

# THE ESSAY FILM

DIALOGUE | POLITICS | UTOPIA



EDITED BY  
ELIZABETH A. PAPAIZIAN & CAROLINE EADES

# **The Essay Film**

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# Introduction

## DIALOGUE, POLITICS, UTOPIA

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Elizabeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades

Defined by filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin as ‘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)’ (2007: 10), the essay film has emerged as a major topic in film and media studies over the past thirty years. The ‘essay film’ label has been conferred on a diverse, and ever growing, group of films that have tended to escape generic classification – including, for example, *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, Alain Resnais, 1955), *Kaneh siyah ast* (*The House is Black*, Forough Farrokhzad, 1963), *F for Fake* (Orson Welles, 1974), *Sans soleil* (*Sunless*, Chris Marker, 1983), *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, Harun Farocki, 1989), *Blue* (Derek Jarman, 1993) and *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, Agnès Varda, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Distinct from both narrative and documentary filmmaking, linked to the histories of modern literature and philosophy, and characterised by a loose, fragmentary, playful, even ironic approach, the essay film raises new questions about the construction of the subject, the relationship of the subject to the world and the aesthetic possibilities of cinema.

With its increasing presence in a continuously evolving media environment that offers new opportunities for its circulation, the essay as a visual form has necessarily become an object of intensified critical interest, engendering festivals, conferences, special issues of journals, monographs and edited collections.

Starting with Laura Rascaroli's *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (2009), followed soon after by Timothy Corrigan's *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (2011), the field has grown exponentially as the object of critical study has evolved from its origins in pre-war European avant-garde cinema to the broad appeal of the 'videographic essay' disseminated over the internet.

This book explores the essay film and its consequences for the theory of cinema, taking as a guiding principle the essay form's dialogic, fluid nature – that is, its ability to mediate or communicate among different domains in an open-ended critical engagement. Communication among and across distinct genres of filmmaking, between fiction and non-fiction, between cinema and other media (such as literature, painting, the internet), between the ostensible enunciating subject of the film and the world, or among conventional rhetorical modes of address – to name just a few possible intersections – lies at the root of the particular dynamism of the essay form. The free and 'heretical' nature of the essay (in opposition to 'orthodoxy of thought') was emphasised by Theodor W. Adorno in his 1958 analysis of the literary essay's potential as 'the critical form *par excellence*' (1984: 166). In fact, its dynamism and heterogeneity serve to reveal the versatility – even instability – of cinema as an art, ultimately taking on a metadiscursive function with regard to cinema itself in an increasingly diverse media environment.<sup>2</sup>

In this volume, authors specialising in various national cinemas (Cuban, French, German, Israeli, Italian, Lebanese, Russian, US) and critical approaches (historical, aesthetic, postcolonial, feminist, philosophical) seek to open up new approaches to the essay form in cinema while building on, engaging with, complicating and challenging existing analyses. In particular, this book reconsiders the frequent classification of the essay film as an offshoot of the documentary (albeit a self-reflexive, subjective, often subversive one); the notion of the essay as self-expression; and the determination of the essay film's historical trajectory as part and product of European post-war culture. Building on scholarly work that has already examined in depth questions of origin, historical development, genre affiliation and basic characteristics, the authors of this collection examine the potential demonstrated by essay films or the 'essayistic' – within fiction film, popular cinema and the documentary – to question, investigate and reflect on cinema.<sup>3</sup> What Rick Warner, in the current volume, calls 'the metacritical vocation of the essay film' arises through the relational and mediatory dimension of the essay film, whether conceived as a gesture to the spectator, a space between self and other, or a passage between filmmaking and criticism. The essay form is inextricably tied both to an engagement with politics, in the sense of 'dissensus' or 'the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself' (Rancière 2001),<sup>4</sup> and to a 'critique of ideology' (Adorno 1984: 166), at the same time that it longs for utopia – that is,

for an impossibility, whether conceived in aesthetic, technological, or social terms.

To consider the complex and elusive question of the essay film's specificity and definition, we propose as a starting point a broader understanding of the 'essay-istic' as a mode that can emerge from within films that otherwise belong to the realm of fiction or non-fiction, destabilising conventional distinctions of genre, mode, style and even medium. Loosening the bonds of genre, which have, in any case, never managed to contain the essay, enables a questioning of some of the fundamental assertions made about the cinematic essay (essay as documentary; essay as self-expression; essay as post-war phenomenon), in order to propose an alternate set of conditions: dialogue/metadiscourse; experiment/experience; and utopia/impossibility.<sup>5</sup>

The film essay's origins can be traced back to its literary antecedents, starting with the work of the sixteenth-century statesman and writer, Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), whose choice of the term for his book, *Essais* (*Essays*, 1580), reflects, even more clearly in French than in English, the notion of an attempt or test and, at the same time, the search for a new form. In the literary realm, the label of 'essay' has come to indicate a work that takes on ideas in a casual, even playful way that eschews professional, scientific rigour, and is often infused with details of everyday life. As Georg Lukács argued, the essay takes a concrete topic as a 'starting-point, a springboard' to a consideration of the idea behind it, but never attains 'the icy, final perfection of philosophy' (1974: 16, 1):

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 it would have been impossible. (1974: 14)

This quality of digression, of interruption, of circling around an idea without bringing it to a scientifically rigorous conclusion suggests further essential characteristics of the essay form: first, its dialogic quality – that is, its apparent address to a reader, whether a specific person or any reader. And second, its refusal of conclusions: the essay film by nature defies all notions related to totality and fixity, the whole and the completed.

The characteristics of the literary essay carry over into film form, though the translation from one medium to another creates new problems of definition. How can an audiovisual art, an art of the moving image, realise a text-based form,



and in particular, its impression of dialogic address? While many films that have been called 'essays' rely for this effect on an apparently singular speaking subject in a documentary mode and, in particular, the 'commentator-*acousmètre*' (Chion 1999: 21) of the voice-over, others display plural intentions that intersect and overlap in a mutual undermining of authority through montage (including sound montage).<sup>6</sup> In other words, while there is a clear overlap between the essay film and what has been called first-person documentary, these two modes of filmmaking are not identical.

The essay's engagement with politics, its metadiscursive aspect, and the frequent use of voice-over have all contributed to an association of the cinematic essay not only with nonfiction cinema, but with verbal or literary language, whether spoken or written.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, both the notion of 'trying out' new approaches and the importance of montage as (dialogic) essayistic method have created a sense that the essay film is a branch of experimental cinema. But the essay film cannot be equated with experimental cinema any more than it can be slotted into a subcategory of documentary. Essayistic experimentation ('trying out'), like essayistic dialogue, encompasses both form and ideas; the ideas themselves may be developed through image, sound or word, and often all three.

Along these lines, Sergei Eisenstein used the term 'essay' in 1927 in his notes as a way to describe his own *October* (*Oktiabr*', 1928) and to locate it within the 'dialectical development' of his work from *Strike* (*Stachka*, 1924) onward, towards its projected culmination in filming Marx's *Capital*:

After the drama, poem, ballad in film, *October* presents a new form of cinema: a collection of essays on a series of themes which constitute [the] October [Revolution]. Assuming that in any film work, certain salient phrases are given importance, the form of a discursive film provides, apart from its unique renewal of strategies, their rationalization which takes these strategies into account. Here's a point of contact already with completely new film perspectives and with the glimmers of possibilities to be realized in *Capital*, a new work on a libretto by Karl Marx. A film treatise. (1976: 4)<sup>8</sup>

In what sense can *October* be considered 'a collection of essays'? Later in his notes, Eisenstein quotes a review that extols the sequence of raising the bridge as 'one of the most brilliant passages' in the film, and explains this is so 'because film language is completely revealed' in that sequence (1976: 11). Eisenstein's connection of film essay to 'discursive film' and to 'film language' in *October* signals his commitment to montage as film thinking, and specifically to the dialectical shape of film thinking. Thus, as Annette Michelson has pointed out, 'for Eisenstein, as

for Marx, “not only the result, but the road to it also, is a part of the truth. The investigation of truth must itself be true, true investigation is unfolded truth, the disjunct members of which unite in the result” (1976: 30, citing Eisenstein citing Marx). The dialogue of the literary essay is replaced by the movement of the dialectic of film form. If the endpoint is the utopian, unattainable ‘film treatise’, *Capital*, then the essay embodies the unrealisable attempt at that impossible endpoint, the fragments of an impossible totality.

In this sense, an alternate lineage of the essay film can be proposed. Corrigan has asserted a clear historical moment for the essay film, locating its origins in the post-World War II era, at the time of the establishment of film studies as an academic discipline and of the phenomenological turn in film theory – that is, a time of historical and representational crisis in the aftermath of the modern project’s failure. While many of the contributors to this volume associate the essay film with historical, technological and/or aesthetic crisis, it is possible to argue, as Nora M. Alter has done, for an essayistic tendency in the interwar period, associated with the avant-garde, in other words, an earlier time of crisis (2007: 49).<sup>9</sup> This tendency evolves alongside the impetus towards aesthetic experimentation that arises with every new technological innovation. The French filmmaker Germaine Dulac similarly alluded to the coexistence of crisis and technological development in the interwar period: ‘A *film d’essai* is not necessarily good. Made with improvised resources, it is often less perfect than films produced in regular circuits, but it always includes a principle of renewal and spiritual research that is worth encouraging and remembering’ (1994: 168; our translation).

Thus the post-war appearance of the essay film might be placed into context as a nodal moment in which, like the interwar period before it, the availability of new technologies intersected with a perceived crisis of representation in the face of political upheaval, leading to the emergence of new artistic forms, and forms that answered political as well as aesthetic needs.<sup>10</sup> It is worth considering whether our current historical moment, in which the essay form has entered a new stage of accessibility on the internet, can be understood as such a nodal point. However, while underlining the potential of the essay film to subvert ideology on a global level, this collection does not aspire to provide a global or world cinema survey of the essay film. Rather, it seeks to challenge the stereotype of essay film as a subjective expression of a politics of identity, whether defined through gender, nation, geography or ethnos; and to provide a theoretical analysis of the possibilities of the essay form in cinema (including its often troubled intersection with autobiographical intention), an undertaking that necessarily examines both the ‘classics’ of the essayistic mode and the many variations that continue to develop with the evolution of cinema itself.

This book is organised around three areas of enquiry corresponding to the set of conditions discussed above: dialogue/metadiscourse; experiment/experience; and utopia/impossibility. Part One, 'The Essay Film as Dialogue', demonstrates the unique capacity of the essayistic to create connections and tensions while probing the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, subject and object, narration and reflection, image and thought, whole and fragment, stasis and movement. In shifting the emphasis from the essay film's affinity with the documentary to its metadiscursive aspect, we consider the essay form in experimental as well as narrative cinema, locating the essayistic precisely in the passages, or interstices, between realms. Timothy Corrigan's contribution explores the way that the essay form can emerge within the framework of a mainstream fiction film by means of what he calls 'essayism' – that is, the incursion of an 'intellectual and structural detour' into the construction of a film narrative. Rick Warner examines the encounter between the essay and narrative film from the opposite side, considering the way that one of the most fundamental devices of popular cinema, shot/countershot editing, becomes enmeshed as a process of 'essaying' – both in the representation of dialogue and in the practice of montage – in the work of two of the best-known practitioners of the essay form, Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki. Martine Beugnet expands the scope of study outside the cinema proper to a dialogue between two disciplines. Tracing the dialogue in film and text between filmmaker Claire Denis and philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, she reveals how the essayistic project of each author is embodied as an 'intrusion' into more recognisable textual or cinematic forms. Finally, the editors of this volume consider a dialogue across time and space between two canonical documentary filmmakers, Jean Rouch and Dziga Vertov, through their best-known and least-categorisable films, *Chronicle of a Summer (Paris 1960)* (1961) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Arguing that both films rely on a dialogic structure that attempts to overcome the divide between subject and object, this chapter suggests that fragmentation, indeterminacy and failure might be as intrinsic to the fabric of the essay film as the notion of an attempt.

Part Two, 'The Essay Film as Politics', shifts the enquiry to the political potential of the essay film, examining the tension between its subjective enunciation and public engagement and taking into consideration its impact, across borders and cultures, as a form of potential subversion, protest and assertion of the self into the polis. Here, the connection between essayistic form and crisis is explored in relation to the attempt at 'think[ing] the possibility of a political subject(ivity)' (Rancière 2001). To this end, Luca Caminati examines the 'open' structure of

Pier Paolo Pasolini's 'Notes' films, which interweaves cinematic modes into a fluid aesthetic experiment that both reproduces and provides a possible model for a transnational revolutionary universalism. Eric Zakim probes the possibilities (and limits) of subjective expression in film through an analysis of Chris Marker's 1960 essay film on Israel, *Description of a Struggle*, arguing that the essay film fails at its attempt, through cinematic form, to escape 'the imposition of finite, imposed meanings on the objects of place and history'. Anne Eakin Moss contemplates the essay film's potential, as a form based in 'rupture and critique', for a feminist politics through a close reading of several films by Chantal Akerman. She argues that Akerman's films investigate the nature of the cinematic encounter with the world as a project that registers the filmmaker's presence and effect on that world. With a similar focus, Mauro Resmini considers the problem of crisis – aesthetic, political and psychological – as constitutive of the essayistic project of two films by Nanni Moretti, *Palombella rossa (Red Wood Pigeon)*, 1989) and *La cosa (The Thing)*, 1990). But the attempt to integrate crisis into a coherent, rational interpretation of history results in a remainder that cannot be assimilated: the 'desire for collectivity'.

Such utopian desire, whether political, interpersonal, technological or aesthetic, becomes the focus of Part Three, 'The Essay Film as Utopia'. The chapters in this section explore impossible attempts at articulating stability and coherence; for example: the promise of subjective expression and of direct communication with the spectator through and in the essay film (see Rascaroli 2009: 15); the potential of essayism to undermine authoritarian discourse; or the possibility of achieving, through filmmaking, an authentic life. Laura U. Marks considers the Civil War trilogy (1998–2002) of Lebanese filmmaker Mohamed Soueid through the lens of 'atomism', a model of immanence drawn from an ancient strain of Islamic thought through which, Marks argues, films approach the unencompassable and unknowable subject – engaging with politics indirectly, through a consideration of its fragmentary singularities. In his discussion of Cuban filmmaker Nicolás Guillén Landrián's films, Ernesto Livon-Grosman reveals how the ambiguous functions of documentary within Cuba's state-controlled institution of cinema are subverted by means of the technique of *détournement*, borrowed from French thinker and filmmaker Guy Debord, in order to challenge the didacticism of a militant cinema that had been appropriated by the state. Oliver Gaycken shifts the focus to the project of 'living deliberately' through domestic occupations. Triangulating among the amateur filmmaking of Richard Proenneke, the avant-garde essay films of Jonas Mekas, and the American essayist Henry David Thoreau, he argues for a specifically American tendency of the essay film that aims to transform perception through the revelation of the experience of the everyday. A more

sceptical position is taken by Luka Arsenjuk, in the concluding chapter of this volume, where he examines the recent trend of the ‘new videographic tendency’ and its utopian aspiration to reconcile criticism and cinephilia. In considering the possibilities of the videographic essay, Arsenjuk argues for formal reflexivity – which paradoxically points towards the ‘impossibility of the reflected thing to ever simply coincide with itself’ – as decisive for the essayistic.

Finally, an afterword by Laura Rascaroli reflects on the ethical dimension of the essay film.

Given the subversion of nearly all accepted aesthetic boundaries in the essay form, it seems that the essayistic in film – as process, as experience, as experiment – also opens the road to its own subversion, as a form of dialectical thought that gravitates towards crisis. Thus it fosters the development of new forms, ranging from avant-garde experiments to experimentation within narrative cinema, and actively supports the emergence of inquisitive gestures as an intrinsic component of cinema as an art.

## Notes

- 1 As Andrew Tracy has emphasised, the essay film is ‘an appealingly simple formulation [that] has proved both taxonomically useful and remarkably elastic, allowing one to define a field of previously inassimilable objects’, and whose evolving definition is ‘an invention and an intervention’ (2013: 44).
- 2 Along these lines, film critic and video essayist Kevin B. Lee has recently suggested that the essay film ‘may serve as a springboard to launch into a vital investigation of knowledge, art and culture in the 21st century, including the question of what role cinema itself might play in this critical project: articulating discontent with its own place in the world’ (2013).
- 3 See, for example, Richter 1992 [1940]; Bazin 2009 [1958]; Liandrát-Guigues and Gagnebin 2004; Ofner 2007; Bellour 2011; Kramer and Tode 2011; Lebow 2012; Blümlinger (2015); Koch (2015); Leslie (2015).
- 4 ‘Politics is not the exercise of power. Politics ought to be defined on its own terms, as a mode of acting put into practice by a specific kind of subject and deriving from a particular form of reason. It is the political relationship that allows one to think the possibility of a political subject(ivity) [*le sujet politique*], not the other way around’ (Rancière 2001).
- 5 Michael Renov notes the ‘resistance to generic encirclement’ (2004: 72) of essayistic works; Laura Rascaroli begins her examination of the essay film by stating that ‘we should resist the urge to ... crystallize [the essay film] into a genre’

- (2009: 2); and Réda Bensmaïa suggests that ‘the essay is not *a* genre like any other, and perhaps not a *genre* at all’ (1987: 91–2).
- 6 Catherine Lupton elaborates on the potential of the essayistic voice-over to ‘[undermine] from within the notorious authority of the singular, omniscient, voice-of-God documentary narrator’ (2011: 159).
  - 7 Alexandre Astruc’s notion of a ‘camera-pen’ has been one of the foundational concepts of the interpretation of the essay film. Nora M. Alter explores ‘other ways of thinking the essay film’ that go beyond the ‘logocentrism’ of many interpretations by focusing on music, suggesting that sound can create a ‘layered history of meanings’ in the cinematic essay (2011: 175, 185).
  - 8 The notion of a cinematic essay form recurs in Béla Balázs’s *Spirit of Film* (1930), in a section about Soviet cinema called ‘Montage Essays’ (2010: 185). In Russian, the available terms for ‘essay’ (*esei*, *ocherk*) do not carry the same etymological resonance as in French or English of an attempt; the Russian term *esei* is simply borrowed directly from French, and the term *ocherk* comes from the word ‘sketch’, which conveys a similar sense of incompleteness, but not the precise connotation of ‘attempt’. However, Eisenstein read widely in German, English and French, and often used foreign words in his writings: in this case he actually wrote the word ‘Essays’ in English, putting it into quotation marks which, along with his description of the film as ‘glimmers of possibilities’, suggests his awareness of its resonance.
  - 9 Alter argues for ‘a genealogy of the audio-visual essay [that] begins in the 1920s when the genres of feature and documentary were settling into their formal categories’ and appears as ‘essayistic traces ... with increasing frequency in films of the 1920s’ (2007: 49), though the tendency is formally theorised only in 1940, with Hans Richter’s manifesto, ‘The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film’. Alter also associates the essay form with ‘moments of crisis – political and representational’ (2007: 48).
  - 10 Jean Epstein recognised this when he wrote that ‘in certain aspects the evolution of cinematographic dramaturgy and poetry develops slowly and continuously; in other cases, it proceeds through sudden transformations. But the technical and artistic transformations of profitable films follow a path already paved by either knowingly or unwittingly daring trials [...]. There are commercial failures that are the pilots for commercial success because they lead by accident or experimentally show the way to develop the cine-analysis from one optimal profit to another’ (2012 [1955]: 344).

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# **PART ONE**

The Essay Film as Dialogue

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# Chapter 1

## Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative

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Timothy Corrigan

The essay, the essayistic and essayism represent three related modes that, at their core, test and explore subjectivity as it encounters a public life, and, in this action, they generate and monitor the possibilities of thought and thinking through that public life. The essay and essay film might be considered rhetorical organisations or structures; the essayistic an inflection or tactic within another primary practice; and essayism a dissipation or intellectual pause of that primary practice. In their relations to other practices – and for my purposes specifically to narrative – each of the three represents different representational ratios: *assimilative*, whereby the structure and perspective of the essay supercede and assimilate other representational organisations; *inflective*, whereby the essayistic defines and distinguishes, as it defers to, another practice; or *digressive or dissipative*, whereby essayism intervenes within and disrupts those traditional practices and their positionings.

The present chapter draws on the third mode, and aims to describe and argue a way in which the heritage and distinctions of the essay take a somewhat different form and path from those described more essentially by the essay film. I have argued elsewhere that the essayistic ‘assimilates and thinks through other forms, including narrative forms, different genres, lyrical voices’ (2011: 35). Here I wish to investigate how, in a significantly different way, essayism puts that thinking into play as an intellectual and structural detour within the presiding shape of a contemporary film narrative, as a figurative disruption or digression that questions, at its heart,

the experiential mode of film narrative itself. To be more specific and schematic, essayism questions the organisational knowledge of film narrative: i) through the disintegration of narrative agency; ii) through the exploration of the margins of narrative temporality as history; and iii) through the questioning of the teleological knowledge that has conventionally sustained and shaped narrative.

This framework and focus emerge from my work with the essay film proper, where I examined a specific kind of essay film that interrogates and pursues questions of cinematic value. Borrowing the term 'refraction' that André Bazin uses to discuss cinematic adaptations, I have described this particular brand of essay films – which include Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990) and Lars von Trier's *The Five Obstructions* (2003) – as *refractive* essays that reflexively examine the changing values of modern cinematic images (2011: 181–204). Although films which incorporate essayism do not fit, strictly speaking, into the category of essay film, they can be considered, I argue, a version of a film practice whereby essayism inhabits narrative in a way that generates complex reflections on the representational values embedded within their narrative organisations.

A critical touchstone for this model of narrative essayism is Thomas Harrison's study of the novels of Joseph Conrad, Robert Musil and Luigi Pirandello, titled *Essayism* (1992). In this investigation, Harrison examines how the very different narratives of these very different novelists mobilise essayism as a mode of epistemological reflexivity on the perspectives and structures of the narratives themselves. According to Harrison, in these cases: 'Not only does the essay give shape to a process preceding [narrative] conviction, and perhaps deferring it forever. More important, it records the hermeneutical situation in which such decisions are made. For this reason the essay ultimately requires novelistic form, which can portray the living condition in which thought is tangled' (1992: 4). Essayism thus initiates an '*immanent* critique of ... [the] norms and structures' of the narrative, whose 'hermeneutics of suspicion turns inward, toward the objectifications defining the active subject', the agent of its narrative (1992: 10, 12; emphasis in original). Showing 'that the real story' is 'the story of *interpreting* the story', narrative essayism foregrounds a 'process of derealization' caused not by a characterological flaw in a protagonist but rather by the disturbance and implosion of those structures – ideas, values, facts, judgments, and laws [...] that define the truth of the everyday' (1992: 17, 47; emphasis in original).

This question of interpretation and value thus becomes arguably the inevitable, necessary and elusive concern of narrative essayism, aligning its encounter with what Hermann Broch terms the 'gnosiological novel', a narrative structure, perspective and strategy that focuses 'its investigations on the very possibilities of knowledge and its worth within narrative' (1992: 17). Later Milan Kundera

would expand on Broch's model in a way that describes essayism in terms of the 'unachieved': 'All great works contain something unachieved,' he writes, and this unachieved 'can show us the need for i) a new art of *radical divestment* (which can encompass the complexity of existence in the modern world without losing architectonic clarity); ii) a new art of *novelistic counterpoint* (which can blend philosophy, narrative, and dream into one music); iii) a new art of the *specifically novelistic essay* (which does not claim to bear an apodictic message but remains hypothetical, playful or ironic)' (2008: 63, 65; emphasis in original).

Moving this model of essayism to the cinematic encompasses numerous films with little else in common than this divergent incorporation of an essayism that acts as a digressive critique embedded within the struggle to narrate. As with other prominent tendencies in the post-war history of the essay film, French cinema of the 1960s features early examples, including *Hiroshima mon amour* (1960) directed by Alain Resnais from a screenplay by Marguerite Duras, and Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963), and these in turn have generated a variety of international films that continue the exploration and interrogation of film narrative from within the pull of narrative, including Glauber Rocha's *Antonio das Mortes* (1969), Helke Sanders' *Die Allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit - Redupers* (*The All-Round Reduced Personality*, 1978) and virtually all of Peter Greenaway's work.

These and more recent films mobilise essayism to question, most broadly, 'what counts' in contemporary film and media culture as they investigate how contemporary films engage – implicitly or often explicitly – problems of imagistic and narrative value in culture, how movies can and do question our ways of seeing through movies, and how the dynamics of cinematic looking can become a measure of value. To borrow Wallace Stevens' phrase, these films fracture and intensify narrative images in order 'to make the visible a little hard to see': that is, to see beyond the teleologies and agencies of narrative, to move intelligence beyond the frames of vision, and to question the use-value that increasingly defines the imagistic logic of new and old media today.

My two recent examples will be Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* and Lech Majewski's *The Mill and the Cross*, both released in 2011, both engaged with and questioning – not coincidentally, I think – a dominant Judeo-Christian narrative as the foundation of knowledge, and both operating on the edges of conventional narrative form.<sup>1</sup> While Malick's film locates essayism as a movement beyond the boundaries of various narrative frames where a perceptual 'grace' expands, Majewski's film configures its essayism as an arresting of narrative movement that concentrates an intellectual and emotional insight within those frames. As works that integrate essayism into their stories, both films open pressing questions about the implicit value of the narratives and cinematic images that they mobilise.

## Looking Away: Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*

*The Tree of Life* is an oblique adaptation of that pivotal epistemological tree in the biblical book of Genesis (and, less centrally, the book of Job), as well as a deflected adaptation of Darwin's evolutionary tree in *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Aimed at significantly redefining the limits of those two trees, the first representing an absolute knowledge and the second a scientific knowledge, Malick's film explores a narrative history in which knowledge comes to have much less to do with certain truth or evolutionary progress and much more to do with reflective ruptures of and branchings out of those earlier narrative visions, looking instead through and beyond both those frameworks.

Two patterns inform and contend in this tale of a post-World War II family tree: on the one hand, experience appears through perspectives based in appropriation, individuation and circulation and, on the other, experience provides perspectives based in adaptation, de-individuation and valuation. The intersection of these two developmental schemes propels the film's narrative in a way that continually seems to resist its own narrative logic, pulling away from that narrative in what I would describe as a 'looking away' from the subjectivities and narrative developments that anchor it, and so engaging its world on the essayistic edges of or outside the frames of conventional narrative. For good reason, my reading is fascinated by that evolutionary raptor in the film who, during an astonishing animated sequence, moves ominously towards and then away from its potential prey – signaling and then swerving away from a Darwinian logic of appropriative conquest (and from the spiritual beginning aligned with an Old-Testament Genesis).

*The Tree of Life* is a paratactic narrative of fragments whose primary vehicle and drifting agent is the son Jack O'Brien and his perhaps coming of age between nature and grace, between the heritage of his father and that of his mother. For the father, life is about boundaries, control and the 'ownership of ideas'. He is appropriately an inventor obsessed with use-value, rather than a creator of use-less value, who struggles for survival while haunted by his lost potential and path as a pianist. Shaped by a vision of a linear plot and a horizontal perception, his will to control and to 'propertise' human relations often desperately drives those familial relationships forward. Unsettling this vision from the outset, however, the very beginning of the film flashes the narrative forward to the traumatic death of one son, a trauma that irrevocably troubles the father's agency and the genesis of the narrative that precedes and follows it. Conversely, Mrs. O'Brien shows Jack the way of grace, a way that opens emotionally onto a world into which she longs to surrender the agency of personal control and direction. She drifts



Fig. 1: Looking askance towards essayistic space: *The Tree of Life* (Terrence Malick, 2011)

longingly through events and lives with a perspective that continually looks vertically askance into essayistic spaces and skies beyond the frames of her home and the frames of the image.

The binary couplings that describe this and other Malick films accordingly include the push and pull between the logic of narrative and the space of essayism, between an anthropomorphic frame and its off-screen space, between continuity edits and unexpected temporal cuts. Within the tension of his two parental perspectives, Jack and his story struggle for coherence, mapped as de-centered and fragmented flashbacks that, rather than orchestrating the past, pull the characters and their stories away from a narrative progression. With these two directions ‘wrestling inside’ him, Jack’s identity continually digresses from, rather than evolves through, visions and images of appropriation, individuation and circulation. He inhabits, in my terms, the spaces of essayism on the fringes of narrative, as he moves in and out of an open and fluid world defined by adaptation, de-individuation and valuation.

*The Tree of Life* and Jack’s life specifically thus create an image of spreading evolution that deflects both expressivity and subjectivity. Most sensationally seen in those swirling undefined images that punctuate the film and its twenty-minute sequence of ‘unseeable images’ in outer space, the characters and especially Jack attempt to ‘shape their own [evolutionary] autobiography from out of a cosmic bath of image and sound, the vastness of which repeatedly threatens the discrete shape of individual autobiography itself’ (Rybin 2012: 176). Rather than locate a linear connection between past, present and future, the narrative flashbacks in *The Tree of Life* become a search for a genesis – or more accurately many geneses – which might be better described as disruptive recollections that never adequately



collect and circulate, as fractured and drifting images and moments producing not evolutionary lines but the spreading reflective branches of essayism.

Pulling away from narrative becomes, at its most extreme moments, a devolution without direction, an essayistic deviation that describes graphically a 'looking away' across frames and boundaries as a radically distinctive mode of knowledge. Within the frames of the home, Jack's desires and looks continually wander past the edges of his social and epistemological borders: on the fringes of his story are experiential detours into an awkward and uncomfortable encounter with an African-American community, a vague and secret exploration of his sexual crush on a young neighbour girl, and strange and unsettling sightings of criminals or physically disabled figures on the edges of his vision. If the frames of the homes in the film offer the possibility of a dwelling and place, those frames are dramatically porous – just as the boundaries of Jack's youthful perspective and the direction of his looks never stay still as they search the air for thought. Indeed, punctuating and infusing much of the film is the luminescence of this other world eliciting new ways of thinking, created through lighting which Malick and others have commonly called the 'magic hour', the hour when, for instance, the source and centrality of the sun dissipates through and beyond the earth's horizon and the focus of the frame.

Stylistically, the editing, oblique eye-line perspectives, elliptical cuts and visual compositions dramatise the unlocatable fragments of longing, jouissance, violence and ultimately thought: the unassimilable, the undirected, the unexpected, the affective, the essayistic. Even as an adult, Jack, the architect, creates and explores architectural spaces that are both open and closed within the transparent and reflective surfaces of soaring skyscrapers. He inhabits and sees through modernist buildings with sharp angles and geometric framings, spaces and shapes that contrast dramatically not only with the spaces and shapes of his desires and the world of nature that surrounds him but also with the strained expressions of his meditative and intensified close-ups.

Looking away in *The Tree of Life* means especially a looking away from haunting humanistic questions about loss and violence, questions whose answers cannot be found within the frameworks of evolutionary appropriation and expressive individuation but only in an adaptive inclusiveness that looks according to and accepts a multi-directionality beyond the frame. At one point, for instance, a voice questions 'What was it you showed me?' and the shot then opens up through a crane reverse pull above branches of trees under which boys are playing. If evolution describes a progressive and horizontal dialectic in which questions produce answers, Malick offers questions only to have them visually and inadequately answered by a verticality that expands and dissipates human

play through imagistic branches that point well beyond the frame of that play. As Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit write about those questions, their value, and the individual in Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), 'Language raises questions ... which language may be inherently unable to answer [...] [T]he preponderance of the interrogative mode itself [through voice-overs] foreclose[s] the possibility of discursive solutions', thus becoming a 'reworking of the individual within a new relational ethic'; more to my point: the 'looking is simultaneous with the asking; they are juxtaposed modes of reacting to the world. Juxtaposed, but not equal in value; the film enacts the image's superior inclusiveness over the word. Looking at the world doesn't erase questions about the world, but it does inaccurately replicate those questions as a viable relation to the world' (2008: 134–5; emphasis in original). In my revision of this point for *The Tree of Life*, looking away dramatises an essayistic movement into Kundera's notion of the 'unachieved', a digressive dissipation that discovers the value in images that open beyond themselves and beyond their appropriative, evolutionary and circulating value. The determination of value now turns toward its adaptive transformation of individuation into something beyond individuation.

In a film where windows, doors and portals regularly map and insistently demarcate the control of spaces and the limits of perspectives – such as Jack's odd punishment of having to repeatedly close a screen door in one peculiar scene – the perplexing final sequence of *The Tree of Life* may describe the utopian fantasy of looking away from and through the gateways of the family evolution that has haunted Jack, a fantasy of a pure essayism beyond the borders of any narrative frame. Jack climbs through a fragile, illusionary portal unsupported by walls onto an open landscape where the family and friends from his life wander and drift



Fig. 2: A utopian essayism exceeding the portals of the frame.

through a world seemingly without borders. Here, those essayistic directions and mis-directions find, perhaps, some sort of redemption only by exceeding the portal of the frame and adapting that paratactic community that could never be contained in it or in any evolutionary narrative. This is a world that, for Jack and for us, has been and still is very hard to see – except, perhaps, by rejecting the exhaustion of appropriative looking and by adapting, instead, to the essayistic wonder of not fully seeing the world before us.

### Insight Within the Frame: Lech Majewski's *The Mill and the Cross*

Making the visible difficult to see as an epistemological provocation moves in a very different direction in *The Mill and the Cross*, where the grand narrative that essayism disrupts and interrogates is the story of Christ's crucifixion, a narrative Majewski encounters as an embedded image within Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1564 painting *The Way to Calvary*. Famously substituting Spanish Inquisition soldiers for the Roman centurions of history, Bruegel's painting depicts that grand narrative amidst an excess of daily events and figures that surround and immerse the almost invisible crucifixion, which the film then drifts through, investigates and reflects on as both an interrogation and mediation.

As a counterpoint to Malick's integration of essayism as a movement outside the frames of vision, Majewski's film instead concentrates on vision as a difficult insight within the extraordinary narrative complexity of the frame itself, an insight that works to overcome the essayistic distractions of the incidental permeating the narrative. In collaboration with Michael Gibson's (2000) book-length essay about Bruegel's painting, the film brings the painting to digital life by dramatising and reframing the excess of incidents spread across the painting as a cinematic movement (achieved by replicating Bruegel's scene as a backdrop and digitally filming the actors in front of it). As the soldiers of the Spanish Inquisition appear and disappear across the Flemish landscape in the film, daily life awakens with children playing, merchants selling their wares and a myriad of other figures and events that surround various brutal executions, with the crucifixion of Christ becoming the focus of the film only at its midpoint. Overseeing all these events, distractions and brutalities are the mill and the miller, described as 'the great miller of the heaven', whose grinding machinery perches above Bruegel's world and propels the narrative of the painting as movement.

Essayism emerges here on the digressive and unstable margins of that narrative but in a manner distinctly different from Malick's essayism. Bringing Bruegel's painting to cinematic life, the narrative of the film destabilises narrative

temporality, slipping anachronistically between past, present and future, shifting between the crucifixion of Christ, Bruegel's adaptation of it within the sixteenth-century persecutions in Flanders, and the present and future impact of the painting displayed on the walls of Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. These shifts and slippages in turn unsettle and disperse narrative agency in the film, as they merge and expand different figures across the identification of multiple everymen and women (including Christ) to create a kaleidoscope of narrative agents. At the centre of this kaleidoscope, Bruegel himself enters the frame to contemplate the world he labours to represent as the primary but troubled creator of its story.

As an essayist in dialogue with his interlocutor and art patron, Nicolaes Jonghelinck, Bruegel explains and comments on how to make and understand his imagistic stories, noting that the painting (and film he is now part of) 'will tell many stories ... and it should be large enough to hold everything'. He will accordingly 'work like a spider', the figure of a dispersive essayist entangling the Christ event at the centre of his imagistic web as he explores and tests the pathways of the world that surrounds and contains it.

In both Bruegel's painting and Majewski's film, narrative and the value it may have traditionally offered as a kind of knowledge become scattered and potentially lost in a space of distraction in which numerous perspectives and framings mirror the narrative misdirections and interruptions that destabilise the story. The film specifically recreates the seven or eight perspectives in the painting to redirect the linearity of any narrative path, just as the painting refuses the perspectival coherence of a Quattrocento point of view. As a variation on Lev Manovich's painterly effect (2001: 295, 305–6, 324, 327–8), the digital layering



Fig. 3: Bruegel as the troubled creator of an imagistic narrative: *The Mill and the Cross* (Lech Majewski, 2011)



Fig. 4: Stopping the mill to wrestle the moment to the ground.

through the film creates internal frames – through the many doorways, windows and passageways – as distinctive planes of interaction across which it becomes difficult to maintain a focus on an action or figure, or to coordinate an interpretation within the larger frame. For instance, at one point Christ's grieving mother Mary stands sharply outlined by a windowframe through which she peers across the different planes of Bruegel's landscape, where actions overlap and the dominating mill almost disappears. Within the different frames and planes of these moving distractions and conflicting perspectives, the film seeks, most importantly, to put pressure on the difficulty of seeing within its narrative spaces and to inject the strained act of conceptual essayism or essayistic reflection into the tragic and brutal activity of the narrative, so as to generate thought as a literal 'insight'.

Indeed, the key moment in the film occurs when Bruegel tells his patron Jonghelinck: 'If only time could be staid and we could wrestle the moment onto the ground.' That moment occurs precisely when Bruegel signals the miller to suddenly stop the movement of the mill which in turn arrests the movement of a narrative immersed in webs of distraction. This is the moment that Bruegel would paint and that Majewski narrates as a multi-layered 'tableau vivant'. This is the crystallised and concentrated moment of essayism that arrests narrative mobility and a temporality of distraction in order to create within the frame a moment of thought as insight. In a flash of insight, with the stoppage of the mill, the distractions of our worldly narratives become supplanted by a vision and idea of human compassion within the web of human suffering. If Walter Benjamin's 'Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility' famously championed, in the 1930s, the new art of film for its potential to open its frame to the productive

experience of public distraction, *The Mill and the Cross* redirects the viewer to the complex insights, as essayistic concentrations, that could and should be pursued within that often distracting frame.

This is, as Majewski claims, no ‘traditional narrative’ but a ‘contemplative and philosophical’ project (2012). If conventional narrative knowledge promises a signifying organisation of time and space through the coherence of the agency that constructs it, here the instability of the knowledge demands new ways of knowing the world and our experience of it, new forms of concentration and insight found through the complex dialogic of the essayistic. Majewski reframes that narrative perspective within a digital landscape that insists on the imperative to see within it, arresting and refocusing the narrative as an essayistic insight. Whereas in Malick’s film, the digital becomes, to put it simply, a way to represent the unseeable and unrepresentable beyond the frame of a narrative, in *The Mill and the Cross*, Majewski concentrates vision within the narrative to force or elicit thought and reflection as a conceptual and emotional pause. In the conclusion, *The Mill and the Cross* shifts to and pans out from the painting ‘The Way to Calvary’ as it hangs in a Vienna museum; the film then pauses to concentrate on the image as the vortex of a narrative that draws the minds and eyes of a myriad of modern viewers, now perhaps drawn to the hard task of witnessing the essence of its thought.

## Conclusion: Narrative Essayism and Cinematic Value

Cinematic value has of course never been simply a textual issue, and has always been subject to multiple social, historical and industrial criteria. More visibly than most practices perhaps, films have always relied ‘upon categories and classifications, because to value means to rank or rate in an actual or imagined pecking order [...]. This is the case whether value constitutes cost, tone, quality, morality, pleasure or passion’ (Hubner 2011: 1). The contemporary media context for *The Tree of Life*, *The Mill and the Cross* and other films is, however, a culture in which making sense of cinematic images has dramatically shifted away from the conventional markers of filmic value. Today imagistic value has become increasingly perceived in terms of an advancing and converging circulation whereby computer screens, fan networks, iPhones, and other digital platforms recycle communications and materials across the globe. Through the appropriative power of these many spectatorial screens and frames, personal or social narratives can now reclaim images and stories as other personal or social use-values that seem to trump – for better or worse – traditional, often hierarchical questions of meaning and value. As Henry Jenkins’ work (notably *Convergence Culture* from 2008) has

forcefully argued, the rapid expansion of these different venues within today's convergence cultures tend to celebrate, among more specific actions, what I have called evolutionary appropriations and expressive individuation. By this I mean – in a reductive way, I realise – that imagistic and narrative values today now frequently seem centred on the use-values of different social networks that appropriate images as part of a continually evolving circulation of those images within individualised, if not narcissistic, frames of value. While this context might seem distant from essayistic cinema, I see it as a dominant cultural movement and technological frame within which contemporary cinematic essayism often initiates a difficult search for thought as value outside of or within those appropriative frameworks.

