Adamic language, which should not only inform or entertain, but also organize its viewers. In a sense, his dream has become true, if mostly under the rule of global information capitalism, which creates global audiences whose participants are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement, affective attunement and anxiety. Those audiovisual economies articulate satellite feeds, lawyers, TV studios, individual emotions and huge archival machines in ever-shifting constellations.

But there are also independent forms of production with home computers and unconventional forms of distribution, which can also be understood as interactive modes of communication; as horizontal forms of social composition. These optical connections—or indeed visual bonds—reveal the outline of a possible transnational global common: an informal and unofficial public sphere, which is tearing away from the confines of the nation-state and commercial media. This form of image production is largely based on digital technology and tends to merge with other fields of symbolic manipulation like the production of knowledge and information. Home computers, amateur cameras and

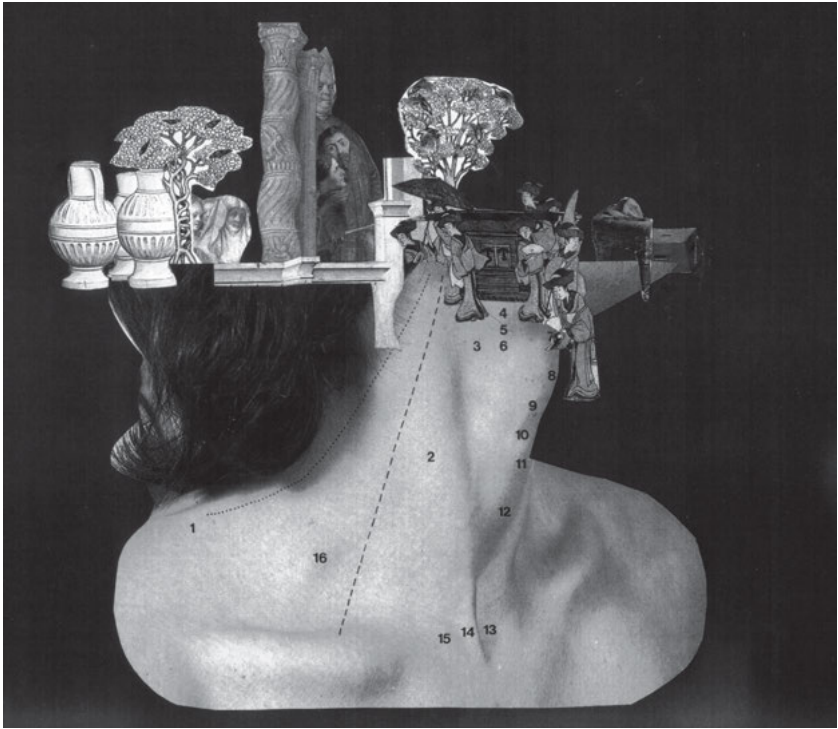
databases are linked by visual bonds based on discontinuity just as in Adorno's essay. They combine individual producers, spectators, cracked software, pockets of public spheres and arenas of discussion in surprising and shifting constellations.

These optical connections also provide a space where many of the older essay works are circulating now after being excluded from TV and mass distribution. There are at least 20 different torrents of Chris Marker's work available on Pirate Bay, which is more than the average retrospective in a film museum. After leaving the protected and often protectionist arena of national culture, these essay films have become travelers in a digital no-man's-land; a fluid and indeterminate space, linked by discontinuity, which hovers between alternative public spheres and the art field, between universities and YouTube, between self-organized productions, glamorous film festivals and the informal distribution of videotapes from hand to hand. Its internal composition might look similar to that of transnational corporate media, but it acts in a very different way. Back in 1958, Adorno claimed that the essay takes as its substance a conflict immobilized.¹² But while the visual bonds of the mainstream immobilize this conflict in order to arrest and avoid it all together, critical essayistic articulations temporarily freeze the social tensions of the moment in dialectical images. They not only expose the tensions of this conflict, but also engage in its contradictions.

NOTES

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2000), 91–112 [see chapter 4, this volume].
2. The essay "does justice to the consciousness of non-identity, without needing to say so, radically un-radical in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in accentuating the partial rather than the total" (ibid., 98). And: "Freedom from the pressure of identity occasionally provides the essay (and this is lacking in official thought) with an aspect of ineffaceability, of inextinguishable color" (105).
3. See, for example, Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labour," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133–147.
4. Siegfried Kracauer, "Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit," in *Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 8:371.
5. Fredric Jameson, "Culture," in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1996), 9.

6. Dziga Vertov, "Kinopravda and Radiopravda," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 52.
7. According to an e-mail conversation with Keith Sanborn. An online source that I could not verify claims the shift to black and white was due to a faulty SECAM to NTSC transfer (http://www.impossiblefunky.com/archives/issue_13/13_cinematexas.asp?IshNum=13&Headline=Cinematexas%202000). A rather obscure controversy concerning the distribution of VHS copies of this film is documented at www.notbored.org/sanborn2.html, and other discussions of possible appropriations of this film can be found at <http://libcom.org/forums/libcommunity/guy-debord-films-any-copyright>.
8. Abe Mark Nornes, "For an Abusive Subtitling," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2004), 447–469.
9. Produced by, among others, Bosna and Jadran Film, it was the only film not produced by Sutjeska.
10. According to debates on the user forum at www.imdb.com.
11. Vertov, "Kinopravda and Radiopravda," 52.
12. "Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its concern is always a conflict brought to a stand-still" (Adorno, "Essay as Form," 104).



Original collage from Lynne Sachs, *The House of Science: A Museum of False Facts* (16mm film, 1991). (Courtesy of the artist)

20

ON WRITING THE FILM ESSAY

(2016)

LYNNE SACHS

I feel a closeness to writers, poets, and painters, much more than to traditional film directors. For one thing, we ciné experimenters are not bound by the plot-driven mechanics of cause and effect, which, for me, often bring the transcendent experience of watching a movie to a grinding halt. The kinds of films I make give the space for mysterious—at least initially—sequences that don't simply illustrate why one event or scene leads to another. More like an artist than a traditional documentary maker, I am interested in a kind of meaning that is open to interpretation. Once a film is complete, I often learn things about it from my audience—how the convergence of two images actually expresses an idea or how a nondiegetic sound expands the meaning of a spoken phrase. I hope it's doing one thing, but I might discover that it's doing something completely different. In this way, the films are kind of porous and flexible; they are open to interpretation. My essay films, in particular, are full of association. Some are resolved, and some are adolescent; they're still trying to figure out who they are. Through the making of the film, I learn about myself in the context of learning about the world. My job is not to educate but to spark a curiosity in my viewer that moves from the inside out. The texts for these films come to me in both public and private spaces: on a long train ride, during a layover in a strange city, at a café, in a hotel room, on the toilet.

Throughout the 1990s, I gravitated toward the simultaneously visceral and cerebral French feminist theory of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. As a moving-image artist searching for a new discourse that spoke to radical issues with an equally radical form, I embraced this kind of writing, as it led me toward the non-narrative, unconventional grammar of experimental film as well as the self-reflexivity of the essay. My first essay film was *The House of Science: A Museum of False Facts* (1991), a personal rumination on the relationship between a woman's body and the often-opposing institutions of art and science. While I was shooting this film, I was also keeping a diary:

My memory of being a girl includes a “me” that is two. I am two bodies—the body of the body and the body of the mind. The body of the body was flaccid and forgotten. This was the body that was wet with dirty liquids, holes that wouldn't close, full of smells and curdled milk. Of course there was the skeleton. This was assumed and only reconsidered upon my very rare attempts at jumping farther than far enough, clearing the ditch, lifting the heave-ho. But the body of the body was not the bones. This body wrapped and encircled the bones, a protective cover of flesh, just on the other side of the wall I call skin.

I will never forget a cross-country plane ride I took near the end of editing this film. Throughout the time I was in the air, as I flew over the Mississippi, the Great Plains, and the Rockies, I was searching frantically for the hidden skeletal structure of the film. I'd committed to a premiere at the Los Angeles Film Forum, and I had only a couple of months until my screening date. (Stupid me. I'll never do that again!) Midway into the flight, I realized that it was all laid out before me in the form of the poetry journal I carried in my backpack. The writing had been with me all along; I simply hadn't realized that this text was more than a dispensable traveling partner in the “journey” that was the production of the movie. Over the next few weeks, my poems began to guide my editing of the images and sounds. Ever since that early period in my filmmaking career, I've kept a handwritten journal during the making of my films. In addition to contributing an oftentimes essential narrative element, this kind of writing can be the critical link to the “naïve” yet curious person I may no longer really “know,” the person

I was when I embarked on the intellectual and artistic adventure that is the creation of a film.

In my essay film *Which Way Is East: Notebooks from Vietnam* (1994), I built a voice-over narration out of two surprisingly oppositional perspectives on postwar Vietnam. My sister Dana Sachs, one of the first American journalists to live for an extended period of time in Vietnam, offered expansive, highly informed insights on Vietnamese daily life. In contrast, my writing traced my own transformation from earnest, war-obsessed American tourist to more keenly observant traveler:

Driving through the Mekong Delta, a name that carries so much weight. My mind is full of war, and my eyes are on a scavenger hunt for leftovers. Dana told me that those ponds full of bright green rice seedlings are actually craters, the inverted ghosts of bombed out fields. At Cu Chi, we pay three U.S. dollars so that a tour guide will lead us through a section of this well-known 200-kilometer tunnel complex. This is the engineering masterpiece of the Viet Cong, a matrix of underground kitchens and living rooms and army headquarters. As I slide through the narrow, dusty passageway, my head fills up with those old war movies Dad took us to in the '70s. My body is way too big for these tunnels. I can hardly breathe. After five minutes, I come out gasping. We decide not to spend the extra ten dollars it costs to shoot a rifle.

Only by reconnecting to the developing stages of my awareness through my journal could I provide an opening to my American audience. The narrative trajectory of this half-hour film follows our evolving understanding of the landscape and the people of Vietnam. Honestly, my sister Dana and I fought throughout the writing of the film's voice-over. If she hadn't been my sister, I probably would have fired her as a collaborator! The fundamental tension between the two of us grew out of several distinct differences between our points of view. While she had very much completed her own reckoning with the destruction caused by the war between Vietnam and the United States, I, like most tourists, was still dealing with the echoes and the guilt that came with that psychic burden. While she wanted to follow the order of events to the letter, I felt free to articulate our experiences by distilling our stories into anecdotes that could function like parables. By recognizing the inherent tension between

my position as a non-narrative experimental filmmaker and my sister's commitment to a more transparent commentary, we were able to find a rhetorical strategy that mirrors the most fundamental conflicts around discourse and truth facing an essayist in any format. In several quintessentially self-reflexive moments, my sister expresses exasperation with almost every aspect of my production process: "Lynne can stand for an hour finding the perfect frame for her shot. It's as if she can understand Vietnam better when she looks at it through the lens of her camera. I hate the camera. The world feels too wide for the lens, and if I try to frame it, I only cut it up."

In 1997, I completed *Biography of Lilith*, a film exploring the ruptures that both women and men must confront when transitioning from being autonomous individuals to being parents with responsibilities. I began making this film when I discovered that I was pregnant with my first daughter, and three years later I was able to punctuate the final sound mix with the cries of my second. Inspired by the theoretical texts of Julia Kristeva and Antonin Artaud, in particular, this film celebrates my most intimate and abject concerns about the changes in my body and my place in the world as a woman. My film on Lilith, Adam's first mate, is also a portrait of a female archetype who boldly desired to be on top during sex. The film pairs a nonauthoritative exposition of Lilith in a multiplicity of cultures—both ancient and contemporary—with my own pre- and postpartum writing. In this way, I juxtaposed two years of historical and cultural research and interviews with intimate ruminations on my own sexuality and motherhood:

I'm learning to read all over again. A face, this time, connected to a body. At first, I feel your story from within. Nose rubs against belly, elbow prods groin. Your silent cough becomes a confusing dip and bulge. You speak and I struggle to translate. I lie on my side, talk to myself, rub my fingers across my skin, from left to right. I read out loud, and I hope you can hear me. I'm learning to read all over again, but this time I have a teacher.

In *States of UnBelonging* (2005), my fourth film in a five-film body of work I call "I Am Not a War Photographer," I turned to Terence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and to the "Hell" section of Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre musique* (2004) for lessons from filmmakers who were capable of

articulating the horror of war. I constructed this film around an epistolary friendship I had with an Israeli student who moved back to Tel Aviv during an extremely volatile period in Israel-Palestine. A meditation on war as well as land, the Bible, and filmmaking, this essay film is built from e-mails that we exchanged for more than three years. With enormous hesitation and intimidation, we reveal our anguish and bewilderment in the film's soundtrack as well as on the screen as text. *States of UnBelonging* became a vessel in which I was able to face my own dilemmas as a Jew. To be Jewish in the twenty-first century, one must face the miasma swirling around the state of Israel. With an awareness of my own position in this charged political landscape, I start the film with a kind of meta-historical lamentation on the way that human beings organize time:

Do you ever have the feeling that the history you are experiencing has no shape?

Even as a teenager I was obsessed with history's shifts and ruptures. Wars helped us order time. A war established beginnings and endings. There is "before." There is "during." There is "after."