Within the contemporary cultural context of individuated world buildings, evolutionary conquests and narrative distractions, *The Tree of Life*, *The Mill and the Cross* and other films today detour into an essayism that works to discover worlds that exist elsewhere, beyond narrative frames and within narrative frames, into which the subject and viewer adapt by embracing the difficulty of seeing as knowing. In the context of their argument about Malick's films, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit describe this as the creation of an 'anarchic receptivity' of images in which the precondition of this wholly receptive gaze 'is a subject divested of subjectivity' and so becomes 'a subject without claims on the world'; so unlike the terms of narrative circulation and appropriation in today's convergence cultures, this alternative way of seeing demands 'an active passivity' in 'a community grounded in anonymity and held together by an absence of both individuality and leadership'; in which the recognition of 'the most powerfully individuated perspective on the world ... is also the erasure of perspective itself' (2008: 164, 165, 143–6). These essayistic images outside the frames of perspective or concentrated within them become indeed a very difficult way to see; therein lies, I believe, the crucial value of the essay, the essayistic and essayism today.

## Note

- 1 Thanks to Kevin Hudson for introducing me to Majewski's film.

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## Chapter 2

### Essaying the Forms of Popular Cinema: Godard, Farocki and the Principle of Shot/Countershot<sup>1</sup>

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**Rick Warner**

How might we take into account both the ‘essay film’ and a broader, even more variable sense of the essayistic that has marked some of the most crucial innovations in modern cinema since the end of World War II? The most satisfying efforts to define the former have often had the unfortunate effect of obscuring the full presence of the latter. While there is certainly an international tradition or quasi-genre of the essay film that stems most significantly from the inaugural experiments of the Rive Gauche directors in post-war France (Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, Agnès Varda and Georges Franju), there are also films to be dealt with on the outside of that category that make substantial use of essayistic principles and procedures, from the entwinement of fiction and nonfiction to self-critical, open-ended reflection. As Raymond Bellour (2011) has argued, the ‘essay film’, as it tends to be circumscribed, does not give us the complete history of the essayistic in cinema.<sup>2</sup>

Conceptually, there are two major obstacles where addressing this extended ambit of essayism is concerned. First, while virtually all commentators on the cinematic essay recognise that it renders null the customary distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, there is still a tendency to define the form primarily, if not

exclusively, from the side of documentary. To be an audiovisual essayist, most discussions imply, is to be a particular kind of unorthodox documentarian who brazenly puts forward a 'first-person' viewpoint, delights in self-reflexivity, and produces works that are more or less in accordance with a model set by Chris Marker, the director most frequently singled out as the quintessential essayist of audiovisual media. These accounts often hinge on a limited sense of what an essay composed in the medium of cinema must look and sound like, even as they stress that the practice is characterised by considerable variation. We come to expect a certain combination of structural traits: a contrapuntal voice-over commentary, the creative reuse of already existing images and sounds through montage, a digressive course of reflection, gestures of self-inscription on the part of the essayist-filmmaker, and so on. If 'fiction' is taken into account, it tends to be treated mainly as an element that makes documentary more personal, more performative, and more subjective.<sup>3</sup>

Not only does this way of classifying the essay film conveniently leave intact the very boundary between fiction and documentary that the form itself works to destabilise, it also miscasts some of the early critical elaborations of the essayistic that we now take to be canonical. Alexandre Astruc's 1948 manifesto on the 'camera pen', for instance, tends to be recruited for documentary-centred understandings of the essay film and its historical progression, when in fact Astruc's notion of an emergent cinema of complex ideas takes its cues from the inventive exploits of filmmakers who were not in the main documentarians, namely, Orson Welles, Robert Bresson and Jean Renoir (2009: 31–2). Even as his article anticipates what has come to be called the essay film, the prototype he limns is far from a Markeresque endeavour reliant on voice-over and a montage of assorted material. The scriptural metaphor he employs has primarily to do with dramaturgy and with aesthetic devices common to the fiction film – from tracking shots to performance gestures – that eloquently bear out the contention that '[a]ll thought, like all feeling, is a relationship between one human being and another human being or certain objects which form part of the universe. It is by clarifying these relationships ... that the cinema can really make itself the vehicle of thought' (2009: 34).

A second problem that stands in the way of a broader, more flexible definition of the essayistic in modern cinema is that arguments tend to insinuate, or declare outright, too drastic a separation of the audiovisual essay from the features of popular cinema, its narrative-based conventions, its 'classical' forms of shot linkage and composition. It is doubtless the case that film essayists have traditionally worked in modes of production well removed from the mainstream, but as they have conducted their investigations into the resources of the film medium, they

have often engaged with popular cinema in ways that demonstrate less a hostile, counter-cinematic rejection than an inquisitive stocktaking of possibilities.

Indeed, a number of the most frequently studied examples of essay films borrow indispensably from the operations of popular cinema. Consider the use of point-of-view structures and dramatic, exquisitely fluid traveling shots in Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955). Welles' *F for Fake* (1973) tinkers with continuity editing from start to finish, revelling in its synthetic and false constructions; and Jean-Luc Godard's *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (*2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*, 1967) also experiments imaginatively with continuity procedures during its celebrated swirling espresso scene, with a view to discovering novel uses for such techniques as matching-on-action. Even Guy Debord, the most radically negative of audiovisual essayists, states in his final film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (*We Spin Around the Night Consumed by the Fire*, 1978) that the only ingredient he wants to keep of the dominant cinema is perhaps the notion of a countershot. My point is that although the essay film is peripheral to popular, narrative-driven cinema, it often selectively draws nourishment from that cinema's forms, forging a relation that is far from antagonistic. To adopt a term from Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, cinematic essayists tend to be 'possibilists' of the medium (1995: 10–13). Instead of simply swearing off this or that technique out of some dissenting credo, they appropriate and test out whatever forms they believe can enrich their own reflections.

In what follows, I want to examine how two consummate audiovisual essayists, Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki, have made reflective use of what is perhaps *the* most common syntactical feature of popular cinema, shot/countershot cutting. Let me first acknowledge that even within the context of conventional Hollywood cinema, certain directors make use of shot/countershot in more nuanced and resourceful ways than film scholars have tended to confirm.<sup>4</sup> The work of Alfred Hitchcock is a striking case in point (though one can find similarly versatile uses in the work of Welles, John Ford, Nicholas Ray, Vincente Minnelli and Fritz Lang among others). In several of his films Hitchcock utilises shot/countershot not merely to convey spoken dialogue for the sake of narrative continuity but to emphasise a play of contrasts, tensions and affective sensations in the intervening space between characters.<sup>5</sup> In *The Wrong Man* (1956), the device both advances a motif of doubling and, in a rather curious auto-referential sense, seems to implicate itself in the deterministic misidentification that befalls Manny (Henry Fonda). As Noa Steimatsky has keenly noted, it is as though the back-and-forth linkage between observer and observed actively compels misrecognition (2007: 121–6). In the same film, shot/countershot conspires with the décor and lighting (specifically a lamp in the main couple's bedroom, situated between their figures)



Fig. 1a: Shot – Manny tries to get through to Rose...



Fig. 1b: Countershot – Rose descends into irrational guilt: *The Wrong Man* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1956)

in order to inscribe a shift in their relational dynamic as Manny's wife, Rose (Vera Miles), spirals into madness. In Hitchcock's hands, then, the technique can serve intricate purposes that go well beyond the representation of verbal exchanges.

In the full-blown, more experimental modern cinema that Hitchcock looks ahead to from the side of the classical, shot/countershot is sometimes said to be a signal aspect insofar as it is omitted.<sup>6</sup> But a more careful inspection of the work of such innovators as Bresson, Godard and Michelangelo Antonioni reveals not absolute avoidance but rather a variety of displacements and repurposings. The shot and countershot may coincide in a single framing by means of a superimposition (think of the clever use of a glass partition in Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984),

or in Akira Kurosawa's *Tengoku to jigoku* (*High and Low*, 1963)). Or the head-spaces, interlocking camera angles, and pace of alternation may be skewed from what is customary to the point of making the technique exceedingly strange (take the opening scene of Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* (*Eclipse*, 1962) where a lamp is again positioned in the space between a distraught couple). Or the accords established by the alternations may be irrational, the linkages belonging to a more poetic order of ruptures and associations (see the 'false countershots' (Sitney 2015: 78) that recur periodically in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Zerkalo* (*Mirror*, 1975)). Or the technique may be retained in its most traditional syntax, though within circumstances that

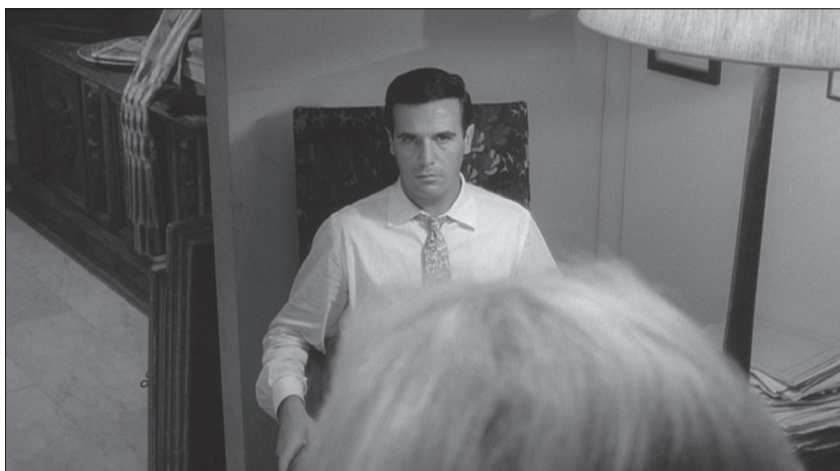


Fig. 2a: Shot – Riccardo catatonic after an exhausting argument...



Fig. 2b: Countershot – Vittoria likewise speechless and disaffected: *L'Eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

indicate a more varied spectrum of effects (consider the alternation employed in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1964) to express the miraculous force of Christ's healing of a leper). Or shot/countershot may indeed be refused, but in a manner that still provokes mindfulness of the procedure by keeping its grammatical functions in play implicitly.<sup>7</sup> That is, sometimes its absence is meant to be felt and contemplated. As Farocki once remarked on this phenomenon, shot/countershot is cinema's 'most important expression of the law of value; it can be the norm even when absent' (2001: 94).<sup>8</sup>

Essayistic filmmakers have participated in this reworking of shot/countershot in highly innovative ways that have infused the technique with new conceptual resources. Instructive here is Gilberto Perez's account of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's eccentric and modulatory use of the procedure in *Geschichtsunterricht* (*History Lessons*, 1972) as a means of underscoring class divisions and a confrontation of historical points of view on either side of the cut. For Perez, their use of the manoeuvre both compares *and* differentiates at once; it both connects *and* divides and therein it suggests a striving for 'a rapport of some sort even if it is the rapport of contention' (1998: 308).

My task here is to closely analyse how both Godard and Farocki have also tried in their respective essayistic projects to reconceive shot/countershot. As two critics-turned-filmmakers with strong proclivities for using montage as a means of investigation, these directors have, at different stages in their prolific careers, devoted considerable energy to the critical reevaluation of some of the most rudimentary features of cinematic expression. I intend to demonstrate that their interest in opening out this device of continuity editing emanates from a prolonged, reflexive dialogue with the history of cinema and its forms. In the case of Godard, I will take up both a narrative film from his New Wave stage, *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963), and a later effort, *Notre musique* (*Our Music*, 2004) that more boldly mixes fiction and nonfiction as part of its melancholic rumination on the wars of the twentieth century. Both productions carry out an essayistic enquiry into the possible uses of shot/countershot: in the earlier film, this occurs in the context of a key dramatic scene involving a couple on the verge of dissolution; and in the later work, the stakes of the enquiry extend to the film's own address to the spectator. As for Farocki, I will focus for the most part on one of his gallery video installations, *Contre-chant* (*Counter-Music*, 2004). Though *Contre-chant* is more of a documentary than either of the two examples by Godard, it still expands on the utility of shot/countershot within a multiscreen display format that Farocki calls 'soft montage'.

Studying the efforts of these two pioneering essayists in this light will have two main repercussions with respect to the problems of definition raised at the start of

this chapter. First, it will cast into relief how the audiovisual essay has extended and refined its own processes through a receptive and analytic encounter with the forms of popular cinema. Both Godard and Farocki, as we will see, refigure shot/countershot as a way to set in motion and pass on to the viewer an intensified form of what Serge Daney called ‘thought in the mode of the interval’ (quoted in Bergala 2000: 27). Second, since their work in this regard demands that we consider at close quarters single shots and the cuts and gestures that link them, we will need to conceptualise the essay form in the register of its momentary unfolding. My focus thus falls less on the ‘essay film’ in a top-down categorical sense, than on what I prefer to call the activity of *essaying*. The term ‘essay’ applies here not as a noun but as a verb, an itinerant process that I want to inspect at the level of shot-to-shot relations, where the cinematic thinking in fact happens most acutely.

### Godard’s Essays in Novel Form

In overviews of the cinematic essay, one frequently runs across Godard’s famous definition of himself as an essayist in his 1962 interview with *Cahiers du cinéma*:

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. Were the cinema to disappear, I would simply accept the inevitable and turn to television; were television to disappear, I would revert to pencil and paper. For there is a clear continuity between all forms of expression. (1972d: 171)

When Godard makes this statement, he has his very first feature films in mind, and what he defines is not a generic category so much as a critical disposition that colours his approach to working with sounds and moving images.<sup>9</sup> In particular, there are two key points that we should take away from this remark before we apply it to his oeuvre. First, his sense of the term ‘essay’ has to do with an activity of *criticism* that persists from his written articles into his film practice. Second, it is clear from his phrase ‘essays in novel form or novels in essay form’ that this critical venture can have as its province the fiction film no less fittingly than the documentary.

What precisely, then, carries over from Godard’s written criticism into his feature films? How is a critical dimension ‘subsumed’? Where should we look and

listen for it? Godard's last major push of writing articles for *Cahiers du cinéma* in the months leading up to his debut with *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960) evinces a mindset that is eager to ascribe to the films he examines the reflective spirit he intends to exhibit through his own work to come. Of the impulses that inform this outlook, the most relevant to our purposes is what he calls the merging of 'course' and 'discourse'.<sup>10</sup>

For Godard, this juxtaposition of terms describes a film practice wherein creative and critical operations go hand in hand. More specifically, the dramatic 'course' of the film, that is, the narrative development of the fiction, coincides with an equally salient 'discourse' concerning the fundamental aspects of filmic expression. Curiously enough, he takes Anthony Mann's austere *Man of the West* (1958) as an example of this kind of enterprise. Godard writes in his 1959 review that the film provides a 'lesson in modern cinema' in that it at once 'shows and demonstrates, innovates and copies, criticizes and creates'; the film thus unfolds as 'both course and discourse, or both beautiful landscapes and the explanation of this beauty ... both art and the theory of art'. With each shot and with each device enlisted, the film, he contends, renews the genre to which it contributes as well as the very syntax it adroitly uses. 'Just as the director of *Birth of a Nation* [D.W. Griffith, 1915] gave one the impression that he was inventing the cinema with every shot, each shot of *Man of the West* gives one the impression that Anthony Mann is reinventing the western exactly as Matisse's portraits reinvent the features of Piero della Francesca' (1972c: 117). Godard strongly mischaracterises the film, but what should interest us here is the desire he voices for a metacritical approach that looks ahead to his own audiovisual work, his more boldly reflective 'essays in novel form'. What he imputes to Mann's film is a way of working that incisively engages, critiques and refigures the instruments of his craft on a shot by shot basis.

This yearned-for approach later takes material shape in Godard's own *Le Mépris*. While *Le Mépris* is perhaps not an 'essay film', at least not in the taxonomic sense that favours the personal documentary, it sets to work an inquisitive mode in accordance with Godard's account of himself as an essayist. Its fictional 'course' stages the decline of a marriage against the backdrop of an international co-production of a film adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey*. As themes of compromise and miscommunication bridge these two equally disastrous events, the film's metacritical 'discourse' surveys the cinematic state of things in 1963 and reassesses the possibilities of classical cinema even as Godard embraces the innovations of modern cinema.

The reflexive and allegorical aspects of *Le Mépris* have been studied extensively by others.<sup>11</sup> What I wish to examine in detail here is the way in which Godard's



careful, synthetic combination of different cinematic traditions engenders an essayistic reflection into the aesthetic and conceptual matters that are centrally at stake in the film, a reflection that surfaces in and through Godard's formal choices.

At the time of its initial release, Godard summarised *Le Mépris* as 'an Antonioni film shot by Hawks or Hitchcock' (quoted in Bordwell 1985: 315). This fusion of styles is nowhere more evident and fascinating than in the extended apartment scene that runs through the middle third of the film as the young married couple, Paul (Michel Piccoli) and Camille (Brigitte Bardot), bicker and restlessly circulate throughout the unfinished rooms, trying out poses and postures as if searching for some acceptable form of being together in the maze-like interior. The scene invokes, without discord, the hallmarks of Antonioni's cinema (the persistent play of frames-within-frames, stretches of dead time, figures arranged so as to signal mutual disaffection, the 'autonomous mediating gaze' of the camera (Perez 1998: 89)), as well as the *mise-en-scène* of Minnelli's melodramas (a delicate, anxious choreography of motion and gesture in domestic space, the cuts sparse and unimposing, the camera mid-range and itinerant, the colour keyed to emotional shifts in the CinemaScope frame). What deviates from classical convention, of course, is that the scene meanders on for over thirty minutes without much occurring to move forward and complicate the plot. And yet, it does build toward a powerful if somewhat mysterious climax in its final minutes.

The scene begins to edge toward its dramatic conclusion as Paul and Camille sit down on either side of a table with a white designer lamp at its centre. We see them in a profile two-shot, framed almost symmetrically against a large window, and just as Paul switches on the light, an axial cut carries us to the middle of the lampshade, which now dominates the widescreen image. Cropped and 'flattened out' against a shallow background in soft focus, the object is suddenly less a lampshade than a blank field that lights up at random while the camera shuttles back

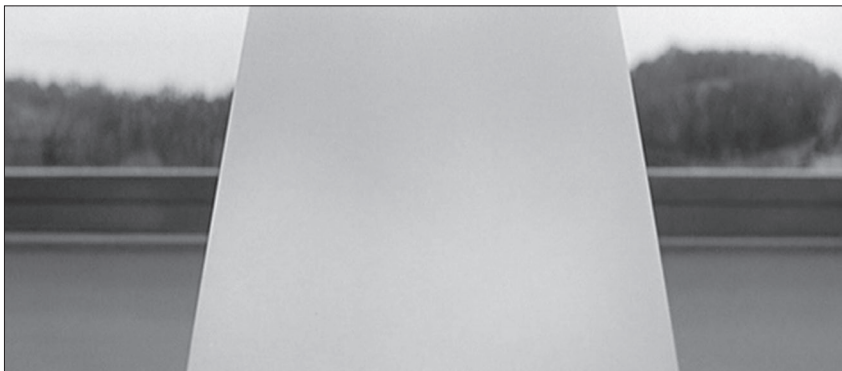


Fig. 3: The abstracted lampshade between Paul and Camille: *Le Mépris* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963)

and forth between the two characters, and while Paul tries, and fails, to pinpoint the exact moment his wife stopped loving him. ‘Since we were at Prokosch’s?’ he asks her. ‘When you saw me pat Francesca Vanini’s behind?’ Camille just shakes her head and responds, ‘Let’s say it was that. Now it’s over. Let’s not talk about it.’

With this unorthodox manoeuvre Godard puts motivations of technique and *mise-en-scène* intensely into question. Initially, there is a slight suggestion that the camera’s activity is aligned with Paul’s desire to learn the source of Camille’s scorn, but as their conversation continues it becomes evident that the camera’s mobility and concentration have, by the standards of classicism, only an arbitrary relation to his questioning. In the conspicuous absence of shot/countershot cutting, the camera’s course and tempo are not determined by speech. Instead of staging a tennis match of queries and reactions, Godard here stresses, in a single, unbroken take, the intervening space that dialogue scenes often reduce or omit. As for the lampshade, one might be tempted to read it as an obstacle that divides the characters and accentuates their emotional rift, their inability to connect in the scene. It seems to me, rather, that Godard is affectionately mocking such use of objects in melodramas from the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Rendered abstract, the lampshade resides where shots and countershots would ordinarily pivot in the exchange (or in the space the cuts would skip across, depending on camera position). Visually, conceptually, it isn’t an object so much as a zone that the camera studies with each alternating pass. The tenor of the shot isn’t to indicate, in unambiguous terms, ‘alienation’ (this already being a cliché of the European art cinema that Godard alludes to in the scene) but to trace and inspect the spatial interval that both unites and separates this volatile couple.<sup>13</sup>

The moments that follow continue to explore this idea, oddly enough by resorting to the very device Godard has just avoided. Paul and Camille rise and revolve around the lamp in opposite directions. After a semi-violent scuffle, the musical score resurfaces and Camille makes to leave. There is a cut to a medium shot of Paul now calmly pursuing her as the camera retreats at the same rate, followed by a cut to a legitimate countershot from his implied viewpoint – this shot pushing forward through the doorway as Camille turns and says that she despises him: ‘J’té méprise!’ Here again, the curious movement of the camera is crucial: the shot and countershot converge with a forceful ebb and flow, a pull-and-push sensation expressed frontally.

Though emotionally resonant, this scene-ending alternation of shots is puzzling. Why, at this decisive point in the film – literally a threshold moment for both the couple and the film’s metacritical reflections – does Godard make use of shot/countershot, *the* classical technique for interlinking two shots and figures in a continuous scenography, just seconds after pointedly refusing it? And why does he stray



Fig. 4a: Shot – Paul approaches Camille (backward track)...



Fig. 4b: Countershot – Camille leaves the apartment (forward track): *Le Mépris* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963)

here from the tendency elsewhere in his work (such as *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life to Live*, 1962) and *Masculin féminin* (*Masculine Feminine*, 1966)) to avoid the device at all cost?<sup>14</sup>

It helps to recognise, first of all, that this version of shot/countershot is a citation of sorts – a borrowing from the repertoire of another director. To put it in Godard's own parlance, the moment is 'shot by Hitchcock'. Godard, in his 1957 review of *The Wrong Man*, had earlier identified Hitchcock's use of this striking procedure of shot (backward track) and countershot (forward track). There he refers to the example where the 'wrong man' crosses the threshold into the city jail, and he cites another use at the conclusion of *I Confess* (1953) where the priest suspected of murder approaches the culprit whose guilt he has learned during confession (1972b: 48–54). As Godard more than likely noticed, the device would return in *Vertigo* (1958), first when Scottie (James Stewart) tails 'Madeleine' (Kim Novak) around San Francisco, and then once more when he walks into an open grave in his nightmare.

If *Le Mépris* brings some of these references into play (after all, Godard wanted to cast Kim Novak as Camille), it is no simple question of *hommage* when the mobile shot/countershot occurs. Godard revises the manoeuvre for his own purposes. For Hitchcock it is foremost about point of view, the subjective gaze of a character as it traverses a space and fastens to an object or person. In *Vertigo*, the binding force is one of desirous pursuit (shot) and magnetic allure (countershot). But for Godard, the subjective look is of lesser importance than the rhythmic, almost musical interaction of bodies in the scene – indeed the countershot draws away from Paul’s sightline as it pushes through the doorway, and the camera sustains its own intensity of observation, enacting here as it does elsewhere in *Le Mépris* a detached curiosity, more enquiring than knowing.

Already in Hitchcock’s use of the mobile alternation, shot/countershot takes on more than a purely mechanical, functional role. Godard’s recourse to the technique is thus a creative reworking of a creative reworking. But Godard’s revision bears with it even greater complexity. *Le Mépris*, and this apartment scene especially, unfolds as an investigation into the subtleties of interaction (verbal, gestural) between a couple on the brink of separation. The camera style, the cutting, and the manner of composition make us mindful of a charged space between Paul and Camille, of what we might call an inter-corporeal field of affects and intensities. As Alain Bergala argues, the film sets for itself the almost scientific project of detecting the feelings and forces that circulate in the space between characters:

Godard utilises the resources of cinema – as others would use an electronic microscope or laser scalpel – to see something that would otherwise escape our ordinary perception, how one passes, in a fraction of a second, between two shots, from misunderstanding [*méprise*] to contempt [*mépris*] [...]. His experiment is such that he expands a tenth of a second and the small space between a man and a woman to the level of Cinemascope and an hour-and-a-half long film, as Homer had done before him on the scale of a decade and the Mediterranean. (1999: 18–19; my translation)

Godard’s work here constitutes an essayistic process in two linked senses, despite the fact that *Le Mépris* lacks some of the technical traits that recent accounts of the essay film have hovered around (first-person enunciation on the part of the director and so on). First of all, the scene’s confluence of ‘course’ and ‘discourse’ animates a certain kind of reflexivity, one that tests out different traditions of staging and also probes the rudiments of film grammar. The essayist’s commentary, instead of being voiced, emerges through a critically allusive disposition of form.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, while there is nothing like ‘direct’ authorial address in *Le Mépris*, the apartment scene implicitly invites the viewer to take part in the speculative thought that Godard brings to bear on shot/countershot. As a linchpin of popular cinema, the device typically correlates and unifies multiple elements (dialogue, sightlines and reactions of characters, off-screen space and sound) in order to ensure narrative intelligibility for an audience primed to absorb and follow content.<sup>16</sup> Godard on the contrary configures the interspatial gap between these two characters as a site of sustained puzzlement, not just for Paul and Camille but for the spectator as well.<sup>17</sup> After all, we don’t come away from the scene with a sense of Godard’s optics having *satisfactorily* revealed something. The thrust of the scene rather engages a problem of filmic expression that calls for still further thinking and experimentation.

### ‘Try to See, Try to Imagine’: Godard’s Lecture in *Notre musique*

At the height of Godard’s political militancy with the Dziga Vertov Group, shot/countershot falls into more aggressive disuse in his work, as it reflects the negatory stance toward popular cinema that marks those years of his career. However, his late films and videos reinvigorate what I have called the ‘possibilist’ attitude of his early projects. Let me be clear. For Godard in his late period, shot/countershot remains anathema in its rote uses and numbing ‘ping pong’ rhythms, as he puts it in his *Scénario de ‘Sauve qui peut (la vie)’ (Scenario of ‘Every Man for Himself’, 1979)*, while augmenting the device with video cross-fades and staccato slow motion. But there is still a way in which his treatment of interlocutory situations – whether they happen between characters in his fiction films<sup>18</sup> or between himself and interlocutors in his video dialogues<sup>19</sup> – keeps shot/countershot in play as a potentially valuable tool. Even though he seldom applies the technique in these later productions, his framing and relative arrangement of figures often betray its role as a shaping absence.

In a 2000 interview, Godard claims that he ‘would like to make a film with a real reverse-shot [*contrechamp*], since ‘there has never been one. There has only been what the Americans did, but that has become any- and everything’ (in Rancière and Tesson 2002: 64). He fails to explain exactly what a ‘real’ example would have to involve or achieve, but with a fleeting reference to the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, he implies a more strenuous conceptualisation of the procedure in terms of self-other relationships.<sup>20</sup> If in *Le Mépris*, Godard looks to rehabilitate shot/countershot for largely aesthetic reasons as he combines classical and modern film styles, at this later stage in his career his reflections on and

with the technique indeed become more abstractly philosophical, more attuned to ethical concerns, and more intensely bound up with matters of actual history. There is no more intriguing example of this than the lecture he gives midway through *Notre musique*, while playing a version of himself.<sup>21</sup>

*Notre musique* consists of three parts distinguished by Dantean intertitles, 'Hell', 'Purgatory' and 'Paradise'. The first is a videographic montage, roughly similar to the form of Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (*History(ies) of Cinema*, 1988–98), that gleans images from both fiction films and documentary footage and weaves them into sometimes jarring and sometimes harmonious combinations. The leading visual motif is imperial (and genocidal) conquest as the montage jumps between and compares multiple violent atrocities of the twentieth century – historical events that are prefigured and echoed by shots from the fiction films caught up in the mix, films that range across genres from the Hollywood western and the film noir to European art cinema.<sup>22</sup>

The 'Purgatory' section unfurls as a narrative but continues to ruminate on these same themes within its diegesis. The threads of action have to do with intellectuals who have traveled to post-war Sarajevo for an annual literary conference, European Literary Encounters. Godard in fact attended this conference in 2002 and gave a lecture entitled 'Text and Image', and *Notre musique*, completed two years later, presents an elaborate reenactment of his talk.<sup>23</sup> The lecture scene, we should note, occurs just after an equally key scene in which a young female Israeli journalist interviews the esteemed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish – an encounter that Godard films with odd breaks in continuity, using just the light from a window, their figures at times mere silhouettes. Godard twice enlists shot/countershot in this earlier scene, but within coordinates of time and space that are strangely shifting and irrational.

The lecture itself is a kind of attempted dialogue scene (again inflected by a play of light and darkness) between Godard and a small, mostly young audience, through the intermediary of a translator.<sup>24</sup> It begins as Godard sits down, snaps open his attaché case, and, without any preliminary remarks, launches into a digressive series of questions and provocations raised by photographs. The opening part of his lecture addresses problems of perception – the identification of buildings destroyed by war, the identification of the Virgin Mary – when there is merely one picture judged in isolation, that is, cut off from comparative contact with other images. He challenges those in attendance to recognise a bombed-out cityscape captured in a grainy, black-and-white photograph, and after their incorrect guesses – 'Stalingrad', 'Beirut', 'Sarajevo', 'Hiroshima' – they are surprised to hear him respond, 'No. Richmond, Virginia. 1865.'

The use of sound in this scene is just as meaningful as the photographs.

Godard's voice does not stay in one register but erratically changes, now sounding as if it fills the entire lecture hall, now sounding softer and more internal, as though a voice-over passage that the audience *of* the film can hear while the audience *in* the film cannot. It is with this more internal voicing that he states, 'Yes, the image is joy, but beside it lays the void. All the power of an image can only be expressed through it.'<sup>25</sup>

This aphorism, which suggests that the power of an image owes not to its integral contents but to expressive forces at work in the voids that surround it, prompts Godard's camera to track laterally back and forth over the crowd, continually adjusting its speed, proximity and focal range as a meditative piano score emerges. With a citation of Jean Racine's tragedy *Phaedra* (1677), Godard's off-screen voice throws suspicion on the ability of verbal language to apprehend the things, subjects and events it can only name. Then he says to the audience: 'Try to see. Try to imagine. In the first case, you say: "Look at that." In the second, you say: "Close your eyes."' The camera comes to a halt as it focuses on a young woman seated in the audience who has her eyes shut. Precisely when she reopens them, Godard asserts: 'The shot and countershot are basics of film grammar.' Before he finishes this sentence, a cut (anticipated by a flare of light and a short-lived black screen) reverses the camera's angle so that we are now looking back at Godard. This, in fact, is a countershot, and also conceivably a point-of-view shot, in line with the visual perspective of the woman just shown.

Godard, now reduced to a blurred, shadowy presence in the background, refers to a pair of sequential shots he has taken from Howard Hawks' screwball comedy *His Girl Friday* (1940). The shots materialise as photographic stills in the foreground, while two hands compare them via juxtaposition and alternation. We should observe here that two different audience members, unseen except for their hands, work these stills: one person holds a shot of Cary Grant while someone else, in an adjacent seat, holds a corresponding countershot shot of Rosalind Russell.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the intricacy of this moment is such that we, as spectators of *Notre musique*, are not only positioned in relation to the audience members depicted in the film. We are also encouraged to investigate two photographs and figures (Grant, Russell) that appear between two partially concealed figures within the shot itself (attendants of the lecture). The chiaroscuro lighting scheme is further significant on this score, as the hanging lamp above Godard's head in the background accents two spatial intervals of engagement that overlap in the same composition – one between Godard and the audience he addresses (a group that reflexively includes us at this point), and another between the stills and the two people handling them.

According to Godard, what the shot/countershot taken from *His Girl Friday* starkly demonstrates is that 'the director is incapable of seeing the difference



Fig. 5: Godard's lecture: *Notre musique* (Jean-Luc Godard, 2004)

between a man and a woman'. If this remark seems cryptic at first, it holds a key to what Godard is trying to achieve with his lecture, through the very form and structure of his exercise. He objects to Hawks' staple use of shot/countershot both because it pictorially manufactures sameness where we should discern difference (the shots of Grant and Russell mirror each other with regimented symmetry) *and* because it institutes continuity as an *a priori* matter of course. For Godard, then, the regrettable contrivance of Hawks' editing in this case is that it disregards otherness and imposes, *instead of seeking out*, a relation of continuity, accordance and complementarity. As becomes evident as the lecture goes on, Godard attempts, on the contrary, to recast shot/countershot as a principle of comparative and differential observation, a manner of seeing that deals with at least two images at once and that ignites *exploratory and imaginative thought*. He thus invokes the technique in response to the problems of perception that set his master class in motion, and he uses a modified, unorthodox version of the procedure himself, his aim being to extend this form of seeing and imagining to the viewer.

Having brought this inquisitive procedure into play, Godard now takes us through a series of 'shots' and 'countershots', again using photographs, and these combinations assume a more historical and ethical tenor, while interweaving fiction and documentary. From this point forward, the scene is filmed predominantly with the camera just behind Godard's semi-dark head and shoulders, the increasingly restless audience no longer in sharp focus. He compares two photos that present opposing sides of the same historical moment in 1948: a vibrantly hued 'shot' of Jewish refugees walking from the sea onto the beach of a newly



created nation of Israel, and a gritty black-and-white ‘countershot’ of Palestinians ‘walk[ing] into the water to drown’, as Godard says: ‘Shot/countershot: the Jews become the stuff of fiction and the Palestinians the stuff of documentary.’ This provocative statement insinuates an affinity with the claims of Darwish in the preceding interview scene, namely that ‘the truth has two faces’, a phrase uttered both by Darwish and now by Godard.<sup>27</sup>

In the roundabout but developing logic of the lecture, then, the initial concern for preserving difference leads to an ethically-minded consideration of disastrous self-other antagonisms. It may be the case that Godard implicitly sides with the Palestinian cause, but his application of shot/countershot looks to break down the doctrinaire non-thought that has severely worsened this cultural, racial, territorial and political conflict. Indeed, there occurs a short interlude in his lecture in which his voice silences and the film cuts between two young audience members studying photographs – a fair-skinned woman associated with a photo of an emaciated concentration camp inmate, the image marked with the word ‘Jew’; and an Arab male linked with a different photo of a death camp prisoner, marked with the word ‘Muslim’.<sup>28</sup> With this shot and countershot between spectators, Godard, courting controversy, riffs on the fact that in the Nazi camps, the German term *Muselmann* (Muslim) was used to define those who had declined to such a state of abject suffering as to be ignored even by their fellow inmates (see Levi 1996: 88, 125, 128). Godard provides no lucid argument here; he uses shot/countershot in a speculative fashion, trying it out as a form of navigating and negotiating betweenness where brutal othering prevails.

In the remainder of the lecture, Godard continues to reflect on the interrelation of documentary and fiction *vis-à-vis* problems of sympathy and fascination. He does this by recounting an anecdote involving two prominent atomic physicists, Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr. One day in 1938, while walking in the Danish countryside, the two men notice Elsinore Castle off in the distance. The German scientist says that there is nothing extraordinary about the edifice, which moves the Danish scientist to respond, ‘Yes, but if you say it’s Hamlet’s castle, *then* it becomes special.’ Then there is a cut to an abstract image of nothing but a lamp as it sways from the ceiling, to and fro diagonally across an otherwise black frame (I would call this shot ‘nondiegetic’ were it not for the ceiling lamp already established in the scene).<sup>29</sup> Godard’s voice-off (contending with murmurs from a restive crowd) says: ‘Elsinore the real, Hamlet the imaginary. Shot and countershot. Imaginary: certainty. Reality: uncertainty. The principle of cinema. Go towards the light, and shine it on our night. Our music.’

I want to conclude my analysis of this poignant but deeply challenging lecture by highlighting just how it operates as an example of the essayistic. As several

critics have argued, *Notre musique* is obsessively and metacritically 'about' communication, but it would be more accurate to say that the film dramatises scenes of *failed* communication, even as the potential for meaningful exchange is sensed. The lecture is no exception. It may indeed utilise forms of address that prompt the viewer to collaborate (and for some who count this film as an 'essay', the apostrophic consideration of the audience is itself enough to cement that distinction) but he also takes intensive measures to interfere with and render difficult the possibility of some kind of direct, successful interaction. He not only disarticulates the spatial layout of the scene, through a fractured *découpage* and an intricately layered sound track that keeps changing registers; he also paints himself here as a figure whose reflections are lost on those in attendance. The last part of the scene in particular, which is shot mostly from his side of the attempted dialogue, depicts a failed effort to relate, at least to the diegetic audience, the significance of shot/countershot as a principle of cinematic thinking and inspection.<sup>30</sup> His lecture comes to an abrupt close as one of the audience members asks him whether the new, small digital cameras can 'save the cinema', and Godard sits silently in the dark, electing not to reply to such a narrowly technological notion, his face inscrutable.<sup>31</sup>

And yet, even as the director portrays such a breakdown within the scene, he still endeavours to involve the extra-diegetic viewer in his reflection and to share his montage-based form of seeing. The framing of his tenebrous, self-inscribed figure near the end of the lecture suggests a peculiar self-portrait of the artist (viewed from the back). When he uses his hands to compare photographs, he does so with the images turned away from the attendees and *toward us*. This oblique means of address pursues a more intimate relation with a recipient than the format of the public lecture permits. It is as if Godard is striving for the sort of co-investigative complicity between artist and observer that is fostered by the painter-at-work motif in Western self-portraiture.<sup>32</sup> The relation of intimacy between essayist and viewer has been cogently theorised as resulting from an 'I-You' rhetoric of 'direct address' and 'interpellation' (Rascaroli 2009: 14–15). But in this case, Godard's address to the spectator *of* the film is rather indirect. Both sonically and visually, we are at times situated as though we are overhearing either his internal musings or thoughts he directs towards another audience onscreen, and the turns of his reflection threaten to lose us at any point. He is closer here, I believe, to the tenuousness of lyric address than to the logic of interpellation and its forcible constitution of a receiving subject.

The essayistic stakes of the film hinge on this attempted rapport with the spectator who must, in order for this 'dialogue' to succeed, become able to use the process of shot/countershot herself (not strictly as a filmmaking procedure but

more generally as a means of perceiving her way through a multiplicity of encountered images and situations). In its routine, verbocentric uses, shot/countershot syntactically assures continuity and a more or less steady flow of communication. Godard's essaying fundamentally retools the device in a more philosophical register, and on that basis, pursues a dialogue with the spectator, at the limits of mutual understanding. The essayistic resides not in the gesture of address to the viewer itself, as though to satisfy a generic requirement, but in the possibly shared exertion that follows from that gesture. In this film Godard has a name for this striven-for condition of seeing together: *notre musique*.

### Farocki's Critical Essayism and 'Soft Montage'

In recent scholarly debates around the essay film, the Berlin-based filmmaker and media artist Harun Farocki has featured just as prominently as Godard. His films, videos and gallery installations have served as canonical examples for several leading historians and theorists of the practice.<sup>33</sup> His film *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1989) is now widely regarded as a paradigmatic instance of an essay film, and, as Nora M. Alter has shown, Farocki, in the latter stage of his long career, 'translated' this kind of cinema to the space of the gallery and its notably different circumstances of exhibition and reception (2007: 53–5).<sup>34</sup>

Farocki acknowledged his debt to Godard's politically conscious film practice on a number of occasions, asserting that Godard's works are training exercises that test and sharpen one's mental acuity (see Elsaesser 2004b: 178–9). With Kaja Silverman, Farocki co-authored *Speaking about Godard* (1998), an observant study of eight Godard films that testifies well to Farocki's familiarity with and attachment to the French-Swiss director's body of work. While methodological affinities between these two figures indeed suggest themselves, there are reasons to be cautious of too cosmetic a comparison. Most relevant to our purposes, Farocki's sensibility is more that of a forensic documentarian. His work, while not averse to flights of imagination, is less inclined to take poetic license with the historical record when he handles either found or newly made material.<sup>35</sup> As an essayist, he arguably espouses an altogether different tradition of the practice than the one I have claimed for Godard. If Godard's essaying within dramatic circumstances speaks more to the enduring legacy of Astruc's 'camera pen', Farocki's approach falls more in line with a tradition of the essay film prophesied by the German filmmaker and multimedia artist Hans Richter, an approach that comes into view at the intersections between documentary and the avant-garde (see Richter 1992).<sup>36</sup>

Without neglecting these dissimilarities, I want to argue that Farocki comparably refigures the device of shot/countershot as a vital part of his essayistic sound and image practice. In doing so, I want to stress three intertwined dimensions of Farocki's working methods that resonate with the way in which I have viewed Godard as an essayist: first, an abiding critical disposition that carries over from his written film criticism; second, a 'possibilist' engagement with the history of cinematic montage including both popular forms of editing and avant-garde alternatives; and third, a tireless attempt to free up, yet still assiduously cultivate and test, the associative, imaginative and constructive faculties of the spectator.

The extent to which Farocki's essayism follows from and enduringly reflects his status as a critic-turned-director is perhaps not emphasised enough in commentaries on his output. His written articles for the German film journal that he co-edited throughout the 1970s and into the following decade, *Filmkritik*, exhibit an analytical mindset that minutely attends to cinematic form and its political implications.<sup>37</sup> They display a detailed concern for technique that would seem more befitting of a filmmaker than a critic (and by then, he had indeed already experimented with film and television).<sup>38</sup>

Farocki's fascination with and desire to recast shot/countershot becomes evident in more than a few of his *Filmkritik* pieces in which he puts examples of its deployment under the microscope. If for Godard it is Hitchcock who refines the technique in highly intelligent ways, for Farocki the key innovator in this respect is Bresson.<sup>39</sup> In his article 'Bresson: a Stylist', Farocki maintains, 'Shot/countershot is an element in film language which is often criticized – Bresson criticizes it by using it even more intensely' (2001c: 180). For Farocki, Bresson's uses differ from convention by conducting for the viewer a 'weighing' of opposites as if on a scale, a close study of physical gestures that mirror, balance or clash with each other on either side of the alternating cuts. It renders palpable the spatial interval between two figures as they confront one another and as the regard of the camera is strongly conveyed. Vision is crucially at stake, but for the viewer more than for the *dramatis personae*, hence the consistent omission of eyeline matches in Bresson's use of the procedure.<sup>40</sup>

In his *Filmkritik* text 'Shot/countershot: The Most Important Expression in Filmic Law of Value' written in 1981, Farocki makes several points that not only critique standard uses but also betray an aspiration to reorient the device to the demands of essayistic thought. He writes that shot/countershot has 'an advance effect on the shooting' by determining beforehand how an event should be filmed; it is a default way of treating stock kinds of dramatic situations. Its function for the spectator is chiefly denotative, and it masks its own operations in keeping with the 'invisibility' of continuity editing. But he mentions productively

unusual examples, such as Godard's *À bout de souffle*. He analyses a conversation scene between Patricia (Jean Seberg) and Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) that includes lively, ablative jump cuts as the lovers drive through the streets of Paris. He points out that Godard does at one moment use shot/countershot in a fairly conventional manner, but only to deviate from the technique thereafter in the scene. He latches on to Godard's film here for two reasons: because it successfully integrates shot/countershot within an aberrant style of cutting that calls attention to the cuts themselves; and because it does not *altogether* dispense with the mainstream convention it supplants and critiques. 'What distinguishes Godard from experimental filmmakers,' Farocki says, 'is that although attempting something different, he still allows the non-difference of that which is different to appear' (2001b: 94).

In the same article, Farocki insinuates the need to extricate shot/countershot from the schemes of continuity that constrain it and to reinvent it in a way that intensifies the perceptual activity of the filmmaker and viewer alike. 'I am trying to comment on this shot/countershot by taking shots from both sides. Placed side by side, they are meant to yield *another image*, and that which exists between the images should become visible' (2001b: 108). In essence, Farocki's position here calls for shot/countershot to become a full-fledged operation of 'montage' instead of mere 'editing'. As he argues in an earlier piece (and he restates this distinction in subsequent interviews): 'One notices montage, and one does not notice editing. Montage is linking images through ideas, editing is ... creating a flow, finding a rhythm' (2004: 77). Moreover, Farocki's reimagining of shot/countershot demands that it be used in a way that preserves, even in its 'finished' effects and structures and cadences, the *sense of trial* that distinguishes the detail-oriented work that a cutter undertakes at the editing station.<sup>41</sup> He suggests that to alter the device in this way would be to make up for the film medium's 'paucity of stylistics of play' relative to the performing arts (2001b: 108).

We can deduce from these articles that reflect on shot/countershot a set of related aspirations and imperatives that come to define Farocki's montage-based enterprise as an essayistic director: the need to make the spectator keenly sensitive to and mindful of the montage process itself; the need to use montage as a technique of meticulous scrutiny, in a tentative and probing register, while still making forceful combinations; and, ultimately, the need to convert the viewer into a skilled montagist in her own right, not by having her become a filmmaker, too, but instead by enabling her to acquire the kind of mental agility that the audiovisual process exhibits.

These basic imperatives are on vivid display in many of his essayistic films, such as *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* and *Wie man sieht (As You See,*

1986). But it is more specifically his installation projects that realise a form of essaying through a radically revised conception of shot/countershot. Two technical factors spark and make feasible this move on his part, the integration of video and an attendant multiplication of the screen. Here again Farocki takes certain cues from Godard's pioneering experiments. Farocki, discussing the origins and the aims of his own installation work, cites Godard's *Numéro deux* (*Number Two*, 1975) as a formative influence, not just because of its video-enabled divisions and layered convolutions of the 35mm film frame but also because of its adaptation of the technical difference of video editing (i.e. its specific interface with images versus that of traditional film editing) into a manifest organisational principle of the completed work shown to an audience: 'My point of departure was the fact that only one image is seen when editing film, rather than two images when editing video: the one already mounted and the preview of the next one. When Godard presented *Numéro deux* in 1975 ... I was sure that here the new experience of video editing, the comparison of two images, was evident.' He goes on to remark that when he attempted a similar effect in his double-projection installations, he regarded this form of montage, with its sense of 'anticipation and reprise' between two screens at once, as an amplified variation on 'the shot/reverse shot in single-strip film' (2009a: 207).

Farocki describes this formal principle on display both in *Numéro deux* and in his installation endeavours since *Schnittstelle* (*Interface*, 1995) as 'soft montage' (Silverman and Farocki 1998: 142). The interplay between multiple screens involves both serial and concurrent linkages that execute a variety of doublings, refrains, reenactments, side-by-side weighings and relays of motifs.<sup>42</sup> The process is 'soft' in that its ensembles, while they may be robust, have a provisional tone and texture, as though the relations are still being essayed. 'More trial, less assertion', Farocki explains (2009a: 73). If this way of working is less aggressively didactic than other methods that Farocki enlists in some of his prior, more agitational films such as *Nicht lösbares Feuer* (*Inextinguishable Fire*, 1969), it also increases the share of the spectator by refusing to direct attention too coercively toward certain meanings and connections that have already been secured by the filmmaker.<sup>43</sup> And for Farocki, soft montage takes effect not only within individual works; it extends to the constantly renewed and re-tested correspondences between and across many of his projects when they are installed together as repeating loops in gallery space, making for an intricate scene of comparison that enfolds multiple stages, contexts and varieties of his output simultaneously (2010: 207).<sup>44</sup>

Even as this shift into soft montage on Farocki's part entails a dramatic change in media (from single-strip film to video) and site of exhibition (from cinema and television to the art gallery), Farocki takes care to preserve a reflective investment

in the history of cinema and its forms, including popular cinema and shot/countershot. In his two-channel installation *On Construction of Griffith's Films* (2006) he considers the emergence of the technique in Griffith's expressive arsenal, through a dissection of moments sampled and reworked from *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) and *Intolerance* (1916). Farocki's critical gesture here is to characterise his own image practice as a derivation of this foundational procedure in narrative cinema, while also implying that his revised and amplified use of shot/countershot maintains something of the freshness of invention and broader range of possible applications that Griffith touches upon without fully harnessing himself. That is, Farocki, in a silent production of his own, borrows from Griffith's use of the procedure a reflexive commentary on the frame and the cut – one that entails a pronounced emphasis on doorways that open and shut. We are given to see in detail how the device articulates both connection and separation, how it engineers a 'drama of comparisons' (the subtitle of *Intolerance*) in which vision (thanks in part to the technical absence of a soundtrack) takes precedence over verbal dialogue. Farocki shows that as Griffith's system evolves, shot/countershot splits the space of a scene into rigidly compartmental blocks of action. To bear out this point Farocki reedit a dialogue scene from *Intolerance* between a man and woman who are separated by a door, as well as by an imaginary boundary instituted by the frame (and by social mores impeding intimacy). The scene stages the overcoming of these barriers, as the woman eventually opens the door and the potential lovers share a kiss goodnight – an event we view with a kind of double vision in Farocki's version, the same shot displayed on both panels of the diptych concurrently.

With Farocki's slightly earlier installation *Contre-chant (Counter-Music, 2004)*, which, by a felicitous coincidence, appeared the same year as Godard's similarly titled *Notre musique*, we find a more ambitious use of soft montage as Farocki now draws on avant-garde film traditions. He samples and to a certain extent emulates two of the most celebrated city symphony films made during the interwar era, *Chelovek s kinoapparatom (Man with a Movie Camera, Dziga Vertov, 1929)* and *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt (Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis, Walter Ruttmann, 1927)*.<sup>45</sup> He does this while piecing together an eccentric city film of his own, a study of contemporary Lille in France, which he composes out of archival video footage from surveillance cameras, as well as out of computer simulations and 'operational' images, as he calls them, that monitor locations around the city in terms of graphic and thermal changes – images that reduce the humans they capture to tabular lines and dots.

Farocki's montage between two screens orchestrates multiple threads of reflective argument. While comparing scenes of people sleeping in Vertov's film with

similar video footage used for a monitoring phase at a sleep clinic, the installation encourages us to see that surveillance – as both a theme and a class of images – already appears in *Man With a Movie Camera*. But Farocki's montage also gradually demonstrates that the constructivist dreams of Vertov and Ruttmann have given way to a control society where the lives of the inhabitants are extensively regulated by a cold, purely functional vision that organises the city, dictating and scanning its daily flows. Where the utopian energies of the 1920s films serve to incorporate the city's subjects in a regime of production (of the film, of the city), the more dystopian video installation shows by contrast that in today's world, the role of workers and citizens is diminished in a post-industrial regime of reproduction.<sup>46</sup> To drive home this view, Farocki juxtaposes shots of spirited and dynamic workers from Vertov's and Ruttmann's films with contemporary footage of attendants in control rooms in front of data monitors – professional verifiers who are not workers so much as 'appendages of the apparatus', as the intertitles put it.<sup>47</sup>

*Contre-chant*, the original title of Farocki's installation, is doubly significant: the homophone in French for the word for 'countershot' (*contrechamp*), it also translates as 'counterpoint'. Together, these meanings express an ambition to realise a kind of music or song (*chant*) that works in critical opposition to the deadening regime of images that Farocki identifies in Lille. Given the avant-garde



Fig. 6: Symphonic factory workers contrasted with a post-industrial verifier of visual data: *Counter-Music (Contre-chant)*, Harun Farocki, 2004)



nature of his main cinematic references and the installation's far remove from narrative fiction, shot/countershot might seem an alien notion. But as Christa Blümlinger astutely comments, the video surveillance feeds that Farocki appropriates are, from his standpoint, detrimental to the society under watch precisely because in their original context, they rule out the principle of a countershot as a necessary measure (2009: 103).

Instructive on this score is an aphoristic argument once offered by Serge Daney, a conceptual and partly technological distinction between 'the image' and 'the visual' that Farocki found highly applicable to his own work:

The image is always located at the forefront of a conflict between two energy fields, it is doomed to bear witness to a particular otherness, and something is always lacking even though it invariably has a hard center. The image is always both more and simultaneously also less than what it is in itself [...]. So as not to complicate my life further I have decided to clearly differentiate between the 'image' and the 'visual'. The visual I understand to be an optical verification of a purely technical function. The visual knows no reverse shot [*contrechamp*], it lacks nothing, it is complete within itself, a closed circuit, a little like a pornographic spectacle that is nothing more than an ecstatic verification of the functioning of the organs. (Quoted in Farocki 2010: 65)<sup>48</sup>

According to Daney, 'the visual' embodies a logic of sheer, automatic transmission and confirmation, a thoughtless circulation of audiovisual matter, a purely technical relay of information that requires only 'optical verification' on the part of the recipient: the very idea of a countershot is irrelevant as there is no lack, no off-screen, no 'otherness' to be acknowledged (so this logic deceptively implies). On the other hand, 'the image', which Daney aligns more closely with the history of cinema, bears with it no ruse of completion and self-sufficiency. It forms relations that are robust and resonant, but always alerts us to the fact that *further thought is needed*.<sup>49</sup>

In *Contre-chant*, the soft montage effectively tries to reinscribe the critical power of 'the image' where 'the visual' prevails. It puts into effect the notion of a countershot within and against the extensive reaches of an informatic system that has no use for such a principle and that alarmingly inclines toward 'a progressive dehumanization of seeing' (Blümlinger 2009: 108). As viewers, we are addressed neither as the symphonic subjects of the 1920s avant-garde, nor as the tamed and tabulated functionaries of 'the visual', but instead as nimble, co-investigative montagists.

There are two key essayistic gestures that underpin and leaven this process and its not quite direct address to the viewer. First, Farocki's investment in Vertov

extends past the shots lifted from *Man with a Movie Camera*. The installation engages and creatively adapts the Soviet filmmaker's theoretical 'principle of the interval as a visual correlation between two far-apart [and seemingly incommensurate] images' (Blümlinger 2009: 107). Thus the 'countershots' arise in Farocki's combinatory system when a linkage of two sampled images (whether within or across the two channels of the dual projection) opens up and softly urges the viewer to examine a transversal field of relationality between two disparate elements. It is primarily on this basis that *Contre-chant* guides us to take part in an activity of counter-observation.<sup>50</sup>

Second, *Counter-Music* implicitly entertains a relation (part oppositional and part analogical) between the control room and the editing room, as sites where a multiplicity of gathered sights and sounds are intensively studied by trained professionals.<sup>51</sup> In some of his other video works such as *Interface* and *Der Ausdruck der Hände* (*The Expression of Hands*, 1997), the editing station, with its monitors and gadgetry, is a conspicuous part of the reflection, indeed its main hub. Such an impulse to stress the work conducted at the editing station, and to give the spectator, as much as possible, a cutting room experience (without quite catering to technical interactivity), is a feature of many bravura examples of the audiovisual essay: to name a few, *Man with a Movie Camera*, *F for Fake*, Godard's *Scénario*



Fig. 7: Film and video editing stations compared by means of double projection: *Schnittstelle* (*Interface*, 1995)

du film *'Passion'* (1982) and Pedro Costa's *Où gît votre sourire enfoui?* (*Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?*, 2001). In their own ways each of these efforts showcase the gestural and mental dexterity required of the editor not simply for the sake of foregrounding a means of production but for the purpose of collapsing its experiential aspect of trial, its sense of play and unforeseen discovery, into the register of the 'completed', ready-to-be-received work.<sup>52</sup>

The editing room does not overtly appear in *Contre-chant*, but Farocki invokes it both through his detailing of the control room and through the two-channel format of the soft montage, which, as I have indicated, adapts the *dispositif* of the video editing station to the exhibition space of the gallery.<sup>53</sup> This move, as Farocki here and elsewhere manages it, is essayistic not just because it is reflexive, because it relies partly on verbal commentary, or because it renders documentary subjective, but because it looks to incite and sustain a kind of 'mutual galvanism' between the filmmaker and the spectator who must work constructively in the manifest gap between the two screens, in the absence of a surefire rhetoric of continuity.<sup>54</sup>

By way of conclusion, I want to stress that this softer type of montage needs to be understood as a tactical alteration in the context of Farocki's oeuvre a whole, and that the same can be said respectively of Godard's lecture in *Notre musique*. One could of course compare these two directors as leading exemplars of a more militantly politicised means of essayistic reflection, given that both figures at one time dedicated themselves to a bid for leftist revolution in the ferment surrounding 1968, a time when they both spurned the device of shot/countershot in accordance with their ideological and aesthetic opposition to popular cinema.<sup>55</sup> Their later experiments on and with popular forms testify to a shift toward a different, more tentative style of argument, replete with rethought practices of montage and adjusted modes of address to the viewer.<sup>56</sup> In Godard's 'our music' and in Farocki's 'counter-music', we find two approaches in which a concern for political and ethical questions still remains, but is tempered by a form of montage that tests and guides us with a greater 'margin of indefiniteness'.<sup>57</sup>

## Notes

- 1 My thanks to Kyle Stevens, Inga Pollmann and Gigi Nemeroff for their advice and support.
- 2 Timothy Corrigan's use of the term 'essayism', which he takes from Robert Musil, also allows for a flexible corpus of examples (see Corrigan 2011: 31, as well as his chapter in this collection). In my own usage, 'essayism' and 'essayistic' refer to *modal* variants of the essay that can make their way into a variety of genres and

- idioms, including narrative fiction, without loss of reflective potency.
- 3 Jean-Pierre Gorin, referring to his own essay films, regards as ‘fictional’ not just staged episodes but the dramatisation of intelligence as part of a speculative enquiry: ‘There is an inherent drama for me in any attempt at thinking about anything and it is the pace of this “drama” I am after. Thus the speculative nature of my films; the fact that they pile questions upon questions and tend to disqualify any answer as temporary; that they are full of false leads; that they are investigations which wander away from their own stated premises; that they proceed in fits; that, at their core, there is the stop-and-go motion of a mind trying to figure “it” out. An “it” which is always problematic, always shifting as the investigation progresses’ (in Tillman 1988). In his curatorial efforts around the essay film, Gorin defines the practice in similar tones, not as a genre so much as a necessarily unruly exercise of ruminative thought (2007).
  - 4 For David Bordwell, the technique of shot/countershot, while it is essential to upholding narrative continuity, does little more than stage dialogue, clarify spatial relationships and offer the viewer something like an enhanced articulation of her own perceptual means of observing conversation (2008: 57–74). Bordwell recognises that the device undergoes aberrations in the history of art cinema and otherwise non-Hollywood productions (2008: 70–72) but he neglects its expressive diversity in mainstream narrative cinema, both classical and contemporary.
  - 5 Raymond Durnat points out how Hitchcock’s use of the procedure in *Psycho* (1960) injects into a still-intact continuity scheme the graphically jarring collisions of montage (2002: 162–3). Sam Rohdie directs attention to Hitchcock’s estrangement of the device in *Vertigo* (1958), the effect of which unsettles without dismantling the logic of classical cinema (2006: 66–70). Even when working in a lighter, more leisurely mood, Hitchcock finds expressive uses for shot/countershot. In *North by Northwest* (1959), it serves as a privileged way of making palpable the binding energy between the two main lovers that builds in intensity across multiple scenes as they negotiate a sense of ‘togetherness’, as Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) puts it.
  - 6 For one relevant instance of this perspective, see Deleuze 1989: 173–4.
  - 7 As I acknowledge later in this chapter, Godard has long mined the expressive power of the patently avoided or deferred countershot. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, while not quite being essayistic directors, are perhaps the unrivaled masters of the suppressed and *very* selectively used countershot. See their *Deux jours, une nuit* (*Two Days, One Night*, 2014) for an example of this strategy as it supports an ethical exploration of interpersonal confrontation and dialogue.
  - 8 While I have noted clever modifications of shot/countershot in classical cinema and modern cinema, one could find like-spirited examples in the experimental

avant-garde (e.g. Manuel De Landa's *The Itch Scratch Itch Cycle* (1976) and Ken Jacobs' *The Doctor's Dream* (1978)) as well as in 'postmodern' narrative cinema abounding in playful self-consciousness and ocular mischief (e.g. Brian De Palma's split-screen optics from *Sisters* (1973) to *Passion* (2012)).

- 9 Though Godard's self-description as an 'essayist' appears routinely in studies of the essay film, commentators tend to jump ahead and apply it to projects by the director that more readily fit the mold of a Markeresque essay film, such as *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967) (see Corrigan 2011: 69). The extent to which Godard's earlier films count as essayistic thus goes without close examination.
- 10 There are other budding predilections in Godard's written criticism of this period that lend themselves to a discussion of essayistic cinema, such as the crossing of fiction and documentary, the combination of meticulous construction with Rossellinian or Rouchian spontaneity, and the will to reflect on the film medium itself (see Henderson 1980).
- 11 For shrewd accounts of the numerous intertextual, reflexive and allegorical aspects of *Le Mépris*, including its attempted synthesis of classical and modern cinema, see Brenez 1989, Aumont 2000 and McElhaney 2006: 1–3.
- 12 If this use of the lampshade as a divider echoes Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*, it also reworks a key scene in Minnelli's *Some Came Running* (1958) where the potential breakup of Dave (Frank Sinatra) and Gwen (Martha Hyer) is visually suggested by a large lamp arranged between them in the frame. As for Godard's toing and froing camera, if we compare it to the already mentioned moment from *L'Eclisse*, we can see that it assumes the interlying position of an automatically rotating fan that Antonioni situates between his couple, just under the lamp, its whirring noise dominating the audio track and its force intermittently disturbing Vittoria's (Monica Vitti's) hair.
- 13 For an astute analysis of spatial-corporeal and other 'intervals' in cinema, see Bergala 2000: 25–35. One also thinks here of the passage drawn from Élie Faure that we hear at the start of *Pierrot le fou* (1965) concerning Velázquez's primary interest in painting the energetic spaces between figures and objects.
- 14 *Vivre sa vie* derives most of its shot structures from a gymnastic avoidance of shot/countershot, enlisting as it does an array of pans and tracks and eccentric compositions for its dialogue scenes. But even in that film there are moments where shot/countershot exchanges do occur, namely, in the eleventh tableau in which Nana accidentally 'does philosophy' with Brice Parain. Earlier, in the third tableau, when Nana (Anna Karina) connects with the suffering heroine from Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928), her reaction shots are folded into a series of angular shot/countershot exchanges onscreen between Jeanne and her inquisitors.

- 15 Given my claim that Godard's essaying owes, at least initially, to a certain persistence of criticism from written into audiovisual manners of expression, we can also view his compression of different styles in this scene (the long take and an unorthodox form of continuity cutting) as a continued exploration of the concerns from his 1956 article for *Cahiers du cinéma*, 'Montage, My Fine Care'. For Godard, combining *mise-en-scène* ('a look') and montage ('a heartbeat') can have a revelatory effect by drawing out 'the soul under the spirit, the passion behind the intrigue' (1972a: 39).
- 16 Apposite here is a statement that Godard would make while discussing *Pierrot le fou*. Explaining that he sees each shot transition as a thorny problem to brood on, he says, 'A director like Delbert Mann probably doesn't think this way. He follows a pattern. Shot – the character speaks; reverse angle, someone answers. Maybe this is why *Pierrot le fou* is not a film, but an attempt at film' (1972e: 223). The notion of 'attempt', which strongly evokes the essayistic, here emerges as part of a critique of shot/countershot in its default, prescribed applications.
- 17 Along these lines, Godard's *Adieu au langage* (*Goodbye to Language 3D*, 2014) looks back to *Le Mépris*, particularly in a scene where the space between an unhappy couple is studied by means of a superimposition combined with 3D. Both a lamp and a bouquet of flowers occupy the depicted spatial interval between characters.
- 18 For an incisive account of Godard's critical tinkering with all manner of interlocutory circumstances, see Brenez 2004.
- 19 Godard's video dialogues – such as with Woody Allen in *Meetin' WA* (1986) and with Michel Piccoli in *Cent ans de cinéma: Deux fois cinquante ans de cinéma français* (*2 x 50 Years of French Cinema*, 1995) – consistently use stationary camera set-ups and long-held shots that are disturbed by titles and cutaways to (or superimpositions of) a diversity of appropriated and revised materials. Godard tends to occupy the frame (if at all) with his back to the camera, his discussant more frontally visible, the composition resembling *one side* of a shot/countershot alternation. Some of these setups offer clever variations on the *mise-en-scène* of his films (e.g. the positioning of a lamp between Godard and his partner Anne-Marie Miéville in *Soft and Hard* (1985), which delimits the interval between their bodies as a radiant field where images periodically appear as superimpositions that graphically fall into place with striking congruence). At some level, these video projects each rely on the self-conscious idiom that Michel Chion refers to as the suspended or 'avoided reverse shot' (2009: 471).
- 20 Godard refers to Levinas here with ambivalence. He dismisses the philosopher's focus on the face-to-face encounter as a 'bad reverse-shot', but he imagines collaborating with Levinas to discover a form of expression that is 'worked out with

greater care.' He then goes on to declare in the interview: 'As it happens, I have a project for a short film on lovers meeting in the various *arrondissements*. I proposed something. I have no idea whether it will ever be made. I'd call it *Champ contre champ* (Shot/Reverse-Shot). It features a girl called Adrienne Champ and a boy called Ludovic Champ' (in Rancière and Tesson 2002: 64). Godard never made this proposed short, but his commissioned trailer for the 2008 Viennale, *Une catastrophe*, videographically reworks a shot/countershot alternation between two young lovers embracing from *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*, Robert Siodmak and Edward G. Ulmer, 1930). The same alternation of shots appears in the form of stills in the promotional materials for Godard's *Adieu au langage*.

- 21 Rascaroli insightfully reads *Notre musique* as 'an essay film that creates the conditions of its own communicative negotiation, and takes it as its subject matter as well as textual strategy' (2009: 99). In order to better claim the film for a definition of the audiovisual essay that is firmly anchored in the first-person documentary, she plays down the film's fictional elements as 'not imping[ing] on the communication of an essayistic argument' (2009: 95). By contrast, I would suggest that the fiction is rather an inextricable aspect of Godard's essayistic thinking in the film.
- 22 In the 'Hell' segment, a blurring of the very boundary between fiction and nonfiction is further achieved by the video manipulations of tint and texture that affect both kinds of materials and lend them the same grainy, chromatic substance.
- 23 Corrigan examines the significance of the reenactment idiom in general within essayistic cinema (2011: 196–98).
- 24 This calls to mind the role of the translator in *Le Mépris*. More than just a measure to protect against dubbing, and more than just a means of riffing on the theme of troubled communication, she calls attention to the dynamic, volatile space of interaction between characters.
- 25 This aphorism is obscurely coupled with a photographic still from Sergei Eisenstein's uncompleted *¡Que viva México!* (1979), a still that shows a skeleton taking off his own mask. *¡Que viva México!* returns here from Godard's 'Hell' montage, where shots from Eisenstein's 'Maguety' episode show up.
- 26 Technically these two shots from *His Girl Friday* are production stills, but the critique Godard offers still generally applies to Hawks' working method.
- 27 'The truth has two faces', which Godard repeats from Darwish, is not simply a thesis statement he accepts without scrutiny. In the overall economy of the film, it ties in with his reflections on Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of the face-to-face encounter (at one point in the film, a character studies Levinas's book *Entre nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, its cover plainly visible). We might note here that

an impetus to overcome brutally othering relations is part of the essayistic legacy that continues from Montaigne, whose turn to such a style of writing was meant in part to short-circuit the dogmatism at the source of the religious wars that raged around him.

- 28 These two attendants are not to be confused with the two audience members who hold the stills from *His Girl Friday* earlier in the lecture. Then again, Godard's opaque and varying representation of the audience over the course of the lecture seems designed to provoke this sort of confusion. A close viewing of the scene reveals that this young man and young woman are sitting near the front – we see them briefly during the lateral, back-and-forth tracking shot near the start of the scene – whereas the two members singled out earlier are seated more towards the back.
- 29 The shot strongly echoes the swinging lamp in *Alphaville* (1965), which describes the spatial interval between Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine) and Henri Dickson (Akim Tamirof) in the cramped stairwell of the latter's hotel.
- 30 The one character in the audience who at first seems to 'get' Godard's lecture, or who at least seems moved into deep contemplation, is Olga (Nade Dieu), the young woman portrayed with her eyes closed, a Jewish French student of Russian descent. Later in the film, we learn that she has sacrificed her own life in a Tel Aviv movie theatre, in an act of protest for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Specifically, she claims to be carrying a bomb in her shoulder bag, but, after she is killed by sharpshooters, they discover the bag contains only books. While Olga is shown wandering through 'Paradise' in the enigmatic last part of *Notre musique*, her suicide is *not* what Godard means to inspire through his lecture, as his response upon hearing news of her death indicates. Her deed is therefore another index of failed communication.
- 31 Burlin Barr (2010: 69) offers a sharply detailed account of how Godard fractures and distorts the space of the lecture hall, in the process converting shot/countershot into 'an analytic instrument for revealing and interrogating difference' to be shared, potentially, with the audience. I would add that over the course of the lecture, inconsistencies emerge in the depiction of the audience, which seems large at some moments and quite small at others. There is no master shot that gives us a definitive read on the entire event, and the number of attendants seems to dwindle as the lecture progresses.
- 32 For an analysis of Godard's essayistic self-portrayal in his late work, see Warner 2013.
- 33 For influential arguments that treat Farocki as an audiovisual essayist, see Blümlinger 2004a and 2004b; Pavsek 2008; Rascaroli 2009: 44–63; and Corrigan 2011: 156–62. For a substantial comparison of Godard and Farocki as 'theorists'



in the context of the essay film, see Pantenburg 2015: 135–52.

- 34 Whereas Godard has long defined himself as an ‘essayist’, Farocki dismissed the term ‘essay’ as an inappropriate classification of his work (see Hüser 2004: 313), finding it vague and preferring instead ‘form of intelligence’ (Elsaesser 2004a: 103). This, I think, should not dissuade us from defining Farocki as an essayist; his understandable misgivings ought rather to remind us not to use the term essay as a mere pigeonhole.
- 35 On these grounds, Farocki sometimes took Godard to task, arguing that *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, for example, offers arguments that are compelling and admirably ambitious but not accurate: ‘He makes one intellectual observation, then another, and then compares them – literalism is lacking. His first main idea: Sternberg lights Marlene Dietrich in the same way as Speer lights Hitler – this isn’t quite true, but it’s a great idea’ (in Hüser 2004: 309). Even on aesthetic grounds Farocki had ambivalent feelings about Godard’s work. Alter (2015: 151–2) recounts that in a film course she co-taught with Farocki, though he admitted to being influenced by Godard’s split-screen montage in *Numéro deux* (*Number Two*, 1975), he also embraced, as a necessary alternative, Artavazd Peleshyan’s principle of ‘distance montage’, as evidenced in *Vremena goda* (*The Seasons of the Year*, 1975). Alter explains that this type of montage, rather than forging links between consecutive shots, cultivates the spectator’s awareness of associative relationships between elements and contexts that never converge materially onscreen.
- 36 Attending to the differences between Richter’s and Astruc’s prophecies, Alter suggests two separate paths along which the essay film evolves: one (stemming from Richter) that tries, from within the art world, to merge the documentary with the experimental avant-garde film; and another (stemming from Astruc) that attempts to critically combine the documentary with the feature-length fiction film. In recent decades, Alter suggests, the two strands have become entangled in the context of the gallery installation (2007: 51–2).
- 37 The collocation in German of ‘Film’ and ‘Kritik’ is richly evocative of the aesthetic and philosophic history of essayism. Nicole Brenez (2009: 131–3) argues that Farocki’s films and videos take part in a deep history of the recasting of *Kritik* that begins with the Jena Romantics’ revision of Kant’s notion of the term. Whereas for Kant, aesthetic criticism is a transcendent operation relative to the work of art it addresses and requires a certain distance for the sufficient exercise of taste and judgement, the Jena figures transpose criticism ‘to the register of the work itself’, thus rendering it immanent to the work’s own expressive powers. This is one way in which we can understand how Farocki, not entirely unlike Godard, continues to be a critic after he makes the transition to working primarily with sounds and images.

- 38 For an overview of the journal *Filmkritik* that acknowledges the close link between film production and film writing that its contributors insisted on through a style more 'descriptive' and 'essayistic' than it was evaluative, Olaf Möller draws a comparison to how *Cahiers du cinéma* served as a training ground for New Wave directors in France, Godard among them (2004: 70–1). See also Pavsek 2008, which describes the journal's modus as 'filmmaking by other means'.
- 39 Bresson is of course a major reference for Godard's work as well, from the truncated framings of *Vivre sa vie*, to Godard's trailer for Bresson's *Mouchette* (1967), through to the mantra-like use of Bresson's maxims from his book *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1997 [1975]) in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.
- 40 Thus Bresson's version of the device, as Farocki interprets it, countermands what film theories in full swing at the time of Farocki's article understood as the 'suturing' effect of shot/countershot in popular cinema, its stitching of the spectator into the film (see Oudart 1977–78 [1969]; Bordwell 1985: 110–13). Farocki instead suggests a detached, though raptly attentive, mode of spectatorial observation.
- 41 In this respect, Farocki's *Filmkritik* piece 'What an Editing Room Is' is a companion to his articles concerning shot/countershot. He portrays the cutting room as an outpost of the media industry where the editor, beholden to bureaucratic power, must generate a 'second script' due to the inevitably unrealisable 'plans and intentions' that guided the shooting (2001a: 78–80). He laments that this trial-and-error process is squandered as the editor is made to translate the 'babble' of the footage into an unadventurous 'rhetoric' of conventional continuity syntax (2001a: 82).
- 42 I should add that in this multiscreen process, titles and black screens often interrupt and rhythmicise the flow of images. Farocki's use of titles is characteristically terse and much less given to wordplay than Godard's.
- 43 Farocki, while explaining this freer play of meanings and associations, likens his own process to what Gilles Deleuze calls Godard's 'method of AND' (2010: 207).
- 44 This more encompassing sense of 'soft montage' as an exhibitory logic can be more hectic than Farocki's formulation recognises. When I have attended solo exhibitions of Farocki's installed videos, I have certainly been struck by how resonances take shape between and across a multitude of screens playing at once, with each shot of Farocki's work seeming to groove, potentially, with any other shot. But I have also found that the sensation can be attenuated by the commotion of other visitors moving about the gallery space, as well as by the cacophony of viewers' voices and the sounds from multiple Farocki works overlapping and competing.

- 45 See Corrigan (2011: 51–5) on the significance of the city film within the history of the essay film.
- 46 Christa Blümlinger observes how *Counter-Music* traces a shift between ‘the industrial era of the masses and production to the post-industrial era of data and services’ while at the same time exploring a parallel transition from filmic-artistic images to the ‘functionally oriented’ recordings of video surveillance (2009: 102, 103).
- 47 Farocki also brings into the mix sampled shots from industrial films contemporaneous with Vertov’s and Ruttmann’s projects.
- 48 There is a larger historical and political context for Farocki’s embrace of Daney’s argument than I have the space to explore. Where Daney writes at the time of the Gulf War in 1991, the journal entry in which Farocki quotes Daney’s distinction is dated 19 March 2003, not coincidentally the first day of the US invasion of Iraq.
- 49 One of Daney’s main points is that in a world where ‘the visual’ reigns supreme, the spectator, if critical thought is her goal, is obliged to take matters into her own hands, to perform her own mental montage and supply connective counter-shots where they fail to find material expression. For an alternate translation of the full article that Farocki cites, see Daney 2006. There Daney theorises ‘obligatory’ montage as the (television) viewer’s mental and combative supplement to material form.
- 50 For a more thorough exegesis of Vertov’s concept of the interval, see Papazian 2016.
- 51 Near the end of the installation, that is, before it loops back to the start, Farocki adds to this comparison a third heavily mediated space of observation – the war room. Titles that mix with shots of a contemporary control room in Lille state: ‘We know rooms like these from the movies. In rooms like these rocket launches are supervised – or the Third World War is started or prevented.’
- 52 Arguably this trend has its earliest expression in Guido Seeber’s virtuosic avant-garde advertisement film *Kipho* (1925) with its split-screen contrapuntal montage and its highly reflexive display of editing technique. In fact Seeber’s theory and practice of the ‘trick film’ anticipate many of the strategies that Vertov, Farocki, Godard and other montage-based audiovisual essayists exploit in their efforts to augment the perceptual sensitivities of the spectator (see Cowan 2010).
- 53 By *dispositif* I mean a given technical setup that promotes certain rules and patterns of engagement while remaining open to crafty variations at the behest of the filmmaker or media artists. For a rich discussion of this term that informs my own sense of its aesthetic valences, see Martin 2011.
- 54 For Friedrich Schlegel, ‘[t]he essay is a mutual galvanism of author and reader’;

- its dynamic spirit 'should combat intellectual arthritis and promote nimbleness' (quoted in McCarthy 1989: 189).
- 55 Farocki recounts that in the early to mid-1970s, he was searching for a politicised but form-driven approach on par with that of Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's Dziga Vertov Group films, and he sums up his attitude toward popular cinematic forms by saying: '[I] was against intercuts and shot/countershots' (2009b: 223).
- 56 Such a transition from militant to a more speculative means of essaying plays out in the methods of a variety of essay filmmakers. One thinks here of Chris Marker's emblematic *Sans soleil* (*Sunless*, 1982) with its embrace of the video synthesizer and the 'Zone' that it generates as a sort of last-ditch effort to wrest utopian energies from images of the past, in response to the once-militant Sandor Krasna's disenchantment with the political struggles of the 1960s.
- 57 I allude here to Godard's verbal citation, at the beginning of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, of Bresson's maxim: 'Don't show all sides of things. A margin of indefiniteness' (1997 [1975]: 104).

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# Chapter 3

## The Practice of Strangeness: *L'Intrus*, from Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) to Claire Denis (2004)<sup>1</sup>

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Martine Beugnet

*L'Intrus* (*The Intruder*, 2004), Claire Denis' cinematic 'adoption' of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's eponymous essay, is one of her most intriguing and perplexing works. Indeed, the filmmaker's essayistic project is best envisaged as part of an ongoing dialogue with the philosopher, an exchange that resonates across their respective oeuvres. In its combination of the autobiographical and philosophical, individual and universal, the film shares with Nancy's written essay the disregard for generic boundaries associated with the essayistic approach. Denis' film, however, does not fit in with attempts to define the essay film as a genre, in particular those that align the category with a strong verbal component such as a voice-over commentary.<sup>2</sup> In fact, speech does not feature prominently in Denis' film work as a whole. Although, as we will see, *Vers Nancy* (*Towards Nancy*, 2002), which stands as a companion piece to *L'Intrus*, is based on a conversation, it can be considered an exception among the films of a director who is known for her scarce use of dialogues. In her filmmaking, fictional and non-fictional, Denis has always favoured the power of the image over that of speech, and this prominence of the visual (in relation to a largely nonverbal soundtrack), together with the implicit belief in the value of the sensory as a form of knowledge, extends to her practice of essayistic film form as well as to her interpretation of Nancy's essay.

A child of the era of decolonisation, Denis grew up in various regions of France's sub-Saharan colonial lands, and was brought back to the '*métropole*' as a teenager in the 1960s. She has thus had a double experience of foreignness, abroad, and in her 'own' country, which she did not know and where, in similar yet fundamentally different ways than in Africa, she felt like an outsider again. As the daughter of a colonial administrator, a childhood beautifully evoked in her first feature, *Chocolat* (*Chocolate*, 1988), she stood as a highly visible embodiment of the Western presence on colonial soil. On her return to France, she would live through the more banal experience of becoming an invisible intruder, an exile at 'home' – a theme explored in her subsequent works (see Beugnet 2004). From the start, Denis thus drew on her personal knowledge of feeling rootless to explore issues that have remained at the heart of her filmmaking: the deeply troubling questions of identity and alienation, assimilation and rejection, desire and fear inseparable from the post-colonial malaise that affects France with particular acuteness.<sup>3</sup>

It does not come as a surprise, then, that Denis should find inspiration in the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy, a philosopher whose interests and research span the fields of politics and psychoanalysis, developing around notions of otherness and selfhood, community and multiculturalism, and questioning the concept of historical progress. Furthermore, the autobiographical basis of *L'Intrus*, unprecedented in the philosopher's writing, explains why Denis should be drawn to this text in particular. Nancy, a particularly perceptive viewer and analyst of her work, has found the echo of many aspects of his thought in Denis' films, not the least of these is the refusal of closure, which is important in the essayistic project of both.

Nancy's keen and long lasting interest in Denis' work eventually led him to write a series of texts on the director's work, starting with a much quoted article on *Beau Travail* (*Good Work*, 1999), Denis' celebrated portrait of Djibouti and the Foreign Legion (Nancy 2001). Similarly, Denis' direct cinematic practice of Nancy's ideas started before the making of *L'Intrus*, with her contribution to the collection of short films, *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello* (2002) – that is, the short film *Vers Nancy*. In turn, one year after its initial theatrical release, on the occasion of the televised broadcast of *L'Intrus* on the Franco-German 'Arte' television channel, Nancy wrote a detailed analysis of the film (Nancy 2005).

As this chapter goes back and forth between the films, the philosophical essay and the article, what emerges is the impossibility to dissociate abstract concepts from their embodied manifestation: in its cinematographic and in its literary expression, the theoretical preoccupation with foreignness is mapped out on the very body of the narrator/character, as well as in the wording of the written text and on the material surface of the film's images – imprinted, as it were, in the flesh of the text/film.