I am currently working on *Tip of My Tongue*, a film on memory that began with fifty autobiographical poems that I wrote about each year from my birth in 1961 to my fiftieth birthday. Unlike my previous films, in which the research and shooting themselves prompted the text, this project grew directly from my poetry. Without the slightest concern for how the poems would eventually shimmy their way into one of my movies, I gave myself the unencumbered freedom to write about my own life. In each poem, I looked at the relationship between a large public event and my own insignificant, yet somehow personally memorable, connection to that situation. I am working with a cast of eleven people from almost every continent, each of whom was born around the year 1961. Together, we are creating an inverted history of our collective half-century through a series of spoken story distillations that place the grand in the shadow of the intimate. From glimpsing a drunken Winston Churchill on the streets of London to watching the moon landing on television from a playground in Melbourne to washing dishes during the Iranian Revolution to feeling destitute during the recession, we are working collaboratively to construct our own recipe for a performative sound-image essay film.

21

TRAMP STEAMER

(2016)

ROSS McELWEE

I've been asked to write a short essay about why I make essay films. I admit to having been stymied by this request, and having tried various approaches, ruminating on how Facebook, YouTube, selfies, and reality television have altered forever the terrain we autobiographical essay filmmakers once trod in relative solitude. But somehow, I did not feel that I had anything new to add to this discussion.

Instead, I decided that an entry from a production journal I kept while making Bright Leaves, an essay film I finished in 2003, might somehow communicate the frustrations and pleasures available to a maker of essay films.

Almost all of Bright Leaves is filmed in what I would call a self-reflexive cinema vérité style. Oxymoronic, I know. But what I mean is that although various scenes in the film often include the filmmaker's off-camera voice and even sometimes the image of the filmmaker himself—both violations of the cinema vérité aesthetic—the footage that was shot in this manner was still unscripted and undirected, with nothing ever staged or redone for the camera—and in that way, true to cinema vérité.

However, what I had long envisioned as the last shot of Bright Leaves had a somewhat Hollywood quality to it.

I imagined a shot of a freighter departing Wilmington, North Carolina, to sail across the Atlantic with a cargo of tobacco. The idea was that freighters—usually large container ships—frequently carry loads of American tobacco to European and Asian cigarette companies. Since I was dealing with

cargo ships, I could not hope to “direct” them, but I could be prepared to film their departure by staying in touch with my contacts in the Port Authority in Wilmington. To do so would require a degree of preproduction planning—a commonplace procedure in shooting documentaries, but one to which I was very unaccustomed. What follows are entries from five days of filming.

Bright Leaves production journal

November 16–20, 2002

Wilmington, N.C.

Friday, November 16

Planning to get what may be the last shot for *Bright Leaves*. This will be my second attempt to shoot footage of a freighter leaving Wilmington. The first attempt, last June, was completely unsuccessful. One freighter was delayed and ended up sailing at night. The following day, the other freighter’s attempt to unload its freight was rained out. I had to return to Boston without my shot. This time, I arrive on a Friday. Perfect weather has been forecast. I have only one goal for the entire weekend: to get a usable 60-second shot. I’ve consulted the Wilmington Port Authority website to select a weekend during which maximum number of freighters are scheduled to depart—three. I rent a car and drive to Southport, plot out best place to position camera in preparation for shooting on Saturday. But to my dismay, as night approaches, clouds roll in and it begins to rain. Heavily. In my motel, I become addicted to Weather Channel. It shows entire southeast coast blanketed with rain. But there are indications that there may be break in the rain at some point during day on Saturday. The main freighter I’ve decided I want to film, the *Star Invatana*, has to delay its sailing time because it cannot load paper pulp in the rain. (Stands to reason.) My contacts at Wilmington Shipping Co. tell me that a smaller freighter, the 200-ft. *Hatta Metha*, is sailing *into* the port of Wilmington at 10:00 A.M. Even though it will be heading in the wrong direction—upriver instead of out to sea—I decide to try to get footage of the *Hatta* as insurance. I drive to a public park overlooking the river that leads to the port and select a shooting angle at the bend of the river that makes it seem as if it could just as easily be sailing out to sea. As it comes

upriver, miraculously, the rain pauses. As the ship reaches the appointed river bend, I press the On button of my camera, but at precisely that same moment, I hear a loud sound—the splat of immense rain drops suddenly hitting the plastic sheeting I had wrapped around the camera. In a matter of seconds, my lens is soaked. It's a full fledged squall. The wind is threatening to topple the camera and tripod, sheathed as they are in the plastic sheet, which now only worsens things by performing like a spinnaker. I can see nothing through the view finder. I scramble to get the camera out of the rain. I head back to my motel.

Saturday, November 17

More calls to my harbor master contacts. Hoping to film the *Hatta Metha* as it departs on Sunday. It's about one-sixth the size of a container ship, but better than nothing. Also, it has a strange looped mast and rigging that make it look more like a large shrimp boat. It's basically a tramp steamer, but I am starting to get desperate.

Sunday, November 18

In the morning, I return to the park with a river view and I locate a shelter from which I can shoot even if it is raining. I wait for an hour, but no sign of the ship. When I call the harbor master, I learn that for some reason, the *Hatta's* departure is cancelled, but he does not know why. He tells me to contact the Cape Fear Pilots Office. I finally reach someone there who informs me that the *Hatta* is being held by the Coast Guard because one of its lifeboats is powered by an outboard motor which, during a standard inspection, was discovered to be non-functioning. "What's the *Metha* carrying anyway?" I ask the man at the Pilots Office. "Some sort of munitions . . ." So it's a gun runner. I decide to extend my stay one day in hopes of getting something on Monday.

Monday, November 19

Rain has finally stopped. Weather is perfect. I get up at 5:45 to prep for filming both the *Star* and the *Hatta*. But again the *Star* postpones its departure until evening. And the *Hatta* will not be sailing until sunset.

At 5:00 P.M. the little *Hatta* comes sailing down the river, and I begin shooting. But as I pan to follow it, my tripod plate comes loose. I quickly figure out the problem and correct it, remount the camera, and press the On button. But suddenly a large cabin cruiser cuts in front of the freighter, totaling eclipsing the distant *Hatta*. Shot ruined.

That night, my contacts tell me the *Star Invatana* will finally head out to sea. Thinking of Fellini's magical illuminated nocturnal passenger liner in *Amarcord*, I rush back down to the port, set up my camera and tripod, and wait patiently. The *Star Invatana* finally comes down the river. It looms over the river bend, bigger than God. It is immense—and in daylight, would indeed have been perfect for the shot. But at night, it seems only to have the bare minimum number of running lights on, and at best, would only be a grainy unreadable silhouette in the moonlight. The shape of the ship would not have registered. I do not waste my valuable film stock. I return to my crummy motel room.

Again, I have postponed my flight back to Boston in hopes of getting a final ship, the *Pegasus*, from Denmark. It's scheduled to depart tomorrow. After it sails, there are no more ships scheduled for the next several days. The river pilot informs me: "That *Pegasus*, it's just a little bitty thing. Not much bigger than a large yacht." Ever concerned about documentary verisimilitude, I ask, "But does it at least cross the ocean?" "Well, I certainly wouldn't cross the ocean in it, but those Danes are crazy fuckers." Great. I'll try again tomorrow. It will be my last chance.

That night, I turn on TV. *Cast Away* is playing, and I just happen to tune in to the very scene where Tom Hanks's character is lying nearly dead on his raft when a huge tanker comes by—a ship that will ultimately rescue him after he's been stranded on an island for four years. Though it's only been five days for me, I feel similarly. I need a large ship to rescue me.

Tuesday. No large ship, but right on schedule, the small *Pegasus* comes downriver at dusk, just as the moon is rising behind it. The river belongs to us—the *Pegasus* and me. But wait—what is that annoying sound? A speedboat with some drunken yahoos aboard, fast approaching. I start shooting as the *Pegasus* makes its way out to sea. Please don't ruin my shot. Stay back. Please! And I am able to get the shot of the freighter I've been waiting for—just before the prow of speedboat punctures the frame screen-left. I cut the shot. Pack up my gear. Head back to Boston.

In May, *Bright Leaves* is invited to make its premier at the Cannes Film Festival Directors' Fortnight. I *am* thrilled to be there, and as I watch the end of the film I note that the shot of the tramp steamer gliding down the river and out to sea *works well enough*.

Five days to get a usable 45-second shot. Though I'd be hard-pressed to tease it out, somewhere in this long-winded account of an almost futile and misbegotten film shoot lies the reason I continue to make autobiographical essay films. I will offer this much: I would not reject the notion of a tramp steamer serving as an appropriate emblem for the way in which I tackle the challenge of making autobiographical essay films.

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THE ABCs OF THE FILM ESSAY (2015)

HARUN FAROCKI AND CHRISTA BLÜMLINGER

A FOR ADORNO

CB: When we put together a conference and film program on the essay film in the early 1990s at the Vienna Stadtkino [City Cinema], you not only contributed with film suggestions but also gave advice on texts. Instead of mentioning Bazin (whom we expected to hear about), you brought up Adorno. His “Notes to Literature” seemed to be a central starting point for you, even though in your time as a film critic you were not an Adorno fan at all. Today, Adorno is mentioned everywhere in this context, and one seldom thinks of Max Bense, whose theories on Adorno’s text “Essay as Form,” in which he argues that the essay form is self-reflexive, were fundamental as the “imminent criticism of spiritual entities.”¹ Even Bense determines in “About the Essay and Its Prose” that all great essayists are critics and connects the concept of the essay to the experiment.²

HF: What I liked about Adorno’s text is that it offers almost hymnic praises for the essay as form. Adorno was a formative figure for me, and when I was twenty, I tried, as best as I could, to imitate his style. First and foremost, I adopted his aporias. Adorno was an important teacher, even a father figure, for everyone who experienced West Germany in 1968. He was someone we had to contradict, had to act against, and from whom we had to dissociate ourselves, because he didn’t believe that

a revolution was possible. Adorno did not take any stock in film, but his method of ideological critique was well known and applied to film criticism. Too often this critique simply confirmed what was already known. What I liked best in Adorno's text concerning the essay was the sentence that an essay does not begin with Adam and Eve but with that which interests the author.³

B FOR BAZIN

CB: In the 1950s, as is well known, André Bazin, in connection with Chris Marker's essay films, brings the concept of "lateral montage" [*montage latéral*] or "montage from ear to eye" into play. Were Bazin's theories and Marker's films important for your early work in film?

HF: I didn't read Bazin until the 1970s. I especially liked how he emphasized the *mise-en-scène*. And how he defended *Europa '51* [*Europe '51*] by Rossellini: a racy film in spite of its colportage story. Until then I had only encountered criticism that assessed the story and not the parts that turn film into a film.

Before that, in 1962 in West Berlin, I had seen *Description d'un combat* [*Descriptions of a Struggle*] by Chris Marker. I had never heard the name Marker before and expected a film adaptation of a Kafka story by the same name. Marker's film about the State of Israel surprised and impressed me deeply.

I had never seen a documentary film that took so many liberties. That's how Marker became a role model, although for a long time I did not dare take such liberties myself for political reasons. And even though I disliked Marker's gentleness—after all, he did not exactly have a combative spirit.

C FOR CHAIN/CABLE

CB: In the 1970s, when a number of filmmakers got involved in the project of television as utopia, you were also concurrently working on films

and television programs. When Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville completed *Ici et ailleurs* [*Here and Elsewhere*] in 1974, at issue was not only the question of how to weigh the relationship between politics, film, and television, but also to consider fundamental questions of the relationship between word and image. At one point in the film, Godard uses a play on words that uses the biological metaphor of the double helix, with which he describes the complexity of film montage: the association goes from the assembly line [*la chaîne de production*] to the television channel [*la chaîne de télévision*] to the hotel chain up to the linking [*enchaînement*] of filmic images and sound. It seems to me that your films include these kinds of association chains as well, as a motor for descriptive concepts, albeit inserted in a more subtle and dispersive manner and therefore, most likely, anchored more solidly. In particular, I am thinking of *Wie man sieht* [*As You See*] and the figure of weaving.

HF: In the 1970s it was a necessity to agitate one's own institution. My institution was public television, and I belonged to a small, a very small group, which was not demanding new subject matter but criticized the relationship between image and sound instead. In the television program entitled *Der Ärger mit den Bildern* [*The Trouble with Images*], I tried to represent that in documentary contributions shown on television image and sound are not at all put in a productive relationship. (Sound is the master, image the servant. At best, this relationship can be reversed.) With this television program I was not able to get the TV workers to remove their directors. But I started to learn something: How can I make a film structure that is not governed by a narrative? That's how I arrived at arrangements that go back to [Dziga] Vertov and [Walter] Ruttmann, to their cross-sectional montage films [*Querschnittfilme*]. Both directors took a (fictional) day and asked: How do people wake up, how do they go to work, and so on. In *Leben-BRD* [*How to Live in the Federal Republic of Germany*], I arranged scenes from role playing, starting at birth and up to death. I came across direct cinema, documentary films that take up incidents that can be played back like a fictional film [*Storyfilm*]. In order to undermine the power of the commentary, I searched for rhythmic and compositional order in the images.