## Towards *L'Intrus*

In 2001, Denis was commissioned to create a short film as part of a collection entitled *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello*.<sup>4</sup> Aptly called *Vers Nancy*, Denis' black-and-white film is shot entirely in a train, presumably on its way to the border town of Nancy in Lorraine, in the Northeast of France, that bears the same name as the philosopher. Nancy himself is filmed in conversation with one of his former students, the Slovenian philosopher and translator Ana Samardzija. The train journey is a familiar trope of the cinema, the changing landscape framed by the window a reminder of the unravelling images of a filmstrip. In this case, however, the trope takes on a historical significance as well, as the train travels east, towards a destination redolent of the history of France's involvement in World War I and II, and a border that remains present as a sensitive landmark in the nation's collective memory.<sup>5</sup>

Sitting across from each other in front of the window, Nancy and Samardzija try to define what it is that renders our encounter with the foreign so fraught. Starting with Samardzija's own experience of being an 'invisible intruder' (as a foreign white woman who speaks fluent French) hoping to integrate in France, they evoke that inherent but necessary contradiction that lies at the heart of the construction of individual as well as collective identities: the existence of an 'other' as the very fundament for self-identity, and the need to define oneself through difference, with and against the other, simultaneously denying one's own internal fragmentation. Their exchange is visually punctuated with images of French-Caribbean actor Alex Descas, standing alone in the corridor. As the train nears its destination, Descas enters Nancy and Samardzija's carriage, and, seemingly aware that he is 'intruding' on their discussion, comments on the briefness of this (cinematic) journey. Descas is a well-known actor who features repeatedly in Denis' films. Yet he casts an ambiguous figure here, as the mostly silent black man arguably objectified by the lingering gaze of the camera, and whose image serves as the visual counterpart to the dialogue between the two white travellers. The *mise-en-scène* accurately reflects Denis' denial of the easy route offered by common political correctness, and her questioning, along with Nancy, of the belief in the possibility of complete 'assimilation' implicit in its discourse – a discourse where, as Nancy precisely puts it, one has to pretend 'that a black person is not black'.<sup>6</sup> Nancy's definition of the foreigner, offered as an opening to his *L'Intrus* essay, similarly eschews political correctness to engage with the more complex reality of an irreducible strangeness: for Nancy, as for Denis, the 'truth' of the foreigner lies precisely here, in the impossibility of reducing and erasing the difference without denying her/his existence at the same time. What needs to be

practiced, then, is not assimilation, but the difficult experience of being with the intruder, of being intruded upon.

There must be an element of the intruder in the stranger, otherwise his/her strangeness is lost [...]. Yet most of the time, we refuse to admit it: as a subject matter, the intruder is an intrusion into our moral correctness (it is in fact a remarkable example of *political correctness*). And yet intrusion is an inherent part of the truth of the stranger. (Nancy 2000: 11–12; all translations are mine)

## Not Adaptation but ‘Adoption’

Such reflections are at the core of many of the debates that stirred the cultural, social, political and artistic arena in France as the end of the twentieth century loomed. Tellingly, both Denis’ masterpiece, *Beau Travail*, and Nancy’s essay *L’Intrus* (2000) were the result of commissions on the theme of foreignness by a TV channel, Arte, and a publisher, Galilée, respectively. Denis and Nancy’s respective oeuvres are thus easily contextualised as part of a much wider reflection that includes the work of a significant number of French thinkers and filmmakers.<sup>7</sup> If Nancy’s text stands out, however, and if it wields such evocative power in cinematic as well as literary terms, it is thanks to its remarkable blending of the autobiographical account with the philosophical essay. Starting with the description of the heart transplant that he went through nine years before, the philosopher establishes a thought-provoking analogy between the physical and psychological implications of the transplant and the fear of being intruded upon. Through the description of his medical condition, Nancy explores how the experience of one’s identity being threatened from within by that which comes from the outside is complicated by the need to lower one’s defenses, to weaken one’s immune system in order to survive. Part-essay, part-diary, part-stream of consciousness, the book weaves together the account of the personal experience that forms its starting point and running metaphor with a theoretical meditation on the nature of foreignness that is at the heart of the contemporary geopolitical predicament of the West. That this relatively short book should inspire such significant yet highly dissimilar film works as Nicolas Klotz’s *La Blessure* (*The Wound*, 2004) and Denis’ *L’Intrus* is a tribute to the richness of the metaphorical and conceptual journey it offers as well as to the openness of a reflection that eschews straightforward conclusions.<sup>8</sup> As a result, as Nancy himself recognises, even in the case of Denis, who chose to retain the title of the book, the link between source-text and film is necessarily much looser than one of adaptation or even transposition. Indeed, if

the hybrid quality of Nancy's text, part philosophical essay, part autobiographical account, is reflected in the film form, it is, as we will see, at the cross between different genres that Denis' unclassifiable film hovers, its essayistic nature woven into a loose, unresolved tale and worked through the very materiality of the film.

In his discussion of the relationship between his writing and Denis' film-making, Nancy compares it to a creative form of 'filiation', thus simultaneously referring to one of the core themes in Denis' film: kinship or lineage, real or imagined. Elaborating anew the metaphorical play on the theme of otherness, identity and embodiment by describing the process of translating the text to the screen as a form of 'adoption', Nancy thus emphasises the rich connections and fertile departures that the corporeal allegory of the transplant (and, with it, of 'contamination') creates in terms of form as well as narrative inventiveness:

I must point this out for those who have not read it: the book does not contain a story as such that the film could adapt [...]. As I once said, being struck by the assonance, Claire Denis did not adapt my book, she adopted it. (In fact the film does speak of adoption.) The relationship between us differs from the relatively 'natural' process of adaptation (a simple change of register or tool); it is an unnatural and implicit relation established through a purely symbolic lineage. In the end, this might be the truth of all lineages – and maybe also the lesson to be drawn from the film, just as my book suggests that there is no such thing as one's 'true' proper body; and by saying 'just as' I am already engaging with the complex and subtle system of correspondences, of 'inspirations' or contaminations between us. (2005: 1)

Hence, Nancy adds, 'in spite of the undeniable, irreducible and welcome heterogeneity that separates the film from the book, the former brings us back to the latter and draws it, as in an ebb tide [*reflux*] beyond itself' (2001: 2). The use of the word 'reflux', as in the title of Paul Gégauff's 1965 film in which Michel Subor, the lead actor in *L'Intrus*, also played the central character, points to an intricate process of exchange, a form of ebb tide or reverse current at work within the film itself as well as in the passage from text to film. Indeed, if there is no direct narrative equivalent possible between the two, the following excerpts from Nancy's essay, redolent of Rimbaudian accents, can nonetheless serve to emphasise the premise of both the book and the film with equal aptness:

I have (who, 'I?', that is precisely the question, the old question: who is the subject of this utterance, always estranged from its own statement, always, inevitably, an intruder, and yet, inevitably, the driving force, the mainspring, the

heart?) – I, then, have received someone else’s heart, almost ten years ago. For reasons that have remained obscure, my own heart had become obsolete. To live, it had become necessary to host someone else’s heart. (2000: 13)

My heart was becoming a stranger from me: a stranger, precisely, because it was inside. [...] A strangeness reveals itself ‘at the heart’ of that which is most familiar – but the term familiar is insufficient here: at the heart of that which never made itself known as ‘heart’. (2000: 17)

[I]dentity equals immunity; one is identified with the other. To lower one is to lower the other [...]. We are snowed under with recommendations about the external world, but the most vigorous enemies are inside: the old viruses hiding in the shadows of our immune system, the intruders of old, who have always been there. (2000: 33)

The figure of the intruder as described by Nancy is refracted in Denis’ film through the kind of constellation of elusive characters and elliptical storylines that typifies her cinematic worlds. Similarly, ‘intrusion’ can be considered a visual and rhetorical element of Denis’ essayistic project, which is alternately based on digressions from and forays into recognisable narrative film forms.

The film is dominated by the presence of Michel Subor in the role of Louis Trébor. Trébor is a mature man who undergoes a heart transplant before embarking on the search for a long-lost son – a journey that takes him from the Eastern French mountain range of the Jura to Tahiti, via Switzerland and South Korea. In the book, Nancy conveys the process of self-estrangement that occurs before and after the transplant through the recurring switch from first-person account to impersonal or passive voice (using the passive impersonal form in French, ‘on’, or passive infinitives) where the subject, the narrator, becomes the object of the enunciation. In the film, this process is unexpectedly brought to the fore by the first question directed at Trébor in the French Polynesian idiom, when he calls at the house of his son’s Polynesian mother and she asks Trébor what he wants, substituting the pronoun ‘him’ for ‘you’: ‘Tu veux quoi, Lui?’ (literally: ‘What do you want, Him?’).

As in all of Denis’ previous features, however, dialogues in *L’Intrus* are typically scant. In its cinematographic treatment, the experience of self-alienation is thus more suffused, although just as pervasive as in the writing. The leading character chooses to go back and settle in a far-away country, part of former French colonial land, where he spent time in his youth – although, as one of the locals gently points out, there is no place for him there. From the Eastern French

countryside where Trébor literally blended into his environment, the film thus takes us to radically different landscapes (and, through the multisensory evocative power of the images, different air, climate and smells). Here, Trébor stands out. He becomes the object of curious gazes and, silhouetted against the light, often forms a black hole on the surface of the image.<sup>9</sup> As he becomes progressively sicker, the recurring images of his hands caressing his scarred chest herald the growing intrusion of heterogeneous images within the body of the film itself.

Of Nancy's book, Denis thus retained the metaphorical play on the notion of the transplant, which simultaneously describes the effect on an individual's corporeal and psychological identity of the grafting of a foreign organ, and the mutation of the geopolitical body at large, as it is subjected to an influx of outsiders. The analogy is a topical one: as many other contemporary observers have pointed out, and as Nancy and Samardzija remind us in *Vers Nancy*, while the virtual and actual circulation of images and human bodies across national divides increases, an ageing, post-colonial Western world appears to retreat, arguably more than ever before, behind the illusion of a unified and integral identity, and occasionally reacts like a besieged body, as if seized in paranoid fear of hidden takeovers.<sup>10</sup>

Such latent feelings of paranoia imbue the world inhabited by the main character. As Trébor's journey unravels, the film takes on a dark, thriller-like quality, weaving into its loose plotline the evocation of an international mafia and the traffic of organs. At the beginning of the film, he is depicted living a solitary life in the densely wooded frontier zone that stretches across the Franco-Swiss border. Neither his lover, the pharmacist from the local town (played by Bambou), nor his son, Sidney (Grégoire Colin), with whom he appears to have a distant relationship, seem to know much about him, and the film offers few clues to elucidate the mystery that surrounds this ambiguous character's dominating presence. Trébor has a Swiss and a Russian passport; he has lived in a multitude of countries and has been trained to kill. Walking, cycling or driving across the beautiful countryside that surrounds his hide-away, he observes from afar the desperate advance of groups of illegal immigrants hunted by customs officers. However, he too is hunted. Beset by ghosts of his past, he remains constantly on the alert, attuned to the way his dogs sense the presence of intruders. Yet the greatest threat comes from within: Trébor's heart is ill, and to survive he has to leave his retreat and get a transplant.

But the new heart will not free Trébor from his own history. The past continues to haunt him, materialising throughout the film in the form of the young Russian woman (Katerina Golubeva) who follows him all the way to the Polynesian islands where he revisits the sites of his youth in search of his eldest estranged son. The content of the debt for which his persistent follower eventually exacts

retribution remains imprecise and as impossible to erase as the colonial guilt carried by so many of the doomed figures that inhabit Denis' films. In order to gain a new lease of life – the transplant of a heart that, he specifies, must be of a young male – Trébor has unwittingly concluded a Faustian contract, unknowingly sacrificing the present to the chimeras of the past and of the future. Towards the end of the film, enigmatic images of the mutilated body of the young man played by Colin – the son who has been ostensibly disowned in favour of another, long-lost heir – suggest that it is his heart that now beats in Trébor's, his own father's chest.

In Denis' films, individual narratives almost always come entangled in the vicissitudes of a collective history, and blood ties rarely stand unquestioned: guilt is part of the inheritance and the sons and daughters try to free themselves from the sins of the fathers. Grégoire Colin's character in *L'Intrus* recalls two characters he played in former films by Denis: the resentful son who reinvents himself as adoptive father in *Nénette et Boni* (1997), and Sentain, the orphan who joins the Foreign Legion in *Beau Travail*. In the character of Trébor himself, one finds an heir to the father figure of the commander who welcomes Sentain into the 'family' of the Foreign Legion. Trébor also stands as an echo of the pathetic and exploitative father figure of Denis' *S'en fout la mort* (*No Fear, No Die*, 1990), Ardennes (Jean-Claude Brialy), a shady business man and father of two sons: like Trébor in *L'Intrus*, he tries to buy the love of a young man (played by Alex Descas) whom he claims to have fathered during his – idealised – time in a colonial land.

*L'Intrus* evokes anew the ambiguous functions of lineage, 'real' or fantasised, in our contemporary world of closed frontiers and border controls, since in a time where technology and medicine rewrite the boundaries of corporeal identity, blood-ties and the name of the father continue to establish one's identity and legitimise claims of belonging to a particular country or social grouping. Lineage remains the ultimate key, that which opens gates and frontiers: the basis of a 'natural political economy' as Nancy puts it (2005: 3). Yet in Trébor's case, blood connections prove too fragile, or too difficult to trace, and the scene of the 'casting' improvised in Papeete, the capital city of French Polynesia, by a group of elders intent on finding a surrogate son who bears some resemblance to the ailing white man forms a remarkable cinematographic parable on the issue of genealogy in a post-colonial context. Ultimately, it is in renewed friendship, or thanks to the obstinate presence of the improvised son who appears ready to adopt him, that Trébor seemingly forges the tentative links that may allow him to confront death and even start to redeem himself.

Hence, argues Nancy, the significance of the Christ-like figure, in Nietzschean terms,<sup>11</sup> as it appears time after time in Denis' films: this is the perpetual



intruder, the disavowed or disowning son who has no regard for the privileges associated with biological ancestry. In the sacrificial son played by Colin, Nancy again finds in *L'Intrus* the figure that he had already associated with the character Sentain in *Beau Travail*. Before he is murdered, the young man is filmed in Trébor's deserted house, crying, a garland of leaves on his head. This garland was first worn by a vagabond girl – another Christ-like figure, female this time, and a not-so-distant heir to Agnès Varda's Mona, the young woman who casts the charismatic, uncompromising figure of the intruder in *Sans Toit ni Loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985).<sup>12</sup>

## The Living Dead

Cinema, however, generates its own mythology. In its ability to conjure up life-like, moving images of a reality that might have vanished long ago (as *L'Intrus* does when it brings a young Subor/Trébor back to life), cinema plays its own tricks in denial of nature's curse of mortality. Unsurprisingly, then, cinema opens a space where the battle between nature and *techne* can be played out, summoning archaic figures of retribution, bringing into life the strange mutant forms generated by the tampering with nature. Cinema is the 'natural' realm of Frankensteinian creatures and of the living dead – one of the terms used by Nancy when he evokes his own predicament: 'I become a science-fiction android, or, as my youngest son once described me, a living dead man' (2000: 43).

Just as the task of summarising Denis' deliberately mystifying narrative is to betray as well as emphasise the quintessential intangibility of her film worlds, so to try and elucidate the destiny of the main character of *L'Intrus* is to ignore the impossibility of disentangling the real from the fantasised (are the images of the son's dead body, with the heart carved out, actual, or the hallucination of a drugged man?). Indeed, in her portrayal of a man who feels himself gradually estranged from his own body as much as from his own environment, Denis is faithful to Nancy's account of his own feeling of alienation. From active body in control of the space and dominating the frame, Trébor increasingly withdraws into a reclining figure, an object of medical care, handled and examined by others. Between mind screen and sensory screen, in fragmented sequences accompanied by syncopated drum beats and the outlandish, lingering sound of electronic sound waves and single guitar chords, images then offer themselves as the evocation of a physical and mental process of self-estrangement which Nancy's words had already conjured up with cinematic force: 'I end up being nothing else than a flimsy thread; from pain to pain and from strangeness to strangeness' (2000: 40).<sup>13</sup>

Trébor (as indeed the characters of Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001) before him) embodies the predicament of the modern man as Nancy describes it in his essay. Using science to play God with nature, to push the frontier of death further away, man turns into 'the most terrifying and troubling of technicians, the one described by Sophocles twenty-five centuries ago, the one who denatures and constructs nature anew, who recreates the creation, builds it out of nothing and, maybe, takes it back to nothing. Capable of the origins and the end' (2000: 44).

Aptly, it is in Geneva, the world capital of watchmaking, that Trébor undergoes the transplant that might rejuvenate his ailing body. In one of the city's exclusive shops, he is seduced by the movement of the branded mechanism and buys an expensive model. In this case, however, just as genius engineering cannot domesticate time, surgery fails to fend death off. Repudiated by one son, in exile everywhere, a man whose body rejects a new (his own biological son's?) heart, Trébor becomes a hostage to medical knowledge and a foreigner to himself, caught in a timeless void.

There is something of the monstrous about this film character, as if he were some distant heir of Frankenstein and Nosferatu. At the beginning of the film, *mise-en-scène*, light and camera work stress the character's closeness to the natural environment he inhabits: Trébor appears to exist in sensual harmony with the elements, his body almost merging with its surroundings. He lives in the sole company of his Husky dogs, only sharing the dark kingdom of forests that spreads out around his house with the leader of a larger pack of dogs, a kind of wolf-woman (played by Béatrice Dalle, made to look more predatory than ever).<sup>14</sup> His sensuality extends to killing as it does to sex: the same hands that silently cut the throat of an intruder and clean the blood off the knife are seen tenderly caressing the body of a lover a few instants later. When in need of the fresh blood that will extend his lifetime, however, Trébor moves seamlessly from life in the depth of the Jura forest to the exclusive world of high-flying international trade and banking. And as with the classic vampire figure (and the lowering of the coffin into the boat towards the end of the film brings to mind cinema's first vampire) (see Gelder 1994), it then emerges that in the wider world, this apparently isolated, reclusive figure has an extensive network of factotums taking care of his wealth – a capital that appears to know no borders.

## From the Filmed Body to the Body of the Film

The deep, rectilinear scars that, as a result of the transplant, run across Trébor's torso create a gruesome sight – straight, linear folds of reddened flesh that cut



Fig. 1: Trébor's scars: *L'Intrus* (*The Intruder*, Claire Denis, 2004)

through his chest to form a dreadful geometrical pattern. As incongruous as some of the artificial borders that divide the surface of the earth, they find their visual equivalent in the duplication of man-made boundaries that punctuate the frames, like scars on the skin of the film itself.<sup>15</sup>

Another example of Denis' essayistic rhetoric is found in the recurrent visual motifs of the film: wide-angle shots lingering in slow panoramic movements or aerial travelling shots on the limitless expanse of natural landscapes convey a sense of wonder. Yet the open-ended feel of these unfolding spaces and distant horizons is constantly challenged by the limitations imposed by the human hand. Frontiers and customs; walls, blinds, doors, windows; the camera tracking certain gestures – a hand on a door knob, the massive door of a bank safe sliding back smoothly in its frame; the intervals between frames even vividly evoked by the motif of the double window (as when Grégoire Colin, at the beginning of the film, disappears briefly behind the dividing wall of adjacent rooms while the camera, looking in from the outside, pans blindly from one to the other window). The allegorical presence of the tiny child (Colin's character has a baby son or daughter with a woman who works as a customs officer) lovingly nurtured and carried against the young father's chest, shows him or her as the only one who appears to remain in symbiosis with the surroundings even when s/he is laid in a cage-like crib. Unaware yet of its individuality, of its coming alienation from the whole, the figure of the small child embodies the fleeting memory of a being-in-the-world uncomplicated by paranoid ownership and the delimitation and defence of a territory where the foreign body is always reducible to a threat.

The film speaks of enclosures and partitions, yet shows them to be porous, vulnerable to the intrusion of the gaze, the movement of bodies, the blow of a weapon, and the effect of time. Here, the play on the scale of shots emphasises the metaphorical significance of the ailing body. Switching from close-up shots of Trébor's body to long shots of the countryside where groups of trespassers appear

as tiny silhouettes, the film works to collapse optical into haptic vision (see Beugnet 2012: 82–6), to create the dizzying feeling that what we are seeing is the inside of Trébor's body.

In her review of Nancy's philosophical essay, Marie Gauthier remarks that in writing *L'Intrus*, Nancy adopted a style that is unlike that of his other philosophical essays, using words to dissect his subject with unyielding precision: 'We find none of the circumlocutions and rhetorical approach that are characteristic of his writing, but instead concise, forceful sentences. The words are as cutting as they are precise, adding to the sense of bottomless void and vertigo' (2000: 3). As the text unravels, however, its rhythm also recalls that of irregular breathing or a heartbeat: hurried passages, where series of short interrogative sentences collide, are followed by clauses using elaborate phrasing and long sentences between parentheses that create suspended moments of reprieve. In turn, in his comments about the film, Nancy proves particularly sensitive to the pace of Denis' work, the sense of *perpetuum mobile* that calls to mind the regular beat of a heart offset by the film's discontinuities and overlapping of temporalities:

The gliding movement of the swimming and the cycling; car journeys; dogs racing; the course of planes and boats; wanderings; surfing; the movement of the film, its *kinesthesia*, is a movement of movements and sensations of movement, its conclusion suspended in the flight of the dog sleigh and the movement of the whip of the woman who drives it [...]. [T]ime is mechanical, in sync, counted – similar to the regular beat of a heart, to that machine where only the beat matters – and *at the same time*, it is continuous and fluid, variable, extensible and unpredictable [...]. Duration at once rises and becomes suspended, and is ceaselessly punctured and thwarted by ellipses, imprecise flash backs and uncertain overlaps. (2005: 3; emphasis in original).

Drawn into the film's circular flow (the journey takes us around the world and back), the characters operate less like psychological constructs than like chemical bodies reacting to a series of contrasted environments, or like cells traveling through the body of the film, set on their course by its internal kinesthesia (Nancy describes the sequence of the red and white balloon that explodes at the boat launching ceremony in South Korea as 'the heart of the film' (2005: 4)).

Denis thus channels back the inspiration that she draws from Nancy's book into her own creative project, elaborated in close collaboration with her director of photography and camerawoman Agnès Godard, and her editor, Nelly Quettier. Indeed, it is not through the elaboration of a conventional discursive layer (as in *Vers Nancy*, with the filmed philosophical dialogue), but through the film's



Fig. 2: 'The heart of the film': *L'Intrus* (*The Intruder*, Claire Denis, 2004)

multisensory meaning-making that the essayistic character of Nancy's text is reworked. Even more than her previous films, *L'Intrus* gives precedence to the medium's kinesthetic and material qualities, above and beyond the requirements of narrative and discursive continuity. The result is, as Denis herself recognises, a somewhat outlandish construct, which the spectator, leaving expectations and preconceptions aside, needs to engage with sensually as well as intellectually. In an interview following the ambivalent reception of *L'Intrus* at the Toronto Film Festival, she admitted: 'My films, sadly enough, are sometimes unbalanced. They have a limp, or one arm shorter, or a big nose, but even in the editing room when we try to change that, normally it doesn't work' (in Davis 2004). The image of the editing room as a Frankensteinian laboratory seems particularly apt in the case of a film that not only sets out to evoke the vulnerability of modern man's identity through that of his body, but is itself constructed primarily like a sensory universe – a body of sensations.

Rather than relying on a chain of events, the structure of *L'Intrus* is based on the superimposition of block-like ensembles that are edited together to create series of contrasts and resonances. Movements within the frame and between frames, colours and light, frame scale and composition, bind together particular groups of sequences which, in turn, become part of the sum of sensations, temporalities and rhythms that form the body of the film as a whole. From the texture of skin and the erratic geography of the wrinkles on a face to the metallic slickness of a heavy steel door; from the organic mass of the forest to the strict lines of a modern office's designer environment, Godard's camera tracks bodies, objects and gestures, capturing a multiplicity of textures, tones and movements to be combined through *mise-en-scène* and montage. The dark, earthy tones of the Jura countryside are followed by the bright, colourful patchwork of the Polynesian towns and seascapes. In turn, images of the sun-drenched beaches and heat of a Southern island

alternate with those of an almost monochrome expanse of snowy fields and icy lakes caught in cold winter light. The tumult of handheld travelling shots and the claustrophobic intimacy of extended close-ups on bodies are opposed to the stillness of the camera focused on an inanimate object or on the familiar gestures that make up routine chores; the turbulent movement of horses galloping in the snow is contrasted to the languishing calm of a hot afternoon, curtains flapping limply in the warm tropical wind. Alternatively, however, images may form patterns that echo across the film: the brief vision of the shining top of a coffin recalled by the cold, reflecting surface of an office table; the flower headdress of the young vagabond of the French forest replicated in the headdresses worn by the Tahitians; the unfolding of land meeting sea in a Polynesian archipelago echoing the line where forest meets plain in the east of France. Fleeting, at the end of the film, as another example of Denis' essayistic imaging, opposed worlds seem to merge as the bluish treetops of the wintry forest of the Jura caught in aerial shots resemble, for a moment, the changing surface of the Southern seas.<sup>16</sup>

Denis constructs her film as series of liminal zones, an in-between territory where heterogeneous spaces and temporalities cohabit, and ubiquitous characters from various horizons cross paths. Within this hybrid fictional universe, the insertion of scenes drawn from Gégauff's 1965 film, *Reflux*, may be understood as the visualisation of Trébor's reminiscences; however, as filmic matter – that is, as extracts of related but older material inserted in the body of the more recent film – they are like pieces of tissue transplanted onto a strange body and, in spite of their similarities, only imperfectly integrated (Subor is clearly identifiable, as is the location of the shot; Gégauff's images might have aged, but they have preserved the youthful ghost of the ailing man in *L'Intrus*). The image of Trébor/Subor as a young man in Polynesia thus creates an uncanny sense of recognition, and a forceful evocation of the porosity of (cinematic) time.<sup>17</sup>

This is precisely what Nancy identifies as the quintessence of Denis' work: 'The joint intrusion of times and places with that of people forms the film's fundamental reflection' (2005: 3). Most crucially, as evidenced in the blurring of the frontiers of past and present in *L'Intrus*, film opens a space where the practice of foreignness operates at the most fundamental level – as the practice of death, or, to paraphrase Nancy, as a means of keeping death and life together, 'life and death intimately woven together, each intruding in the heart of the other' (2000: 23).

Transplanting *L'Intrus* to the screen, Denis effectively co-opts Nancy's writing to feed it into her filmmaking agenda: cinema envisaged as a practice of foreignness. Underpinning such a project is the willingness to explore forms of embodiment that move beyond the mapping of abstract concepts onto actors' bodies, to the materialisation of the same concepts within the form and material

texture (the ‘flesh’ as it were) of the film itself.<sup>18</sup> The film thus offers itself as a body of sensations through which, as spectators, we might sense and practice our ability to let our defences down – to be drawn into and infused by the unfamiliar.

## Notes

- 1 A version of this article was first published in the *Film-Philosophy* journal; see Beugnet 2008.
- 2 See Lopate 1992; see also André Bazin on Chris Marker and the essay film (Bazin 1998).
- 3 See, in particular, Silverman 1999.
- 4 *Ten Minutes Older* is a two-part collection of short films commissioned from fifteen well-known art directors (Bernardo Bertolucci, Jim Jarmusch, Aki Kaurismäki and Werner Herzog, amongst others) who were given the very loose concept of time as a premise. The results were highly variable, as reflected in the critics’ ambivalent reviews.
- 5 In the course of three subsequent wars, between 1870 and 1945, France and Germany fought repeatedly and bloodily over the dominion of the region. The Alsace-Lorraine region was occupied by Germany between 1870 and 1918, and again between 1940 and 1944. In times of peace the frontier zone between the two countries was fortified and heavily militarised.
- 6 See also Denis’ comments on political correctness at the time of the release of *J’ai pas sommeil* (1994), her portrait of a black serial killer, in Beugnet 2004: 85.
- 7 One thinks, in particular, of Julia Kristeva’s work on the same topic (1988) and of Tsvetan Todorov’s book (1989).
- 8 Klotz’s film depicts the arrival of African immigrants in Paris-Charles de Gaulle airport, where they are unlawfully detained by the French police; see Beugnet 2008.
- 9 For the human form as ‘stain’, see Beugnet 2012: 112–13.
- 10 For a discussion on ‘Paranoid Spaces’, see Burgin 1996.
- 11 That is, the figure of the ultimate outsider, quintessentially irreducible to ideologies and established social systems, and as such, in opposition with the kind of recuperation and exploitation of Jesus and the figure of Christ in evidence in the Christian doctrine.
- 12 In its feminine guise, the Christ-like figure thus forms a recurrent essayistic trope for female filmmakers. In particular, her presence disrupts and questions the narrative and relational economy of the film, for she does not fit in with the logic of the gift/counter gift: she gives, and requires from others that they give, without reciprocation.

- 13 In this sentence, which reads in the original French as follows: 'Je finit/s par n'être plus qu'un fil ténu, de douleur en douleur et d'étrangeté en étrangeté', Jean-Luc Nancy oddly combines the third person singular ('finit') with the first person singular ('finis'). Nancy explains further that this combination is intended 'to reflect the intrusion of the network of measures, observations, and chemical, institutional and symbolic connections' (2000: 40) on his body treated for lymphoma.
- 14 Although Nancy insists on the uncertain, changing relation between body and identity (in the book, he points out that the heart he received might be the heart of a woman and/or of a person of a different race), his analysis of gender in *L'Intrus* re-establishes traditional boundaries: female characters are, he says, the ones who nurture, nurse, and their closeness to dogs in particular marks them out as those who sense the presence of intruders. This analysis disregards the emphasis that the film puts on Trébor's closeness to his own (female) dogs, and the nurturing role of the young father played by Colin.
- 15 For a discussion of the scene between Trébor and the blind woman, and the description of exiles as 'seers', see Beugnet 2012: 85–7.
- 16 The film's overall construct, the way it contrasts the motif of frontiers and enclosures with an editing of sequences in which different worlds are put in contact with another, is reminiscent of Laura U. Marks' notion of an enfolding-unfolding aesthetics (2009). With reference to Deleuze's Bergson-inflected concepts of actual and virtual images, Marks contends that the process through which images unfold (and may become actual) from an infinite plane of virtual images is complicated by series of filters that will select, block or rarefy certain images and, by extension, our perceptual experiences. Cinematic conventions are one example of such a filter. In the information age, she argues, the unfolding is increasingly mediated, the perceptible is progressively more codified, to the point where we do not perceive images anymore, we merely read them as pieces of information. The most interesting films, she argues, are those that bear the traces of their own unfolding, while also, through a process of enfolding, putting images in contact with other images, sending them back to the world of virtual images – films, she says, that 'cultivate enigmas' (2009: 98).
- 17 Although he is not mentioned, Gilles Deleuze's thought on cinema (1989) haunts the dialogue that Nancy and Denis have established through their respective means of expression. Deleuze's Bergson-inspired understanding of film is that film is, by 'nature', the medium of false continuity; that its mechanical unfolding of frames (and then again, technological advancement is fast ruling out the 24-frames-a-second paradigm) is always open to overlaps and intrusions, to temporal and material heterogeneity, corporeal metamorphosing and the



transplantation of strange images and sounds.

- 18 Hence Barbara Kennedy's description of the filmic experience as a practice of the affective seems particularly apt in the context of Denis' latest feature. Taking her cue from Deleuze's notions of classical versus modern cinema (1989: 214) and from Felix Guattari's suggestion that we gain knowledge not through representation, but through 'affective contamination' (1995: 92), Kennedy summarises the notion of a film that 'performs as a body': 'The filmic experience has evolved through a whole new idea of the processuality, the rhythm of the film as a set of bodies, in motion, producing a new cartography of the visual. The film does not record images, or convey representation. It acts, it performs, as a "body" with other bodies, in a constituted body, a molecular body, through the affective' (2000: 103).

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# Chapter 4

## Cinéma-vérité and Kino-pravda: Rouch, Vertov and the Essay Form<sup>1</sup>

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Caroline Eades and Elizabeth A. Papazian

A film is an idea, flashing out or slowly elaborated, but one that cannot be escaped, whose expression can only be cinematographic.

– Jean Rouch, ‘The Cinema of the Future?’ (Rouch and Morin 2003: 266)<sup>2</sup>

Both *Chronique d'un été (Paris 1960)* (*Chronicle of a Summer (Paris 1960)*, 1961) by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, and *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1928) by Dziga Vertov sit uncomfortably within the definition of documentary – to such an extent that sub-categories, such as ‘reflexive documentary’, ‘city symphony’, ‘cinéma du réel’, ‘cinéma direct’ and ‘ethnographic film’ must be stretched to fit them or even invented to accommodate them. In this chapter, we consider the possibility that they belong to the category of ‘essay film’.

In her recent work on the topic, Laura Rascaroli suggests that ‘we should resist the urge to overtheorize essayistic cinema and crystallize it into a genre’ (2009: 2). Perhaps the essay film should be understood not as a genre, but as an overflow, a counter-genre within an industry or system based on classification and genre, or even as a non-genre lying outside the system of classification. Because the term has been sometimes used, as Rascaroli points out, ‘indiscriminately, in order to classify films that escape all other labeling’ (2009: 22), we will avoid defining the essay film exclusively in terms of these two uncategorisable works, but will instead

examine their irreducible qualities in order to explore the concept of essay film.

Our exploration is guided by the following questions: what can these two cases tell us about the essay film? How do these two films compel us to adjust received definitions, and challenge the contextual, intertextual and historical criteria that have been used to account for the essay film? While acknowledging the obvious political, aesthetic and cultural differences between two films produced under distinct historical conditions, we seek to reveal the connections between them, which we argue can be situated precisely in their essayism.<sup>3</sup> Our approach will be to consider in depth each aspect of what Timothy Corrigan has defined as the ‘tripartite structure’ of the essay film: ‘(i) a testing of expressive subjectivity through (ii) experiential encounters in a public arena, (iii) the product of which becomes the figuration of thinking or thought as a cinematic address and a spectatorial response’ (2011: 30).

The present chapter begins with enunciation, the ‘testing of expressive subjectivity’, which we consider by attempting to define the essay film in relation to documentary and experiment. Skipping to Corrigan’s third requirement – the testing of ideas, or visual thinking – we analyse visual thinking as dialogue, as process, and in its temporal relationship to the filmed object. We then expand the question to its historical and political dimensions – that is, to public experience or ‘experiential encounters in a public arena’, which we examine in terms of political engagement in these films. This three-pronged configuration appears to echo Edgar Morin’s characterisation of the ‘three levels of enquiry’ of *Chronicle of a Summer*: ‘the level of private life, internal and subjective; the level of work and social relations; and finally the level of present history, dominated by the war in Algeria. The film should be a montage of images in which the question “How do you live?” is transformed into “How can one live?” and “What can one do?” which would bounce off the viewer’ (Rouch and Morin 2003: 237).

## Expression and Experimentation

Michael Renov has defined four major documentary functions, which operate as ‘modalities of desire’: ‘to record, reveal, or preserve’; ‘to persuade or promote’; ‘to analyze or interrogate’; ‘to express’ (2004: 21–2). Although he ascribes several of these functions to *Man with a Movie Camera*, it is the last category, the ‘expressive’ function, that seems to have been formulated to accommodate the outliers to documentary, and in particular for the two films under consideration here.<sup>4</sup> Renov’s inclusion of an expressive function in his definition of documentary allows for a common ground between the documentary and the essay film:

'There is no contradiction between the elemental documentary impulse, the will to preservation, and the exploration of subjectivity; indeed, it is their obsessive convergence that marks the essayistic work' (2004: 81). This convergence and, in particular, the *inward direction* of the essay filmmaker's interest and gaze, give rise to the 'digressive and fragmentary character of the essayistic' (2004: 85).

If, as Bill Nichols (1991: 179) has argued, the type of pleasure experienced by the spectator of documentary film is 'epistophilia', or the love of knowledge (as opposed to 'scopophilia', famously defined by Laura Mulvey (1975: 17) in relation to the fiction film), often replaced by 'engagement' – both of which 'presuppose an exterior object, a target for cathexis or concern' – then the inward direction of the essay film must necessarily produce a different sort of pleasure. Theodor W. Adorno suggested, in his 1958 analysis of the literary essay, that the pleasure of the essay form is 'the pleasure of *freedom vis-à-vis the object*, freedom that gives the object more of itself than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas' (1984: 168; emphasis added). Thus the inward direction of the essay never becomes solipsistic, but maintains an engagement with the world.

Corrigan's definition of the essay film, while overlapping with Nichols' in its emphasis on engagement, does not get mired in the questions of indexicality or the claims of truth characteristic of discussions of documentary, but rather focuses on the intersection in the essay film of subjectivity with public spheres. In the documentary, the distance between subject and object is maintained, whereas the essay film attempts specifically to address this distance and explore its nature and function.<sup>5</sup> The movement of addressing the subject/object divide does not happen through the effacing of mediation; rather, the essay film is all about mediation, about the enunciation of a subject, the 'testing of expressive subjectivity' directed to an audience.

Both *Chronicle of a Summer* and *Man with a Movie Camera* confront such questions directly, starting with the title and the initial shots of each film. The question of its status as non-fiction is raised in *Chronicle of a Summer* first of all in the playful and somewhat ironic reference to French medieval historiography in the title.<sup>6</sup> But the colourful and detailed fifteenth-century miniatures of the Duke of Berry's book of prayers are replaced in 1960 by initial shots of post-industrial Paris late at night and at daybreak, with a voice-over by co-author and director of the film Jean Rouch: 'This film was not played by actors, but lived by men and women who have given a few moments of their lives to a new experience of *cinéma-vérité*.' In the first scene, featuring Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin and Marceline Loridan in an after dinner discussion of the project, Morin explains, 'What Rouch and I want to do is a film on the following idea: How do you live? [...] We start with you, and then we're going to ask other people.' A connection,



Fig. 1: Setting up the premise (an essay): *Chronicle of a Summer* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961)

already implied by the use of the French word '*expérience*', is established between experience (the film 'lived' by its participants, who will be having conversations 'around a table'), experiment (conducted by the sociologist Edgar Morin and the ethnographer Jean Rouch with the assistance of a camera) and the idea of a new form ('a new experience of *cinéma-vérité*' as an experiment based on dialogue and shared anthropology) with an explicit emphasis on enunciative positions ('we'/you'). Even before the first scene, the initial shots of everyday Paris as night passes into morning, concluding with workers flowing from the subway exits, suggest the relationship of this film to the 'city-symphony' category of the late 1920s, a category to which *Man with a Movie Camera* also belongs.

*Man with a Movie Camera* similarly begins at daybreak, framing the day in the life of its imagined Soviet city (a city created through the magic of editing out of footage of several different cities) with the beginning of a film screening at the cinema. In fact, the very first shot is a composite of a giant camera with a tiny cameraman standing on top of it, setting up his own tiny camera on a tripod; the second shot shows a low-angle shot of a building in a city, thus announcing the relationship of camera, cameraman and city-as-object. Even before the camera appears or the pit orchestra tunes up, a series of title cards presents an onscreen manifesto, declaring the film to be 'an excerpt from the diary of a film-cameraman (*kino-operator*)'; 'an experiment in the cinematic transmission

of visible events' that 'aims at the creation of an authentically international absolute language of cinema'.<sup>7</sup> The designation of the film as a 'diary' places it in the company not only of the personal, subjective expression of amateur writers but equally in the company of the eclectic mixture of journalism, fiction, reflection and polemics of Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer* (published in periodicals from 1873 to 1881). The manifesto's insistence on an 'experiment' conducted 'without the aid of a script' and 'without the aid of theater', based on cinema's 'complete separation from the language of theater and literature' evokes Vertov's promotion of an 'unplayed' cinema consisting of unscripted, non-acted, unstaged 'film facts'. Vertov's crediting of a production team, listing himself as 'author-supervisor of the experiment', his brother Mikhail Kaufman as 'chief camera-operator' (*glavnyi kino-operator*) and his wife Elizaveta Svilova as 'assistant in montage' (*assistant po montazhu*) underlines the model, so central to his theory and practice of the 1920s, of the 'kino-eyes' or kinoks (*kinoki*), a collective working together in 'unplayed cinema'. Here it appears more formal and hierarchical, invoking the notion of the film as the production of a 'film-apparatus' (*kino-apparat*), a tool wielded by 'man'.<sup>8</sup> (The film's title can mean 'a man', 'the man' or 'man' (humankind), with a 'camera' or 'apparatus'.) Here the experiment is clearly linked to the formation of a new Soviet institution (apparatus) of cinema, the 'film factory', with supervisors, operators and assistants working together with (and constituting) the apparatus in a new form of production.<sup>9</sup>

Rouch and Morin's identification of their film as *cinéma-vérité*, an explicit reference and homage to Vertov's theory and practice (and one that would become permanently associated with Rouch just as *kino-pravda* was for Vertov), sets in motion a dialogue between these filmmakers across time and space.<sup>10</sup> Just as *Chronicle of a Summer* playfully and self-reflexively puts the notions of experiment, experience, camera, communication, urban life and '*cinéma-vérité*' into dialogue from the outset, *Man with a Movie Camera* playfully and self-reflexively puts the notions of diary, experiment, apparatus, communication ('cinematic transmission of visible events' and 'absolute cinematic language') and city into its own dialogue. Each film immediately stakes its claim to an experimental transgression of existing forms/genres in cinema as well as a new conception of the relation between the subject and the filmed object. As experiment, each film embodies what Jacques Rancière calls the 'aesthetic power of cinema' by 'abolishing the opposition between an interior and an exterior world, the spiritual and the physical world, the subject and the object, nature as the known object of science and emotion as lived experience' (1998: 51, 52), thus seeking to open up the possibility of a new form of cinematic expression – as communication (transmission, language, conversation), as experience (a film not 'played', but 'lived'; an experiment conducted by

a group working together), and as a form of thinking and knowledge production ('truth').