D FOR DISTANCE

CB: You always openly declared your interest for Artavazad Peleschian, for his films as well as his theories of distance montage. In short, Peleschian's montage does not want to patch together heterogeneous material but rather unstitch shots. As he writes, his films get rhythm from leading shots and function on the principle of rhyme and reprise that occur on a larger scale. However, in Peleschian's films there is scarcely a word heard or seen. Would you say this design is formative for your films and installations as well?

HF: Peleschian edits in an extraordinary manner. There is a jump with almost every cut, but at the same time mysterious powers are activated in the two connected shots, so that a firm connection develops. I got acquainted with his work late, not until the late 1980s. I read his text about distance montage frequently. I inferred from this label that one should not only edit two connecting shots. Even images that are far apart comment on one another. That means again: to find a kind of composition for images. Again, to strengthen the level of the image.

E FOR ESSAY

CB: It seems that in your work the relationship between word and image is reconfigured anew again and again, like in a game of billiards. In films such as *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* [*Images of the World and Inscriptions of War*] or *Wie man sieht* a commentary accompanies the montage of images, but the installations implement written texts in the form of intertitles. Is the purpose to increase the density [*Verdichtung*] or to unstitch the seam between the images, or is there another purpose altogether?

HF: Whenever I made a film with a lot of text, I often felt a strong need to keep my mouth shut in the next one. And the opposite was also true: after a film without commentary, I felt like a coward to stay out of it by remaining silent. Nowadays, when a soccer player commits a

foul, he raises both arms to indicate his innocence. And I often feel as if I am a player like that: I didn't say anything—I only document after all!

F FOR FAKE

CB: Would the essay film be a form that can transcend the boundary between fiction and reality or rather contest such a boundary? Your film *Leben-BRD* seems to point in that direction: it is not “real” life that is interesting but rather societal rehearsal into life.

HF: In one episode of *Ernste Spiele* [*Serious Games*], titled “Immersion,” a man reports how he went on patrol in Bagdad. He split up from his companions for a short while when he hears a detonation. He saw that one of his mates got torn to pieces by a bomb. He describes his horror and the panic that overcomes him. At almost every screening, the audience believes that the man is reporting an incident that has happened to him personally. In reality, it is a role-play performed on a U.S. military base. A group of civilian psychologists are organizing a workshop in which army psychologists should learn to work with “Virtual Iraq,” a digital location simulation for the treatment of traumatized soldiers. A psychologist plays the trauma victim, and he plays the role so well because he wants to prove that “Virtual Iraq” works—he wants to sell the system. Nonetheless one cannot say that the scene is not true.

G FOR GRAFE

CB: Frieda Grafe speaks of the essay film as the “auteur film of the documentary genre.”⁴ In what way can this definition be applied to your films and installations?

HF: I like Frieda Grafe's definition of the essay film as the auteur film of the documentary genre a lot! She wrote peculiar texts without announcing their peculiarity with a genre designation. She feared that

when a film called itself an essay, it would be too aware of its peculiar language. I got that! My film *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* consists of elements in images and text that can be arranged in different sequences, are combined and recombined. In accordance with a permutational rule that can also be violated from time to time. During production and even afterward, I asked myself whether the film is not striving for too much novelty. I came to the conclusion that my method was justified. It was the only way for me to create a rather associative connection for vastly different subjects: photogrammetry, taking measurements of people through art and by the police, the Auschwitz camps in the reconnaissance photographs of the Allies. You call that politics of the gaze today.

I still believe today that my method in this case is a productive one, but I still never made a film like that again, one that includes so much text and such an elaborate construction. The reason may be that I never imagined again having that much that was new to contribute. The reason may also be that I don't want or have the courage to make a Frieda Grafe-esque film, a straightforward essay.

H FOR HERESY

CB: Could Adorno's critical definition of the essay as having an "innermost form of heresy"⁵ be applied to your films and artworks?

HF: Is "heresy" a fitting word for it? Doesn't the heretic strongly believe in God and even the Church? I'm rather a non-believer—but even that I can't manage.

I FOR INSCRIPTION

CB: What is the reason for using the concept "inscription"? You don't speak of "traces" [*Spuren*] in *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, so it seems you are interested in "discourse networks" in the sense of Friedrich Kittler. Is this interest applicable to your films in general?

HF: I wasn't thinking of Kittler! I read somewhere that cities used to bear the inscription of labor. In German, the word "inscription" elicits the image of an inscription in a stone, on a tombstone or at the base of a monument. A form of writing that cannot be erased. In the word "combination" used in *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* there exists a contrast: you cannot tell by looking at the images of the world that war has been inscribed on them; war has been inscribed cryptographically. On one hand, indelible and, on the other hand, invisible.

J FOR "JE"

CB: Robert Musil writes that the essay is more than a simple attempt; it is "the singular and unalterable form assumed by a person's inner life in a decisive thought."⁶ With this definition that is tied to the individual, Musil demarcates the concept from the idea of the preliminary and the scholar's essay. In a diary entry, Musil emphasizes that the living thought (as opposed to the dead thought) is connected to emotions and includes the "I" [*das Ich*].⁷ It seems to me that this dimension of the essay has a bearing on certain figures in your films about work, for example the inventor/entrepreneur in *Nicht ohne Risiko* [*Nothing Ventured*], or on the way in which you tell the story of the civil engineer Meydenbauer in *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*.

HF: I cannot express this as decisively as Musil did. I vaguely feel similar. I also believe that there must be an "I" that speaks through a film. But this does not have to be the "I" of a man or a woman who made the film. It is rather the "I" of the film construction. Through this "I" the thought comes alive. Or: spiritual topicality.

K FOR KLUGE

CB: Long before the essay film became fashionable in Germany you adopted this format, as did, albeit in a completely different way, Alexander Kluge.

HF: Kluge is unique. And, by the way, an Adorno student. He was directing a film school, at the Ulm School of Design, before he became known as a filmmaker. In his literary texts he wrote about the battle of Stalingrad or a court trial in prose. His great film *Abschied von Gestern* [*Yesterday Girl*] was based on his story “Anita G.,” using the abbreviated last name like in a court report or in a Kafka novel. There are fictional vignettes interrupted by documentary footage in *Abschied von Gestern*. All of a sudden, a waiter in a hotel recounts his time in Auschwitz. Kluge invented and asserted his own mixed form. When I caught on, with *Wie man sieht*, I had been making films for 20 years. I had made films in which actors appear who don’t act according to cinematic realism—I did not get anywhere with that. The attempt to make a feature film that adheres to rules was a complete failure. Hence documentary films.

L FOR LAGGARD

CB: Once, when I was looking for a fitting description of your working method I wrote, loosely based on Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Slow Construction of Thoughts during Filmmaking.” I wanted to address the concept of slowness also as an opportunity for the viewer to be able to follow the development of a thought.

HF: I like this derivation a lot! The sentence by Kleist ascribes to speaking the function of practice. One has to go through materials again and again in order to gain perchance a thought. There is a lot to learn from the compositional rules of a film, even, or perhaps especially from a commercial fictional film [*Storyfilm*]. Just think of *Morocco* by [Josef] von Sternberg. Dietrich runs once through splendid rooms that have not been shown before nor are shown again. The word is that von Sternberg used the decor of a neighboring studio that happened to be available. This is conspicuous and makes us aware that a location almost always shows up twice in a film. On the one hand, this is due to production logistics. It also functions as a parameter: the first time the hero was shown happy in this location; the next time he is unhappy, or vice versa.

I started early to watch films over and over again, up to a hundred times, which was, in the time of film prints, rather time-consuming. As an instructor I also used films over and over to demonstrate and discuss a detail. An inductive method. One has to believe and make others believe that there is something to discover on the micro level, in the minute construction!

M FOR MONTAGE AND MISE-EN-SCÈNE

CB: What do you think of Godard's idea, articulated early on, about comprehending a film as montage art [*un art du montage*] in order to connect film with mise-en-scène, often seems as the opposite in scholarly film debates, and therefore arrives at a form that belongs to the *essai de fiction* (and less to documentary film)?

HF: Godard likes to edit in precisely those spots where one expects an imperceptible series of shots in fictional film [*Storyfilm*]. You could say he composes like a Russian when he narrates like an American. The jump from the long shot to the close-up or vice versa is often much more intense with him than is common, creating shots appears like thought processes, as explicit arrangement. But this method can also lead to false tension, trigger excitement without cause. With spoken language these false dramatizations also occur, caused by opening every sentence with "in contrast to" or "and just as."

N FOR NUMBER

CB: In your filmic studies concerning a society obsessed with control you continually show how the individual is no longer identified by a signature or a number but by a code. Deleuze comments: "[T]he masses have become samples, data, markets, or 'banks.'"⁸ What do you find interesting about the masses from the past?

HF: The old social-democratic masses disappointed us in the worst way when they stopped the protest against war. Industrial society

educated them and gave them skills, but they couldn't emancipate themselves, at least not as a majority, and make use of their own knowledge and know-how. In 1968 many believed capital or consumerism, as [Pier Paolo] Pasolini called it, had dissolved the old masses and reorganized the nuclear family around the television. You can develop that thought further: the nuclear family devours TV programs with their eyes and votes for the television impresario Berlusconi. (Sedated as once the Roman city proletariat. The television blondes as protective magic: A sign of the fear of an invasion by the peoples of the North.)

The new masses have more knowledge and skills than ever. If you look on YouTube you get the impression only student jokes are emerging. But there have also been surprises in the last few years, in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt.

In which mass gatherings also play an important role, a medium that rather fits with the old masses.

O FOR ORDER

CB: In *The Order of Things* [in French, *Les mots et les choses*] Michel Foucault refers to Borges and his Chinese encyclopedia in which conventional notions of listings are carried to the point of absurdity. It seems to me you are also interested in classification systems and all kinds of proximities in your films but also in undermining these.

HF: Yes, great! In a better world, if I were a prince, I would—after some physical exercises and a light meal—have a Greek teacher introduce me to all kinds of notions of similarities, sweepingly called associations in the cutting room.

In the film *M* there is a sequence that has frequently been described but often neglecting a detail. We alternately see police and gangster aristocrats debating how they can find the child murderer. “But how? How?” they say, and suddenly you see a pearl necklace shaped like a question mark. One of the gangsters had the piece of jewelry in front of him on the table and played around with it during the deliberations.

In German you would say, “Die Frage steht im Raum” [The question looms large], and thereby teaches a thing to speak.

P FOR PORTRAIT

CB: You devoted a television portrait to Peter Lorre in 1984, *Das doppelte Gesicht* [*The Double Face*]. It is not a classic portrait of an actor but a precise investigation how a face is created in film under specific conditions and production circumstances. The study is done predominantly with the help of film excerpts, still photography, and frame enlargements. Nowadays you execute such analyses differently, by way of installations or performances, for example in your work on [D. W.] Griffith. Do you see a difference in terms of procedure?

HF: An installation in an artistic space is better suited to explanations of styles and cinematographic syntax than the television show. For one, in the former you can work with several image tracks and sound tracks, and because you are able to look at your work right away again.

Even though the film by Felix Hofmann—who later published a book about Peter Lorre and exile in the U.S.—is highly biographical, I capture a moment in *Zur Bauweise des Films bei Griffith* [*On the Construction of Griffith's Films*]. It is about a sequence from *Intolerance* in which the shot/countershot appears as if it were an explanation.

What is so special about Lorre is that his career begins with the extraordinary film *M* and ends with the extraordinary film *Der Verlorene* [*The Lost One*—back in Germany. It is almost irresistible to look at what lies between these two films.

Q FOR QUARREL

CB: Your films are sometimes brought into context with debates commonly called iconoclastic controversies or image quarrels [*Bilderstreit*].

Do you ever feel used? Or do you feel pressured to take sides in such debates?

HF: When my first feature film, *Zwischen zwei Kriegen* [*Between Two Wars*], was shown, there was much dissent. Many left the screening banging the exit doors loudly. But with my second film, *Etwas wird sichtbar* [*Before Your Eyes: Vietnam*], the films on offer were already so differentiated that hardly anyone went to a film he or she had not expected to see. This differentiation has exponentially increased since then. The system of distribution organizes the needs in such a way that no one runs into cultural artifacts anymore that are completely unfamiliar. Like they say on Amazon: Customers who have bought *A* also bought *B* and *C*.

I know a fifteen-year-old girl whose parents wanted to show her a black-and-white film. But she refused to see it. She was fearful of a film that isn't in a conventional format, like a cuisine that includes the consumption of dogs and cats.

R FOR REPETITION

CB: Is the structural principle of repetition in your opinion as important in non-fiction films as it is in fiction films?

HF: I think so. In most non-fiction films there is cross-cutting: you cut back and forth between two or a handful of locations/characters. Maybe not as a matter of structure but rather with the intention of creating some variety. The danger in doing this is that when *A* is getting boring then you cut to *B*, when *B* gets boring you cut to *C*, and so on. It is a kind of chase, pursued by the fear of boredom.

S FOR SERIES

CB: Many of your films use the serial principle as a structure, in particular *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*. Does the Turing machine,

which features prominently in your self-portrait as a filmmaker and artist in this film, represent a kind of “last” machine to communicate with film, although (or maybe even because) this machine inaugurates the age of the computer?

HF: At the end of my film *Zum Vergleich* [*In Comparison*], a robot appears working as a brick layer. He can turn a diagram into a brick structure by slightly turning certain bricks according to the alignment given in the plan. A single stone corresponds with a pixel. This is pure computer aesthetics. I don’t know of any other more natural connection between computer and film.

T FOR TRANSMISSION

CB: One of your video installations is called *Übertragung* [*Transmission*]. In this installation it seems you want to tackle more than just the motif of the magical touch; something about the art of linking gestures emerges as well.

HF: You tell children not to touch anything. They should learn to use the gaze instead to gain access. I was looking for locations in which people are searching for physical connections, to touch something in order to comprehend it, so to speak. Many people do not just touch but also take a photo as a back-up.

U FOR UNIVERSE OF TECHNICAL IMAGES

CB: Your approach to photography—in your films—seems to be inspired in part by Vilém Flusser’s theories, with whom you also had personal contact. Does Flusser’s “universe of technical images” represent for you an important key to understanding digital image technology?

HF: Flusser laments that the new media are still used in archaic ways. He creates a world in which matter doesn’t count anymore, in which the disembodied human being is pure mind. Human beings of the

future should communicate on a much more complex level. Flusser uses the string quartet as a model. And they have to communicate with each other to figure out when to turn off the machines that keep them alive.

V FOR VERACITY

CB: In what way is, for you personally, the category of “truth” important for a documentary film?

HF: There is an element of truth involved. But first of all it is important not to cheat. It is about the rules you set for yourself. Of course, you can condense things in a documentary and have *A* pose a question and use an answer by *B* that he says a little later in a similar context. But if a film claims to tell a story chronologically, it cannot use an answer by *B* that he uttered long before the question was posed by *A*.

In my film about investment negotiations, *Nicht ohne Risiko*, you can see a large window and during the negotiations the February light is fading. It would be dishonest to manipulate a shot that was recorded at 2:00 P.M. so that it looks like it was shot at 6:00 P.M.

W FOR WEISS

CB: That your work is part of the so-called European avant-garde can not only be inferred from your book on Godard or your making-of documentary on a [Jean-Marie] Straub–[Danièle] Huillet film. To simplify, one could also mention Brecht as a common denominator. What is your connection to the author and filmmaker Peter Weiss, to whom you devoted a television portrait in the same year your second feature film, *Etwas wird sichtbar*, was screening in cinemas?

HF: *The Aesthetics of Resistance* includes an episode on Brecht. Weiss describes how Brecht is working on a project in Stockholm, and it is obvious how much he admires Brecht’s method of working—working

in a team. I loved this book, and when I met Weiss I was watching his films in Stockholm. Avant-garde film was just as formative for Weiss as painting—this is a rarity in German literature.

X FOR AN UNKNOWN QUANTITY

CB: Some of your films seem to be based on a certain interest in employing unknown quantities, whether it's about venture capital (*Nicht ohne Risiko*), how surveillance technologies work (*Auge/Maschine* [*Eye/Machine*]), or the history of measurement technology (*Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*). One could therefore call your essay films science fiction.

HF: What I don't like about science fiction is that it looks too much like science fiction. Godard's *Alphaville* is a well-made exception. I hope my films concerning weapons or computer animations do not adhere to the genre.

Y FOR YATES

CB: Could one understand your installations that employ archival materials as a type of memory theater [*Gedächtnistheater*], in the sense of Frances Yates—that is, as a model of mnemonic technology, one that is based on the metaphor of visualized locations [*Bildraum*]?

HF: I really enjoyed reading Yates's book. When I was a child I was able to remember more vividly whether a Latin verb appeared in the upper-right-hand corner or on the lower left hand than remembering any types of irregularity associated with the verb.

When I work with two parallel filmstrips, montage becomes spatial. And when several work sequences simultaneously play in a room, the viewer is aware at once that similar or identical footage is reappearing. Let's say cautiously that a part of the blueprint becomes visible in this manner.

Z COMME ZIDANE (Z FOR ZIDANE)

CB: At the Documenta 12, you dedicated a complex 12-channel installation—*Deep Play*—to a legendary soccer match. With this installation you were ahead of the artist duo Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno who filmed Zinédine Zidane playing in a different match some time later. In your diary documenting your preparations for this installation you compare the sports broadcasting market to the mechanisms that guide the art world.⁹

HF: *Deep Play* was a state-of-the-art project intended to show the final match of the 2006 World Cup from many perspectives. So-called heat maps, which register the movements of the players, are commonplace today. You can subscribe to them and watch them on your phone. In those days, we had to procure them with some effort. It bothered me that I could not do much with my hands and only had to communicate. Conceptual art. And yet, people like to watch soccer matches, precisely because you cannot do that with your mouth. Regardless of all tactics and strategies, and in spite of all practice.

Translated by Margit Grieb

NOTES

1. Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicolsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1:3–23 [see chapter 4, this volume].
2. Ibid.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, “About the Essay and Its Prose,” trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984): 151–171.
4. Frieda Grafe, “Der bessere Dokumentarfilm, die gefundene Fiktion,” in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992), 139–143.
5. In the original: “innerstes Formgesetz die Ketzerei” (Theodor W. Adorno, “Der Essay als Form,” in *Noten zur Literatur* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1958], 73).
6. In the original: “die einmalige und unabänderliche Gestalt, die das innere Leben eines Menschen in einem entscheidenden Gedanken annimmt” (Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [Reinbeck: Rowohit, 1978], 1:253).

7. Robert Musil, "Erlebnis und Gedanke" [diary entry], in *Tagebücher*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1983), 2:851.
8. In the original: ". . . les masses [sont devenues] des échantillons, des données, des marchés ou des 'banques'" (Gilles Deleuze, "Post-scriptum sur la société de contrôle," in *Pourparlers* [Paris: Minuit, 1990], 243-44).
9. Harun Farocki, "Histoire d'une installation (sur la Coupe du monde de football)," *Trafic*, no. 64 (2007): 18-47.

23

RIDDLES AS ESSAY FILM (2016)

LAURA MULVEY

PETER WOLLEN, LAURA MULVEY: “THEORY” FILM AS ESSAY FILM?

Looking back at our early collaborations in the mid- to late 1970s from some forty years later, it might seem surprising (now that the term is so widely discussed and applied) that we thought of our films as “theoretical” rather than as essay films. But, and this might be a personal lapse, I have no memory of the term being in circulation at the time, at least in the UK. The avant-gardes of the 1920s were certainly very important for our generation, and 1970s issues of *Screen* bear witness, for instance, to the Soviet 1920s avant-garde, both its theory and its films, as well as Bertolt Brecht as crucial points of reference. Since Nora Alter and Tim Corrigan have very kindly invited me to think about our films in the context of this volume, I have asked myself the question: Are there ways in which *Penthesilea* (1974), *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), and *AMY!* (1981) might relate to the essay film (while acknowledging that the very flexibility and elusiveness of the form defines it)?

To begin with, “theory” and “essay” imply rather different aesthetic and political principles: theory carries with it a certain baggage of authority, while the essay should be uncertain, incomplete, and heterogeneous in its mode of address. I would like to suggest here that if our “theory films” shared the formal characteristics of the essay, it was, in the first instance,

due to the particular context of the 1970s experimental-film movement in the UK. Feminism, our theoretical mainspring, necessarily challenged patriarchal authority invested in language, culture, and aesthetics; out of this political engagement, an aesthetic of heterogeneity and uncertainty was, again necessarily and politically, intrinsic to our films. But as our project involved questioning language itself, whether linguistic or cinematic, how ideas became words or images, a theoretical dimension was also fundamental to the films.

SOME PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Both Peter and I were writing about film from a theoretical perspective before we ever imagined that we would make films ourselves. Our writing was, however, “essayistic”: quite short pieces published in journals and magazines, outside either a film criticism or an academic context, with personal commitment and original ideas compensating for the lack of footnotes or in-depth research. Peter’s early film writing in the 1960s had reflected his *Cahiers du cinéma*-influenced Hollywood period (which had, in turn, influenced me). His *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969; definitely a work of serious research, although still light on footnotes) is an obvious turning point: the book is a triptych of three essays, with “auteurism” sandwiched between Eisenstein and film semiotics. It acts as a signpost, indicating that his interests were moving away from the great Hollywood directors and toward the avant-garde and film theory.

Then, around the same time and just as Peter became more and more preoccupied with Godard’s radical films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, New American Cinema, new radical European cinemas, Brazil’s Cinema Novo, and so on also reached the UK through festivals, special seasons, and so on. All these cinemas, and perhaps Godard above all, showed that films could be made about ideas and depict thought and that the paraphernalia of large productions were neither necessary nor relevant. My turning point came later, with the influence of the women’s movement; writing “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1973–1974) marked my break with Hollywood and my new interest in experimental cinema, which was, in the first instance, the small but heroic tradition of women’s

experimental cinema. But these personal, intellectual, and political shifts would not, as such, have enabled us to make films ourselves. It was the wider intellectual context in the UK in the 1970s, backed institutionally by new funding sources that brought a new movement of radical experimental film into existence. For Peter and me, it was a logical step to apply for available funding, to expand our written theoretical essays into image and sound; we could then reflect cinematically on the kinds of political and cultural film issues and questions that we wanted to explore. Hans Richter's concept of the essay film "visualize[s] thoughts on screen," and can make "visible the fundamental idea." Richter proposes that

the essay film, in its attempt to make the invisible world of imagination, thoughts, and ideas visible, can draw from an incomparably larger reservoir of expressive means than can the pure documentary film. Since in the essay film the filmmaker is not bound by the depiction of external phenomena and the constraints of chronological sequences, but, on the contrary, has to enlist material from everywhere, the filmmaker can bounce around freely in space and time.¹

Although we were unaware of these useful essay-film aesthetic guidelines and principles, they coincide quite closely with our aspirations at the time.

PRINCIPLES: SOME POINTS OF COINCIDENCE BETWEEN THEORY FILM AND ESSAY FILM

As Peter and I worked in collaboration, we designed our films as much as possible in advance and, by and large, in accordance with certain agreed principles. The idea of "theory" as the main driving force of these "compositions" was, as I have said, an extension of our earlier essays but was also completely different due to the move into the film medium. I remember Peter used the concept in the Marxist sense: political activity could range across theory, agit-prop, and propaganda. But he had also a long-standing interest in the avant-garde art, literature, and modernism, predating and alongside his interest in film. He made a characteristic point in an interview in *Screen*, soon after we made *Penthesilea*:

One of the objects of the film, to my mind anyway, is to say that people should be prepared to make the same effort and approach a film in the same way as they would a book. It is a text, and just as when people read a book they are prepared to do further reading or they are prepared to encounter difficulties, so they should in a film. That is implicit in the transfer of the idea of reading. . . . One could call our film a political film in the sense that one, for instance, would talk about Brecht as producing political texts. You can also argue that people like Lautréamont or Joyce or Duchamp were political in another sense, subversive or deconstructive, although they professed no interest in politics at all. And our film shows as much influence from, eg, Duchamp as it does from Brecht—perhaps more.²

Our working principles indicate hybrid influences as well as a commitment to an aesthetic of hybridity. The films should be heterogeneous, broken into chapters, made up of very different kinds of material that had to include found footage, direct address to camera, and a foregrounding of medium specificity. The films had to be hybrid in their citation of other arts, quoting, for instance, visual arts and including music, but also, probably most important, incorporating words and language, as image and voice. They also had to include some element of storytelling and performance.

LANGUAGE, WRITING, AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

Although these strategies might have a lot in common with those of some essay films, they were applied to very definitely theoretical topics. From rather different perspectives, both Peter and I were concerned with questions that had been thrown up by feminism. In our first two films, we used two ancient Greek myths of monstrous women (Amazons and the Sphinx) as hooks on which to hang reflections on women's place within patriarchal culture, language, and the "Symbolic Order" (to use the Lacanian term). Through a women's liberation reading group, I had encountered Freud and psychoanalysis, and it seemed as though Freudian theory could offer a way in, like a small crack of light through

a chink in a door, and illuminate some of the problems that early feminist theory was trying to address; psychoanalytic concepts and their vocabulary were extremely relevant to questions of gender, sexuality, and how they were socialized under patriarchy. Peter and I wanted to use the myth of the Sphinx to question the Freudian Oedipus complex, displacing the Oedipal father with the problem of motherhood. This idea runs through *Riddles* like a central spine but still allowed digression into varying modes of address and reflections on the mother–child relation in everyday as well as theoretical terms.

In both *Penthesilea* and *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Peter and I were particularly preoccupied with language, both as an aesthetic tool and as a topic of investigation in its own right. Jacques Lacan's reformulation of the Freudian Oedipus complex into the successive phases of Imaginary (maternal and pre-language) and Symbolic (paternal and post-language) seemed, to a feminist mentality, to sum up perfectly the dilemma of motherhood and its place not only in the oppressions of the everyday but also as crucially formative for patriarchal culture. We were influenced by the French feminist theorists Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, both of whom questioned the Lacanian Oedipal chronology and the rigid distinction between the pre- and post-Oedipal. Kristeva's concept of the "semiotic" associates the maternal body with a pre-Symbolic form signification: these tones and rhythms of language later become subordinated to the purpose of denotative meaning, but also persist in poetic writing and music. Our interest in language and the verbal was a logical development of this theoretical and mythic background. In the first instance, "language" meant the lack of it, suggesting an in-between space in which to reflect on how muteness might be made apparent or find a mode of expression. Although the relation between speech and non-speech is crucial to *Penthesilea*, in *Riddles of the Sphinx* words take on new importance so that the verbal and the visual intertwine, "reaching out toward" or on "the verge of" expressiveness, and asking: How does the verbal function within the "muteness" of the semiotic?