With this overlap of experimentation and participatory communication explicitly linked to the public sphere – the city, its streets, its monuments, its inhabitants and its institutions (particularly the institutions behind each filmmaker's career, i.e., the film factory in *Man with a Movie Camera* and the ethnographic museum in *Chronicle of a Summer*) – we find ourselves in the realm of the essay film. In the case of *Chronicle of a Summer*, the notion of an attempt is conveyed from the outset: in response to Rouch's concerns about the camera's effect on 'normal' conversation, Morin says, 'We've got to try' (*Il faut essayer*).

Both in *Chronicle of a Summer* and in *Man with a Movie Camera*, the experimentation might be described as 'essay'. As Morin said shortly after completing the film, both he and Rouch conceived of the film as neither 'merely sociological or merely ethnographic or merely aesthetic, but really like a total and diffuse thing that is at the same time a document, an experience lived by each person, and a research of their contact' (2003: 253). Elsewhere Morin underlined the way that these various approaches intersect in the essay film: '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' (Rascaroli 2009: 39, citing a 1996 interview by Giovanni Maderna). The indeterminacy of form and goal combined with their necessity is precisely what Jean-Luc Godard would single out as specific to these filmic 'attempts': 'People like Rouch don't know exactly what they are going to do, and search for it. The film is the search. They know they are going to arrive somewhere – and have the means to do it – but where exactly?' (1986: 180).

Vertov's experiment, on the face of it, had clearly defined goals that coincided with the historical moment of its production; but while the announced goal of 'the cinematic transmission of visual events' – without recourse to fiction, whether story, character, staging or even verbal language itself – can be understood as the construction in visual form of a socialist public sphere,<sup>11</sup> it simultaneously declares itself an experiment in form which cannot predict its own impact.<sup>12</sup> In fact, even later, when *Man with a Movie Camera* was relegated by Soviet cinema to the category of (formalist) 'youthful error', Vertov defended the film's experimental nature, asserting its utility for the evolution of film language: 'We figured that we were obliged to make not only films for broad consumption, but also, from time to time, films that beget films' (2008c: 328). In this sense *Man with a Movie Camera* conforms to Adorno's definition of the word 'essay', in which 'thought's utopia of hitting the bull's eye unites with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional nature' (1984: 64).



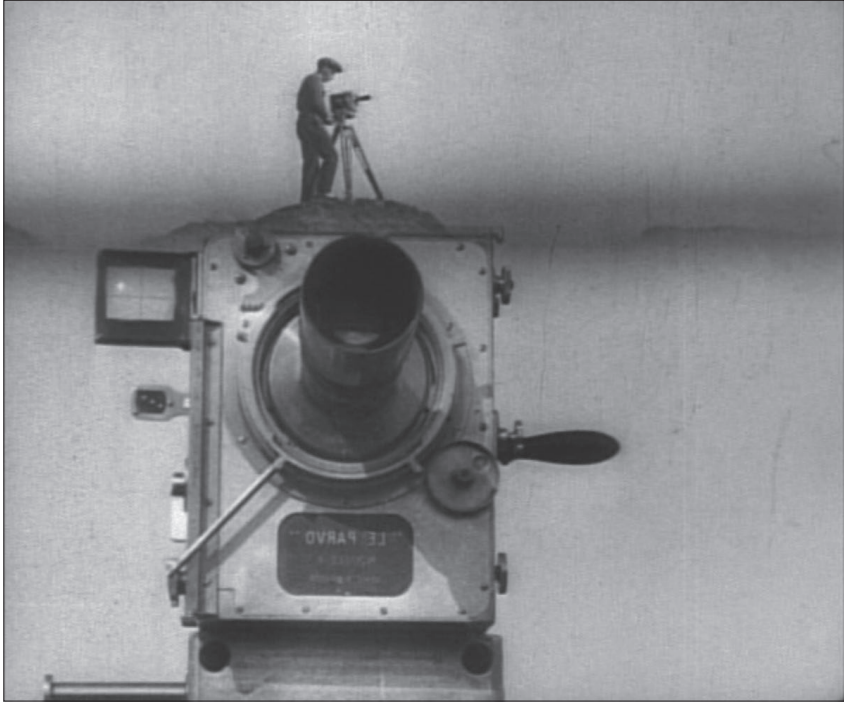


Fig. 2: Setting up the premise (the film apparatus): *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1928)

The explicit challenge to the existing conventions of cinema is conducted in both *Man with a Movie Camera* and *Chronicle of a Summer* through technology – starting with the technology of the lightweight camera. The first shot of *Man with a Movie Camera*, the composite shot of a giant camera with a tiny cameraman apparently standing on top of it and setting up his camera, serves as an embodiment of the title of the film that establishes the equal and yet disproportionate importance of the movie camera. Man works ‘with’ the camera, wields the camera-tool, but simultaneously is dwarfed by the power of the camera, which not only fills half the screen but also produces this mediation (the composite shot): the shot serves both as an illustration and an embodiment of the idea of man working with the film-apparatus, an idea that recurs as a variation later in the film when another ‘giant’ camera is superimposed over a long shot of a crowd in the city, illustrating and embodying the simultaneous observation and production of Soviet society by the film-apparatus.

But it is the camera’s portability, its non-threatening lightness and simplicity of operation that make it so powerful. In an early sequence, for example, a woman waking up in her bedroom, washing her face and getting dressed, is shown at close enough range to make the viewer aware that the camera must be within her



Fig. 3a: Life caught unawares...

room (and that she must be not only aware of it, but in on it).<sup>13</sup> Successive shots of people waking up from sleeping on benches – a boy grinning; a woman getting angry and running away, awakened apparently by the camera’s presence – show us that the camera can ‘catch life unawares’ (*vrasplokh*, or ‘red-handed’), as Vertov called it in his manifestoes of the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> This required very specific equipment, as Vertov declared in his 1926 ‘Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups’:

1. quick means of transport,
2. more sensitive film,
3. small, lightweight, hand-held cameras,
4. lighting equipment that is actually lightweight,
5. a staff of lightning-fast film reporters,
6. an army of kinok-observers. (1984: 74–5)

In the 1960s, cameraman Mikhail Kaufman recalled his earliest innovations with the equipment he was offered when he began working in 1922: an old Pathé camera, nicknamed the ‘camel’, and a more lightweight model, which he ‘took and remade’; when he became a cameraman he ‘made an improved device [*apparat*]’ himself (1993: 144). Later, while filming *Kino-glaz* (*Kino-Eye*, 1924), Kaufman erected a tent next to a magician’s performance, so that from within it he could film the magician’s audience unobtrusively, catching ‘in close up the faces of people, recording their reactions, their feelings’ (1993: 148).

The new technology catches ‘life as it is’ (*zhizn’ kak ona est*) on film, but also analyses it and reveals it. In his earliest manifestoes, Vertov compared the camera

Fig. 3b: ... *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1928)



to the telescope and the microscope: 'Kino-eye is understood as "that which the eye doesn't see",/as the microscope and telescope of time,/ [...] as tele-eye,/ as X-ray eye,/ [...]. Kino-eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible' (1984: 41). The Kino-Eye, or the film apparatus as wielded by man, could make sense of 'the chaos of visual events', by 'distending time, dissecting movement, or, in contrary fashion, absorbing time within itself, swallowing years, thus schematizing processes of long duration inaccessible to the normal eye' (1984: 19). A decade later, in a 1934 lecture, Vertov described his 'first experiment' in film, a recording of himself jumping from a great height. Through 'special cinematic means', that is, accelerated shooting, which appears as slow motion when projected, the camera was able 'to remove a man's mask', to 'read [his] thoughts at a distance', even 'to penetrate to the level on which a person reveals himself completely' (1984: 124–5).<sup>15</sup> Vertov's interest in technology was therefore always connected with his 'persistent striving to reveal the way of thinking of the living person' (2008c: 329).

Like Vertov, Rouch wields cinema technology as a tool for revealing life as it is. The opening of *Chronicle of a Summer* immediately positions Rouch as the filmmaking expert who voices his main concern at the outset of implementing Morin's project: 'I don't know if we will be able to record a conversation that is as normal as it would be if the camera was not present.' Once he has stated his own challenge at the beginning of the film, Rouch engages in searching, trying and finding solutions to the problem, just as he had always done as an ethnographer in the African environment.<sup>16</sup> *Chronicle of a Summer* became the experimental space that allowed him to address a major technical issue: the visibility – or transparency – of the apparatus (camera and microphone). Rouch, who claimed to be opposed

to what he saw as the hidden-camera techniques of the kinoks, often wrote about his innovations in sync-sound filming with a hand-held camera: lightweight cameras had been used by the American army during the war, and he was eager to 'try out' (*essayer* in French) this type of equipment in *Chronicle of a Summer*. After Albert Viguier, initially hired by producer Anatole Dauman as the film's cinematographer, quit when he was not allowed to shoot all the sequences with a tripod-mounted Arriflex that would have guaranteed the 'quality of the image', Rouch had Michel Brault flown from Canada to Paris and opted for a new portable 16mm sync-sound camera, the prototype of the KMT Courant-Mathot Éclair, and used Electro-Voice lavalier microphones connected to a Nagra for outside sequences (see Di Iorio 2007: 32–3). Rouch later acknowledged: 'Thus, in a certain sense, we made the first experimental feature-length film. The idea that sums up this experience is the following: you can film anything anywhere' (2003: 167).

The trying out of sync-sound innovations can be seen in the contrasting techniques of two sequences in *Chronicle of a Summer*: in the film's second sequence, when Marceline and Nadine ask passersby 'Are you happy?', the microphone is visible, but the camera is stationed too far away for interviewees to understand that they are being filmed. In contrast, when Marceline later walks with the sound-recorder under her arm and a lavalier microphone on her lapel through the deserted Place de la Concorde and the cavernous, eerily abandoned space of the Paris food market Les Halles, she knows, of course, that she is being filmed. The camera's presence in a car in front of her gives her, however, the illusion of being alone with her thoughts, which she speaks aloud. The filmmakers in the car cannot hear her words, and can only follow her blindly, as Rouch explained in a 1980 interview: 'We had not seen or heard anything; we had simply provoked two movements, feelings, emotions, memories' (2003: 153).<sup>17</sup>

The experimental dimension of *Chronicle of a Summer* provides Rouch the opportunity to develop his new concept of 'shared anthropology', and in particular the constitutive role of the camera as a provocative agent: 'It is a strange kind of choreography, which, if inspired, makes the cameraman and soundman no longer invisible but participants in the ongoing event' (2003: 99). Rouch's use of the camera is a key component of his practice as an ethnographer and can be related to Alexandre Astruc's '*caméra-stylo*' ('camera pen') inasmuch as it does away with the division between what Astruc calls 'expression' and 'adaptation' (2009: 31, 37).<sup>18</sup> The technological and functional transformation of the camera is closely associated with the transformation of the filming subject (as a 'mechanical eye' accompanied by an 'electronic ear') from observer to participant, and the transformation of the filmed object, or 'the ethnologized Other' in the words of anthropologist Marc Henri Piault: 'not an archeological curiosity any more, he

acquires the status of a subject and gains the ability to address those who look at him' (2004: 214).

Rouch undermines any attempt at monologic discourse throughout the film, even when it comes from his co-director Morin. The co-directors had differing views on the approach to filming, which led to crucial tensions in the form and structure of the finished film: Morin explained in 1962 that he favoured the model of conversations over meals and wine around a table, which he called '*commensalité*', while Rouch promoted a model of '*pédovision*', or 'filming experiments in the street, in nature, with synchronous sound' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 240). They also had different views on editing: Morin preferred a model he called 'mosaic-montage', or editing 'of opposing sequences sustained on the guiding theme of "How do you live?"', while Rouch insisted on 'biographical-chronological montage' (2003: 254), which would show the people in the film 'as a function of their evolution' (2003: 251). In fact, the dialogue continued even in the footnotes Rouch provided to Morin's discussion of the creative process, stating, for example, that "Coauthoring" is not simple teamwork where the two partners agree. It is a more violent game where disagreement is the only rule, and the solution lies in the resolution of this disagreement' (2003: 265 n17).

In the segment featuring an outdoor conversation around a table with French and African participants (Marceline, Nadine, Landry and Raymond, among others), Rouch provokes a discussion of the deportation of French Jews during the war, situating the summer of 1960 in a larger political and historical framework, and countering Morin's attempt at a single, intense 'close-up' on present social conditions through a discussion on an announced topic, the situation in the Congo. Rouch does this first by asking the African students if they know

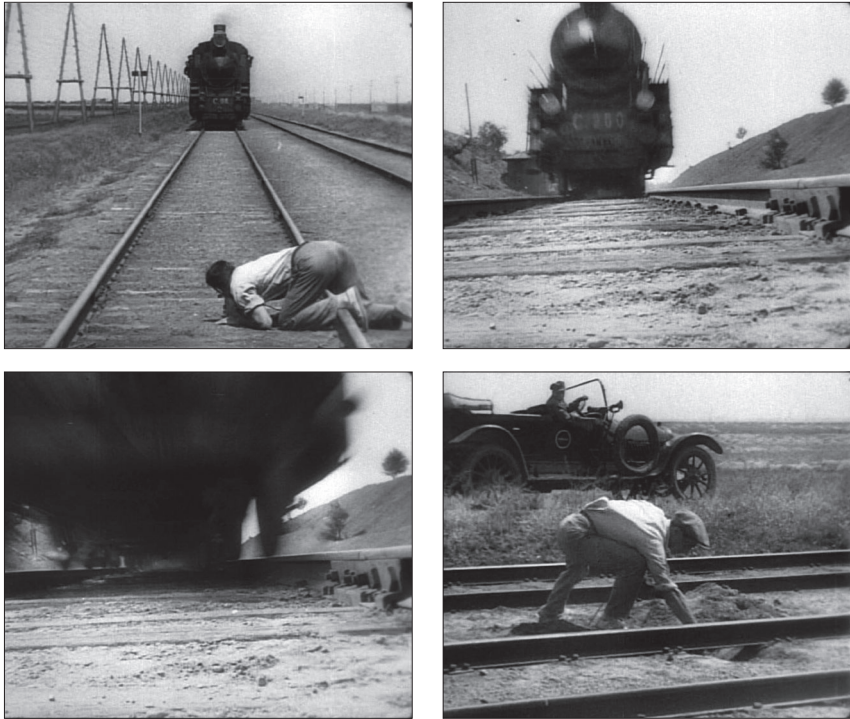


Fig. 4: *Commensalité*:  
Rouch, Landry and  
Nadine in the discussion  
about race.

why Marceline has a tattooed number on her arm; as she fiddles somewhat nervously with a white rose that had not been present earlier in the sequence, she explains the concentration camp tattoo, and the camera pans quickly to the faces of her African interlocutors to record their reactions. The sequence ends on a freeze-frame close-up of her hand stroking the rose as a counterpoint to the brutal historical events discussed on the soundtrack, and a formal transition to the next sequence when Marceline describes her family's ordeal during the war.<sup>19</sup> In this segment, Rouch uses the tools of the film apparatus against or in addition to the more straightforward scientific aspirations of his partner, the sociologist Morin, who had already given the participants a topic for discussion. Rouch seems to work toward opening up the theme of the film to other major concerns for both European and African youth (the war in Algeria, which had provoked a heated discussion in the previous sequence, as well as issues of gender, race and ethnicity) and, ultimately, toward creating a space for dialogue. Although Rouch initially seems to assent to Morin's idea, he is able to assert his own, more open conception over Morin's by means of a superior ability to wield technology and communicate his questioning through framing and editing.

In *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov's team of kinoks, with Vertov (director), Kaufman (head cameraman) and Svilova (editor) at the forefront, provides a kind of openness that is based not on conversations or sound counterpoint, but almost exclusively on camera and editing. The kinoks, as Vertov wrote in 1926, regarded editing (montage) as 'the *organization of the visible world*', and insisted that editing occurred at all stages of film production: 'during observation' of the object to be filmed, 'after observation – mentally organizing what has been seen', then 'during filming – orienting the aided eye of the movie camera', and, of course, 'after filming' (1984: 72; emphasis in original). This organisational principle is made evident when the camera's most impressive feats are immediately demystified, as with the shots of an oncoming train followed by shots of Kaufman taking his camera out of a hole dug under the tracks, or the shots of the powerful flow of water over a hydroelectric dam intercut with shots of Kaufman suspended over the dam. As Vertov explained many years later, the film functions as a 'grammar of cinematic means', that is, of the possibilities open to film form (2008: 328).

A characteristic tension is produced by the fact that some of the footage for *Man with a Movie Camera* – in particular, shots of Kaufman as the 'man with the camera' filming factories, mines and industrial projects – was shot during the making of the group's previous film, their first at the Kiev film studio, *Odinnadsadyi* (*The Eleventh Year*, 1928), a film about industrialisation in Ukraine focusing in particular on the construction of the Dneprostroi hydroelectric dam. Kaufman was the head cameraman for that film, and a second member of the team filmed



Figs. 5a–d: A grammar of cinematic means: *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1928)

him filming the footage for *The Eleventh Year*.<sup>20</sup> This becomes apparent as one watches the revelations of the most incredible camera feats of *Man with a Movie Camera*, the onscreen explanations of how a particular shot was done: the viewer cannot avoid wondering about the other camera operator, whom we never see. A close analysis of the ‘power’ sequence in *Man with a Movie Camera*, which culminates in the masterful shots of the hydroelectric dam, reveals the way that the film constructs a whole, perfectly functioning, industrialised socialist society out of fragments of footage, showing the causal relationships among its parts. At the same time, the use of footage from outtakes of the earlier film, with its more overt ideological function of documenting and promoting the construction of socialism in Ukraine, puts the two works, and their differing documentary functions or ‘modalities of desire’ (Renov 2004: 22) into dialogue.<sup>21</sup>

In his discussion of the essay form, Adorno differentiates between two types of experimentation, one characteristic of scientific positivism, the ‘verification of asserted theses through repeated testing’, the other a characteristic of the essay, which uses experience to ‘give depth to its observations by confirming or refuting them’ (1984: 156). The essay form ‘turns [the] object this way and that’, ‘questions

it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles', and 'create[s] conditions under which [the] object is newly seen'.<sup>22</sup> Unlike science, the essay refrains 'from any reduction to a principle', instead 'accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total'; it 'thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than smoothing them over' (1984: 157, 164). Relying on Adorno's notion of the essay form as 'blowing open' conceptually any totalising concepts, any illusion of objectivity, we might posit the essay film as a form based on 'dialogic understanding' (Bakhtin 1981: 352), or 'interwovenness' (Adorno 1984: 169). By introducing new technology and showcasing the apparatus in their filmmaking practice, Verov and Rouch inscribed the definition of the essay film as a form open to the fragmented, the dialogic, the plural and the interactive, both within the image and between images. In the post-war essay film, this is also done formally, and more traditionally, through the juxtaposition of voice and image, which is often achieved, in sound film, through the contrast between voice-over (often the implied author's voice) and the images appearing onscreen. The 'interwoven' or dialogic structure is based on the essay form's characteristic irony – that is, 'the tension between presentation and what is presented' (Adorno 1984: 170), a structure that mimics the split self as well as the split nature of reality. In this sense the experiment becomes something other than a hermetic operation in a closed laboratory: it is a challenge to the institution of cinema itself, an attempt to re-think cinema.

## Visual Thinking: Essay as Dialogue

In order to consider the essay film as a 'figuration of thinking' directed towards cinema itself while opening a space towards the public sphere, one has to question whether the 'subject-I' with the 'camera-eye' has to define his/her interlocutor the same way that the written essay distinguishes itself from scientific discourse, which is characterised by the absence of such an interlocutor, and from the literary text, which is characterised by its ambiguous presence. Film genres have been commonly identified through the various modes of address they use towards the indeterminate community of spectators. The essay film might therefore be understood as a text negotiating the tension between strategies of avoidance and explicit modes of address, from the gaze into the camera to subjective framing to voice-over narration and the presence of characters/narrators.

By introducing an Other, familiar and close to the subject-I, the essay film builds what Roland Barthes calls a space of 'cultivated affects' (1977: 64), thus



echoing Montaigne's definition of a friend as a key feature of his writing project: 'A single dominant friendship dissolves all obligations. The secret I have sworn to reveal to no other man, I can impart without perjury to the one who is not another man: he is myself' (1958: 142). The essay as a form that addresses the subject/object divide, giving the object 'more of itself than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas' (Adorno 1984: 168), asserts itself against the epistolary genre, the manifesto and the novel, by emphasising familiarity over elitism, a community of ideas over proselytism, and the alignment of the singular 'you' onto the 'I' – resulting in a sense of a plural 'we'.<sup>23</sup> This 'we' might be conceived in terms of the self/other relationship (Rouch and Morin), of the dynamics of a group with its leader (Vertov and the kinoks) or of the collective of viewer-participants in the film (the young people featured in *Chronicle of a Summer's* shared anthropology; the internal audience in *Man with a Movie Camera*). The essay film as exemplified by Rouch's and Vertov's films resorts to unconventional forms of filmic enunciation to claim the plurality – and in Rouch's film, the specificity – of the subject. In Rouch's case with the reintroduction of the camera-eye, the breaking of the fourth wall, and an 'uncomfortable awareness of theatricality' that 'anticipates the radical anti-illusionism of post-1968 film theory' (Di Iorio 2007: 41, 26); in Vertov's case with 'the manipulation by montage and the search for formal rhymes and rhythm ... as modes of a political cinema, a revolutionary art' (Comolli 1969: 51).

Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* occupies a particular place in his filmography, between two other attempts at addressing the same concern – that is, how to achieve a subject/object sharing experience through film. The first attempt in what Rouch called 'shared anthropology' is exemplified by his early ethnographic short films and consists in 'inserting one's *self* with a tool which will provoke the emergence of a certain reality' (Yakir 1978: 7; emphasis in original). The second attempt goes further, as Rouch explained in his 1973 essay, 'The Camera and Man':

The observer is finally coming down from the ivory tower; his camera, tape recorder, and projector have driven him, by a strange road of initiation, to the heart of knowledge itself. And for the first time, the work is judged not by a thesis committee but by the very people the anthropologist went out to observe. This extraordinary technique of 'feedback' (which I would translate as 'audio-visual reciprocity') has certainly not yet revealed all of its possibilities. But already, thanks to it, the anthropologist has ceased to be a sort of entomologist observing others as if they were insects (thus putting them down) and has become a stimulator of mutual awareness (hence dignity). This type of totally

participatory research, as idealistic as it may seem, appears to me to be the only morally and scientifically feasible anthropological attitude today. (2003: 44)

As a result of this new turn in challenging ethnographic principles and practices, Rouch teamed up with Nigerian actors Damouré Zika, Lam Ibrahim Dia and Tallou Mouzourane to produce *Jaguar* (1955), *Petit à Petit* (*Little by Little*, 1969), *Cocorico Monsieur Poulet* (1974), *Babatu, les trois conseils* (*Babatu and the Three Wise Counsels*, 1976) and *Madame L'Eau* (1993). *Chronicle of a Summer* serves simultaneously as a bridge between two modalities of sharing (the object and the subject of cinema) and as an intermediate step between them, in the sense that it allowed Rouch to withdraw from the ambiguity of the former by inverting the ethnographic eye, and to avoid the ambiguity of the latter by partnering with another self, another French man and scholar, in the person of Edgar Morin.<sup>24</sup> To circumvent the underlying principle of the uneven, if not hierarchical, nature of relations between so-called equal participants, *Chronicle of a Summer* levels down the object, the filmed reality, and the subject of the essay film as spaces geared towards dialogue rather than reflection: 'film is the only means I have to show someone else how I see him' (Rouch 2003: 43).

In the same manner the group of people interviewed will engage at the end of the film in a dialogue among themselves, and between themselves and their images on the screen, because they share the same 'reality' (a screening room in Paris in the summer of 1960). The film as an essay reflects the ongoing dialogue between the ethnographer, Rouch, and the sociologist, Morin, not so much because they share this reality too, but because of their attempt at creating a dialogic community of ideas inscribed in the process of the film as attested by its conclusion: the film ends with a discussion between Rouch and Morin alone (the only such instance in the film) in the Musée de l'Homme, thus drawing the intellectual community into the film materially and figuratively. But at that very moment the essay as community or intersubjectivity comes to an end too, and the two authors return to the 'real', the Museum (as a cultural and scientific institution) and the streets of Paris (as a public space open to all), each one following his own path, first side by side, then separately. At the same time, the film concludes with a display of the technical apparatus of the film: the microphone sticking out of Rouch's coat, and the two investigators discussing its outcome.

While this would seem to correspond with Jay Ruby's requirement for ethnographic film, 'the absolute scientific necessity for making methods public' (1975: 109), this sequence overflows the bounds of scientific discourse. By including himself and Morin in the frame as objects of the camera-eye, in dialogue, Rouch explicitly combines the techniques of the ethnographic documentary as shared



Fig. 6: Discussing the failed experiment at the Musée de l'Homme.

anthropology and as co-authorship. At the same time, however, *Chronicle of a Summer* becomes an essay film in the very nature of its project, a collaboration between two equals, two intellectual friends, two subjects who need the invisible presence of the other as self to express himself. It should be noted that the space opened by the essay film through intersubjectivity and a community of ideas is not presented as a genre, or as a model, but the unfolding of its own process as shared thought. We can perhaps infer that ultimately the verification of the efficiency of such a community is the disappearance of the other, subsumed in the self, first figuratively, then literally; conversely, its failure is confirmed by the reintroduction of their difference, starting with their appearance on screen as engaged in a dialogue that would continue after the film's release.<sup>25</sup>

Despite obvious differences between the two films and directors, Vertov's *Kino-Eye* can be understood as following a similar logic of visual thinking in the sense that the community of ideas that founded the group (Marxism-Leninism plus avant-garde aesthetics) was based on a community of individuals (the 'kinoks' or kino-eyes – headed by the 'Council of Three', the Kaufman brothers, Mikhail and Denis/'Dziga', plus Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's wife) who shared authorship of the films on the basis of the alignment of the 'you' with an 'I' in a dialectical form that aimed to develop outward and forward in a spiral fashion.<sup>26</sup> The collective aspect of the group's methods was noted by film critic Vladimir Korolevich in 1928, in a

description of *One Sixth of the World*: 'Where they went into life with their camera and filmed. Where it wasn't just the leader working, but the collective, led by a shared idea. The collective is a sum, a sum total – leader plus cameraman plus editor. All of them have equal rights. Among them is a woman. [...] In the collective in which everyone has full rights, where they edit facts' (2004: 204). The 'we' of the kinoks is itself a utopian collective of workers opposed to traditional models of community, striving together toward a new, collective subjectivity: 'we introduce creative joy into all mechanical labor, we bring people into closer kinship with machines, we foster new people. *The new man*, free of unwieldiness and clumsiness, will have the light, precise movements of machines, and he will be the gratifying subject of our films' (Vertov 1984: 8; emphasis in original).

But the dialogic nature of Vertov's model goes even further than its collective enunciation, crossing the boundary of the screen into everyday life, as Vertov articulated in his discussion of his 1926 film, *One Sixth of the World* (*Shestaia chast' mira*): 'This film has, strictly speaking, no "viewers" within the borders of the USSR, since all the working people of the USSR (130–140 million of them) are *not viewers but participants in this film*. The very concept of this film and its whole construction are now resolving in practice the most difficult theoretical question of the eradication of the boundary between viewers and spectacle' (2004: 182; emphasis added). The transformation of object into (emancipated, collective) subject would transpire in part through the eventual expansion of the network of kinoks throughout the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> The kinoks as products generated by this community of ideas and people become not so much the paradigm as the dialectical result of a filmmaking experiment/essay, a new form to address, express and effect the fundamental changes undertaken by Soviet society. *Man with a Movie Camera* can then be understood both as the culmination of Vertov's concept of *kino-pravda*, the cinema as Communist film-newspaper, or more generally of kino-communication, with an ideal of scientific objectivity, transparency and total knowledge (perhaps paradoxically organised as poetry), but also as a bridge to his more 'epic' form that featured recognisable heroes, as exemplified in his 1934 work of mourning for the lost leader, *Tri pesni o Lenine* (*Three Songs of Lenin*).<sup>28</sup>

In both *Chronicle of a Summer* and *Man with a Movie Camera*, the attempted 'you' (the community of ideas as process, and the community of authors as subjects) will not survive the imperative of the singular 'I' as author/narrator of fiction films or documentaries, with Rouch's return to filmmaking in Africa and Vertov's subsequent movement toward socialist realism in *Lullaby* (1937), *Three Heroines* (1938) and even in *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934). As Bob White underlines in the case of Rouch, 'it is not a political, religious, economic utopia, but an utopia of the intersubjective, or rather an utopia through the intersubjective' (2004: 2). In that

sense, the passage to and through the essay may also constitute an exclusion, the disappearance of a 'you' subsumed in the dialectical nature of the text, whether as a result of the breakup of the Kino-Eye partnership when Mikhail Kaufman, the man with the camera, after growing tension during the making of *Man with a Movie Camera*, leaves the group in favour of solo authorship (e.g. *Vesnoi* (*In Spring*, 1929));<sup>29</sup> or in Rouch's case, when *Chronicle of a Summer* fails to implement the collaborative project undertaken by two relatively new social sciences: sociology and ethnography. Both cases underline the irreducible nature of the essay film as incapable of 'achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically', since 'the essay is more dialectical than the dialectic as it articulates itself' (Adorno 1984: 152, 166).

Inscribed within the historical tension between two modalities of thought, between scientific discourse and artistic expression, 'between conviction and seduction' (Macé 2004: 115), between truth and aesthetics, the emergence and resurgence of the literary essay has often (since Montaigne) been situated at the turning point of theoretical debates that exceed the question of redefinition of literary genres. The essay's 'hybrid' nature (Rouch and Morin 2003: 257) is to be found not only in the tension between discourse and expression, it also allows for the dialectical process at stake in aesthetics as defined by Rancière: 'a mode of thought that develops with respect to things of art and that is concerned to show them to be things of thought' (2010: 4–5).<sup>30</sup>

In this sense, *Chronicle of a Summer* and *Man with a Movie Camera* served to establish the historical possibility of Rouch's definition of 'shared anthropology'<sup>31</sup> and Vertov's 'cinematic transmission of visible events', much as Michel Foucault envisioned the role of his previous essays in the construction of his own thinking process: 'The studies of madness and the beginnings of psychology, of illness and the beginnings of a clinical medicine, of the sciences of life, language and economics were *attempts* that were carried out, to some extent, in the dark: but they gradually became clear, not only because little by little their method became more precise, but also because they discovered – in this debate on humanism and anthropology – the point of its historical possibility' (2008: 17; emphasis added). In other words, whatever the medium, whether literary or cinematic, the essay takes the form of a 'debate' (Foucault), a 'dialogue' (Montaigne), a 'dialectic' (Adorno), and allows for its own historical possibility in addition to that of its object. In addition to being confronted by 'another' discourse, the essay is also a form that confronts other forms of thought (treatise, novel, film, etc) in times of philosophical and theoretical crisis.

The essay film is thus both the constant assertion of the subject or enunciator of a discourse and the process of a quest towards the object of this discourse: 'The

essay becomes true in its progress, which drives beyond itself [...]. Its concepts receive their light from a *terminus ad quem* hidden to the essay itself, and not from an obvious *terminus a quo*' (Adorno 1984: 161). For Rouch and Vertov, cinema is the form for a *practice*, not so much as the product of a theoretical, ideological or disciplinary framework, but as the verification of an hypothesis that can only be articulated through an essay, and therefore different from scientific experimentation (deduced from an hypothesis), or from experimental cinema (independent from any hypothesis). For Vertov, film was the visual implementation of dialectical thought just as for Rouch it was the visual implementation of the ethnographic gaze. In their films, the mobility of the eye/I is displayed and emphasised through its deployment in space, whether in the metropolis or in the expanses of the Empire, and becomes the embodiment of a mental construction that unfolds in visual representations neither as a *flânerie* nor as an itinerary, but as a process, a journey intent on finding its own route.

## The Space of the Essay

In addition to providing film essayists with the apparatus of their thinking process, the role of the camera is to open a space for others, creating a community, and ultimately a public sphere. This is not simply a matter of the subject-I with the camera-eye interacting with the public sphere, but the creation of a new space – in Vertov's words, 'to establish a visual bond between the workers of the whole world' (1984: 52), which he envisioned as a 'departure from authorship by one person or a group of persons to mass authorship' (1984: 71).<sup>32</sup>

*And, finally, our third victory* (and this is the most important thing for us) is the growth of sympathy towards our work in all corners of the Union; it's the formation of an ever-increasing number of 'photo-eye' and 'kino-eye' circles; it's the move to independent work of those who have risen through the ranks of these circles; it's the ubiquitous reviews of our works; it's the provincial reviews; it's the letters we are receiving from the various towns, villages, and hamlets of our country. (2004: 194; emphasis in original)

In *Man with a Movie Camera*, the idea of participation emerges through the process of filmmaking from shooting to screening: most striking in this regard is the 'frozen frames' sequence, in which Elizaveta Svilova 'reanimates' the objects recorded on pieces of celluloid. Here the public sphere is produced not within the film, but by the film, as demonstrated in sequences set in the movie theatre, with

the audience reacting to images given previously in the film. The self-reflexive connection between the audience within the film and the audience watching *Man with a Movie Camera* suggests the notion of an internal addressee, inherent to the work of the kinoks. The relationship of this internal addressee to the kinoks is always regulated into a hierarchy that both imitates the organisation of the Bolshevik Party as vanguard and is integrated into that hierarchy: in 'Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups' from 1926, Vertov distinguishes between the 'kinok-observers' who collect 'separate, isolated phenomena according to generalized or distinctive characteristics', the 'group leader', who collects the data and rearranges it into a 'construction of the theme', all of which is overseen by the local 'Goskino cell of the Red kinoks' ('an educational model workshop through which Young Pioneer and Komsomol film groups will be drawn into production work'), which is in turn supervised by a central 'Council of Kino-Eye' (1984: 69–70).<sup>33</sup> Although Vertov's particular participatory model would seem to thwart the opening of possibility of unfettered creativity or agency to its internal and external audience, the fact that this film and this model have continued to inspire filmmakers from the post-war European new waves to digital theorists and practitioners today suggests an openness in *form* ('a film that begets films') that cannot be explained away with Vertov's theories.

Vertov's inclusion of the filmmaking process in *Man with a Movie Camera* finds a clear parallel in *Chronicle of a Summer's* penultimate sequence, in which the participants have a chance to comment on their own performances and on each other's. The particular setting of this sequence emphasises the filmmakers' overt intention to share the creative process with the objects of the film now turned into spectators: they are seated not in a movie theatre but in the screening room of the French advertising agency Publicis, watching the film rushes, and therefore assuming the position of directors as well as critics and actors of the film. The opening to a public sphere through the reflexive setting of the 'screening' sequence is somewhat thwarted by the return to the initial purpose of the film, a social experiment on Morin's terms.<sup>34</sup>

After the screening, while pacing up and down a gallery in the Musée de l'Homme with a rather silent and noncommittal Rouch, Morin wonders whether his 'characters' look 'true' or not, while being satisfied for not having 'guided the spectators' and achieving a film that 'is different from ordinary cinema because it reintroduces us to life'. For Rouch, on the contrary, the merit of *Chronicle of a Summer* lies not in the 'truth' of the observed phenomena, but rather in the project of 'shared anthropology', which is realised not only in the participation of the 'characters' in the filmmaking process, but also in the attempt at reversing the eye of the ethnographer by delegating the exploration of French society to Landry,

an African observer. For Rouch, it is the reversal of the ethnographer's gaze, the sharing of viewing perspective and therefore of authority, that fulfills 'the joint dream of Vertov and Flaherty, of a mechanical cine-eye-ear and of a camera that can so totally participate that it will automatically pass into the hands of those who, until now, have always been in front of the lens. At that point, anthropologists will no longer control the monopoly on observation; their culture and they themselves will be observed and recorded' (2003: 46).

If the camera has not been handed over to those who 'are in front of the lens' within *Chronicle of a Summer*, at least they can become observers of their own culture once they are given the status of spectators.<sup>35</sup> Here, too, we see a parallel with Vertov's model, in which kinok-observation is the initial step in Kino-Eye filmmaking, both as a way to train the eye before obtaining a camera, and as an essential part of the filmmaking process (see Vertov 1984: 69–73). The choice of setting for the screening of the film rushes corresponds to another feature of the essay film: the fact that it 'displays its performativity in an especially emphatic way, because it tends to include in the textual fabric the process of its own coming into being' (Rascaroli 2009: 17). By organising the discussion in a setting very similar to the *ciné-club* in terms of audience (the ordinary Parisian spectator) and purpose (a screening followed by a discussion), *Chronicle of a Summer* seems to point towards the nature of the film as an essay through its form (rushes) and mode (experimental, avant-garde).<sup>36</sup> But this particular choice necessarily implies a questioning of its status as 'art' since the screening does not take place in a *cinéma d'art et d'essai*, but at the heart of the advertising industry (Studio Publicis): the public sphere is always a political sphere.<sup>37</sup>

## Essay and Politics

According to Timothy Corrigan, the crystallisation or institutionalisation of the essay film as practice addresses a crisis in both representation and definition of the cinema in all its dimensions – social, economic, cultural, ideological and institutional – within the post-war environment (2011: 7). The essay film, then, aligns with Sartre's *analogon*, that is, as a 'substitute and representative of a phenomenon that cannot be rendered directly' (Jameson 1992: 53): for Vertov, this unrepresentable event is both the possibility and the (perhaps already anticipated) failure of the Soviet project as imagined by the avant-garde; for Rouch, the failure of colonial reformism and revolutionary unrest in newly independent countries. The film essay arises in a time of crisis, but is it the crisis of representation, the crisis of the modern project or the crisis of film as a postmodern project – or perhaps



all of these – that can be addressed through the production of this form? The post-World War II era seems a pivotal moment in terms of the (re?)emergence of the essay film in conjunction with a crisis of representation – not coincidentally the time of the establishment of film studies as an academic discipline and of the phenomenological turn in film theory, as well as the time when, as Adorno so famously stated, poetry had failed to express the inexpressible. This historical and representational crisis differs completely from the crisis of representation posed by the Russian Revolution and World War I, which the avant-garde of the 1920s had so eagerly addressed: in the post-World War II era, the crisis is related to the utter failure of the promise of totalising systems, in fact of the modern project in general. Through their works and within their respective contexts, both Vertov and Rouch point towards a genealogy of the essay film deeply anchored in modernity as the condition of possibility of cinema as art.

Since *Man with a Movie Camera* was made in 1928, it responded to and reflected the earlier historical crisis posed by World War I and, in the Russian context, by the Russian Revolution. Vertov's theory of the Kino-Eye as communication answers the question of how art will be relevant to the new Soviet system by proclaiming film as a new medium, untainted by the *fin-de-siècle* obsession with autonomous art, ready to serve the ends of the new state: the Kino-Eye, both as filmmaking project and as the product of filmmaking, would document reality, showing the Soviet worker both himself and his work, and other workers and their work, both within the vast expanses of the Soviet Union and outside it, while contributing to its construction (see Papazian 2009: 69–124). Vertov's model is not unlike Walter Benjamin's model of film in his 'artwork' essay, which, according to Miriam Hansen, posits the potential for an alternative (no longer liberal) public sphere in film (2011: 170).<sup>38</sup> But Vertov's idea was, in a sense, more totalising even than that: Kino-Eye was an essential means toward the growth of the Soviet project; Kino-Eye aesthetics would organise all of life, leading ultimately to Communism: 'Instead of fake copies of life, the montage of life itself' (2004: 84).

If the situation is different both in political and aesthetic terms for Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in 1960, their project nonetheless appears to coincide with a pivotal moment in the history of cinema theory, criticism and practice, 'the snapshot of a moment in which cultural, theoretical and technological discourses are caught in the process of crystallization' (Di Iorio 2007: 43) as well as 'a revolutionary moment in modern society', the moment of West African independence (Grimshaw 2001: 91). As Sam Di Iorio proposes: the 'major changes in the theory and practice of French cinema in the 1960s – the move away from phenomenology, the dissemination of new cameras and microphones, the expansion of

militant filmmaking collectives, the reawakened interest in theories of montage, the rediscovery of the Soviet avant gardes of the 1920s – can all be traced to the early debates about *cinéma vérité*' (2007: 43). The film is therefore not so much an achievement in itself as it is an 'essay' – the inscription of a *process* that will ultimately implement Rouch's long-term objectives in three areas: technology, science and cinema. In 'The Camera and Man', he presents these ideas with an optimistic and assertive tone that resonates with Vertov's early enthusiasm and defines very clearly how his work, including *Chronicle of a Summer*, ventures beyond the field of conventional ethnography and filmmaking: 'Within the universality of concepts in the scientific approach, we maintain a multiplicity of orientations: if the ciné-eyes of all countries are ready to unite, it is not simply to have one point of view. Thus film in the human sciences is, in a certain respect, in the avant-garde of film research. [...] [I]t is because our experiences have led us to similar conclusions and thus have given birth to a new cinema language' (2003: 45).