Although apropos of Godard's *Le Gai Savoir*, in "The Two Avant-Gardes," Peter elaborates the point, which was to become essential for the questions addressed in our films:

[T]he film [*Le Gai Savoir*] deliberately suspends "meaning," avoids any teleology or finality, in the interests of a destruction and reassembly, a

re-combination of the order of the sign as an experiment in the dissolution of old meanings and the generation of new ones from the semiotic process itself. . . . *Le Gai Savoir* is not a film with a meaning, something to say about the world, nor is it a film “about” film . . . but a film about the possibility of meaning itself, of generating new types of meaning. The array of sign-systems at work in the cinema are thus brought into a new kind of relationship with each other and with the world.³

Located within the context of *Riddles* and its commitment to considering the “problem” of motherhood, “the possibility of meaning itself, of generating new types of meaning . . . a new kind of relationship with each other and the world” all lead to a search for the place from which women could utter the repressed counter-meanings of patriarchal discourse, an area of experiment in its own right, a theoretical move away from linguistic transparency to the stutter, the hieroglyph, and the riddle.

Quotation from our notes on *Riddles*:

The “voice” of the Sphinx has special significance, speaking from a distinct place with a distinct form of language. The riddle is metaphoric, interrogative, and incomplete; it involves wordplay, enigma, and disguise. It is, however, important to stress that the Sphinx is not outside language as she is outside the city of Thebes, the realm of patriarchy, but is able to offer a different discourse, potentially the nucleus of a non-patriarchal symbolic, based on a different Oedipal structure—or, perhaps it would be better to say, a different mode of entry into language, kinship, and history. Language is the component of film that both threatens to regulate the spectator and also offers the hope of liberation from the closed world of identification and the lure of the image. Language, therefore, is both a friend and a foe, against which we must be on our guard, whose help we need but whose claims we must combat. Hence the body of language in our films is fractured and dislodged.

To my mind, these kinds of ideas and the questions associated with them share the sense of uncertainty, experiment, and the essay as “attempt” that many commentators have seen as central to the essay film aesthetic. Furthermore, the different kinds of “voice” embodied in the Sphinx shift from the questions of theory to questions of form, and its disembodied

voice, the voice-over, is characteristic of many essay films. But the Sphinx's voice moves through a variety of discourses: from the fragmented association of words with the domestic space at the beginning of the narrative section of the film, to a series of theoretical and practical problems raised by motherhood in everyday life, and finally, in the last two pans of "Louise's Story," to a dream-like, experimental form of writing. Peter was, throughout, the primary writer for both *Penthesilea* and *Riddles*, since he was, as I was not, a writer of poetry and stories as well as essays and specifically interested in experimental writing. For the "mirror" sequence (the twelfth pan), he used a method loosely adapted from the surrealist writer Raymond Roussel. He cross-referenced words between French and English dictionaries, then took the word that came on the line below, and finally collected an arbitrary vocabulary and a random sequence of phrases that were then rewritten into an apparent narrative. It was not so much that Peter intended to emulate dream language or the language of the unconscious, but rather to generate words, and images from words, that foregrounded a linguistic materiality in the same sense that avant-garde film had always foregrounded the materiality of its medium.

SELF-EXPRESSION AND AUDIENCE

Peter and I were not, as collaborators, particularly concerned with self-expression; our long and detailed discussions merged quite diverse backgrounds and priorities into a framework for aesthetic and political agreement. The author and his or her self and its expression were under erasure at this time from multiple directions—for instance, early postmodernism, feminism, and Roland Barthes. In this sense, our films diverge from the sense of self-expression so often associated with the essay film. However, although there was no "self" to make itself felt, direct address (P. W. in *Penthesilea*, L. M. in *Riddles*, both in *AMY!*) was one of our cinematic strategies or principles, more to mark the process of the text's construction—that is, more Brechtian—than coming from a specific individual. But more to the point, perhaps, was a conscious address to an audience that we visualized, at its core, as belonging to the same milieu as we did—that is, aware of the significance of feminism for that political

moment; a belief in the importance of the questions that feminism raised, both for the cinema and for everyday life; and committed to the political radicalism of avant-garde aesthetics, their challenge to the transparency of dominant ways of seeing, and the offer of a poetic, visual, cinematic novelty and excitement to anyone who cared to give the films a try. We always conceived, perhaps optimistically, of the core as porous, essentially a gateway to the so-called and always elusive “wider audience,” but realistically these films neither could nor would reach beyond a limited constituency. While our first two films’ running time of 90 minutes made a residual gesture to the feature film, our concern for *mise-en-scène* was much more significantly rooted in Hollywood: color, lighting, camera movement, music, gesture, and contrasts between interior and exterior spaces and perspectives, for instance, were designed to be “read” by the spectator, in the manner of the 1950s melodrama that I had loved so much. *Riddles* has a carefully constructed symmetrical pattern, evoking a pyramid, with rhyming sequences arranged on each side of a central pivot point. In addition to the “Contents Page” at the beginning of the film, we hoped that this pattern would offer the spectator a structure within which he or she could find an orientation in the face of the difficulty and the heterogeneity presented by the material. If the emphasis on *mise-en-scène* had Douglas Sirk or Vicente Minnelli in mind, the pattern of the film was influenced by Hollis Frampton’s use of structure in *Zorns Lemma* and (*nostalgia*). Finally, the sections of “Louise’s Story” that move onto location introduce chance elements—casual passersby, the wind blowing in the trees, circulating traffic—that relate more to Italian neorealism and, for Peter and me, most particularly to Roberto Rossellini. Although we had no expectation that these cinematic citations would be picked up by an actual audience . . . we could always imagine that they just might have been.

NOTES

1. Hans Richter, “Der Filmessay: Eine neue Art des Dokumentarfilms,” in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992) [see chapter 6, this volume].
2. Peter Wollen, interview, *Screen* 15, no. 3 (1974): 120–134.
3. Peter Wollen, “The Two Avant-Gardes,” in *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 100.



Renée Green, *Begin Again, Begin Again*. (Courtesy of the artist and Free Agent Media)

24

CERTAIN OBLIQUENESSES

(2016)

RENÉE GREEN

Writing about one's operations is always risky. As what is in between the words isn't graspable. The absence of the phenomena. The absence of phenomenal experience. The usual complaint about words by musicians and artists, those whose medium always slips between words, with no agreed-upon shareable sensation, or by poets, the constant gaps felt in evoking slipping sensations with words, shaken differently by performance. A viscerality, by definition felt in the body. Each one of us different, despite myriad standardizations.

1

LOOKING BACK

After a 1995 conference held in London at the ICA and cosponsored by Iniva, "Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire," I decided I wanted to radically shift the focus of how I was working and how the work could be perceived. It became evident to me that I needed to focus more specifically on time-based media, as well as on different forms of diffusion, placement, and contact. I'd been working with these forms previously, but I'd initiated this shift for myself in 1994 with the invention

of Free Agent Media, which I launched with the publication of my novel and video *Camino Road* in Madrid at the Museo Reina Sofia. I'd already produced works using video and sound and I wanted to push this further into filmmaking and digital modes. There were several reasons. My visceral reactions to ways of being positioned was a definite indication to me that I needed to find a way of working more suitable to the varied dimensions of creation I wanted to express. As language and sound have always been aspects of my ways of thinking and creating, as is indicated in many of the discrete works I've made, I wanted to be able to animate in a simultaneous yet contrapuntal, layered way, visually and aurally. To bring the parts together into one form. I also found it irritating to keep speaking to a public on panels. I wanted to be able to show a clip of a film, something that had already been thought and formed, with images and sound and movement. I needed to shift, and I did. I wanted to create in a form that others could respond to without needing an intermediary. A popular form that could also be erudite, containing worlds, with kaleidoscopic potential. A form that didn't require a docent. The tour was contained within the form itself, if a tour was desired. Each percipient following [his or her] own mental path, with its myriad associations, while encountering a composed form in a space, whether on a tiny screen or projected in labyrinthine rooms.

I'd been primed for this most of my life. From childhood TV studio experiences and appearances, through my studies of photography and its history, to courses in video and film in New York that I took after working day jobs, as well as having grown up with an electronic engineer, my father. Once I'd made the decision to shift I had a little help from friends who were already working in the field of film and video. My first exhibition in which I used time-based media extensively was in 1992, *Import/Export Funk Office* at Christian Nagel Gallery in Cologne. Why I made the conscious decision in 1995 was related to the lag in terms of recognition of the fact that I was continually growing and becoming, exceeding the categories then used while attempting to classify my work, which used installation as a format, within which were videos, films, still photos, prints, books, audio, computers, and sculptures, which entailed attention to specific formats, as well as to different relationships at play between these and the percipient's attention. Besides, as one person said, I was a "one-woman diaspora," physically on the move in addition to moving between forms.¹

2

When reading, I find references to the “interstices” of Gilles Deleuze, and I’m reminded of Homi Bhabha’s reference to interstices. I check *The Location of Culture*, prompted by a conversation a few days ago in Helsinki regarding Bhabha’s *Fanon*. I think of Frantz Fanon and Paul Bowles. Algeria and Morocco. 1959.

What has been specific and distinctive about my way of working? My answer: Schematically, a way of consistently combining: the spaces, the architectures, colors, and the moving images, and sonic circulations, and constructions, objects, and things. Yet there is an excess that seeps out of the schematic, and it is this created tension/space—interval, break, interstice—that I like to probe.

Over time, I’ve produced these kinds of mixed configurations, again and again, repetitions with differences. Now for over twenty years. I’m beginning to reflect on the accumulation, the projects, and the years, despite their ephemerality. The cinematic parts are cohesive nodes of what is expanded and contracted specifically and variably in spatial conditions, some with a precise, yet slipping, resonance, and also contrapuntally, rhythmically in relation. But the partialness creates an often-impossible unbridgeable lacuna. Sometimes I think of Antonin Artaud and his agonies. Certain impossibilities to link or comprehend. Part of the distinction between subjects and subjectivities. “You are not I.” No problem. But . . .

From *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992–1993), through *Partially Buried in Three Parts* (1996–1997), to *Some Chance Operations* (1998–1999), through *Between and Including* (Secession, 1999), and *Wavelinks* (2002), through *Climates and Paradoxes* (2005), to *Endless Dreams and Water Between* (2009), and, most recently, with *Begin Again, Begin Again* (Schindler House, 2015),² the combinations: films, videos, architectures, structures, sounds, objects. An integrated essaying. What compels this way of essaying, of thinking through this matter, in combination with sound, and with different dimensions of the cinematic? Moving through overlapping sounds and differently scaled moving images, found in the architectural arrangement of spaces and structures. Ephemeral and solid. To be moved through, or to pause in. Is there a relation between a physical movement

and the composition of film being referred to as essay films? What might be a relation? Forms of wandering? Montage? Linking?

There is no single answer. I've attempted to trace this combining compulsion. It was in the world. The predilection emerged from seeking forms for expressions. Growing up with electronics and music, the parental conditions related to these, what was generated, the effects of changing technologies and social spheres, which encompass economies, governments, laws, changing customs, environments, and slippages, improvisations, creations.

Deliberate excess, of being and perceiving,³ composed with different intersecting modalities and media, including the cinematic. Immersiveness. Precedents and differences.

3

Case Study: *Begin Again, Begin Again*⁴

The film, the site, the total work.

Three excerpts from a written conversation:⁵

“Expanded temporality,” yes. It’s part of the concept of the exhibition that I continue to test while finishing the film *Begin Again, Begin Again*, which will augment the first stanza of the film currently projected in the house, when it is completed. The present and what accompanies us is a prevalent theme circulating throughout the work and in the exhibition. Traces. As you say, “specters,” “ghosts.” “Preservational” is a word you suggest in terms of my work as you mention it in relation to “survival.” I would rather describe it as enunciatory. Actually the work probes to find buried aspects, what hasn’t been wanted, and to discover what else can be felt, thought, imagined—beyond what we think we know. First emergence and recognition (“to grant ghosts the right . . . to . . . a hospitable memory . . . out of a concern for justice?” quoting Derrida in *Climates and Paradoxes*, a film in the exhibition and a film script in *Other Planes of There*) would need to take place before preserving. This differs from a “salvage paradigm” that James Clifford has

elaborated on. It's about allowing and listening and feeling, rather than suppressing and repressing and claiming. Architecture is an interesting example in repression, combined with preservation, yet decay is inevitable as well as returns of what's been repressed, in different forms for example. This house. Life in relation to it is apparent. It is still surprising. What is it possible to observe by encountering it in a full sense? What Schindler attempted, stated in his 1912 manifesto, was beautifully and profoundly achieved in this physical enactment of using space as a medium—the unexpected consequences don't detract from this enacted wish, yet everything is always in relation to something, even what one is ignorant of. In this house-as-manifesto he also pays homage to his sources, physically if not verbally. California. The Pacific Coast. Japan. Loos. Wright. His experiences in nature, whether in Styria or in Yellowstone.

The film provides an indication. Durational aspects of my engagement with the buildings, his past, my past and “exposition,” as you mention. What would be the “irreducibility of an object or a place,” especially as each encounter creates a particular evocation for a specific person?

Balancing what you refer to as “exposition” with “doing justice to the irreducibility of an object or place” is at the crux of a challenge and difference I perceive between modes of engagement and approaches. Mine as an artist, doesn't require me to expose in a documentary way, for example. When is justice ever done? To essay, as a verb, in the sense of to move through and to meditate on, as well as to invent and speculate in the forms I create is the best I can do. Things are in profound and complex relation. I'm interested in shifting attention to ways that these relations take place. I'm also involved with probing feelings that somatically manifest, in addition to processes of thinking. The Schindler House became a factor in an engagement of this process.

But what of the essay film aspect? What about the film *Begin Again, Begin Again*?

It was scripted; it has a voice-over and additional layers of varying sound. The voice and the sounds and breaks and moving images form an

ineffable whole. Yet the conjunction of the elements in their strangeness or particularity was desired. Composed yet not meshed. Organized structurally by several kinds of cuttings and joinings, of words, sound, images, yet held in sequences of uttered numbers, in a particularly textured voice. A beginning of the process is not locatable. The script, before and after it was recorded, became the spine for the mixture of images and layers of sound, eventually led by the voice, which exists as a consciousness, yet it is not specified whose. What happens to the percipient while listening and watching? Viscerally? These are questions still being asked and discussed at screenings. The presentation in the Schindler House was unique, in terms of physical and aural resonances.

4

NOT *GESAMTKUNSTWERK*

The high-tech interface has been appealing to artists because it does have the potential to fragment and diversify the master narrative, offering simultaneous multiple perspectives, freshly negotiated interdependent vocabularies, and the direct experience of ambiguity, the ineffable, and a sensory and mental landscape that lies above, below, and beyond ideology. The classic *Gesamtkunstwerk* that we inherited from the Renaissance in the form of masques, pageants, and opera regrettably had its muscular and metaphysical transcendence rooted in the heart of empire—the single-point perspective of the ravishing choreography and scenery made sense only from the royal box. Everyone else had to take it on faith that this worldview was complete.⁶

A different impulse, conversant, exchange encounter, choice; movement; many perspectives; multiple directions of sound; varying concentration levels, loose, focused. To give what I'm doing a name, what about Visceral Combinatory Essaying? It can be described as a composed and surprising conundrum that combines what is in the world, what is found, what is imagined, as some chance operations—a visceral

sonic-visual-haptic-spatial essaying: existing NOT only as a single screening, but in relation with other moving-image devices, audio devices, and objects AND it too exists differently, yet resonantly, as a single screen work. Paradoxes and climates affecting what is made and perceived. Impossible wishes as an impetus.

Here, in what I'm writing:

An attempt at conveying, despite the difficulty and limits of words alone: composed combinations without sound, voices, spaces, image, color and the rhythms, breaks, counterpoint, dissonances, resonances between each and in the altering variability/variety of the temporal and movement potential.

An attempt to convey in list form:

Reverberations

Resonances

Conveying

Spaces

Intersections

Expanded Composition

Voices and Sounds

The perceivers' attention as an element, as material, as a medium: what is created in the intervals, breaks, interstices

Literal, present, distant, fictive, poetic, compressions and expansions

Being alive & a lifetime: Perpetual Perceptual Explorations

Poetry and beyond words, unsensible

Broken structures

Durations

Nonclimatic (i.e., non-climax)

Being-in-relation attempts, open perceptual possibilities

A certain density

Uncoding compressed and overlapping components via engaging, for whomever, yet my perception conveyed in a repeatable form that can move and exist in variable places with variable resonances; open and specific; the work, all parts, details, and nuances, as an attention activator and shifter.

The limits of revisiting what was made, to translate it. The composed work itself still exists to be encountered. Its obliqueness and multiplicity to be probed. Yet there is still the inescapable paradox of telling, to convey the experience. Essaying it, giving it a go. Theorizations, interpretations, and codifications come retrospectively, even if immediately after something is made. Or perhaps before, in anticipation of something that will be made, yet never synchronously. To quote from *Begin Again, Begin Again*: “That is the theory, but our theories are untested.” Accuracy could never be ensured. But essaying is about something else.

NOTES

1. Renée Green, “Other Planes, Different Phases, My Geometry, Times, Movements,” in *Other Planes of There: Selected Writings* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 12–13.
2. I note the locations in which the historic architecture was a specifically resonant and layered component, although “place” has been an important element in all of the works. This is not the same as “site-specificity,” which I consider to be a misnomer. These distinctions are elaborated in Renée Green, “Site-Specificity Unbound: Considering ‘Participatory Mobility,’” in *Other Planes of There*, esp. 225–229.
3. Approximately twenty-six hours included in *Import/Export Funk Office*, for example.
4. *Begin Again, Begin Again* is the name of my exhibition and its accompanying film for the MAK Center for Art + Architecture at the Schindler House, West Hollywood, Calif., 2015.
5. Excerpts from a written conversation with Nicholas Korody, “Ghosts of Schindler’s Past Haunt Renée Green’s MAK Center Exhibition,” *Archinect* (Los Angeles), March 24, 2015, <http://archinect.com/features/article/123300660/ghosts-of-schindler-s-past-haunt-renee-green-s-mak-center-exhibition>.
6. Peter Sellars, foreword to Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), x–xi.



25

ESSAY DOCUMENTARY

The disembodied narrator and an unclaimed image that floats
through space and time
(2016)

REA TAJIRI

[A caption for a photo, found among thirty other photos that are part of a personal body of work left behind without much explanation; a mock-up for an unpublished photo-essay book documenting Japanese-American life in Chicago after World War II.]*

This previously “floating image” now finds itself inserted into a book of texts that describe essay documentary.

Will you allow this image to adhere to all meanings you derive from the writings in this book?

A few details become clues to location and time. Could those painted numbers, seen in reverse, lead you back to that doorway or that address?

The Silvercup Bread logo seen through the glass on the van parked outside on the street is a ghost. In Queens, New York, the Silvercup bread

*Two Kibei youths spend a few hours in a Japanese record shop, reading the Japanese papers and listening to the latest Japanese song hits, many of which show the influence of the American Occupation. Chicago, Illinois, Near North Side, ca. 1947–1955.

factory becomes the Silvercup Film Studio, one of the largest film and television studios in New York.

The nylon bomber jacket, the shape of the helmet of jet-black hair slicked with brilliantine. The white line of the part that divides the hair. The buttons on the overcoat of the man closest to the door, all carefully illuminated. The source of light? A controlled photo flood placed by the photographer.

The book in which this photo is contained seemingly floats into and out of our awareness, seen less and less as the years went by. It surfaced in old boxes, distinct due to its spiral-wire binding. It does not lay flat and demands extra room. Moments where it would be found: in a chest of built-in oak drawers in a Chicago bungalow home [built 1921, purchased in 1957 by a Japanese-American couple]. In a box placed on a shelf behind underneath a bar in a home in the San Fernando Valley (California). Moments when it was almost thrown away: several, yet the evidence of the care taken in its unusual handmade construction forced it to be considered, then kept.

A Catalog of Glances:

- | | |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1940s | The maker and author and documentarian. |
| 1950s | Imagine the glances this received! |
| 1960s | Rejecting the history depicted, it's formality was unfamiliar, seemingly forced. |
| 1970s | Adolescent repulsion, parental voices with dulcet sentimental tones. |
| 1980s | When found in a box in the garage, examined with curiosity and subtle hostility. |
| 1990s | Discomfort: a cold glance, aversion to the sentences; whose voice spoken in the text? |
| 2000s | A recognition and identification skipping generations. The images become penetrable, and reveal. |

26

FROM *TEN THOUSAND WAVES* TO LINA BO BARDI, VIA *KAPITAL* (2016)

ISAAC JULIEN

I would like to familiarize you with some of my early works. As a first instance, *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* (2007) encapsulates very well the problematics that I would like to focus on. The film was shot on location in Italy, in Agrigento Palermo (Sicily) and on Lampedusa. For quite a long time, I have been working from a geopolitical perspective, using it as a locational and poetic device. Even when I am tackling subjects that are essentially political, I try never to lose sight of the individual subjective experience, which underlies major contemporary political issues. This thinking not only influences the modes of production and display of my works, which consist mostly of multiscreen installations, but also reflects on how the themes I explore are pictured, inhabiting a poetical space that is simultaneously fiction and documentary.

This move toward an experimental and poetic orientation within documentary practice actually happened very early in my artistic life, and was very much implied by my first encounter with Chris Marker's cinema. At that time, I had just made *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), my film about the death of a young black man in police custody, and was about to make *Territories*, a more experimental documentary about carnival, race, and riots.

Over the next few years, my practice was to develop from the overtly political, to-the-point protest cry of Colin Roach, to works that attempt to collapse the binary between aesthetics and politics. This shift began with

Territories (1985). Although there were British precedents from the 1930s and 1940s for documentary films that could be poetic, formally experimental, and politically engaged, such as those by filmmakers working for the GPO Film Unit (Humphrey Jennings, Alberto Calvacanti, Harry Watt, and Basil Wright), it was the films that we saw in the black workshops that showed me the way: films like Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) and *Les statues meurent aussi* (1953) were shown alongside films like Raul Ruiz's *Hypothesis of a Stolen Painting* (1979) and Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982). Marker's films, in particular, pointed to a form of ethnography that was critical but also personal and poetic. By taking the experimental-film form and contextualizing it within the film-essay genre, *Sans Soleil* provided a model for how to bridge the two distinct filmmaking traditions of experimental film and political essayist documentary. It wasn't just neo-formalism. That, I think, has always been my problem with abstract film: that, in formal terms, it might be radical and interesting, but it was never radical enough in terms of content.

One of the questions I've been asking since making the installation *Trussed* (1996) is why make film works for a gallery context. Why make moving-image works, or films, for somewhere other than the cinema? In making *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* in 2007, I was interested in developing that question and in expanding the whole notion of the multi-screen installation work. In an increasingly troubled time of emergencies, war, and disinformation, moving images in a gallery context could represent an alternative view—one in which artistic images can play a critical role in shaping our understanding of the world, rather than merely being used as a tool for propaganda or for the art market. This is not simply a question of the number of screens—but about breaking away from the normative habits we have in exhibiting and in looking at moving images.

WESTERN UNION: Small Boats was inspired by the people who sail across the Mediterranean toward Europe—trying to escape hunger, war, and poverty—from places such as Libya. As clandestines in the new land, they become witnesses to modernity's economic failure to accomplish its promises of equality and abundance. The saddening news about refugees who are continuing to drown in the Mediterranean every day, unfortunately, show that this problem is far from being solved.

Nevertheless, *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* is not about "story-telling" as such, but about the migration and movement of people from

South to North. The installation is realized in such a way that, on the one hand, the viewer will form new, empathetic identifications, while, on the other hand, experiencing these images and experiences from an unexpected point of view: from an “other” position. It is hoped that spectators will gain a better understanding of the contexts surrounding them.

This is achieved not only through the images and surrounding sound (in 5.1 surround sound), but also through the design of the installation itself, both in terms of the way one enters the space through five or three screens and how the arrangement of images and sounds re-maps a site for witnessing journeys, which may already be familiar from the media but are now being used as the basis for a cinematic, video experience in an art-gallery context. The installation of screens and how they interrelate a work’s sound; the relationship of installation and space: all this expands the idea of a screen-projected moving-image work today.

When I came to prepare *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), I had already commissioned a poem, “Small Boats” by Chinese poet Wang Ping, to act as an anchor for some of the scenes of this new project—I often start with a poem or music and then develop images around it. Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen, a Vietnamese Canadian artist, helped me enormously; I asked her to research the myths of Mazu, a Chinese goddess who protects fishermen, and she helped make the connection between the Fujianese diaspora and traditional Chinese culture. We were looking for something that would allegorize the Morecambe Bay tragedy in 2004, when twenty-three undocumented migrant Chinese cockle fishermen were drowned by an incoming tide. Eventually, after reading many myths, Jacqueline found “The Tale of Yishan Island.”

I knew that I wanted the work to be set across different times, and specifically that I wanted a section of it to be in the 1930s. One of the working titles of *Ten Thousand Waves* was “Better Life”; I wanted part of the work be about what a “better life” meant for people in the 1930s, and then to contrast that with the search for a better life today, and how that ended in the tragedy of Morecambe Bay. In our research into Chinese film history, we discovered the silent Chinese classic *The Goddess* (1934), which is about a woman who’s struggling for a better life for her children, and who therefore works as a prostitute. Ruan Ling-yu, the actress who plays the role, was incredibly well known in China in the 1930s, and I immediately thought that Maggie Cheung would be ideal to play her—not only is she a

modern-day equivalent but she had actually starred as Ruan Ling-yu in a biopic by Stanley Kwan called *Center Stage* (1992).

In *Ten Thousand Waves*, I am also in a transcultural conversation with and contamination of 1930s Shanghaiese cinema and contemporary installation works by Chinese media artists such as Yang Fudong. This *métissage* of cinematic and contemporary art is achieved through various archival references and through a process of “suturing”; for example, Zhao Tao and Yang Fudong have tea in a sumptuous red palace, a scene that is intercut with archival footage of the Cultural Revolution, with references to literati aesthetics that were repressed by Mao. At the end of this sequence, we cut to the last story of *Ten Thousand Waves*, “The Tale of Yishan Island.” We then see the green spatial drowning sequence; Maggie Cheung as Mazu; and then finally cut to the footage from a Hong Kong documentary about the Morecambe Bay tragedy.