This 'research' has a technological component that is geared towards the democratisation of filmmaking in the very near future, and the abolition of the current division between experts and amateurs, filmmakers and spectators: 'Tomorrow will be the time of completely portable color video, video editing, and instant replay ('instant feedback')' (2003: 46). *Chronicle of a Summer* serves to demonstrate *hic et nunc* how some of these new instruments are already changing current practices in ethnography and filmmaking. The goal set by Rouch beyond his attempts at renewing a specific practice has been hailed as the actual emergence of the utopian ideal of total cinema, first in the writings of New Wave critics<sup>39</sup> and, more recently, in Faye Ginsburg's tribute to Rouch's 'new kind of ethnographic and documentary film practice that blurred the boundaries between producer and subject, fiction and "reality", Europe and Africa, the practical and the poetic, the mundane and the magical, and the audience and the social worlds of film' (2005: 111).

But are these utopian aspirations compatible with the essay film? As Adorno warns: 'when technique is made absolute in the art work; when construction becomes total, eliminating what motivates it and what resists it, expression; when art claims to be science and makes scientific criteria its standard', it 'allies itself with that reification against which it is the function of functionless art, even today, to raise its own however mute and objectified protest' (1984: 155, 156). The essay as form, on the contrary, aims 'to annul the theoretically outmoded claims of totality and continuity, and to do so in the concrete procedure of the intellect' (1984: 164). The essay tends toward 'critique of the system', toward 'open, unanticipated experience over firm, conceptual ordering', refraining, in a 'radically unradical' way, 'from any reduction to a principle' (1984: 157). If for Vertov, 'our path leads

through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man' (1984: 8), for Adorno, 'the essay abandons the main road'; 'thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet' (1984: 159, 160). Or, in Georg Lukács' terms: 'The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict ... but the process of judging' (1974: 18).

Substantial objections to Rouch's ideas and practices – specifically to his 'vérité aesthetic incorporat[ing] imperialist myth, despite its pose of liberalism and anthropological inquiry' (Ukadike 1994: 51) – have been raised by African critics and filmmakers,<sup>40</sup> who condemned a scientific approach still led by 'Africanists looking at us like insects', as Sembene said, in response to Rouch's opposing claim (in Prédal 1982: 77).<sup>41</sup> Manthia Diawara also emphasised Rouch's professional connection with the French administration, still entangled in neo-colonialist ventures at the time he worked 'with the French Ministère of the Relations Extérieures, the Musée de l'Homme and the Université de Paris X Nanterre' (1992: 174 n24).<sup>42</sup> But, in spite of *Chronicle of a Summer's* foundational 'commensalité', the sequence devoted to the discussion of the Congo crisis (following its independence in June 1960) turned to the issue of the ongoing Franco-Algerian war and became 'in fact quite lively, violent, and at moments pathetic' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 238). This contentious debate, in which '[cameraman Albert] Viguier and sound recordist Guy Rophé participated quite spontaneously', was captured by Rouch's camera in order to emphasise divisions of race, gender, class and age among its participants. As Steven Feld notes, Rouch later dropped the term 'cinéma-vérité' as the generic name for the film style in which he was engaging, fearing that it was tainted by the pretension to an absolutist notion of truth (2003: 14).<sup>43</sup>

Vertov's functionalist efforts to create a new man by means of the Kino-Eye may suggest the scientific-positivistic type of experiment, as his machine-like construction of *Man with a Movie Camera* strives toward the systemic and the total: 'I am kino-eye ... and through montage I create a new, perfect man' (1984: 17). The experiment 'longs for something all-embracing, the totality of which would resemble creation' (Adorno 1984: 165) – even as it reveals, by means of technology, the relationship of part to whole, of the tiniest fragments into the utopian totality. In fact, the structure of *Man with a Movie Camera*, in which the fragments both create totality and pull away from totality, closely resembles Adorno's model of 'interwovenness': 'its transitions disavow rigid deduction in the interest of establishing internal cross-connections, something for which discursive logic has no use' (1984: 169). The essay form's disavowal of scientific deduction in favour of associative, even ambiguous logic counters 'positivism's irresponsibly bungled language' (1984: 153), and 'verges on the logic of music, the stringent and yet

aconceptual art of transition' which strives to express something that cannot be expressed 'under the domination of a discursive logic ... but may be outwitted in its own form by the force of an intruding subjective expression' (1984: 169). Here Adorno implies that the essay attempts (but is doomed to fail) to escape the constraints of language through means inspired from musical composition, echoing one of Vertov's most radical claims for his work, his claim of escaping verbal language. *Man with a Movie Camera*, as mentioned above, presents itself as an experiment that aims to create an absolute cinematic language freed of the bonds of verbal language. In an official presentation about the film in January 1929, Vertov declared: 'Here we have *unmediated visual perception*' (2008a: 150; emphasis added).

We regard this film as a scientific experiment in the realm of cinema language [...]. Here one had to view the film without substituting the visual linkages with words, without translating the visual impressions into verbal ones. And from this it can't be said I am suggesting that you shouldn't think. *Think, but don't think in words*. (Ibid.; emphasis added)

In this sense, perhaps Adorno protests too much when he proclaims the heretical, anti-orthodox and, in particular, the anti-utopian character of the essay form; in his advocacy for the 'radically un-radical' refusal of 'reduction to a principle', of mediated immediacy (1984: 157, 159), of unity that comes not from glossing over the fissures in reality, but rather by exploring them, Adorno almost comes around to the utopian longing he critiques in Lukács' model of the essay: 'By reflecting the object without doing violence to it, the essay silently laments the fact that truth has betrayed happiness and thus itself' (1984: 169). If Lukács, writing in 1910, sees the essay form in terms of longing for a total aesthetic system, 'for truth', 'for value and form, for measure and order and purpose' (1974: 12, 17), Adorno, writing in the mid-1950s, understands the essay form in terms of a 'utopian intention' (1984: 161) that is simultaneously fragmented and resisted from within. Like Rouch's 'new experience of *cinéma-vérité*', Vertov's film, then, can be understood as embodying both the longing for totality characteristic of avant-garde cinema of the 1920s at the same time that it resists that totality from within its form.

The fragmentary totality of Vertov's film thus leads us to the concept of *cinéma-vérité*, or *kino-pravda*, with its own totalising claims. Marceline Lorian wrote in a questionnaire given to the participants in *Chronicle of a Summer* after its completion: 'isn't *cinéma-vérité* in its simplistic interpretation a myth?' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 341). Morin took this idea further in his 1962 conclusion to

'Chronicle of a Film': 'How do we dare speak of a truth that has been chosen, edited, provoked, oriented, deformed? Where is the truth?' Morin's own answer to this question is that the term is not 'an affirmation', but rather a kind of research: 'if we achieved anything, it was to present the problem of the truth'. What *Chronicle of a Summer* does achieve, according to Morin, is to reveal 'a concern for the truth', one that acknowledges that 'truth cannot escape contradictions, since there are truths of the unconscious and truths of the conscious mind' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 262, 263).

The revelation of internal states is exactly what Vertov claimed could be achieved by the Kino-Eye, in his 1934 description of his filming of himself jumping from a roof:

From the viewpoint of the ordinary eye you see untruth. From the viewpoint of the cinematic eye (aided by special cinematic means, in this case accelerated shooting) you see the truth. If it's a question of reading someone's thoughts at a distance (and often what matters to us is not to hear a person's words but to read his thoughts), then you have that opportunity right here. It has been revealed by the kino-eye. (1984: 124–5)

The Kino-Eye could 'penetrate' into 'the intimate emotional experiences of people', 'to the level on which a person reveals himself completely' (ibid.).<sup>44</sup> Vertov refers here specifically to his sync-sound interviews in *Three Songs of Lenin*; thus it is not surprising that a similar effect can be observed in certain sections of *Chronicle of a Summer*, and in particular, in the interviews with Marilù. Rouch saw a clear link between his own technological innovations and experimentation and Vertov's, and he built on Vertov's conception of 'cinema truth' (*kino-pravda*) both through an extension of Vertov's principles and through a critique of those principles. In focusing his critique on Vertov's hidden camera techniques (in fact a minor aspect of Vertov's theory), Rouch raised the essential question of objectivity, and underlined the impossibility of achieving anything like it in film:

I have often been reproached for speaking about cinéma-vérité. They said about *Chronique d'un été* that it couldn't be the truth, that truth doesn't exist in the cinema. When Vertov spoke of Kino-Pravda, it wasn't simply filming the journal *Pravda*. But he said it very clearly; the ciné-vérité is the truth of cinema, the truth that one can show in the cinema with a mechanical eye and an electronic ear. When I have a camera and a microphone, I'm not my usual self, I'm in a strange state, in a ciné-transe. This is the objectivity that one can expect, being perfectly conscious that the camera is there and that people know it. From that

moment we live in an audio-visual galaxy: a new truth emerges, *cinéma-vérité*, which has nothing to do with normal reality. (In Yakir 1978: 7)

While Rouch doesn't go so far as to say that 'normal reality' itself is discontinuous, he does mention to Morin that truth is not the sole aim of his filmmaking: rather, the extraordinary 'poetic discovery of things through the film' should be mentioned, such as the 'poetic drama' of 'Angelo walking up an incredible stairway ... to get to his house' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 253). In fact, discontinuity and fragmentation characterise the film's aesthetics from the shots systematically interrupting the repetitive gestures of the factory workers in the sequence dedicated to Angelo's daily routine to the rhythm imparted by questions, answers and pauses in the discussions after each meal, to the series of alternating close-ups, cutaways and filler shots throughout the film. As Morin explained in his opening speech as President of the Jury of the Festival du Cinéma du Réel in 1980 in Paris: 'There are two ways of looking at the cinema of reality. The first is to pretend to show reality. The second is to pose the problem of reality. Thus there have been two concepts of *cinéma-vérité*. First, it pretended to show truth. Second, it posed the problem of truth.'<sup>45</sup> This can be conceived as his embodiment of the essayistic process, the opening up of new questions. The 'poetic discovery of things', like the Russian avant-garde notion of defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*), may signal a different sense of *cinéma-vérité*: not as a goal in itself, but rather in terms of the attempt, or essay, at a truth; neither a scientific truth nor the truth of an artistic creation, but simply the attempt to reveal a truth about the object, about the world.

## In Lieu of a Conclusion

The essayistic nature of Vertov's and Rouch's work is not, after all, so closely aligned to Corrigan's definition of the essay film as the product of the historical moment of the post-war realignment of genres and the theoretical and practical claims of the French New Wave. This definition of the essay film depends on a particular historical crisis (World War II), on a particular theoretical turning point (the move away from phenomenology), and on a particular technological situation (the use of lightweight hand-held cameras and equipment). In spite of their differences, first Vertov, reveling in the possibilities engendered by the creation of a modern state, then Rouch, convinced that the year 1960 would begin the postcolonial era, both contributed to what Piau considers 'the progressive elaboration of a posture, a particularly original and productive move, that [he] would call a phenomenological accompaniment, an attempt in constant progress,

that always needs to be reworked, at understanding differences by coming so close that one can feel the other live' (2004: 212). If we assess the essay film by the impact and measure of its posterity and consider it as a form of mourning for the lost possibility of utopia, for the lost potential of overcoming the fissures of a split reality, then the cinemas of Rouch and Vertov, which simultaneously long for that impossible totality and subvert and resist it, are essential precursors to the post-war essay film.

## Notes

- 1 We would like to thank Anne Eakin Moss, Rick Warner and John MacKay for their comments on a draft of this chapter, and to acknowledge the Centre for Research in Film and Audiovisual Cultures at the University of Roehampton, London, where we presented an early version of this chapter.
- 2 The book *Chronique d'un été* was originally published in French in 1962 and translated into English in 2003 as *Chronicle of a Summer: A Film Book*, published as Part Three of the anthology edited by Steven Feld, *Ciné-Ethnography*. *Chronicle of a Summer: A Film Book* was co-authored by Rouch and Morin, and includes the long essay by Morin, 'Chronicle of a Film'; an essay by Rouch on 'The Cinema of the Future?'; a transcript of the film; and a follow up to the film called 'The Point of View of the 'Characters,' co-signed by Rouch and Morin. Citations from all sections of the book will be given as Rouch and Morin 2003.
- 3 While a certain connection between Rouch and Vertov is generally acknowledged, this connection has not, to our knowledge, been probed in any depth. For example, Erik Barnouw's classic *Documentary* notes both that *cinéma-vérité* is a translation of *kino-pravda* ('film truth'), and that *Chronicle of a Summer* 'indeed had echoes of Vertov, particularly of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, in that it was a compendium of experiments in the pursuit of truth' (1993: 254), but separates the discussion of each filmmaker based on their respective historical contexts. In a more recent book on North American direct cinema, Dave Saunders almost offhandedly links Vertov and Rouch into a continental mode of *cinéma-vérité* that he opposes to the North American trend: 'Whilst the contemporaneous *cinéma-vérité* exponents in France were avowing their artistic lineage by paying tribute to Vertov's strident *Kino-Pravda*, [Robert] Drew sought not to follow this self-reflexive tradition' (2007: 9). In his introduction to the Rouch collection *Ciné-Ethnography*, Steven Feld discusses Rouch's 'debt to Dziga Vertov', in particular Vertov's model of the Kino-Eye 'as a new kind of seeing that created its own peculiar truth' (2003: 13, 14).

- 4 Renov writes: 'The expressive is the aesthetic function that has consistently been undervalued within the nonfiction domain; it is, nevertheless, amply represented in the history of the documentary enterprise' (2004: 32).
- 5 As Nichols notes, although 'the reflexive mode emphasizes epistemological doubt [and] stresses the deformative intervention of the cinematic apparatus in the process of representation' (1991: 61), both the knowledge and engagement of documentary 'stop short of erasing the gap between subject and object, viewer and representation, self and Other' (1991: 179).
- 6 In his 1962 account of the making of *Chronicle of a Summer*, Morin claims that 'the title [didn't] reflect the subject' and was chosen by producer Anatole Dauman (Argos Films), for whom Morin and Rouch's proposed title 'How do you live?' was 'too TV, it seems' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 256).
- 7 While in Russian, as in the French word '*expérience*', the word '*opyt*' can refer both to 'experiment' and 'experience', here Vertov opts for the more technological-sounding and unambiguous '*eksperiment*'. Translations from sources in French and Russian are ours unless otherwise noted.
- 8 Devin Fore draws attention to the ambiguity of the term *kino-apparat* in his article 'Dziga Vertov: First Shoemaker of Russian Cinema' (2010: 380).
- 9 As in English, 'production' (*proizvodstvo*) denotes both factory production and a film or theatre production. The program of the journal *Novyi Lef*, where Vertov's name appeared on the masthead as a member of the group, was 'productivism' (*proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo*).
- 10 Séverine Graff observes that it is difficult to assess exactly what Morin and Rouch knew about Vertov's theories in 1960. Although his films and main concepts had already been commented by most avant-garde journals and histories of cinema, his texts were actually translated in French by Rita Sadoul and published by Georges Sadoul in 1963 (2011: 33).
- 11 See John MacKay (2005) on the 'sensory *agora*' in *Enthusiasm* (Dziga Vertov, 1931).
- 12 Vertov's team made *Man with a Movie Camera* at the VUFKU (All-Ukrainian Photo-Cinema Directorate) studios in Kiev, after he had been fired from Sovkino in Moscow, and therefore certainly not in a moment of ascendancy of Vertov's ideas.
- 13 As John MacKay has noted, this sequence, which he has identified as featuring a dancer, Valia Anastasieva, 'was questioned particularly strongly, in light of Vertov's fierce denials that the film contained any staging; somewhat evasively, Vertov claimed that this footage was captured just as any other newsreel footage would be – that is, without the use of actors – but that the images were simply those of everyday life' (2013: 13 n20, referring to archival sources). Contrast this with a similar scene in *Chronicle of a Summer*, in which the filmed person



(Angelo) was not 'in on it', according to Morin: 'In the darkness we penetrate like burglars into Angelo's little garden. [...] We finally enter the bedroom on tiptoe, holding back our laughter. [...] While Brault shoots, we see Angelo coming out of sleep under the effects of the light. When he discovers us, flabbergasted, he curses at us, and we burst into laughter' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 245).

- 14 Morin refers to the concept of 'life caught unawares' (in French '*pris sur le vif*') as 'that particular irreducible quality that appears in "real life"' which he believes is missing from 'Soviet cinema of the grande époque' (apparently referring to the historical films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin) and 'films such as *The Bicycle Thief* and *Terra Trema*' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 229).
- 15 See also Annette Michelson (1992: 117).
- 16 As Christopher Thompson (1995: 371) among others has observed, the unconditional enthusiasm of the New Wave directors for Rouch's pioneering work and spirit never wavered, from Jean-Luc Godard's 1959 salute to *Moi un noir* (*I, a Black*, 1958) as 'the best French film since the Liberation' (1998: 178) to Jacques Rivette's homage: 'Rouch is the force behind all of French cinema in the past ten years' (1977: 34).
- 17 Mikhail Kaufman stated in 1967 that he didn't believe in the idea of 'provoking facts' with the camera, but rather 'as a means of creating an atmosphere in which the human character can be uncovered more fully' (1993: 147).
- 18 As René Prédal suggests, 'the ethics of the ethnographer are the foundation for the aesthetics of the filmmaker' (1996: 13).
- 19 According to Morin, 'the film in the camera runs out' right after framing 'the face of Nadine, who has begun to cry near Landry' (Rouch and Morin 2003: 238). Marceline Loridan Ivens recalled in an interview that Rouch gave her a rose during filming (ten Brink 2007: 151).
- 20 For the shoot at the hydroelectric dam, the second cameraman was Konstantin Kuliaev; for the other sections shot during the filming of *The Eleventh Year*, Boris Tseitlin, according to John MacKay (2013: 15 n22, based on archival sources). MacKay has shown that the images of the completed dam in both *Man with a Movie Camera* and *The Eleventh Year* were actually shot at the Volkhovstroï dam near Leningrad, thus projecting the completion of the Dneprostroï project (2007: 71).
- 21 The story of Vertov's firing from Sovkino in early 1927, ostensibly for having refused to submit a script for *Man with a Movie Camera* to his boss, Ilya Trainin, in the aftermath of his alleged overspending on *One Sixth of the World* (1926), is documented in Tsivian 2004: 233–46 and 252–6. Vertov planned to make two feature-length films out of the footage shot for the 1926 film: *One Sixth of the World* (which was completed), and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Tsivian 2004:

- 239, 255). Thus *Man with a Movie Camera* is also in dialogue with *One Sixth of the World*, as suggested by MacKay (2013: 6–10, 16), as well as with his earlier film *Kino-Eye* (1924; see Papazian 2009: 92–6).
- 22 See Adorno 1984: 164 and 166 (here quoting Max Bense, ‘Über den Essay und seine Prosa’).
  - 23 The distinction between a singular and several interlocutors is more explicit in French (*tu* and *vous*) and in Russian (*ty* and *vy*) than in English. The opening conversation between Marceline Loridan, Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch in *Chronicle of a Summer* reveals an intricate combination of ‘tu’ and ‘vous’ reflecting the level of acquaintance between individuals – Rouch and Morin addressing each other as ‘tu’, Rouch addressing Marceline as ‘vous’ whereas Morin addresses Marceline as ‘tu.’ The use of first and last names also offers a similar and paradoxical example of familiarity (as well as social and gender differentiation) with colleagues and friends, with Rouch and Morin calling Marceline by her first name, and addressing one another by their last names. While Vertov’s *One Sixth of the World* has the Whitmanesque titles that encompass an ‘I’ that sees and reveals; a plural, collective ‘you’, the addressee, that is gradually revealed to be ‘the owner of one sixth of the world’; and an occasional singular ‘you’ addressed to individual people pictured in the film, *Man with a Movie Camera* avoids intertitles as a relic of the old, literary language, and so its mode of address is exclusively visual.
  - 24 In that sense, ‘reverse ethnography’ as an intermediary step in the evolution of Rouch’s cinema also includes *La Pyramide humaine* (*The Human Pyramid*), which Rouch had planned to finish right before starting *Chronicle of a Summer*.
  - 25 Whereas Rouch continued to make both documentaries and ‘ethno-fictions’, Morin, who had previously published two books analysing cinema from the perspective of social science (Morin 1956; 1957), stopped working in film. A film script he wrote in 1963, *L’Heure de vérité* (*The Hour of Truth*) was produced in 1965 by Henri Calef, but Morin opposed its release because he felt the director had betrayed the script.
  - 26 See, for example, Vertov on *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934): ‘The movement of thoughts, the movement of ideas travels along many wires but in a single direction, towards a single goal. [...] The content of *Three Songs* develops in a spiral fashion’ (2008b: 262–3). Later in the same article, Vertov describes the goal of this motion: ‘from the old to the new, from the past to the future, and from slavery to the free, cultured life of the man liberated by the revolution’ (2008b: 263).
  - 27 On Vertov’s concept of a network of kinoks see Papazian 2009: 76–80.
  - 28 See Papazian 2009: 69–124 on Vertov’s ‘utopian ideal of communication among all the workers of the world via the medium of film’ (2009: 73), and his evolution from ‘a strictly anti-representational, non-narrative, documentary, collective

approach and toward psychology, history, narrative, and kind of “auteur” cinema’ (2009: 75).

- 29 Some of the tension can be seen in the reception to *The Eleventh Year* and Vertov’s coordination of the kinok response (see Tsivian 2004: 310–16); Kaufman disliked *Man with a Movie Camera*, and Kaufman and Vertov ‘were divided in opinion once and for all and started to work independently’ in 1929 (Kaufman 1993: 147).
- 30 For Jean-Louis Comolli, it is precisely the presence of ‘aesthetic manipulation’ in *cinéma direct* that triggers the ‘movement from testimony to commentary, from commentary to reflection: from the sound-image to the idea’ (1969: 45).
- 31 Or, as Maxime Scheinfeigl has put it: ‘two separate lines of force collide. On the one hand, the socio-ethnographic discourse at work in Morin’s project, and on the other hand the opening towards the unforeseen, the unthought-of in Rouch’s *cinéma direct*’ (2008: 93).
- 32 See Vertov’s 1947 inventory of his life’s work, his ‘Artistic Calling Card’, entry no. 49, ‘Idea of an all-union organization of Film-Scouts’, which aimed at the ‘transfer of authorship to the people’ (2006: 95–6), and entry no.18, on the ‘*Humanity of Kinoks*’, an ‘army of film scouts ... and Kinoks in order to abandon single authorship and proceed to mass authorship’ (2006: 86).
- 33 It is worth noting that the internal audience in *Man with a Movie Camera* is a well-dressed audience in an actual movie theatre, as opposed to a group of factory workers or soldiers watching the film at a workers club. The internal audience in the film, then, would be located further down in the hierarchy. But if we consider this film purely as propaganda – i.e., as in Hannah Arendt’s understanding of the term, directed outward toward an audience outside the Soviet project – then the well-dressed, smiling audience serves the simple function of convincing an external audience that Soviet citizens are thriving.
- 34 Both Morin and Rouch had initially abandoned the Publicis sequence, Morin being ‘not particularly attached to it, Rouch having said that it was inedible’. But feeling that the end of the film was too ‘weak’, they agreed on ‘a new conclusion, an improvised dialogue at the Musée de l’Homme after the screening of the Publicis discussion and taking into account (implicitly) the reactions of the first viewers’ (Rouch and Morin 2003: 256). It should be noted, however, that Landry, the African observer, is not visible in the Publicis Studio audience.
- 35 One can also argue that Marceline has been handed the microphone, since she is conducting interviews at the beginning of the film and recording herself as she walks from Place de la Concorde to Les Halles, as previously mentioned. Moreover, Marceline will herself, after the completion of this film, become a filmmaker and the partner of the Dutch documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens. She

later recalled the scene filmed in Les Halles as a form of co-authorship: 'During that scene I became the filmmaker. I proposed the scene to Rouch and Morin. I told them that I had to be alone and that they had to be far away from me. I took the Nagra and put it under my coat with the microphone. And the scene was beautiful' (in ten Brink 2007: 147).

- 36 For Corrigan (2011: 73) for example, Varda's film *Deux ans après* (*Two Years Later*, 2002) displays 'the dialogic dynamic that the essay film inherited from the ciné club format' by offering the participants of her previous film, *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000), an opportunity to discuss their roles in this film.
- 37 '*Cinémas d'art et d'essai*' is an association of movie theatres (mostly located in the *Quartier latin* that will become the major site of the May 1968 riots in Paris) that strove to include avant-garde films in their programs in the 1920s and were eventually acknowledged and subsidised by the French Ministry of Culture in 1955. They share with the *ciné-clubs* an educational purpose, a cinephilic audience, and a selection of international and innovative films, but their status is that of regular movie theatres, whereas the *ciné-clubs* were established to show films to local spectators at their place of work or study, and foster a discussion among them.
- 38 For Benjamin, the 'historic task' of film consists in 'training human beings in the forms of apperception and attention required in an increasingly machinic world' and in 'the therapeutic potential to counter, if not undo, the sensory alienation inflicted by industrial-capitalist modernity, to diffuse the pathological consequences of the failed reception of technology on a mass scale' (Hansen 2011: 132).
- 39 See Jean-Paul Colleyn on the importance of Rouch as a 'revolutionary figure' (2004: 538) for the filmmakers of the French New Wave.
- 40 Rouch's influence was more whimsically criticised in the early 1960s by Jean Pierre Lefebvre and Jean-Claude Pilon, who disapproved of 'the fetishization of the camera' (1962: 45) and accused French-Canadian filmmakers Michel Brault and Claude Jutra of having a bad case of 'roucheolitis', a 'rather labored pun on the French word for measles' (Leach 1999: 62).
- 41 See also Gabriel (1982), Rey (1988) and Piaux (1987), as well as Manthia Diawara's film, *Rouch in Reverse* (1995).
- 42 See Bob W. White: 'For Rouch, the "us" seems to exist beyond time and transcend class and race differences imposed by the colonial order [...]; his notion of sharing is a way for him to redeem his conscience by thinking that in the inter-subjective space created by the camera as an intermediary, differences created by skin color and power don't have any consequences' (2004: 2).

- 43 See also Graff 2011: 36. Instead, Rouch adopted the term ‘*cinéma direct*’ (‘direct cinema’, as it was immediately termed in English), first suggested by Mario Ruspoli, who presented his own film, *Les Inconnus de la terre* (*Strangers of the Earth*) in 1961 as an ‘essay in ethnology’ (see Marsolais 1974: 21–25). This overlap between the North American and Continental uses of the term ‘direct cinema’ has led to much confusion in documentary studies; see Barnouw 1993: 254–5.
- 44 Rouch suggested that it was walking with a lightweight camera that could achieve this effect: the cameraman walking with his camera ‘is thus able to penetrate into the reality, rather than leaving it to unroll itself in front of the viewer’ (2003: 38).
- 45 Later in his speech, Morin attempted to define documentary and fiction in regards to truth, much to Rouch’s disapproval, according to Michel Brault who was also a member of the Jury (see Coulombe 1999: 4).

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# **PART TWO**

The Essay Film as Politics

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# Chapter 5

## Notes for a Revolution: Pasolini's Postcolonial Essay Films

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Luca Caminati

Film, Pasolini believed, provided a unique and indispensable instrument in the waging of the anti-capitalist Third World struggle, as this passage written in 1970 on the ontological difference between the written and the visual in the postcolonial context, from *Lutheran Letters*, suggests:

Nothing compels one to look at things like making a film. The gaze of a writer upon a landscape, rural or urban, can exclude an infinity of things, cutting out from the whole only those that give rise to emotions or serve some purpose. The gaze of a director on this same landscape, meanwhile, cannot fail to take note of – almost listing them – all the things that are found there. Indeed, while for a writer things are destined to become words, that is, symbols, in the expression of a director things remain things: the signs of the verbal system are thus symbolic and conventional, while the signs of the cinematographic system are precisely the things themselves, in their materiality and their reality. These become, it is true, 'signs', but they are the living 'signs', so to speak, of themselves [...]. So if I had gone to Yemen as a writer, I would have returned with a completely different idea of Yemen than that which I have having gone there as a director. I don't know which of the two is truer. As a writer I would

have returned with the idea – exciting and static – of a country crystallized in a medieval historical situation, with tall and narrow red houses, decorated with white friezes as though made by a crude goldsmith, heaped up in the middle of a burning desert and bright enough to scratch the cornea, and here and there valleys with villages that repeat exactly the architectural form of the city among sparse terraced gardens of wheat, of barley, of small vines. As a director I saw instead, in the middle of all this, the ‘expressive’, horrible presence of modernity: a leprosy of chaotically planted lightposts, houses of concrete and sheet metal built without sense there where the walls of the city once were, public buildings in a dreadful twentieth-century Arab style, et cetera. And naturally my eyes had to rest themselves on other things as well, smaller or even miniscule: plastic objects, cans, shoes and textiles of cotton, miserable canned pears (from China), little radios. I saw, in short, the coexistence of two semantically different worlds, united in a single chaotic expressive system. (1987: 31–2; translation slightly modified)

With this quote we get at the real rupture that Pasolini posited in the representation of the ‘elsewhere’ (the non-Western). On the one side, we find the ontology of the written and its descriptive and denotative capacity; and on the other, the filmed, with its visual referents that escape, according to Pasolini’s semiotics, the system of signs, being signs of themselves. While the word ‘crystallizes’ and halts representation ‘in a medieval historical situation’, incapable of showing the dynamic of the development of a place, the camera (seen by Pasolini not as a filtering device, but as a machine that represents things for what they are, ‘listing them’) penetrates into the terrible paraphernalia of modern alienation; only in this way does the ‘leprosy’, the chaos, the nonsense of the displacements of modernity open up before the director and, to a second degree, the spectator. While the writer cannot see certain elements because of the inability of his language, infected with all of the unconscious traditions it brings, to fully signify (that is to say, it operates on a symbolic level that is removed by the very instrument it employs from the things themselves), the lens follows the eyes of the director as they ‘rest themselves’ on this or that small or large item in the scene. It is the difference between hearsay evidence and the eyewitness, and – to continue the judicial metaphor – it makes it impossible not to indict the wasteland of the colonised Third World, a wasteland that has been made, constructed, intended and, as such, must have a perpetrator or perpetrators.

But we must remember that the battle waged when shouldering the faithful Arriflex camera is not against the Quixotic windmills of the new, but rather against that which Pasolini himself defines as *irrealtà*, ‘unreality’. What did

Pasolini mean by *irrealità*? Not dissimilarly from what Guy Debord – in that same year, 1967 – called ‘*la société du spectacle*’, *l’irrealità* is the neocapitalist world of audiovisual media with its claim to have gone beyond ideology, evidently leading the rural world toward an irreversible ‘anthropological mutation’. Pasolini’s call in *Heretical Empiricism* – ‘we must de-ontologize, we must ideologize’ (2005: 226) – is an appeal to battle the unreality of the flattening representation of the (then) nascent ‘society of the spectacle’ which directly acts, in an interesting inversion of the orthodox Marxist relation between base and structure, on the world of reality. Ideological disengagement from reality triggered by media, urbanisation, loss of traditions: to this Pasolini opposes ‘reality’, the agricultural and subproletarian past, primitive religious sentiment, the Third World not as escape but rather as a possible political alterity, but also cinema as an indexical tool, and the open form of the essay film as a political challenge.

Pasolini’s engagement with the essay form includes a significant list of works, shot throughout his long career. Some are direct responses to the Italian political context such as *La rabbia* (*Rage*, 1963) and *12 dicembre* (*December 12*, 1972); or *Comizi d’amore* (*Love Meetings*, 1964), a *cinéma vérité* documentary, in which Pasolini travels through the Italian peninsula asking questions, at the time deemed very risqué, on love, gender and sexuality. This film, which uses direct sound and has Pasolini always present as interviewer, is reminiscent in its style and purpose of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d’un été*, 1961) and of a short film on architecture, *Pasolini e la forma della città* (*Pasolini and the Form of the City*, 1975), which I will discuss briefly below. In this chapter I will focus exclusively on an analysis of Pasolini’s essay films in relationship to his Third World commitment: all the films that should have been part of the *Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo* (*Notes for a Poem on the Third World*, 1968), including *Sopralluoghi in Palestina per Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*Location Scouting in Palestine for The Gospel According to Matthew*, 1964); *Appunti per un film sull’India* (*Notes for a Film on India*, 1968); *Appunti per un’Orestide africana* (*Notes for an African Oresteia*, 1969); and *Le mura di Sana’a* (*The Walls of Sana’a*, 1971).<sup>1</sup> In particular I will discuss two films, *Notes for a Film on India*, which I consider exemplary of Pasolini’s essayistic mode, and *The Walls of Sana’a*, framed by Pasolini as a letter to UNESCO. More generally, this chapter aims at filling a gap in both Pasolini studies and postcolonial studies in the Italian context by looking at the Third World Turn in the politically engaged Italian cinema of the 1960s – and, possibly, to arrive at an understanding of the way in which one of the keenest Italian intellectuals of his time positioned himself in relation to the Third World, allowing us to investigate issues of postcoloniality from an Italian perspective, even if an eccentric one.

## The Third World

Pasolini's travels outside of Europe began in January 1961 with a trip to India, undertaken in the company of Alberto Moravia and Elsa Morante (see Naldini 1989: 240). This was his first direct engagement with the Third World, as Pasolini always put it, stubbornly refusing to use the liberal euphemism 'developing countries', as if the West were the only telos towards which any path was possible. A quick survey of Pasolini's oeuvre shows the important role played by Third World locations. They inspired two feature films, *Edipo re (Oedipus Rex)*, 1967) and *Il fiore delle Mille e una notte (Arabian Nights)*, 1974); the documentaries; medium- and short-length films *Location Scouting in Palestine*, *Notes for a Film on India*, *Notes for an African Oresteia* and *The Walls of Sana'a*; and a screenplay for an unrealised film, *Il selvaggio Padre (The Savage Father)*, published posthumously in 1975). In addition to these completed works, there was the large and ambitious unrealised project entitled *Notes for a Poem on the Third World*, of which the films on Palestine, India and Africa were to be parts.

When Pasolini moved to Rome in 1950 from Friuli (the northeastern part of Italy where he spent large portions of his youth and whose dialect he employed for his first poems), he claimed that it was the 'discovery of the elsewhere' that drove him towards writing his early realist novels, *Ragazzi di vita (The Ragazzi)*, 1955) and *Una vita violenta (A Violent Life)*, 1959) (see Anzoino 1974: 2). It is the logic of this desire for an 'elsewhere' that can only be satisfied by that which is beyond the margins of the seeker, inasmuch as the margins were defined by the West, with its socioeconomic organisation and its canon. Pasolini would try to find its antithesis both in pockets within the West and in the countries that were struggling to free themselves from colonial bonds.

Like many other engaged artists of late modernity, Pasolini was witness to a radical change in the locus of the other, which was no longer only to be identified with the proletariat and the working class, but with the cultural other, whether it be a non-Westerner or someone marginalised within Western society for racial or sexual reasons. As Hal Foster remarked in *Return to the Real* – an examination of the relationship between modernism, anthropology and art practices – this change from a subject defined in terms of economic relations to one defined in terms of cultural identity is significant inasmuch as it forces the committed artist to move beyond national borders, to explore new expressive forms and, above all, to turn to other disciplines (such as anthropology, sociology and ethnography), in order to conduct his creative work (1996: 177). This very special engagement with the Third World, which I call 'heretical orientalism' (Caminati 2007), flickers uneasily in the space between a naïvely orientalist vision of the East, which

denies its own contemporaneousness (it is timeless, unchanging, petrified), and the classical Marxist position on the revolutionary potential of the ‘underdeveloped peoples’ (as theorised by Lenin and Trotsky) which framed the peoples stuck in pre-capitalist life as in need of developing through capitalism to socialism, in a strict teleological vision of the revolutionary process. It has been easy to accuse Pasolini – starting from his first Indian reportage, *L’odore dell’India* (*The Scent of India*, 1962), onwards – of falling victim to an orientalist attitude, and chastise him so as to delight the new censors of postcolonial ethics. As Cesare Casarino has noted, a mere critique of Pasolini’s orientalism is an insufficient and inadequate hermeneutical gesture in and of itself since, like few others, Pasolini saw – through the fog of the parochial and ultra-conformist Italy of the 1950s and 1960s – that there was a need for a possible alternative to the neocapitalist Western model; a requirement for a real and profound alterity, of which he felt himself to be, in many ways, the actualisation (see Casarino 2010: 680). Pasolini was a communist expelled from the party, a homosexual unaffiliated with the gay movement, a Catholic in exile from the church and a polemicist against both the mainstream and the alternative niches of Italian culture.

Following what Edward Said wrote in *Culture and Imperialism* concerning Jean Genet’s role in the nascent postcolonial movement (1994: 185, 317), I suggest that Pasolini has to be considered as an integral part of the *literature of decolonisation*, alongside Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant and Frantz Fanon. More specifically (and here we can see both the strength and weakness of Pasolini’s *tiers-mondisme* (“Third-Worldism”)), Pasolini, Genet, Sartre and other European Marxists were involved throughout the 1950s and 1960s in articulating a form of transnational revolutionary universalism. This understanding of the Third World struggle beyond the notion of identity – that is to say, detached from local specificities of, above all, race – translated Fanon’s post-*négritude* understanding of the role of the black man in the liberation struggle and reinserted it in the burgeoning anti-USSR left that helped generate the 1968 movement. In arguing for Pasolini’s role in the movement of decolonisation, I am following a reading of Fanon already put forth by Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, where he detects the influence of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) on Fanon’s thinking, therefore justifying the contemporary reading of a postcolonial Fanon already present in Fanon’s writing (see Said 1994: 12).

In the Italian context, Fanon received immediate attention from leftist intellectual audiences. In her acutely perceptive essay, ‘Frantz Fanon in Italy’, Neelam Srivastava points to the speed with which Fanon was introduced to the Italian scene (2015: 310): the first translation appeared as early as 1959, and all subsequent volumes were quickly published by Einaudi, thanks to the curatorial work



of Giovanni Pirelli (see Love 2015). Poet and Marxist activist Giovanni Giudici published a much-discussed essay on Fanon in 1963 through *Quaderni piacentini*, the counterculture magazine whose editorial policy aligned it with the anti-imperialist struggle. Here Giudici attempts to normalise Fanon as part of the 'global battle always already in place to bring about the discovery and liberation of man'. Giudici disavows the 'myth of *négritude*', only to acknowledge the specificity of African violence due to the 'tribal condition of living' (1998: 149).

This transnational revolutionary fervour is well captured by Pasolini in one of his poems, *Profezia*, dedicated to Jean-Paul Sartre, and concisely put in an interview few years later: 'Years ago I dreamt of the peasants coming up from Africa with a Lenin flag, taking up the Calabrians and marching West together' (1999a: 1638). Pasolini's geopolitical stance here smacks of both ideological and political heresy, transforming Fanon's post-*négritude* message into a transnational revolutionary universalism and then rather audaciously pointing to the anti-colonial struggle as the model of political action that should be taken up by the Italian intellectuals grouped around the *Quaderni*, who were breaking away from the Italian Communist Party and its historical allegiance with the USSR's doctrine of Manichean geopolitical bipolarism. Instead, Pasolini sought inspiration from the movement of the non-aligned countries that was born out of the Bandung conference of 1955, as well as from the anti-colonial movement in Africa (see Prashad 2008: 31–50). It does not come as a surprise that in 1968, in the 'Apologia' of his poem '*Il PCI ai giovani*' (*Poem to Young Communist Students*), he defined himself as a Fanonian Marcusian intellectual ('*intellettualli marcusiani e fanoniani, me compreso*') (1999a: 1450). To call oneself *fanoniano* was a political and rhetorical gesture of rebellion within the sphere of the Left and amounted to joining the ranks of many other young turks of the *sinistra extraparlamentare* (extra-parliamentary left), the radical left groups that in a few years coalesced around the 1968 student movement (see Srivastava 2015: 309–28).

## The *Appunti* Experiment

Pasolini's first experiment with what would become a new way of making films – a combination of voice-over narration, non-fictional documentation, choreographed re-enactments, impromptu musical adaptation and everything else that went under the hodgepodge heading of *Appunti* (*Notes*) – was carried out during his first trip to Palestine in 1964. Pasolini was in Palestine location scouting for *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 1964) from 27 June to 11 July 1963, accompanied by a cameraman, a small crew and two priests

from *Pro Civitate Christiana*, a post-Vatican II religious association centred in Assisi (see Subini 2003). The trip was apparently undertaken as an excuse to travel through the Middle East rather than to actually find locations, since at this point Pasolini had already decided to shoot his film in Matera in Southern Italy. After returning to Rome, Pasolini decided to edit the material, adding his own off-screen voice and creating a kind of travel diary that included conversations recorded during the trip. *Location Scouting in Palestine for The Gospel According to Matthew* focuses centrally upon Pasolini's ruminations that the modernity of the Palestinian landscape did not lend itself to the shooting of the film.