The intention of this montage was to suture different sequences in such a way that “past” and “present” reciprocally “look” at each other and create a critical commentary. The documentary footage thus becomes an indexical element that cuts into the reconstruction scenes of “Yishan Island” because, for me, it is important for the documentary footage to be inserted as a flash-forward in physical time, connecting China’s history of migration to the fifteenth century to the present day. In fact, “The tale of Yishan Island,” from the Ming period, is set in the past; hence this flash-forward connects this tale to the present-day events of the Chinese cockle pickers at Morecambe Bay. I feel that there is something anachronistic about prevalent ideas around migration and globalization.

With works like *Ten Thousand Waves* and *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats*, I was trying to understand what drives people to cross continents and borders in search of a better life. Each time, the same answer kept coming up: capital. That is when my project *Playtime* was set in motion. But this time, I wanted to address the subject head-on, so to speak. I wanted to try to understand this great force, which drove so many of the themes that had preoccupied me before. When I want to understand something through my work, it’s essential for me to try to picture it, whether it’s China’s present, past, and myths in *Ten Thousand Waves* or something more abstract, like high-frequency stock-market trading. What does

something look like when it can't be pictured—when invisibility is silent, so to speak? The problem with capital, as any critical theorist will tell you, is that it is abstract. For the artist, it is therefore difficult to image.

My first step in making this new work was through a public talk/performance and screening, “Choreographing Capital,” that was part of the “Wide Open School” program at the Hayward Gallery in London in 2012. I invited David Harvey, an expert on Marx’s *Das Kapital*, to be my guest. The session began when I asked him why capital is so hard to depict. He expertly summarized the problem: “In the same way you can only really intuit gravity exists by its effects, you can really only intuit that capital exists by its effects. The apple falls from the tree and you say ‘Oh, it must be gravity.’ The factory closes down and you say, ‘Ah, it must be capital.’ ”

Unlike the challenge of representing gravity, however, representing capital has become a pressing concern. In 1934, Hugo Gellert, a Hungarian American illustrator, published an abbreviated version of Marx’s *Das Kapital*. His version, *Karl Marx’ “Capital” in Lithographs*, compressed the 1,100-page text of volume 1 into 60 pages accompanied by illustrations. Some of these lithographs simply illustrate scenes, actions, or events mentioned: a man herding cattle, a farmer with a pitchfork, and a flock of sheep. Most, however, grapple with the problem of translating Marx’s ideas into images. Some literalize: concepts like “the character of labor embodied in commodities” become images of products such as clothing and chopped wood that are formed by workers’ hands. Others employ metaphor: the class struggle is conveyed in a David versus Goliath image of a heroic muscled worker staring down a much larger top-hatted capitalist as he holds a factory in his grip. Gellert’s efforts to illustrate Marx’s study of capital may well have aided comprehension of the text, but they remain in its shadow. Images in this case might complement language, but they cannot replace it: the two are mutually dependent.

Like *Ten Thousand Waves* and *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats, Playtime* is a multiscreen film installation, while *KAPITAL* is a two-screen installation. This presents me with an additional problem to those faced by Gellert: in my practice as an artist-filmmaker, the images I create have, in theory at least, an indexical relationship to the real. Forgetting CGI technology and so forth for the moment, a filmmaker can work with only

what is in front of him or her: real people, regardless of how they are costumed, and real objects, regardless of how they are altered, remain real people and real objects. That is to say, if it is far from simple to paint, draw, or sculpt an abstraction, it is even more difficult to photograph one. How would one write dialogue for what is silent? How would one direct what is incorporeal? Most important, how would one film what is invisible?

Gellert's efforts to picture capital are not alone. While editing his film *October* (1928), Sergei Eisenstein began making notes for a proposed film of *Das Kapital*. His aim was to film Marx's study so that "the humble peasant or worker can understand it." All that emerged from the project were a few pages of notes giving us tantalizing glimpses into his methods of adaptation. At one point, it seems that Eisenstein's project would take cues more from the form of Marx's study than from its content.

In his essay "The Essay Film: A New Type of Documentary Film" (1940), Hans Richter creates an interesting intersection with Eisenstein and the fact that for him, too, it is the representation of economics that propels his desire for a new form of filmmaking:

The problem starts when for a task, such as to show that "the function of the stock exchange is that of a market," reproducing the stages involved in the stock exchange exactly and in chronological order, however meticulously observed, is no longer sufficient. This is due to the fact that the function of the represented object—in this case, the stock market—is fundamentally different from that of a machine. One can read how a machine functions from A–Z right off the machine itself. However, in order to make comprehensible how the stock market functions, one must include other factors: the economy, the needs of the public, market laws, supply and demand, and so on. In other words, one cannot rely on simply photographing the object, as is the case in straightforward documentaries; instead, one has to try—by whatever means necessary—to reproduce the idea of the object. One has to try to substantiate the notion that one has of the "stock exchange as a market."¹

I would now like to return to a further point that Harvey made about capital—that it must be in constant motion. Harvey gave the example of the immediate aftermath of September 11: "Everything stopped; nothing was moving; the tunnels were shut; the bridges were closed; nothing was

happening. And that went on for about two or three days, and then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani came on TV and said to everybody, ‘For God’s sake get your credit cards out and start shopping’” This example shows how critical it is for capital to remain in motion and to what lengths governments will go in order to restart it when it stops. However, in picturing or unmasking capital, I am also interested in what keeps it moving on an everyday level: the psychology, the desire for profit.

This unstoppable movement of capital is what led me to the idea of depicting the flux of capital as choreography. Right now, this work is on display at the Venice Biennale in the exhibition *All the World’s Futures*, curated by Okwui Enwezor.² When developing the curatorial concept of the Biennale, Enwezor also invited Mark Nash and me to direct a reading of Marx’s book *Das Kapital*: “Das Kapital Oratorio.” Different from most of my projects, which have film as their main medium, this is an ambitious performance in which twelve actors have been reading the precise text of Marx’s book, enabling the spectator to experience Marx’s words in a completely unexpected way and leaving room for a range of interpretations, depending on which passages the visitor encountered.

The artworks I have discussed so far were all inspired by real characters or events, but they cannot be considered documentaries. Instead of having a fact-based approach, I choose to create more poetic depictions of regular people and compelling situations, as was the case with Morecambe Bay’s shipwreck, or ideas that shaped our way of seeing the world, as was the case with Marx’s critique of capital. This brings me to my newest research interest, the architect Lina Bo Bardi.

In 1996, while I was on holiday in Brazil, I saw Lina Bo Bardi’s work for the first time. At the Museum of Modern Art, I had the opportunity to see her emblematic staircase in Solar do Unhão. Then, in 2012, I was invited to have a solo exhibition at SESC [Serviço Social do Comércio (Business Social Service)] Pompéia, in São Paulo, one of Lina’s most meaningful projects concerning her democratic and inclusive practices. It was also at that time that I collaborated with Hans Ulrich Obrist to create an imaginary poster, *The Ghost of Lina Bo Bardi*, for an exhibition that he curated at Lina’s former residence, the Glass House. Three years later, I finally felt that the research had reached a point that enabled me to develop the poetic meditation *Stones Against Diamonds*.

The linchpin for this project on Bo Bardi is a letter written in 1986 to her husband, Pietro Maria Bardi, that she titled “Stones Against Diamonds.” In this letter, Lina tells her husband how her love for semi-precious stones began in Italy when she was still a six-year-old child collecting some small treasures, worthless in the eyes of others, and then was revived when she arrived in Brazil in the late 1940s. After her studies in art and attending architecture school, she moved on to be an editor and a writer, and then became the director of *Domus* magazine at the age of twenty-five.

My work usually develops from a comprehensive research of facts, the usual preliminaries for a regular documentary. *Stones Against Diamonds*, just like *Ten Thousand Waves* and *Playtime*, can, however, be seen as a work that calls into question what a documentary is as a format or as a genre. However, for me, questioning our understanding of history and memory is equally important. By inserting into the film images, characters, and places that were not necessarily part of what the official story tells us, I am able to extrapolate notions of reality and truth. History is something that must be rewritten as time goes by. It can and should be contested, so that new narratives emerge, and this way we are able to create new forms of identification, while learning to relate differently with our past and memory.

The first part of *Stones Against Diamonds* was shot in the Vatnajökull Glacier, the biggest glacier in Europe, as well as on Jökulsárlón beach. A character played by Vanessa Myrie moves around an ice cave, inviting us on a journey through a symbolic landscape of glaciers, rocks, and black volcanic sand—all glistening like diamonds. By inserting some of Lina Bo Bardi’s emblematic architectural elements into the cave, such as the iconic staircase and glass easels, I intended to make a connection between the simplicity of forms that was one of Bo Bardi’s signatures and the organic forms of the ice cave itself. This reminds us not only of the earth’s fragility—the melting of the glacier that carves out these caves—but also that some of the most beautiful objects are the least precious in a conventional sense. Lina Bo Bardi made these aspects of fragility and preciousness visible through both her architecture and her deep interest in Brazilian indigenous and popular cultures.

This work was presented in Venice, at Palazzo Malipiero, and in Basel, at the Kirche Elisabethen, both beautiful old buildings, but ones

that demand a very careful approach when it comes to exhibiting art in them, especially because we cannot talk about Lina without talking about architecture. When I first visited this impressive neo-Gothic church in Basel, for example, I decided that I should rethink the installation as it was shown in Venice. Instead of five screens, I needed ten screens to occupy the space, installing them in the main nave of the church. I think that an interesting conceptual transposition happened when the neo-Gothic architecture was permeated by elements of modern, brutalist design. One of the enticing characteristics of Lina's practice was that she had a great sensibility to develop her ideas in syncretic way.

There is a final aspect of Lina's practice that connects with the trajectory from *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* to *Stones Against Diamonds* that I have been outlining. Lina lived in Bahia from 1958 to 1964, when she lectured at the Bahia Federal University. In her inaugural lecture, Lina included images of prewar Italian public housing and quotes from the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's works. It is believed that this was the first time someone lectured about Gramsci in Brazil. Gramsci was an evident influence on her ideas about popular culture, on her understanding of how folklore was to be avoided, and finally on her distinction between the national and nationalism.

Another Gramscian who has influenced my work was Stuart Hall. According to him, "Gramsci had to confront the turning back, the failure, of that moment: the fact that such a moment, having passed, would never return in its old form. . . . When a conjuncture unrolls, there is no 'going back.' History shifts gears. The terrain changes. You are in a new moment."³

As an artist, I am interested in how philosophy and political theory can contribute to the understanding of culture and aesthetics, which, in turn, plays an essential role in the creation of new forms of perception. In my recent work, I have explored the many possibilities of official history versus subjectivity. I have tried to disclose what being here and now means. How can we re-signify the tragedies that have inspired such works as *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* and *Ten Thousand Waves*? How can capital and neoliberalism be seen in relation to contemporary art? And when I realized that Lina Bo Bardi's body of work was also consonant with these principles, I felt an immediate connection with her and her legacy.

NOTES

A version of this chapter was delivered in September 2015 as part of *All the World's Futures*, the fifty-sixth Venice Biennale.

1. Hans Richter, "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Art des Dokumentarfilms," in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, ed. Christa Blümlinger and Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1992) [see chapter 6, this volume].
2. *All the World's Futures* ran from May 9 to November 22, 2015.
3. Stuart Hall, "Gramsci and Us," *Marxism Today*, June 1987, 16.

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CONTRIBUTORS

A renowned member of the Frankfurt school, **Theodor W. Adorno** (1903–1969) urged the dialectical analysis of society and natural history. In “The Essay as Form,” he diverges from Georg Lukács’s focus on the ideology and concentrates even more on the form and style of the essay, opposing the systematic view of earlier philosophers like Martin Heidegger. He suggests a dialectical relationship between two cultures: the culture of science, which is empirical and factual, and the culture of art, which is irrational and idiosyncratic. According to Adorno, the essay lies between the two oppositional cultures.

Nora M. Alter is professor of comparative film and media at Temple University. She is the author of *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage* (1996), *Projecting History: German Nonfiction Cinema, 1967–2000* (2002), *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of German Culture* (2004), and *Chris Marker* (2006). Her most recent publication, *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction*, is forthcoming.

Paul Arthur was professor of English and film studies at Montclair State University, and published essays in *Artforum*, *Film Comment*, *Cineaste*, and the *Village Voice*. He served on the board of the Collective for Living Cinema and the Film-Makers’ Cooperative. His work has been collected in numerous books and catalogs, and in 2005 he published

an important collection of his essays: *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965*.

Alexandre Astruc (1923–2016) was a French film director and critic most commonly linked to his notion of the *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen) and its ability to provide filmmakers with the freedom enjoyed by writers. He championed the film club Objectif 49, which later merged with Eric Rohmer’s Ciné-club du Quartier Latin and, in turn, led to the development of *Cahiers du cinéma*. In “The Future of Cinema,” Astruc claims that cinema should move beyond spectacles and become more like a language with the possibility of essayistic expression.

The French film theorist and critic **André Bazin** (1918–1958) is best known for his complex theory of cinematic realism in cinema and the founding of the monumental journal *Cahiers du cinéma*. In his comments on Chris Marker’s *Letter from Siberia*, Bazin describes the film as an essay that contains historical, political, and poetic aspects. According to Bazin, Marker subverts the conventional image–sound hierarchy in film and adds the third dimension of “intelligence” as a dialectical approach to the representation of reality.

Raymond Bellour is a noted film and video theorist and critic; he also writes on literature. He is a research director emeritus at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in Paris. His articles on film and video have appeared in a wide variety of international publications. Among the translations of his work in English are *The Analysis of Film* (2000; *L’analyse du film* [1979]) and *Between-the-Images* (2012; *L’Entre-Images: Photo, cinéma, vidéo* [1990]). He is a founder of the film journal *Trafic*.

Max Bense (1910–1990) was a German philosopher and writer whose works are largely interdisciplinary, often including the natural sciences, art, and philosophy. In “On the Essay and Its Prose,” Bense crystallizes the implied conclusion of Georg Lukács’s “On the Nature and Form of the Essay”: the essay occupies the space between poetry and prose, between creation and persuasion. In this piece, Bense focuses on the relative and experimental nature of the essay, as opposed to the essay as

a treatise, and compares the essay to experimental physics, as opposed to theoretical physics.

Ursula Biemann is an artist, a writer, and a video essayist based in Zurich, Switzerland. Her artistic practice is strongly research oriented and involves fieldwork in remote locations where she investigates climate change and the ecologies of oil, forest, ice, and water, as in *Deep Weather* (2013) and *Forest Law* (2014). Connecting the micropolitics on the ground with a theoretical macro level, she interweaves vast cinematic landscapes with documentary footage, SF poetry, and academic findings, proposing an exploration of planetary and videographic organization. Her video installations are exhibited worldwide in museums and at international art biennials in São Paulo, Liverpool, Venice, Shanghai, Istanbul, Sharjah, and Montreal. She had comprehensive solo exhibitions at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.), Lentos Art Museum in Linz, and Helmhaus Zurich. Biemann has published several books, including *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age* (2003) and *Geography and the Politics of Mobility* (2003). Biemann was appointed Doctor honoris causa in Humanities by Umeå University in Sweden and in 2009 received the Prix Meret Oppenheim, the Swiss Grand Award for Art (geobodies.org).

Christa Blümlinger is professor of film studies at the Université Vincennes-Saint-Denis (Paris 8), where she is currently the vice director of EDESTA, the Doctoral School of Aesthetics, Sciences, and Techniques of the Arts. She has curated numerous film and video programs in Austria, Germany, and France. She is a member of the board of *Forum Expanded* (Berlinale). She has published extensively on media arts, film aesthetics, and avant-garde cinema, as the author of *Kino aus zweiter Hand: Zur Ästhetik materieller Aneignung im Film und in der Medienkunst* (2009), co-editor of *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film* (1991), and editor of writings by Harun Farocki (in French) and of Serge Daney (in German).

Timothy Corrigan is professor of English and cinema studies at the University of Pennsylvania. His books include *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (1991), *New German Film: The Displaced Image* (1994), *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (2011), and

The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker (2011), winner of the 2012 Katherine Singer Kovács Award for the outstanding book in film and media studies. In *The Essay Film*, he develops a historical approach to the essay, focused on the watershed years of the 1940s, and develops a tripartite model of subjectivity, public discourse, and thought to define the practice. In 2014, he received the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Award for Outstanding Pedagogical Achievement and the Ira H. Abrams Memorial Award for Distinguished Teaching in the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania.

Thomas Elsaesser is professor emeritus in the Department of Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam. The author and editor of some twenty books, his work has been published in most European and several Asian languages. Among his recent books are *German Cinema—Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory Since 1945* (2013), *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, 2nd rev. ed. (with Malte Hagener, 2015), *Körper, Tod und Technik* (with Michael Wedel, 2016), and *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (2016). His most recent book, *Europe, Cinema and Continental Thought*, is forthcoming.

Harun Farocki (1944–2014) was a German filmmaker, installation artist, author, lecturer on film, and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. His vast oeuvre of more than 100 titles includes feature films like *Between Two Wars* (1978), essay films such as *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989), and installations like *Serious Games I–IV* (2009–2010). He wrote several screenplays, including for Christian Petzhold's films *Barbara* (2012) and *Phoenix* (2014). He served as editor of *Filmkritik* from 1974 to 1984. His films have been widely screened internationally, and his work has been included in numerous global art exhibitions. Farocki's last project, *Labour in a Single Shot*, is conceived of concomitantly as an exhibition and an online archive.

Jean-Pierre Gorin is a French filmmaker and professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego. He is co-founder with Jean-Luc Godard of the Dziga Vertov Group and co-director with Godard of *Wind from the East* (1969), *Struggle in Italy* (1970), *Vladimir and Rosa* (1971), *Tout va bien* (1972), and *Letter for Jane* (1972). Additionally,

he has made three essay films: *Poto and Cabengo* (1978), *Routine Pleasures* (1986), and *My Crazy Life* (1991). His films have won numerous awards and prizes.

Renée Green is an artist, a writer, a filmmaker, and a professor in the Art, Culture, and Technology Program, School of Architecture and Planning, at MIT. Her exhibitions, videos, and films have been seen throughout the world in museums, biennales, and festivals. A selection of her books include *Shadows and Signals* (2000), *Between and Including* (2001), *Ongoing Becomings* (2009), *Endless Dreams and Time-Based Streams* (2010), *Other Planes of There: Selected Writings* (2014), and, as editor, *Negotiations in the Contact Zone* (2003). Green's essays and fiction have appeared in such magazines and journals as *Transition*, *October*, and *Collapse*.

Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) is known and recognized for his fiction, non-fiction, and collections of essays. His “Preface to *The Collected Essays of Aldous Huxley*” assigns three poles to the essay: the personal, the objective, and the abstract-universal. He suggests that an essay should include all three poles, and the movement among the poles creates the distinctive significance of the essay.

Isaac Julien is a Turner Prize–nominated artist and filmmaker. Earlier works include *Young Soul Rebels* (1991), which was awarded the Semaine de la critique Prize at the Cannes Film Festival; the acclaimed poetic documentary *Looking for Langston* (1989); and *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask* (1996). Julien has pioneered a form of multiscreen installations with works such as *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* (2007), *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010), and *Playtime: Kapital* (2014). In 2015, he participated in the fifty-sixth Biennale di Venezia, curated by Okwui Enwezor, with the works *Kapital* (2013) and *Das Kapital Oratorio* (2015). He has exhibited his work in major museums and institutions around the world. Julien is currently producing *The Seven Faces of Lina Bo Bardi*, a new work that is a poetic meditation on aspects of the life and architecture of Lina Bo Bardi. The first chapter of this work, *Stones Against Diamonds*, was shown during the Biennale di Venezia and at Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach. Julien is chair of Global Art at the University of the Arts London.

Phillip Lopate is a New York–based writer and critic. He is the author of four personal-essay collections, *Bachelorhood: Tales of the Metropolis* (1981), *Against Joie de Vivre: Personal Essays* (1989), *Portrait of My Body* (1996), and *Portrait Inside My Head: Essays* (2013); two novels, *Confessions of Summer* (1979) and *The Rug Merchant* (1987); two poetry collections, *The Eyes Don't Always Want to Stay Open* (1972) and *The Daily Round* (1976); a memoir of his teaching experiences, *Being with Children: A High-Spirited Personal Account of Teaching Writing, Theater, and Videotape* (1975); a collection of his movie criticism, *Totally, Tenderly, Tragically: Essays and Criticism from a Lifelong Love Affair with the Movies* (1998); an urbanist meditation, *Waterfront: A Walk Around Manhattan* (2004); and a biographical monograph, *Rudy Burckhardt: Photographer and Filmmaker* (2004). In addition, he has edited the anthologies *Journey of a Living Experiment* (1979), *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (1994), *The Anchor Essay Annual* (1997–1999), *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology* (1998), and *American Movie Critics: From Silents Until Now* (2006). His most recent book, *A Mother's Tale*, is forthcoming.

Georg Lukács (1885–1971) was a Hungarian literary theorist, critic, and philosopher who is best known for developing a model for Western Marxism. In literary criticism, Lukács's work focused on novels and their relationship to social classes. In “On the Nature and Form of the Essay,” he explores the essay, which, for him, not only approaches life through the medium of form but also views life as a form.

After working with the documentary filmmaker D. A. Pennebaker, since 1976 **Ross McElwee** has made ten feature-length documentaries as well as several shorter films. Among his most critically acclaimed are *Sherman's March* (1986), *Time Indefinite* (1993), *Six O'Clock News* (1997), *Bright Leaves* (2003), and *Photographic Memory* (2011). His films have been featured at festivals of Cannes, Berlin, London, Venice, Vienna, Rotterdam, Florence, and Sydney, and his work has been the subject of retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the American Museum of the Moving Image, as well as in Paris, Tehran, Moscow, Seoul, Lisbon, and Quito. Since 1986, McElwee has taught filmmaking at Harvard University, where he is a professor in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies.

Laura Mulvey is professor of film and media studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. She is the author of *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989, 2009), *Citizen Kane* (1992, 2012), *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996, 2013), and *Death Twenty-four Times a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006). She made six films in collaboration with Peter Wollen, including *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) and *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* (1980). With artist/filmmaker Mark Lewis, she has made *Disgraced Monuments* (1994) and *23 August 2008* (2013).

Robert Musil (1880–1942) was an Austrian writer whose unfinished novel, *The Man Without Qualities* (1940), has profoundly influenced modernist literature. The novel is in three volumes, but the last is incomplete. With its largely existential themes, *The Man Without Qualities* can be considered an expanded and extensive essay in the form of a novel. The transformation of short essay into a long novel comes from Musil's intention to grapple with the uncertainties of Western beliefs in post-World War I society. In the last part of the novel, Musil explores the essay as a way to understand what is behind the images of modern life

Laura Rascaroli is professor and co-head of the discipline of Film and Screen Media at University College Cork, Ireland, where she lectures on European and world cinema, film theory, and women's studies. She is the author of *Nanni Moretti* (with Ewa Mazierska, 2005), *Crossing New Europe: Post-modern Travel and the European Road Movie* (with Ewa Mazierska, 2006), and *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (2009).

Michael Renov is professor of critical studies and Vice Dean for Academic Affairs at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Hollywood's Wartime Woman: Representation and Ideology* (1988) and *The Subject of Documentary* (2004); editor of *Theorizing Documentary* (2015); and co-editor of *Collecting Visible Evidence* (with Jane Gaines, 1999), *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (with Erika Suderburg, 2005), *The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies* (with James Donald, 2008), and *Cinema's Alchemist: The Films of Péter Forgács* (with Bill Nichols, 2011). In 1993, Renov co-founded Visible Evidence, a series of international and highly interdisciplinary documentary studies conferences that have, to date, been held on five continents.

An artist associated with the German avant-garde movement, **Hans Richter** (1888–1976) was one of the pioneers of experimental film genre. His films include the three *Rhythmus* films (1921, 1923, 1925) as well as *Dada-scope* (1961), which contains the works of many prominent Dada artists. In “The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary Film,” Richter suggests a new genre of film, the essay film, that can materialize the abstract and, unlike documentaries, integrate the creative activity of imagination.

Lynne Sachs makes films, performances, installations, and web projects that explore the intricate relationship between personal observations and broader historical experiences by weaving together poetry, collage, painting, politics, and layered sound design. Since 1994, her essay films have taken her to Vietnam, Bosnia, Israel, and Germany—sites affected by international war—where she tries to work in the space between a community’s collective memory and her own subjective perceptions. Strongly committed to a dialogue between cinematic theory and practice, Sachs searches for a rigorous play between image and sound, pushing the visual and aural textures in her work with each new project. Supported by fellowships from the Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and Jerome Foundations and the New York State Council on the Arts, Sachs’s films have screened at the New York Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, and Images Festival in Toronto. Recently, both the China Women’s Film Festival and the Havana Film Festival programmed retrospectives of her work. Sachs teaches experimental film and video at New York University.

Hito Steyerl is a German filmmaker, visual artist, writer, and innovator of the essay film. Her principal topics of interest are media, technology, and the global circulation of images. Her films include *The Empty Center* (1998), *November* (2004), *Journal No. 1* (2007), *Lovely Andrea* (2007), *After the Crash* (2009), and *In Free Fall* (2010). Her work has been exhibited widely, and she is the recipient of numerous international prizes and awards.

Rea Tajiri is a filmmaker whose works straddle the documentary and art-film genres. Her films include *History and Memory* (1991), *Strawberry Fields* (1997), and *Lordville* (2014). She explores the effects of social, political, and emotional histories within families and across generations. Her films have been screened at the Venice Film Festival, Whitney

Biennale, Seattle Film Festival, and Los Angeles Film Festival. Her current project, *Wisdom Gone Wild*, chronicles fifteen years of caregiving for her mother, who was diagnosed with vascular dementia. Tajiri has received grants and fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, Pew Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and New York Foundation for the Arts.

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