In the Middle East, Pasolini found neither the Gospel-like conditions he was searching for, nor the religious conversion he was toying with. What he did find was a new filmmaking practice, which would be put into action in the years to come. Several years later, Pasolini developed the project for a full-length film that would have been entitled *Notes for a Poem on the Third World* – made up of five episodes from the *Notes* series – to be filmed in India, Africa, the Arab countries, Latin America and the black ghettos of the United States. Interestingly, the name of the project reverts back to text-based genres – the notes, the poem – as though conditioning the absoluteness of Pasolini's opposition between the written and the filmic. In addition to the ostensible 'practical purpose' of finding locations suited to his films, there were ideological and political motives behind the project. As Pasolini explains:

The feeling of the film will be violently and even foolhardily revolutionary: as though to make of the film itself a revolutionary action (not related to any political party, of course, and absolutely independent) [...]. The immense quantity of practical, ideological, sociological, and political material that goes into constructing such a film objectively prevents the manufacture of a normal film. This film will thus follow the formula: 'A film on a film to be made' [...]. Each episode will be composed of a story, narrated with a summary and through the most salient and dramatic scenes, and by preparatory sequences for the story itself (interviews, investigations, documentaries, etc) [...]. Stylistically, the film will be composite, complex and spurious, but the stark clarity of the problems treated and its function as a direct revolutionary intervention will simplify it. (Quoted in Mancini and Perrella 1981: 7)

The oddity of the project outline begs the question of the cultural milieu where it grew. In short, where does the impulse for the theory and praxis of this activist *tiers-mondiste* work come from? That is to say, what kind of circumstance would favour the genesis of this kind of project? Pasolini was not immune to the general

cultural trends of the time; the choice of the *Notes* resonated with experimental linguistic forms that were dubbed ‘open works’ by Umberto Eco in his 1962 volume *Opera aperta*, which Pasolini called *struttura da farsi* – structures-to-do or to be completed. ‘Open works,’ in Eco’s words, are those ‘that must be brought to conclusion by the interpreter at the very moment at which he benefits from them aesthetically’ (1989: 33). The *da farsi* represents for Pasolini more than a simple case of ‘unfinished’ labour: it is related to the necessity of creating a work with a fluid structure that reflects the Marxist sociopolitical vision of the *da farsi* society, or at least such a vision through the lens of Pasolini’s Marxism.

This notion of Marxist praxis and its importance emerged, as Pasolini well knew, at the very moment that so many African countries in the 1960s were apparently transitioning to forms of democratic/socialist governance, hopefully outside the rigid Soviet model of central planning. Also, it resonates with what Eco – referring to Brecht’s theatre – calls ‘revolutionary pedagogy’ (1989: 45). Eco clarifies the ‘revolutionary pedagogy’ of the open work as follows: ‘it is the same concrete ambiguity of social existence as a clash of unresolved problems to which it is necessary to find a solution. The work here is “open” as a debate is “open”: the solution is awaited and hoped for, but it must come from the conscious participation of the public’ (1989: 45). The formal structure of the open works clearly



Fig. 1: The artist’s authority renounced? Pasolini filming himself through a store window: *Appunti per un’Orestide africana* (*Notes for an African Oresteia*, 1969)

reflects the pedagogical aspect of Pasolini's political engagement, which is never didactic, but serves as the demonstration of an open-ended process, of a *da farsi*. The self-reflexivity of the *Notes* genre, with its embrace of the unfinished, is exemplary of an aesthetic in which the artist's tyrannical authority is renounced, to use Rancière's terminology, to open spaces for new configurations (see Rancière 2009: 18). We do not have a series of documentaries *on* a place (Africa, India, Palestine, Sana'a), but a film *on* a film *for* a place (Africa, etc). Only thus could we make sense of the 'direct revolutionary intervention' that Pasolini places at the base of his *Notes for a Poem on the Third World* project, transforming them from colonising narratives into an open linguistic experience, both cinematically and philosophically.

## The Essay Films

Although the project of the *Notes for a Poem on the Third World* was never realised, we have enough vestiges of it to allow us to discuss Pasolini's idea of what postcolonial essay filmmaking would be. In clarifying this term, I distance myself from Laura Rascaroli, who claims the inherent postmodern nature of the essay film as a product of the phenomenon of the diminishing of authority found in and promoted by postmodern discourse (see Rascaroli 2009: 14), as well as a 'waning of objectivity as a compelling social narrative' (Renov 2004: xvii) characteristic of postmodernity. While this is certainly true for the kind of 'personal cinema' favored by Rascaroli (Agnès Varda, Jonas Mekas, etc), the political brand of Pasolini's experiment was forged in the ideological battles of the literary circles of post-war Italian Marxist culture, molded in the dialectical relationship between the powerful influence of the Lukácsian imperatives that provided the Italian Communist Party with its blueprint for a non-Stalinist aesthetic and the alternative, Brechtian framework that was drawn upon by the artistic and literary avant-garde of the late 1950s (including both *Gruppo '63* literary experimentalism and *arte povera* political modernism). I agree with Rascaroli when she writes that 'subjectivity in contemporary nonfiction films can consequently be seen as an inheritance of the decidedly auteurist and anti-mainstream, anti-establishment cinema of the new waves, and of European and North-American avant-gardes' (2009: 6).

However, Pasolini's self in these films should not be seen in traditional terms of self-expression, but rather as the unraveling of a political process of subjectivisation of the Western Marxist in an encounter with the anticolonial, postcolonial and neocolonial movements of Africa and India. If we are looking to place Pasolini's *Notes* films in a school, we would do well to segregate them from those

of, say, Chris Marker, whose work is the product of Debordian media analysis and archival obsession, or Derek Jarman's personal meditations on sexuality. As much as these two figures may seem thematically associated with Pasolini, it is rather within the works of contemporary television-*vérité* investigation, such as the French activist René Vautier (see Croombs 2014) or the Swiss Gilberto Bovay (see Latini 2011), that we find more direct thematic connections to Pasolini, as well as within the self-reflexive examination of the author function inherited from the European modernist tradition.

'Free indirect discourse' or 'free indirect subjective' (*discorso libero indiretto*), a key concept for Pasolini's own self-assessment as an artist – and a term very familiar to Pasolini's scholars who generally associate it with his modernist films (think *Teorema* (1968)) – seems to work well as a looser framework to describe his political postcolonial non-fiction films. In comments on free indirect discourse and 'cinema of poetry', Pasolini took up the function and limits of authorial intervention in cinema. As he puts it in the chapter 'The Cinema of Poetry' from *Heretical Empiricism*:

This implies, theoretically at least, that the 'free indirect subjective' in cinema is endowed with a very flexible stylistic possibility; that it also liberates the expressive possibilities stifled by traditional narrative conventions, by a sort of return to their origins, which extends even to rediscovering in the technical means of cinema their original oniric, barbaric, irregular, aggressive, visionary qualities. In short, it is the '*free indirect subjective*' which *establishes* the possible *tradition* of a '*technical language of poetry*' in cinema. (1976: 552; emphasis in original)

Thus, what we see in cinema has a double aspect: on the one hand, it responds to the organising will of the author, and on the other hand, it functions within the overall text of which it forms a part. The characters we encounter in Pasolini's film speak the double language of the cinema of poetry. In *Notes for an African Oresteia* we see this played out; the extras in the film, citizens of newly independent Tanzania, are asked to act out scenes of the birth of the democracy from Euripides' trilogy. This daringly juxtaposes the supposed foundation of Western political thinking with the birth throes of the liberated African state: it rebarbarises the Athenians at the birth of modern democracy, while it westernises the Tanzanians. The scene acquires narrative – if not ideological – validity precisely due to this speaking 'through' which is the key feature, stylistically, of free indirect discourse.

The *Notes* films could be questioned in terms of the way in which the problematic they explore is never fully resolved by the participation of the people whose



Fig. 2: Westernising Tanzania: shot of a 'neocapitalist university': *Appunti per un'Orestiade africana* (*Notes for an African Oresteia*, Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1969)

subjectivity is, quite literally, at stake. While a desire to reach out and understand the social issues at play is evident in these films, the free indirect – or poetic – style of this non-fiction film does not allow for a complete encounter with the subjects. Thus it is not a surprise if many perceive this speaking through as a 'speaking for', to evoke Gayatri Spivak's political essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988).

## The Postcolonial Notes

Another example of the kind of essayistic hybridity Pasolini was experimenting with is *Notes for a Film on India*, made in 1968 with a small crew from RAI, the Italian State-owned broadcasting network. As is typical of Pasolini's *Notes* genre, the film positions itself on the boundary between two different registers: artistic experimentation and socio-political documentation. The structure of *Notes for a Film on India* is visually and narratively contaminated throughout, with interrupted narration, off-screen voice-over that explains and repeats interviews that have been carried out, and an alternation between beautiful framings and *cinéma vérité* shots. As a film about a film, in its double, hybrid formal nature, *Notes for a Film on India* is triggered by the deep questions that Pasolini poses to the very basis of modernisation.

The film consists of a series of vignettes held together by Pasolini's own voice-over narration as he meanders through holy sites, interviews workers outside factories, confronts the head of a local communist party organisation, and challenges the editorial board of the national newspaper, the *Times of India*. Pasolini tells us about the story he is supposed to actually turn into a film, concerning a maharaja who gives up his body to feed a starving tiger. The formal audiovisual structure of one scene – almost precisely halfway through the work – is indicative of the aesthetic logic in operation throughout the whole film. A single long track, shot from a camera mounted upon a car, travels alongside an oil pipeline. The car gains speed until images become an indistinct mass of grey material, an amorphous spot of colour, an abstract painting in movement where one can no longer distinguish the contours of sky and earth. Meanwhile, Pasolini's voice-over explains, didactically, the radical change brought about in Indian history as the society shifts from predominantly rural to industrial:

The first part of the film ... represents not only pre-Independence India, but the entire Indian prehistory. The second part of the film, the story of the impoverished family, represents not only the year of Liberation, but all the history of modern India. These problems can be summed up with a single word: industrialisation.

The voice-over is not simply an observation about India, it is also a commentary on the sensory meaning of the shot of the oil pipeline in a convergence of the two registers within the film. To avoid presenting this moment through a perfect coincidence between image and sound, which would hand a sort of victory to the authorial voice, lending it the authority of teleology, Pasolini complicates the composition of the shot, contaminating it, dissolving the contours of the image into a kind of abstract painting in movement.

The mass of amorphous material taints the voice of Pasolini explaining rather simplistically Indian history, diminishing its explanatory force (is this the voice of a colonial observer?) and forcing the spectator to face opposing intellectual and emotional stimuli. The imperial eye of the Western traveler, in the very moment in which it imposes its historic vision upon the other, loses its historical, chronological, and deductive capacity for meaning. The short history of India as told by the off-screen voice, the fast race alongside the profile of modernity represented by the metonymic oil pipeline – in which we see all the ugly assertion of Indian industrialisation from within another product of industrialisation, the car – and the stylistic choice to deprive the spectator of a clear vision by ending up with the indefiniteness and ambiguity of an image that in traditional documentaries

would be edited out, seem in many senses to respond to the concerns of several theorists of the image about the truth content of framed reality, and about the political consequences implicit in the use of ethnographic documentary to translate one culture for another.

Pasolini uses film to interrogate reality, and the Third World seems to be the perfect scenario (that of the 'elsewhere') to call into question the dominant Western cinematographic culture founded on narrative and teleological continuity, as well as the dominant Western faith in economic growth and the subsumption of traditional society by the system of that growth. The marginalised, the refused/refuted, and the excluded come to allegorically represent the Other of the West. It was part of Pasolini's overall ambition in the non-Western films to discover the Other of the West not only in the Elsewhere of formerly colonial areas, but, by triangulation, in the urban outskirts, the decayed countryside, of the West itself. This is the surprising power of the free form of the *Notes* and the reason that, no matter what the ostensive subject, we feel it is being shadowed by Pasolini's passionate negation of modernisation in Italy and its vast social consequences.

Two years after *Notes for a Film on India*, Pasolini made another *Notes* film entitled *The Walls of Sana'a* (1970). The footage was shot on Sunday morning of 10 October 1970, when Pasolini and his director of photography Tonino Delli Colli – having finished shooting the 'Alibech' episode of the adaptation of *The Decameron* – found themselves on the last day of their trip in the Yemeni capital. This October Sunday, Pasolini had not yet decided that the images shot in Sana'a would be edited out of the final version of the film. Pasolini's first visit to Yemen with the Arriflex camera (he would return in 1973 to shoot parts of *Arabian Nights*) would be remembered not for the missing piece of *The Decameron*, but for a short of less than fourteen minutes entitled *The Walls of Sana'a*, a 'Documentary in the form of an appeal to UNESCO', as the subtitle of the film states. It is during this short shooting session in Sana'a that Pasolini elaborated on the ontological difference between the written and the visual in the postcolonial context which opened this chapter.

Sana'a is crumbling, Pasolini narrates, and like 'Prague, Amsterdam, Urbino', must be saved from itself. The inhabitants of the city have perpetrated the crime in a desperate desire for modernisation. The documentary quickly focuses on the state institutions of the country: with a hand-held camera, the film lingers on the Ministry of Public Education, the presidential palace and the Central Bank. It is unclear whether these buildings, all of them in disarray, are halfway-built or already dilapidated. Much like at the beginning of *Notes for a Film on India*, Pasolini's eye dwells upon state apparatuses, as though to pose a question – if not directly posing a challenge – to those who are responsible for what we see.



This engaged, but also clearly sarcastic, gazing foregrounds immediately the main problem of Pasolinian ideology at the moment in which it enters into contact with the alterity of the decolonised Third World: the effects of modernity and technological progress on the pre-industrial world, the inherent contradictions of which Pasolini becomes increasingly aware, and against which he is increasingly radicalised. The irrefutable argument of the documentary is clear: to help these young nations to realise the absolute value of their artistic and historical heritage is, in short, to help them to develop a historical consciousness (Pasolini's voice-over actually states: 'to let Yemen re-enter history').

The ideological contradictions of the message – the neocapitalist West should halt the process of industrial modernisation and thus help the Third World become conscious of its own uniqueness and alterity – certainly doesn't frighten Pasolini, whose entire poetic world is generated precisely by the encounter between the old and the new. We understand this after a few minutes of introduction, in which the off-screen voice-over briefly narrates the recent years of Yemeni history (the republican revolution, the arrival of the Chinese, the first consumer goods) and closes with the observation that Sana'a, 'having never undergone any contamination from any other world, much less by the radically different modern world', has maintained an original purity; 'its beauty has a form of unreal perfection, almost excessive and elating'.

The film then continues with a clean break; we move suddenly to images of Orte, a small town in the Tiber valley not far from Rome. These are images shot during the filming of another short film generally catalogued under the rubric of filmed interviews. Officially titled *Pasolini and the Form of the City*, this short of around fifteen minutes was produced by RAI TV and directed by Paolo Brunatto in the fall of 1973 (the broadcast took place 7 February 1974). Orte appears in its medieval perfection, until the camera zooms out to show an ugly modern building right outside the medieval wall, on the slopes of the hill. Pasolini comments:

At this moment the destruction of the ancient world, that is, the real world, is taking place everywhere. Unreality [*l'irrealità*] spreads by way of the housing speculation of neocapitalism; in place of the beautiful and human Italy, even if poor, there is now something indefinable that to call ugly is saying little.

The director Paolo Brunatto follows with the camera the short architecture lessons that Pasolini imparts to his friend Ninetto and the television viewers. The town of Orte, like many small Italian towns during the massive campaign of housing speculation that accompanied the late 1950s economic boom, had indeed been disfigured. Pasolini's defense could seem to be identical to the elitist

aestheticism that is nostalgic for the very countryside and community that its investments destroy; however, in Pasolini's case, it is marked much more by an historical materialist analysis that looks at how this 'leprosy' shatters the past that was created not by the elite, but by generations of the obscure, along with the historical, architectural and social memory of Italy and the world.

Modernity, which for Pasolini is nothing other than a new prehistory, disfigures and disintegrates human beings just as it does the landscape. Italy and Yemen find themselves, in the eyes of Pasolini, joined in the same destiny of forced modernization, of senseless and unplanned development. The tone is clearly that of the polemical editorials collected in *Scritti Corsari* (1961; literally 'Corsair Writings', though at present never translated into English), and in particular of the main argument of the essay 'Development and Progress': 'Progress is thus a socially and politically ideal notion, whereas "development" is a practical and economic fact' (Pasolini 1999b: 455). Pasolini fears that this development without progress impoverishes the world in the same way in which it impoverished Italy in the 1970s. This is why the nations of the Third World never become 'developing countries' in the Pasolinian vocabulary, as we have pointed out above; they stubbornly remain Third World inasmuch as their thirdness is a reservoir of hope. The Pasolinian Third World will be precisely this space liberated for the creation of new significations.

The intertextuality of these two shorts (*The Walls of Sana'a* and *Pasolini and the Form of the City*) can function as a working concept to think through the relationship between Pasolini and the Third World for two reasons: the use of the methods of comparative anthropology, and the distinctive emphasis on audiovisual media to narrate the Third World:

Italy is ... a laboratory country, because in it the modern industrial world and the Third World coexist. There is no difference between a Calabrian village and an Indian or Moroccan village; it is a question of two variants of a single fact that at bottom is the same. (Camon 1973: 116)

Pasolini undoubtedly anticipates here a theoretical insight later dealt with by meta-anthropologist James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture*. Clifford, in his study, attacks both the superficiality of liberal thought – fighting globalisation by preserving indigenous cultures in a (failed) attempt to recreate 'artificial aesthetic purifications' (1988: 4) – and the orthodox Marxist position which sees local realities as obstacles on the road to progress (such, for example, is Moravia's stance on the socio-economic immobility of India which informs his *Un'idea dell'India* (*The Idea of India*) published in 1962). For Clifford, the world is not populated

by 'endangered authenticities'; he is instead concerned with 'mak[ing] space for specific paths through modernity', a new 'inventive poetics of reality' where 'the time is past when privileged authorities could routinely 'give voice' (or history) to others without fear of contradiction' (1988: 5). If we can free ourselves from the nineteenth-century notion of culture as occidental progress, Clifford argues that we can rethink the concept of ethnography as 'writing about culture from the standpoint of participant observation' (1988: 9).

Clifford's positions seem at first sight like an act of accusation against Pasolinian incursions into another territory, such as his attempts to impose ancient Greece upon the nascent African democracies in the *Oresteia*, the anything-but-apologetic use of Western visual models in the search for characters in *Notes on a Film about India*, or the use of exotic nudes in *Arabian Nights*. Hopefully, however, the analysis of Pasolini's *Notes* as essay films conducted throughout this chapter reveals not only that Pasolini was profoundly conscious of his own Western ideological trespassing, but also that his *tiers-mondiste* experiments are carried out with the aim of going beyond the desire to represent and translate other cultures for the orientalist scopophilia of the European spectator, since they are summoned to the battle in Pasolini's own Italy. The Pasolinian postcolonial thrust develops into a combination of visual experimentalism and comparative anthropology to which I have given the name of 'heretical orientalism', that is, the desire to translate for the Western spectator by didactically establishing continuous connections with Italy, in such a way so as to give points of reference to the reader or spectator, whilst simultaneously experimenting with new visual and narrative techniques that would methodologically break with the imperialist aura of methods honed in the nineteenth century.

In conclusion, Pasolini's essay films are not just documents that represent the other to the Western public, but are political meditations upon the filmic apparatus's ability to perform solidarity. This political self-reflexivity makes the experiments of the *Notes* a more crucial moment within Pasolini's filmography than is generally realised (in spite of the sometimes-crude orientalist lapses) and an indispensable contribution to the debate on the *tiers-mondiste* movement in Europe. It certainly anticipates much of 1970s and 1980s postcolonial filmmaking, from William Klein's documentaries in Algeria to the feminist self-reflexivity of Trinh T. Minh-ha's early works, and it prefigures some of the challenges to political non-fiction films in the era of globalisation, such as the implicit dialogue between Pasolini and Harun Farocki on the ontology of the medium, and with Isaac Julien on gender and postcoloniality.

## Note

- 1 Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

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# Chapter 6

## Chris Marker's *Description of a Struggle* and the Limits of the Essay Film

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Eric Zakim

In the aftermath of Israel's Six-Day War in 1967, the French filmmaker and photo-essayist Chris Marker withdrew his 1960 cinematic essay on the country, *Description d'un combat* (*Description of a Struggle*), from public display. The film then fell into relative obscurity, especially against Marker's continued output of critically successful films, in particular *La Jetée* (1962), his science fiction contemplation of post-apocalyptic subjectivity, and *Sans soleil* (*Sunless*, 1983), a philosophical travelogue through Japan, among other places, which is widely considered to represent the acme of his powers as a film essayist. In the meantime, the earlier cinematic essay on Israel remained virtually out of view until 2007, when it was publicly revived a few years before Marker's death. The Israeli filmmaker Dan Geva had produced a response to Marker's film, *Description of a Memory* (*Tsad rev'i la-matbe'a*, 2007), which was screened at festival venues alongside *Description of a Struggle* – with Marker's permission. And then, as they say, back into the can – or, at least, *Description of a Struggle* remained out of circulation in a publicly accessible format. Only recently, since Marker's death in 2012, the Israeli Film Archive, founded by the film's producer, the late Israeli industrialist Wim Van Leer, released a restored digital version of *Description of a Struggle*, which was screened with some publicity during July 2013 at the Jerusalem Film Festival.

What does it mean to withdraw a film from public view? The question seems fundamental – even definitional – for a type of cinema that would somehow discursively reflect on the filmmaker. An essay film, in other words. After all, Marker's film makes few documentary claims about Israel, except for momentary observations of place and people. But the observations are hardly documentary; they lack stasis and certainty, instead working to disrupt any fixed sense of this place Israel. Indeed, *Description of a Struggle* emphasises an Israel that is a place of infinite signs, symbols in constant motion, where meaning never settles into a firm image. Rather, signs circulate, interact and constantly take on new meaning with the changes observed by the movie camera. The film's chiasmic structure, which opens and closes with reference to the notion of signs themselves, reflects a transitory semantics from the very beginning, when the film opens with its most famous and reproduced image, a camel passing behind a modern road sign. Documentary certainty is thwarted by the indeterminacy of the juxtaposition of similar signs – humps passing each other; one fleshy, the other metallic and artificial. Marker constantly produces a montage of images and signs, whose dialectics of meaning is further problematised by the camel's constant movement through the shot, which changes perspective and destabilises the sign's ability to signify a fixed meaning. In this, the film's hermeneutics distinguishes it from documentary film in that it does not depend on a succession of truth claims that would fix an object within the cinematic image and thus be vulnerable to some sort of objective historical corrective.



Fig. 1: Camel and traffic sign:  
*Description of a Struggle* (Chris Marker, 1960)

On the other hand, neither is *Description of a Struggle* a fictional drama or a solipsistic outpouring of conscious reflection, an imagined projection, that is, of an invented world. The voice of a single narrator does serve to bind the visual interplay within a sequential unfolding, but the narration does not immediately present itself as the organising principle for the hermeneutics of the film. As the Israeli critic Ohad Landesman describes the narration in *Description of a Struggle*, it has 'a personal tone with critical distance' (2013). That indeterminacy of the narration – between personal and distant – might clue us into the obvious reference to Franz Kafka's enigmatic story of the same title, whose protagonist likewise feels his own effacement against the perennial certainties of the world around him. Kafka's narrator might indeed serve as a critical source for Marker's

sense of self in *his* description of a struggle: 'I could not bear the strain of seeing around me the things of the earth. I felt convinced that every movement and every thought was forced, and that one had to be on one's guard against them' (1958: 42).

The film – an *essay* film – always seems to be guarded and off-balance, somewhere in-between: a rhetorical locus that keeps returning in the discourse about the essay film, a 'violation', in Theodor W. Adorno's words, of the 'orthodoxy of thought' (1991: 23), a 'tension', as Raymond Bellour writes (2011: 47), between documentary and fiction; a tension, really, between several discursive modes. Indeed, inbetweenness and the illogic of liminality accompany almost any definition of the essay film since the first attempts in the early 1960s to define a cinema that was neither narrative fiction nor factitious documentary. And little progress has been made since the origins of the essay film in developing a critical language that would efficaciously describe discourse (or an *anti*-discourse, as the case may be) in the essay film. Thus, when Bellour writes in 2011 about the essay film, he can say little that is new and ends up quoting himself from an early 1963 article that attempted to define this new mode of cinematic expression. Even then, in 1963, Bellour was already quoting others, deflecting definition by a circularity of associated quotation: first, the filmmaker Alexandre Astruc in 1948; and then, an offhanded, unreferenced remark by Marker himself, who had made the comment that he 'is an essayist' (*ibid.*). To get to the meaning of Marker's aphoristic self-definition Bellour focuses on theories of the literary essay as liminal, rather than an equally strong tradition in literature that would understand the essay as personal outpouring. The language of the essay film, Bellour writes (quoting himself in 1963 quoting Astruc), is 'neither that of fiction, nor that of reports', by which he means documentary or newsreel films. Rather, it is 'the language of the essay' (*ibid.*).

The phatic, circular logic of Bellour's definition – 'the language of the essay film ... is the language of the essay' – emblematises a continuing inability of criticism to understand the essay film beyond the illogic of the in-between. While Bellour had in mind, in following Marker's reflexive comment, the essay as a form that somehow reflects its liminality back on the filmmaker, inbetweenness has usually been rendered in purely formal terms. In Israel itself, the lesson of Marker's film, we might say, has not moved understanding past the liminality of form. For example, Landesman, while trying to push past form into a definition of expressive action, nevertheless falls back on a formal in-between style to define the essay film. As he has recently written in the Israeli documentary film journal *Takriv*, 'The essay film, make no mistake, is not a typical genre but a way of doing that does not adhere to borders or traditional definitions. It departs from the practice of documentary cinema by combining various styles and means of



expression, taken not just from the field of documentary cinema but also from narrative fiction film and experimental film' (2015; my translation).

While purely formal considerations have done little to advance a definition of the essay film, a focus on the (more abstract) act of the filmmaker – the 'doing' of Landesman's attempt to define it – dominates most understandings of the essay film. With essay form undefinable, it is set aside and the act of subjective expression moves to the centre. The very public nature of subjective presentation in the essay film – the self *on* and projected *through* film – seems to characterise this type of definition. A focus on the consciousness of the filmmaker as the central figure of the essay film has become a way to understand what seems to differentiate these films. But this leads to a simple contradiction: on the one hand, the essay film is transgressive and liminal; on the other, that liminality can only be understood by placing the filmmaker at the very centre of the discourse of the film itself. Indeed, despite consistent references to Adorno's ideas about the nonidentity of the essay – the way the essay refuses stasis and definition – inbetweenness as a condition of film *leads* to an affirmation of the subjectivity of the filmmaker, in contradistinction to the way Adorno (and the Frankfurt School more generally) would see form as a condition of the subject, that is, the self caught within conflicting discursive forces and ideological constructs. According to most definitions of the essay film, which rely on personal reflection as an organising principle for the essay film, inbetweenness does not dissolve consciousness into discourse. Quite to the contrary, inbetweenness points at and constructs consciousness itself.

The question of the position of the filmmaker *vis-à-vis* the material of the film seems completely germane to Marker's work – an essential element of it, in fact – since it does not seem coincidental that the essay film – and Marker's contribution specifically – emerges precisely at the moment of the dissolution of structuralist certainties within expressive form in the 1960s, when it looked as if Frankfurt School ideas of the disintegration of personal subjectivity into the soup of mass culture were, in fact, correct. It was in this milieu that both Adorno's ideas of negative dialectics and Michel Foucault's criticisms of discourse reached their apotheosis and seemed to toll the death knell for the modern subject. Was the essay, then, a way to reconstitute the subject in a form between the subjectivity of fiction and the objectivity of the documentary, within the cracks and fissures of a contentious and divided society – as German Expressionism had first proposed for literature and painting in the 1910s?

That seems to be the question for a host of recent critical responses to the emergence of the essay film. For instance, Laura Rascaroli writes of the essay film as an 'expression of a personal, critical reflection on a problem or set of problems ... not in order to present a factual report (the field of traditional documentary),

but to offer an in-depth, personal, and thought-provoking reflection' (2008: 35). Rascaroli emphasises subjectivity and reflexivity as inherent to the form of the essay film, on one hand, and then the transgressiveness of its expressive modality, on the other. Marker himself, as an analytical subject for Rascaroli (who explores his late digital works), negotiates a number of various expressive commitments – the archive, the museum, the database – to emerge intact, in the end, within his own memory and narrative: 'Marker uses ... the new media ... to create a representation of the self-exploratory action of memory, which rummages through the images and information stored in its database in order to create its own memory, its own narrative of the past' (2009: 82).

That negotiated inbetweenness of the self emerging intact from within the gaps of discursive logic becomes Timothy Corrigan's focus for his definition of the essay film and Marker's specific contribution to its development. Corrigan understands experience and subjectivity as bound up in a complex relation on screen, endlessly oscillating between the binary terms that the essay film negotiates and transgresses: subject and object, fiction and documentary, individual and collective, stillness and movement. He writes specifically of Marker's subject position in his travel photo-essays (especially *Coréennes* on North Korea, 1957; and *Le Dépays* on Japan, 1962): 'Like the images it responds to, the intense, inquisitive, and reflective subjectivity of this traveling voice and text dissolves into the fissures between the different representational materials they struggle to occupy, as moments of reflection and thinking, in the space between the photographic images' (2008: 53). To get at that figure of occupying the fissures *between* representational material and erase the simple equivalence of the essay film as subjective cinema, Corrigan defines the negotiation of the inbetweenness of the essayist's position *vis-à-vis* the image as a phenomenological encounter within experience: 'Essayistic thinking ... becomes a conceptual, figural, phenomenological, and representational remaking of a self as it encounters, tests, and experiences some version of the real as a public "elsewhere". [...] [E]ssay films ask viewers to *experience* the world in the full intellectual and phenomenological sense of that word as the mediated encounter of thinking through the world, as a world experienced through a thinking mind' (2011: 35; emphasis in original).

For Corrigan, the movement from photo-essay to film – both forms played continuing roles in Marker's long career – allows for the voice, the narrating figure, to organise form within the cinematic essay and give it structure and meaning, to become the mediating 'thinking mind' through which we would then experience the world. This idea Corrigan takes from André Bazin's much earlier reading of Marker from the 1960s, where the voice becomes the very 'material' of his films, an instantiation of the intelligence that would rhetorically and discursively

organize the disorganisation of the visual element of the essay film: 'With Marker ... the primary material [of his films] is intelligence, ... its immediate means of expression is language, and ... the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence' (2009: 44). For Bazin, the subject transcends the play of 'lateral' (to use his term) alternation of images, and controls an understanding of the succession and relation of images through his voice: '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 relation 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. [...] [I]ntelligence flows from the audio element to the visual. The montage has been forged from ear to eye' (ibid.). Bazin, who consistently warned of putting too much 'faith' into images, elevates the narrating voice as the focal point through which the images of the essay would reflect and gain meaning. This is a neat solution for Bazin, whose theories of cinema as embodying some sort of 'real' could not otherwise countenance a decentred hermeneutics based on a struggle among images for meaning. Instead, while maintaining the idea in Marker's essay films of an interplay of image and self, Bazin can still organise meaning through the 'reality' of a controlling and intact subject, the filmmaker himself.

In the wake of these theories of the essay film as personal expression of the self, Marker's act of withdrawing *Description of a Struggle* can only be understood reflexively, just as the film would constitute some sort of display of Marker himself: as Rascaroli's reflexive subject or Corrigan's phenomenological experience or Bazin's verbal intelligence. If, as Corrigan argues, 'essayistic expressivity describes ... a subjection of that instrumental or expressive self to the public domain' (2011: 31), then what are we to make of Marker's *ex post facto* erasure of the cinematic play of that subjection in the representation of Israel? In the act of withdrawal, might we also read a self-critique in Marker's withdrawal of himself? Is Marker's withdrawal a refusal – an acknowledgement, we might say – of the very strength of Corrigan's critique of essayistic subjectivity, but through its negation, that is, through the realisation that film does *not* open up possibilities of true phenomenological experience? Does withdrawal admit that in Israel, at least, the negotiation of reflection as the free phenomenological encounter with images, place and history does not so easily reflect back on an intact, stable consciousness, even one in opposition to the discursive demands and restrictions of the public domain?

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On a political level, we can reconstruct a sort of history for Marker that also questions the certainties of expression within the changing vicissitudes of Middle

Eastern history, a history that tends to ensnare and undo any absolute expression of political certainty. As part of a wide-ranging political reaction to Israeli aggression and the country's initiation of military conflict in 1967, it is easy to see Marker's abandonment of *Description of a Struggle* within a broad context of the left's political abandonment of Israel at large. Until 1967 and especially during the early 1960s, which were crucial years for a final European withdrawal from colonies in Africa, Israel stood with the non-aligned movement in Africa, carefully treading the East-West line of Cold War competition, a strategy that had been instrumental in Israel's birth in 1948 when both the United States and the Soviet Union supported Israeli nationhood at the United Nations. Marker himself notes this political convenience in *Description of a Struggle*, albeit with a certain tone of ambivalent disdain. Here, from the narration: 'War has marked this landscape, this climate heavy with murder. War is embedded in all memories. [...] Israel was born of war, as war, through lack of foresight. [...] The West didn't foresee that the Middle East would rebel, that the US and Russia would vote for the birth of Israel.' But in 1967, the war pushed Israel out of non-alignment and consolidated an Israeli dependence on the US – a dependence all but unheard of in 1960, and which only began to take shape in 1962 when the Kennedy administration ever-so-reluctantly began selling advanced weapons systems to Israel.

Marker, in one reading of his 1967 move to withdraw *Description of a Struggle* from public view, simply refused to follow the contours of a bifurcating Middle East of client states split between the US and the Soviet Union. Earlier, in the years surrounding *Description of a Struggle* and *La Jetée*, Marker produced two of his most sympathetic representations of communist regimes, selecting subjects far removed from the Cold War standoff in Europe: North Korea (in *Coréennes*); and Cuba (in his film *¡Cuba Sí!*, 1961). The configuration of Israel within this triptych would not have been surprising at the time. Israel's revolutionary and emancipatory role in a postcolonial, post-European world of the 1950s and early 1960s – especially in Sub-Saharan Africa – was a wide-ranging position. It is easy to forget today that the Tunisian writer, Albert Memmi, whose *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) opened up a critical discourse on the psychic conditions of colonial oppression along with Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* from 1952, also saw in Zionism and Israel a redemptive opportunity for the subaltern identity of the modern Jew. In his preface to a 1971 edition of his *Portrait of a Jew*, originally published in 1962, Memmi reflects on the relations between colonial oppression and the condition of the Jew in the modern world: 'The mechanisms that regulate the relationship between Jew and non-Jew, and are reflected in their respective behavior, recall those which I brought to light in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*' (1971: ix).

While withdrawal of *Description of a Struggle* fits into a certain New Left itinerary of the 1960s, it does not by itself signal a progressive stance on the Arab-Israeli Conflict in the wake of the 1967 War. As Memmi reminds us: 'In France, once the Algerian war had ended, friendship with the Arab countries became more important than that with Israel. De Gaulle decided on the embargo and made a shocking speech, the most serious aspect of it being that he gave permission to the French once again to be anti-Semites' (1971: x). The genealogy of de Gaulle's inflammatory rhetoric, especially in France, has a long and complex history, and in the decades following World War II the question of anti-Semitism in the country has been a complex issue for both right and left. At least, the history of a turning away from Israel after 1967 casts Marker's actions under the pall of even greater political questions and uncertainties. What we can say is that the emancipatory promise of a leftist Zionism – an identifiable, progressive political position in the early 1960s – began to fade in the aftermath of the 1967 War. While politics continued to be debated and remained in flux for years in the country, a discursive rigidness began to infiltrate an Israeli self-understanding after 1967, a rigidness that would also catch Memmi in its net.

Marker's withdrawal of *Description of a Struggle*, then, opens up questions that seem to move well beyond simple political allegiance and take us into the problematic of the essay film itself. We are still left asking what kind of political and artistic act is withdrawal, and withdrawal of a film that would ostensibly be the personal, subjective expression of the filmmaker. On the one hand, as several commentators have noted throughout the years, *Description of a Struggle* asks significant and difficult questions of Israel, prognosticating many of the festering issues and future crises that the society would face, in particular the irrelevance of the kibbutz movement; the obvious economic and social inequalities between rich and poor, and between Jew and Arab; and the struggle over national collective memory and identity. But, of course, *Description of a Struggle* is not a documentary; it does not simply open a lens onto the world of Israel and capture immediately and objectively the images that present themselves in front of the camera. Observation, analysis and opinion are all part of the essayist's toolbox. As Roger Tailleur wrote in 1963: 'It is such attention that marks all Cassandras, and the Sphinx is also renowned as much for the imperviousness of her gaze as for the justness of her prophecies' (2007). So what happens when the seer rejects his own seeing? Is it the realisation that the image presented to the eye turns out to be false – or at least bears the taint that falseness and unintended meaning might be embedded within it? A general reading of the film seems to reach that conclusion. Catherine Lupton, writing on Marker's and Geva's films, notes: 'Eventually, under pressure from events spinning Israel's history too far out of kilter with the

representation he had proffered, Marker would seek to silence the film altogether: withdrawing his consent for public screenings in the wake of the seizure of the Occupied Territories during the 1967 Six-Day War' (2009).

The essay film, though, especially one seemingly steeped in the phenomenology of experience, is anything but a 'proffered representation', which implies a stable hermeneutics and an established representational object. That sort of formal and semantic certainty would seem to run against the purpose and expressive freedoms opened up by the very notion of the essay film, let alone *Description of a Struggle* specifically. Lupton, of course, cannot justify her statement with a citation; Marker, we know, was (ironically) reticent about himself. Lupton's intuitive political conclusion seems then to contradict precisely the expressive mode that would define the essay film. So the sentiment seems hard to avoid: is withdrawal, in a sense, a repudiation of the self? If so, what does that say about the film essayist, the seer and producer of the images that appear to us on film?

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The relation of the filmmaker to the images in the film seems to define the core issue of *Description of a Struggle*, as it has defined Marker's cinematic and photographic work in general. Lupton titles her article 'When Signs Come Home to Roost', playing on Marker's own focus on the ubiquity of signs in Israel/Palestine, the way that everything *is* a sign, the way that meaning is never intrinsic and ever-changing in this volatile environment. Thus the opening image: the doubled images of humps that keep shifting and changing within the movement of cinema itself. Or the next image of a garbage dump, where time has caused a doubling and a shift in the image itself. The image is already not the image, the narration tells us, as time has already transformed what we are seeing and has, in fact, erased it: the garbage dump has already transmogrified into something else. Even the stasis and certainty of the documentary image cannot be trusted; in the least, it doesn't signify any sort of fixed spatial coordinates. Nothing is static in this country, certainly not the signs that present themselves immediately to the eye.

In this way, *Description of a Struggle* seems constantly to move beyond the static planes of the screen into triangulated dimensions, whether of time (before or after diegetic time, as in the garbage dump) or space (in a montage that moves beyond the spatial confines of the frame, as in the references to Marker himself and so many other images beyond the frame). Tailleur plays with the idea of triangulation in his critique of Marker's work, drawing on Bazin who already invoked a 'third position' in Marker. But Tailleur inverts Bazin's equation in order to project intelligence as the apogee of the triangulated image: '[Marker's] tools ... are ...

not the pen and camera as developed by others, but the original formative materials – word and image. [But beyond word and image] a third image is introduced: a sort of poetic superimposition, with which Marker adds to the film captured by his lens the omnipresence of his subjectivity, which he imposes simultaneously’ (2007). Once again, within the montage of image and narrative, the question of subjectivity reasserts itself. Where does the essayist exist within the movement of images in the film? In the interstice between images, as Corrigan would have it? In a transcendence above the play of visual imagery, as Bazin would have it? Or, as Bellour describes it, in the photographic image itself that has no stable identity and exists in a ‘state’ of inbetweenness?

Tailleur’s invocation of a third image as equivalent to, or somehow overlaid by, the subjectivity of the filmmaker, resonates strongly with the triangulation offered by *Description of a Struggle* itself in its Hebrew title, *The Third Side of the Coin* (*Tsad sblishi la-matbe’a*), which invokes a liminality that moves beyond the structuralist oppositions that define so much of the criticism of the essay film. Within this triangulation, though, what constitutes the relation among words, images and the filmmaker himself? Christian Metz complicates this question by describing the language of cinema in more complex terms than Tailleur holds out for Marker. According to Metz, the visual sign does not so easily open itself to directorial manipulation and depends on a deictic process that extends well beyond the simple presentation of a flat image: ‘The image is *always actualized*. Moreover, even the image – fairly rare, incidentally – that might, because of its content, correspond to a “word” is still a sentence: This is a particular case, and a particularly revealing one. A close-up of a revolver does not mean “revolver” (a purely virtual lexical unit), but at the very least, and without speaking of the connotations, it signifies “Here is a revolver!” It carries with it a kind of *here*’ (1974: 67; emphases in original). If the lexeme of the cinema – the image – always already constitutes a deictic function and is not simply an inert tool for a controlling consciousness, then Metz seems to close off the simple possibility of a ‘third image’ as equivalent to the intention of the filmmaker. Some other, more complex negotiation must be at play in this relation.

Walter Benjamin, in 1936, began to look at the cinematic image beyond the simple indexicality of representation, on the one hand, or the pure intention of the artist, on the other: ‘The work of art is produced only by means of montage’ – that is, the material interplay of images – ‘and each individual component of this montage is a reproduction of a process which neither is an artwork in itself nor gives rise to one through photography. What, then, are these processes reproduced in film, since they are certainly not works of art?’ (2002: 110). Within Marxist terms, the obvious answer must certainly be Adorno’s critique of discourse and

ideology, which will receive its final articulation in his theory of negative dialectics and nonidentity in the 1960s. But if, by Adorno's account, identity always implies ideology and no subject can then be free of a metaphysical discourse, then the third side of the coin – the very concept – re-poses the question of subjectivity as constellated through a type of materialism of the image. Benjamin himself opened up the possibility of this reading in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* when he wrote in aphoristic concision: 'Objects are to ideas, as constellations are to stars' (1977: 34). And then Adorno applied the idea directly to the challenge that defines the essay as an expressive form: '[T]he 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' (1991: 13).

In this context, as Marker would seem to have it, the battle for *Description of a Struggle* takes place on the plane of the very material of the image, not within the interstices *between* images. Rather, the signs around him are so closely observed that the image retreats into the defamiliarity of new constellations of meaning. And the subjectivity of the filmmaker is itself subsumed within the montage of images that reaches well beyond the discursive limits of the cinematic frame. Through signs, Marker himself appears to us, or so it seems, within the personal invocations of the filmmaker's visual idiosyncrasies that would redefine the image and reconstellate it through a series of new associations. In this way, his friend, the director Agnès Varda, appears in the film literally as a sign for a storefront called 'Varda'. The sign reaches through Marker beyond the diegesis of the film to take on meaning. In the same way, signs of cats function on several planes, and as images respond both within the film and beyond it, as a reflection of Marker's enduring affection.

Marker's third side of the coin constitutes itself in a liminality of sign and self, a Euclidean point that both exists and doesn't exist, but which nevertheless defines geometric order – or better yet, to invoke Marker's own imagery, Schroedinger's cat in its very indeterminacy: the self that Marker posits but constantly effaces. Thus Marker's subject does not embody the inbetweenness of interstice, but a conscious strategy of encountering signs and images anew, of focusing on an alterity to the ways that an image would intuitively signify. In 1970 Roland Barthes follows this strategy as well in his *Empire of Signs* – and Marker and Barthes would both ultimately find productive alterity in a place they conjure called 'Japan' (in *Empire of Signs*, for Barthes, and in *Sans soleil*, for Marker). In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes employs a conscious strategy of reading signs outside of a metaphysical, discursive knowledge of Japan. Rather, immanence, a sort of literary montage of images, and close contemplation constitute Barthes' toolbox. In



the epigraph, Barthes describes a method that Marker's *Description of a Struggle* already worked to enact ten years earlier: "The text does not "gloss" the images, which do not "illustrate" the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty, analogous perhaps to that *loss of meaning* Zen calls a *satori*. Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing; and in them to read the retreat of signs' (1982: xi; emphasis in original).

Like Barthes, Marker's consciousness – the consciousness of the critic – is enfolded within a contemplation of the detail. The closeness of the image – like the cinematic close-up itself that exceeds spatio-temporal coordinates, according to Deleuze – defamiliarises the sign and liberates it from the discursive bonds of a metaphysical representation. The image in close observation, and in the varied and changing configurations that Marker presents, signifies its own difference from the historical system that lays claim on it. To get to this, in *Description of a Struggle* Marker's camera lingers, like Barthes' lingering over the details of the things that fill his conjured place called 'Japan'. As *Description of a Struggle* progresses, shots become longer. The stitching of scenes recedes, and it is not the metaphysic of representation (contra Lupton) or the narrated montage of Bazin that organizes meaning. Rather, the detail overwhelms the sign and dislodges it from any Orientalist vision that ever cathected meaning onto it. 'What can be addressed in the consideration of the Orient', Barthes writes, 'are not other symbols, another metaphysics, another wisdom (though the latter might appear thoroughly desirable); it is the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems' (1982: 3–4).

From this, then, the redemptive power of cinema to instantiate the sign free of ideological dictate becomes the struggle in *Description of a Struggle* – precisely through the image. For Marker, the struggle is specifically formal and located in the way the relationship between images devolves into a montage of playful simile. The linguistic turn of simile, in Marker's hands, becomes a formal cinematic solution in the struggle for subject expression. Thus, the play of camel and sign only makes sense because of the momentary experience of simile, which represses discourse (history) and reconstitutes meaning outside of a thesis, to borrow from Adorno, but now wholly dependent on the constellated perception (Adorno's 'intellectual structure') in the camera itself.

Bazin's analysis that language constitutes the material of Marker's films holds true for *Description of a Struggle*, but not in how he meant it. Bazin separates image from language; in the essay on Marker, he understands language only as a verbal system free of images. Marker does not seem to hold the same assumptions, certainly not when confronted by the plethora of signs and sign-systems of the

Orient. Struggle here is precisely over control of the image. ‘Signs,’ his narrator begins: ‘This land first speaks to you in signs. Signs of land, signs of water, signs of man, signs...’ Image and sign – in the sense of linguistic signs – are completely bound up with one another in a prescient understanding of the complexity of the Middle East as a space beyond the West. Through simile, the camel and the road sign become unmoored to a system of signs, and signify within the abstract moment of playful equivalence, a playfulness created and mediated by the consciousness of the cinematic apparatus that would define the movement-image. A phenomenology of experience builds through the equivalencies of simile in the film, which becomes a very specific formal epistemology.

From the playful images of the opening, the film works through a host of associations and equivalencies that build up consciousness within the camera. The camera superimposes image upon image in order to create instants of meaning embedded in the experience of objects themselves:

from camel and road signs, through owls and oscilloscopes, to the most serious simile at the end: between Anne Frank and the twelve-year-old girl who would stand in for Israel’s youth and future. But here, simile is achieved through negation: the girl is *not* Anne Frank, a juxtaposition set up, as well, by the opposition between the static black-and-white photograph (how we know Anne Frank) and the long take of the cinematic image-movement (the young Israeli girl). To emphasise difference, the film first gives us the girl *as* Anne Frank, in a static black-and-white photograph, before adding movement to the image, in a long take of the girl in colour. From the narration:



Fig. 2: 12-year-old Israeli girl as cygnet, signal, sign

She will never be Anne Frank. Her very being, her freedom, the stakes of the first struggle. Those were miraculous days. Miracles die with their witnesses. A second struggle begins. To become a nation implies the right to selfishness, conceit. But Israel’s history cries out against power for its own sake. Strength, power, are merely signs. The greatest injustice may well be denial of the right to be unjust. Look at her. There she is. Like Israel.

We’ve to understand her, remind her that injustice on this land weighs heavier than elsewhere, this land, the ransom of injustice. The threats that surround her, to which she gave no cause.

Yes, look at her. A vision that defeats the eye, as words endlessly repeated. Amongst all the wondrous things, most wondrous is her being there, like a cygnet, a signal, a sign.

Here at the end, simile performs the double task of affirmation and denial, and not only because this girl, the focus of the longest shot of the film, will *not* be Anne Frank. Rather, by 'being ... like ... a sign', simile, in effect, makes her too an object of play. The long take reinforces the thingness of the object in the image. It is a defamiliarisation of the sign, in Viktor Shklovsky's terms, or a 'retreat' of the sign, in Barthes'. The sign loses the 'second nature' of signification through close examination, just as Andy Warhol in New York would experiment with long takes of immobile subjects and attempt over and over again to make video portraits by training a static movie camera on posed models, who come to life immanently in the long take of the cinematic portrait.

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The Israelis too, even after Marker's death, locate the problematic of the film on the level of the image and not the voice. The film is available for purchase directly from the Israeli Film Archive at the Jerusalem Cinematheque. But it comes with an indelible visual watermark on the image itself, announcing ownership and literally imposing a metaphysical mark on the film. Far from Bazin's lateral interplay of images – or rather, in a demarcation of the political and conceptual naïveté of Bazin's ideas of lateralness, which works only along the flatness of the x/y axes – *Description of a Struggle* situates conflict along an axis of depth within the image (the z axis), a third dimensionality emanating out from the image (and screen) itself. This three-dimensional palimpsest (with time, in the form of political history, forming the extra-diegetic mark that defines meaning in the film) was not lost on Marker

himself, who sees it everywhere in the country and repeatedly points it out in the film. In the end, the palimpsest of politics and history comes back after his death to haunt him: the watermark imprints his own film within a struggle for political meaning and interpretation.

Marker's work on Alain Resnais' early contemplation of the Holocaust through images, *Night and Fog* (*Nuit*



Fig. 3: The watermark on the film, imposed by the Israeli Film Archive.

*et brouillard*, 1955), must have helped him develop the aesthetics of contemplation and montage that he would employ in *Description of a Struggle*. *Night and Fog* too places in relief the stakes in presenting meaning in the image through the materiality of the image itself, free of a discursive metaphysic. These are the terms as the critic Georges Didi-Huberman sees them in a fierce struggle between Resnais (along with Jean-Luc Godard's *History(ies) of the Cinema (Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988–98)), on the one hand, and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), on the other. In *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs From Auschwitz* (2008) Didi-Huberman brilliantly analyses the effects of an imposed hermeneutics on images from the Holocaust. For Didi-Huberman, Resnais' *Night and Fog* and Lanzmann's *Shoah* stand at opposite ends of a signifying spectrum that runs from material immanence to discursive transcendence. Lanzmann's pronouncements of the necessity to understand the Holocaust within the hermeneutics of an *a priori* system of understanding – '*Shoah* is not made for communicating bits of information, but it teaches everything' (quoted in Didi-Huberman 2008: 127) – rile Didi-Huberman's notions about the totalisation of discourse. He counters Lanzmann's ideas of discursive transcendence with the materialism of the image itself, and in so doing shows the illogic of Lanzmann's position, which must finally deny any image except for what his film would itself create of the Holocaust. In a strong critique of one of Lanzmann's most vocal defenders, Gérard Wajcman, Didi-Huberman mocks the illogic of the metaphysical position: "There are no images of the Shoah", [Wajcman] says in substance, because there is the image of *Shoah*, and this one "teaches everything", becoming coextensive to the phenomenon of which it will give the *all image*' (2008: 128; emphasis in original).

In the case of *Description of a Struggle*, the 'all image' seems to be the national watermark itself, which does not impose a specific meaning on the image, but, like in Didi-Huberman's critique of Lanzmann, is what allows meaning to take place in the image in the first instance. We can only read the image *through* the watermark, and not as an instance in and of itself, as Marker would have us understand it.

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The palimpsest of the state's watermark seems to emblematisé the struggle in *Description of a Struggle* for the retreat of the sign and a montage of images free of an overriding meaning. Obviously, a losing battle. Whether Marker was aware of this is open for debate, but there might be a way of seeing his withdrawal of the film as beginning much earlier than 1967, and perhaps even embedded within the film itself, both in how history would resist the uncoupling of the image from the determinations of its structure, and in how the film concomitantly effaces the

authority of the filmmaker himself, until Marker only appears enfolded within the images that he contemplates.

If, as Bellour writes, the essay film instantiates a type of thought (as Deleuze argued), then what are its origins? What consciousness produces these thoughts and what is the relation of thought to the images of the cinema? Bellour sees these questions as the basis of the essay film as a form, and Marker was certainly aware of the implications of asking these types of questions, which explains, for instance, *La Jetée's* apocalyptic vision for photography's collusion with totalitarian oppression of individual consciousness, memory and experience. In *La Jetée* the photograph frames oppression: nothing is real within the photograph, even those moments that seem the most personal and private: the deep memories of childhood. The prisoner's life is encapsulated by the photograph, bound by it, imprisoned by the structures – indeed, the hermeneutics – of the image that would enchain him. Even his memories and dreams, we find out in the end, are fettered, enslaved, themselves a product of an external mechanism that – ideologically – only *appears* to give the semblance of subjective freedom to the innermost states of the mind.

The one authentic moment in *La Jetée* occurs when the structure of still-image-next-to-still-image, each image discrete, privileged, separate (photography being the very prison of this depicted world of the apocalypse), collapses into a few seconds of heterogeneous cinematic movement. The image of the prisoner's beloved begins to move; she takes on life – as an illusion, we understand, even within the diegesis of the film, but one freely, consciously, emotionally associated by the prisoner. Film redeems emotion and subjectivity alike, in a move from the privileged moments of photographic stasis to the unprivileged movement of endless cinematic images, which can only be constituted by the consciousness of the prisoner himself, over and against the manipulations of the wardens of perception, image and memory. Cinema, in this way, constitutes thinking through the identification of consciousness with the camera, as opposed to the privileged moments that would make up the image.

*La Jetée*, then, backshadows the attempt – the *essai* – of *Description of a Struggle* to free language and the image from the historical and political confines of the complicated place where he locates the film. Indeed, *La Jetée* might even signal the beginning of the withdrawal of the film. In the least, *La Jetée* reads as a gloss on the struggle that Marker describes for Israel, a struggle over memory, identity and discourse.

Dan Geva's film *Description of a Memory* then acts as homage and witness to how Israel as a culture and society cannot seem to move away from a type of hermeneutics of memory and history that would impose meaning on images.

Geva delves into the after-history of the instants Marker projects in *Description of a Struggle*: who was attending and participating at the kibbutz meeting depicted in Marker's film (turns out it was Yitzhak Rabin's sister); who was the Arab boy gleefully descending the slope of Haifa with his cart (turns out no one from the neighbourhood remembers him). Geva reinserts history into experience, questioning the fundamental freedom of cinema to explore experience outside of that history. That is why Geva focuses on memory, a negotiated instantiation of the self, especially as Israeli culture has come to understand it in the last decade and a half, in such films as *Waltz with Bashir* (*Vals im Bashir*, Ari Folman, 2008), which assumes the falseness of all memory; and television shows such as *In Treatment* (*Be-tipul*, 2005), where, on the psychoanalyst's couch, all memory and experience must be trawled for its authentic history. Geva's reflection on the reflection of the self fits within a broad context of Israeli questioning the very struggle that Marker describes: 'Her very being, her freedom, the stakes of the first struggle.' Indeed, it is that promise, the promise of individual freedom within the statist collective that has unraveled for Israel since 2000. And perhaps, as Geva might have it, this is how to understand Marker's withdrawal of his film: through the understanding of the limits of the expression of experience within cinema. In this sense, Geva's film is ultimately pessimistic, as personal memory (his as a boy remembering Marker's film) is bound by the need to historicise. Personal memory can only take on meaning within the collective memory of history.

From Geva's prison house of history, questions about Marker's images arise, about their derivation, about the mediations that montage, in Didi-Huberman's sense of materialist interconnection, would allow. Yes, they are signs. Marker admits this. But they are not signs of *things*. Rather, they are signs of other signs, in an endless intertextual regression (is this Barthes' sense of retreat?). Thus, the landscape doesn't present itself as such, but as a reference to other references. Indeed, origin is unknowable. The same way, the camel appears, as does the refugee ship, and the Jew himself. What Marker constructs – *reconstructs*, *represents*, really – are signs referring to signs. Is this dependence a description of Adorno's sense of immanent critique, where 'a successful work ... is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure' (1982: 32)? For Adorno, the essay – at least, the literary essay; he does not write about film – has the power to activate the most self-effacing form of subjective self-awareness: the retreat from the static, self-satisfied position of a mediating intelligence. For Adorno the essay – as fragmentary and incomplete – begins to take a privileged position against more staid forms of academic knowledge. Still, there are pitfalls to the essay, which cannot through

its very form negate the traps of discourse. Adorno's caveat reads like a prescription against recent criticism of the essay film, where the essay film becomes the very reflection and mediation of the identity of the filmmaker. As Adorno writes: 'The essay abandons the royal road of 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' (1991: 11). The abandonment of documentary representation leads to the trap of Being. Against this, the essay offers the promise of nonidentity: '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' (1991: 9). Indeed, this promise seems to point directly at Marker's struggle in *Description of a Struggle*.

Marker's film tries not to reflect, but in the face of overwhelming historical forces perhaps fails. I wonder whether the form of the essay film can thus perform the intellectual task that Adorno assigns it: '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' (1991: 11). This is Kafka's point too: the struggle he writes about is desire to attain nature, which he recognises as derivative, full of, as he has it, 'too many painful contortions, such as steps or words'. Should we not add images, as well, to the list?

Can the cinema then, a visual medium, perform the same function of putting 'an end to illusion', as Adorno says, without then substituting another type of natural image? That does seem to be what *Description of a Struggle* attempts to express.

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Like Barthes, Marker would eventually find his essayistic subject in Japan, where cultural alterity would allow his most potent expressions of a reimagined image. In Israel/Palestine, like so many before him in a long history of trying to understand and give expression to this place, Marker underestimated the forces that would insist on a particular metaphysics, as Barthes would have it, for the cultural signs he encountered. The third side of the coin would be resisted; the structural oppositions that have become so comfortable for both Israeli and Arab alike, still held sway and would disallow any attempt to undue and reconfigure them. Israeli resistance and antipathy to the look from outside – the tourist versus the initiated,

the outsider versus the insider, the alien versus the privileged citizen, *there* versus *here* – have a long and contentious history that predates the state and encompasses the full swing of the Zionist political spectrum.

The Israeli attitude toward touristic observation and its relation to the essayistic transgression that Marker attempted in *Description of a Struggle* might best be exemplified in a poem by Yehuda Amichai, one of modern Hebrew's great poets and a voice since the 1950s for a moderate, antiestablishment personal politics (and poetics) – what would later form a strong component of what is known as the peace camp. In 'Tourists', from the early 1970s, the Israeli antipathy for the outsider receives expression in a spleen against an observational objectification of the signs of Israeli society and history: the tourists come to see and gawk and disingenuously pray at Rachel's tomb, Theodore Herzl's tomb at the national cemetery, Yad Vashem (the Holocaust memorial) and Ammunition Hill, the 1967 battle site; they yearn for 'our sweet boys' and feel desire for 'our tough girls'. Then, as the spleen exhausts itself, poetic form disintegrates into prose, which is the point of the poem: signs and symbols must dissolve into the banality of the everyday. Metaphysics must give way to actual lived experience. In a brief paragraph, Amichai then outlines a recipe for human redemption: he spots a tour guide in Jerusalem's Old City using *him* – the speaker, the poet – as a reference point to show the group an arch from the Roman period: "You see that man with the baskets? A little to the right of his head is an arch from the Roman period" (Amichai 1980: 82; my translation). Redemption will come, the poet tells us, only when that perspective is inverted: 'I said in my heart: redemption will come only if he says to them: you see there that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, a little to the left and down, sits a man who bought fruit and vegetables for his home' (ibid.).

In a way, Amichai even realises the power of the cinema in this poem: the radical potential of inversion only exists through movement. Movement defines an exasperation caused by perspective's inherent instability, its utopian inability to sustain itself. As the tour guide finishes pointing out the Roman arch, the speaker moves and disrupts the relational perspective that supports the discursive frame of history (and perhaps too the nation): 'But he's moving, he's moving!' – and from movement, redemption might just follow: 'I said in my heart...' (ibid.).

Yet, redemption in Amichai only offers itself through the stasis of inversion, in the fixity of a new relational perspective that focuses on the person, as if the self were free, even resistant, to the way that symbols and signs would define and express the individual.

*Description of a Struggle* offers its own recipe for redemption, far removed from the promise of Amichai's simple opposition of symbol and self (which seems,



too, the utopian promise of the essay film for most critics). Rather, for Marker, at least in *Description of a Struggle*, it is the very fungibility of signs (and images *as* signs) that offers hope. Indeed, while Amichai constantly looks beyond discourse to redeem the individual – ‘I, who use only a small part/Of the words in the dictionary./I, who is forced to decipher riddles against my will’ (1977: 70; my translation) – Marker engages the ‘nonidentity’ and ‘violation’ of the essay, in Adorno’s sense, to redefine a hermeneutics *within* the signs that he encounters throughout the world. Only by exchanging and circulating the signs he confronts can Marker hope to ‘read [their] retreat’, as Barthes would have it. The power of simile as an organising trope in the film lies in the way it exchanges and circulates both visual and verbal phonemes, in the redemptive hope of dissolving the historical totalities that would engulf them. Thus, at the very end of the film, the long contemplation of the girl focuses on a single image in order to dissolve the image, to break it down through repetition and closeness to become something other than a cipher for something else: ‘Yes, look at her. A vision that defeats the eye, as words endlessly repeated. Amongst all the wondrous things, most wondrous is her being there, like a cygnet, a signal, a sign.’ The final three objects – cygnet, signal, sign – dissolve into each other phonetically, like a mantric repetition of material sound that breaks down discourse, forging new identities through immanent relations to other things, other objects. That is what Marker means by ‘a vision that defeats the eye’: the separation of vision and discourse, a separation of the thing seen and the sight that would always already impose on the object meaning. By placing signs in constantly moving relation to other signs, the filmmaker himself strives to forge new meanings beyond the narrow repertoire that has been imposed: thus, cygnet, signal, sign.

The withdrawal of *Description of a Struggle* after 1967 might signal an awareness of the elusive possibilities of just such a politics, of escaping the impositions of finite, imposed meaning on the objects of place and history. If the 1967 war did anything, it encased the Conflict in fixed terms, terms that have already been bequeathed to several generations since, and which seem to have no expiration date. The discursive certainties of the Conflict may have been invented in the events of 1948, but they were solidified and became static in the wake of 1967. Amichai too understood this when he wrote of the 1967 victory and its aftermath – a period in Israeli history known as the ‘euphoria’ – with sadness and pessimism. We could say, finally, that this is what caused Marker to withdraw his essay film, not because of the truths depicted there that were upended, hijacked and discarded. Rather, what Marker hoped to see within the complex nexus of interrelated and conflictual mythologies of the sign in Israel/Palestine – where new similes and thus new meanings might just be possible within the symbolic language that

afflicted this place – was itself an illusion, a wishful chimera that could never stand up to the power of discursive politics, which had already set down the history of this place for decades, if not centuries, to come.

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# Chapter 7

## A Woman with a Movie Camera: Chantal Akerman's Essay Films<sup>1</sup>

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Anne Eakin Moss

The essay film, born of a cinema of rupture and critique, would seem to be the most feminist of filmmaking modes. Prominent female filmmakers helped to shape the contours of this anti-generic, subjective film style from the very beginning. Feminist film critics used essayistic filmmaking techniques to illustrate their critiques of mainstream cinema starting in the 1970s. Yet, in addressing the gender of filmmakers, essay film theorists have mostly obeyed the immortal admonition of Greta Garbo's *Ninotchka*: 'Don't make an issue of my femininity.'

Indeed, it would seem that the essay film makes the very 'issue' moot. Contemporary theory of the essay film sets its mode of address in direct opposition to the relations of authority generated by the narrative film. By convention and by definition, the essay film critiques and transcends the problematics of the gaze, identification, voyeurism and the gendered subject, all of which have troubled feminist film criticism starting with Laura Mulvey (1975), and second wave feminism from Simone de Beauvoir's ground-breaking assertion that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (2011: 283). The essay film has seen itself as a means of revealing the mechanisms of that making and the determinism it masks. Contemporary theorists attribute to the essay film an ideally critical relationship between spectator and screen. For Michael Renov, the achievement of the essay

film, in this case Jonas Mekas's *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), is that it 'resists the snares of resolution or completion, even in the dialectical beyond' (2004: 89). Laura Rascaroli calls 'utopian' the essay film's ability 'to use the camera as a flexible, lucid, incisive means of personal, individual expression' and simultaneously to 'communicate with the spectator directly, to establish a contact with the embodied audience, based on an elective affinity' (2009: 15). In this definition, the essay film is infinitely personal, claiming to speak only for itself, and yet infinitely comprehensible and open to interpretation. It offers the possibility of making visible identity without entailing identification.

Feminist film criticism and 'women's cinema' have long taken as their goal exposing the constructed nature of subjectivity and the power relations it supports. In 'Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema' (1985), Teresa de Lauretis proposed that more than feminism or feminist film theory, it was women's cinema, that is, critically engaged film by female directors, that had shown itself capable of assessing and reformulating gender distinctions in public discourse. Has the essay film demonstrated the endgame of women's cinema understood in these terms? Both purport to constitute an inverse or antidote to normative cinema both in form and content. The essay film would like to grant spectator, filmed subject and filmmaker the complete freedom to perform their gendered subjectivity as they desire, superannuating feminist film criticism once and for all.

In the even more radical terms of other contributors to this volume, the essay film might be considered a 'non-cinema' (see Luka Arsenjuk, in this volume) or a 'non-genre' – a form of 'fragmentary totality' that 'resists that totality from within' (see Eades and Papazian, in this volume). In fact, these contributors explicitly reject a definition of the essay film as 'personal cinema' or an expression of the filmmaker's subjectivity at all. Arsenjuk asserts that the form instead demonstrates 'the inability, the impossibility of being such a subject', and that its formal self-reflexivity does not open a window for the direct address of the filmmaker to the spectator, but stages 'the impossibility of personal or authorial expression'. This theory of the essay film places it in a critically negative relationship with narrative film, emphasising its tendency to want to disrupt the gaze, require self-reflexivity and demand intellectual engagement.

While feminist film criticism has long sought to trouble the construction and transmission of subjectivity in cinema, in many cases it has also attempted to secure for the female film director her own expressive trace. Kaja Silverman proposes that 'authorial citation' (self-referentiality via voice-over or direct view of the director) generates 'authorial diminution, a device for representing a film's director as a subject speaking from within history, ideology, and a particular social

formation' (1988: 213). Silverman takes as an example Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976), in which long static shots of New York City streets are accompanied by the voice of the director reading letters from her mother in Brussels: 'Akerman's voice-over ... deprivileges the authorial voice much more profoundly by rendering it feminine, personal, and informal, and by stripping it of all transcendental pretense' (1988: 214). Stephen Heath, similarly, sees 'feminism' as 'the real of the film' (1981: 99). More recent critics, moreover, read the dialogue between filmmaker and her mother's letters as negating the authorial subject position entirely.<sup>2</sup> Ivone Margulies, in her deconstructionist analysis of the film's text, writes that the film 'questions the notion of presence, of an evident, unified source for an utterance' (1996: 151). Timothy Corrigan, in his extended discussion of the film in the context of defining the characteristics of the essay film, sees its depiction of 'essayistic experience' as 'synonymous with a kind of disembodiment' and 'a description of the self as a continually departing and disappearing subject' (2011: 108). While these critics see negation as the primary function of the voice-over, in Silverman's reading, it is the 'feminine' that does the work of negating authority. For her, the woman's voice actively resists the traditional male voice of the public service announcement, documentary or Hitchcock film. Rascaroli similarly notes a disjunctive effect generated by the female voice-over in the English-language version of Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (*Sunless*, 1983) and Harun Farocki's *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (*Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1989) (2009: 55–7). Yet another critic insists that 'essayistic voice-overs disavow the epistemological mastery put forward by classical documentaries' (Harvey 2012: 7) – irrespective of gender. If male and female directors can deploy the female voice, or any voice for that matter, to the same effect in the essay film, does the gender of the director have any discernible effect? If subjectivity in the essay film is always only citational and deferred, what trace does gender leave?

I examine that trace in the essay films of Chantal Akerman, focusing on *News from Home* as well as her 1993 film *D'Est* (*From the East*), a travelogue of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. In 1991, Chantal Akerman planned 'a grand journey across Eastern Europe' to capture 'all these countries in the throes of great change', in the form of a 'documentary bordering on fiction' (Akerman *et al.* 1995: 17). She admitted, 'There might also be personal reasons for going, and there are' (1995: 20).<sup>3</sup> This journey resulted in the 1993 film *D'Est*, and the 1995 video installation *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's 'D'Est'*.<sup>4</sup> Although *D'Est* closely resembles *News from Home* in its narrow range of camera movement and candid but impassive address of anonymous people on city streets, the film on its own provides no verbal commentary on the

journey. It is primarily with her searching camera that the director engages with all of the contours of the essay film as recently defined (see Renov 2004; Rascaroli 2009; Corrigan 2011). The sheer duration of shots, their subject matter, framing, juxtaposition, rhythm and ordering enact the self-reflexive questioning and mobilisation of thought characteristic of essay films. This is a 'non-vococentric essay film' that finds a way to 'inquire, opine, wonder and doubt, but without words' (Harvey 2012: 20). Moreover, although the film seems to accomplish the complete erasure of the director's subjectivity, it nonetheless engages in a mode of 'women's cinema' that escapes performativity as well as essentialism.

Akerman herself has actively resisted labels of feminist or lesbian filmmaker, so often applied to her after the success of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and *Je tu il elle (I You He She)*, 1974) (see, for example, Smith 1998). Yet I would like to argue here that all of Akerman's essayistic films bear the mark of having been made by a woman, even *D'Est*. Further, rather than marginalising these films, considering the filmmaker's gender allows us to see ways in which her films expand our understanding of the expressive possibilities of cinema as a medium, and of the essay film as an object of analysis. Considering *D'Est* as an essay film in dialogue with Akerman's earlier experimental and essayistic works reveals an ongoing exploration of what it means to capture what Dziga Vertov called 'life as it is' as a woman (and as a white, Jewish, European woman). Akerman's films do not take as their end goal the negation of classical patterns of cinematic identification, but investigate the nature of the cinematic encounter with the world. Akerman is very much present in that encounter, even when she does not reveal herself before the camera.

The cinematic journey eastward in *D'Est* suggests a dialogue with the Soviet montage directors who inspired the French New Wave, a dialogue played out both visually in the film and in the director's statements. Akerman explicitly set out to show that Alexander Dovzhenko's wheat fields in *Zemlia (Earth)*, 1930) are 'ideal images contradicted by those of grayness and Stalinist architecture, of waiting in lines and gulags' (Akerman *et al.* 1995: 28). The steep horizontal framing of a highway behind the opening credits could in fact pay tribute to or parody the opening sequence of *Earth*. A disabled man who ambulates via a wheeled platform in the Moscow subway might have come straight out of Eisenstein's *Bronenosets Potemkin (Battleship Potemkin)*, 1925), making one wonder if social services in the Soviet Union ever improved on those of Tsarist Russia. A woman with a shopping bag in the first tracking shot of *D'Est* could be the mother of the little girl known as Kopchushka ('Little Smoked Sprat') from Vertov's *Kino-glaz (Kino-Eye)*, 1924), walking to the market to buy meat.<sup>5</sup> Or she could be Kopchushka herself, grown old.



Fig. 1a: The woman with a shopping bag: *D'Est* (*From the East*, Chantal Akerman, 1993)



Fig. 1b: Kopchushka's mother leaving the market: *Kino-Glaz* (*Kino-Eye*, Dziga Vertov, 1924)

Vertov's explicitly utopian goals for cinema went beyond those of the essay film. He hoped that his 'kino-eye' would have a transformative effect on human subjects, reorganising them as new Soviet people at every stage of cinematic production and reception. It was not only montage and the experience of watching his films in the movie theatre that were to effect this change, but also the omnipresence of the camera. He imagined trained cadres of 'kinoks' fanning out on the streets of the Soviet Union, filming '*zhizn' vrasplokh*' ('life caught unawares'). For Vertov, who disavowed 'played' or staged cinema, '[e]very instant of life shot unstaged, every individual frame shot just as it is in life with a hidden camera, "caught unawares", or by some other analogous technique – represents a fact recorded on film, a *film-fact* as we call it' (1984b: 57). Vertov's 1924 'Kinoks' Field Manual' offers eight different techniques for capturing 'film-facts' from hidden positions as well as via surprise 'attack':

General instruction for all techniques: the invisible camera.

1. Filming unawares [*S'emka vrasplokh*] – an old military rule: gauging, speed, attack.
2. Filming from an open observation point set up by kinok-observers.



- Self-control, calm, and, at the right moment – lightning attack.
3. Filming from a hidden observation point. Patience and complete attention.
  4. Filming when the attention of the subjects is diverted naturally.
  5. Filming when the attention of the subjects is artificially diverted.
  6. Filming at a distance.
  7. Filming in motion.
  8. Filming from above. (1984c: 162–3)

The kinoks explored these techniques and set them into dialogue via montage in *Kino-Eye* as well as in Vertov's most famous film, *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929).

Akerman could have used this list as a shooting plan for her documentary-style essay films that, taken together, use almost all of these techniques. Though Vertovian techniques seem especially appropriate for evaluating the effects of the Soviet cultural revolutionary project at its end in *D'Est*, Babette Mangolte, Akerman's camera operator on *News from Home* and many of her other experimental films of the 1970s, in fact cites *Man with a Movie Camera* and its cameraman, Mikhail Kaufman, as a direct influence (Anon. 2008). However, Akerman also transforms these techniques, substituting the collective of kinoks or transcendent 'Man with a Movie Camera' with an individual and gendered camera. Both of her city films resemble the 'city symphonies' of Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttmann, but Akerman's films have the tempo of a largo in comparison to the scherzo of *Man with a Movie Camera* (with an average shot length of 2.3 seconds) or the presto of Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927; average shot length 3.5 seconds). *News from Home*'s average shot length is a glacial 90.9 seconds, and *D'Est*'s is even longer at 98.5.<sup>6</sup> While the city films of the silent era used rapid montage and constantly changing framing to establish the camera's superhuman superiority over the city and that of machine to man, Akerman's camera is stable, vulnerable and human. She never attributes her long duration shots to a character or agent, as opposed to the way Vertov, in *Man with a Movie Camera*, lays bare the tricks of the trade in shots of the camera operator and editor. However, neither do Akerman's films maintain the impassivity and illusion of objectivity of Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. They engage personally and intimately with the city streets and the people that inhabit them, their long duration shots allowing for maximum engagement with reality not 'as it is', but as it interacts with the camera.<sup>7</sup>

In an early interview, Akerman drew attention to how her slight stature helped to determine her camera angles and framing (in Bergstrom 1977: 119).<sup>8</sup> She does not look down on her subjects from above, but confronts them face to face at a

human level. Her films register the indelible effect of her movement through the world with a camera, as well as the world's response to her visible individual traits of gender, age and height. In an *Artforum* interview with Miriam Rosen, Akerman speaks of this encounter with her subjects as an engagement with irreducible difference, in the terms of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas: 'Most of the time I make an image head on. I don't think that a frontal image is idolatrous, because it's a face-to-face with the other. But I realized that later, not at the beginning. The other will be in my place when they're sitting in the movie theater [...]. Face to face with an image, we sense ourselves. We are always on the outside when it comes to the other' (in Rosen 2004: 127).<sup>9</sup> Akerman's essay films present a formal, structural study of the relationship between the camera's gaze and that of the director, delivered up for contemplation by the spectator. *D'Est*'s title therefore does not emphasise the director's voyage *to* the East, but the experience she has brought back *from* the East for our contemplation. Narrative film elides the causal relationship between what the camera sees and what the spectator sees, but the essay film's self-reflexivity makes the camera visible even when it is not.

Akerman claimed that though she never operates the camera herself, 'I'm always very close to the image. I'm the one who does the framing. I may not have pushed the button, but I did the lighting' (ibid.). At 14:40 minutes into *News from Home*, a 212-second shot, the longest of the film's first half and the first tracking shot, reveals Akerman, next to the camera, reflected in the window of the subway door. As the train passes through stations, the door opens and closes, and passengers edge their way around the camera. But when the train goes through the darkness of the subway tunnel, the director's ghost-like image can be seen in the window.<sup>10</sup> She stands next to the camera in a white shirt, seeming to clutch the camera for stability as the subway train rocks. Similarly, in Akerman's more recent essayistic documentary *De l'autre côté* (*From the Other Side*, 2002), the second interview shows us the reflection of the camera crew in the screen of a small television next to



Fig. 2: Akerman reflected in a subway window: *News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1976)

Fig. 3: The final frame denies us a view of the camera's reflection: *D'Est* (Chantal Akerman, 1993)



the grandmother's head. A careful search for a similar reflection in *D'Est*, however, reveals only an indistinct occasional light. In the very last shot of the film, the car from which Akerman is filming pulls up to a van that might give a reflection, but the film ends with a cut to black and credits at that very instant.

This game of hide-and-seek structures Akerman's oeuvre and forms a focal point of her work's critical reception.<sup>11</sup> Akerman's camera aims to register not just the world, but also the world's reaction to her and her camera. Viewers familiar with her oeuvre know that she is looking back at her spectators, just as much as they are looking in at her. They know also that her gender and sexuality are explicitly on display.<sup>12</sup> One of her first experimental films establishes this relationship as a formal question. In *La Chambre* (*The Room*, 1972) the camera pans around a tiny apartment, from the still life of a half kitchen to the director lying in her bed gazing directly at the camera. Because the camera intentionally flaunts the 180-degree rule, capturing all 360 degrees of the room before changing directions again and again in a single shot, it seems to occupy an impossibly omniscient point of view, controlled remotely by the filmmaker who changes her pose each time the camera returns to her. The spectator must then occupy that position, her eye drawn inexorably back to the filmmaker with each pan. Perhaps the apple that she bites into in one pan makes her a modern-day Eve, eating from the Tree of Knowledge. In *Je tu il elle*, Akerman, playing the main role ('je') of a jilted lover, strips naked before the camera and before the street level picture window of her apartment. A man passing by glances in, ever so briefly, and Akerman narrates, in voice-over: 'I stood motionless, nude, so that other passers-by could see me. Few people walked by. After that, no one.' If this man is a stand-in for the spectator, he is the distracted spectator of Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1968: 240–1). Akerman's ideal spectator is willing to engage with her face to face, whether she is in front of the camera or behind it.

Even without showing her face, except in the indistinct reflection of the subway window, *News from Home* registers the bodily presence of the filmmaker in New York City, establishing this presence as a visual and expository theme.<sup>13</sup> Her mother's letters plead with her to be careful at night in the big city, worry that she has no summer clothes, no sandals. The spectator then worries too about the young filmmaker out late with her camera on the empty streets, and imagines her sweating in the summer heat. Though Corrigan reads the opening scene of *News from Home* as a mysterious site of radical absence (2011: 106–7), like Kenneth White (2010: 373), I think it markedly shows the presence of the camera and the woman behind it. The film opens with a shot straight down the middle of an anonymous New York City alley. A car passes by on a perpendicular street crossing from left to right. The next one turns right down the alley toward the camera. The driver hesitates, apparently not sure if there is room to get around the camera, but then continues on straight toward it, slowing to pass carefully to one side. Unlike the Lumière brothers' train at La Ciotat rushing toward us on the diagonal, the lumbering station wagon driven by a man in shirt and tie has to negotiate the way down the road to avoid the camera placed directly in its path. Three people emerge from the far end of the alley, carrying boxes on their shoulders. As they turn down the perpendicular street, one, wearing red trousers, seems to give an offhand wave to the camera. Instead of establishing the film's locale with skyline or landmark, the opening shot of *News from Home* registers the presence of the camera from the very start, establishing its self-conscious presence in each shot as a central structural problematic. Other shots similarly place the camera in the middle of the street or in the middle of the sidewalk or subway, forcing cars and commuters to swerve around it.<sup>14</sup>

While the city symphony usually progresses through the course of a workday from morning to night, Akerman's film follows a progression from an early morning encounter with the grid of the city streets and cars to a tentative approach toward the people on the streets and subway, as the letters from home become more worried and persistent. Static shots give way to slow pans and to the tracking shot on the subway, as if her camera were a probe on a distant planet slowly waking and testing its functions one by one. Though the temporal progression of the film is not exactly sequential, the film ends at dusk with an increasingly long covering shot of the receding Manhattan skyline taken from the back of the Staten Island Ferry.

In her eleventh shot, at about ten minutes into the film, just before the first panning shot, Akerman frames a group of people sitting in front of a building from across the street. They look at the camera and gesture as cars pass in between. In the next shot, she has moved the camera to their side of the street, but

Fig. 4: Returning the gaze from the street: *News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1976)



she aims the camera down the sidewalk, perpendicular to the previous shot. Only one of the figures from the initial group remains in view: an African-American woman sitting on a chair placed incongruously underneath the lamppost at the street corner. She gazes directly into the camera, her arms folded. Other passers-by glance inquiringly at the camera, but there is no question that this woman is conscious of being filmed.<sup>15</sup>

This strangely geometrical pair of shots of the woman from across the street and then straight on establishes a contrast that resonates with Vertov's *Kino-Eye* and *Man with a Movie Camera*. In Vertov's shots of 'life caught unawares', the camera captures subjects by surprise, candid-camera style, like the homeless boys whom the camera awakens and the woman riding in the carriage who imitates the cameraman's cranking in *Man with a Movie Camera*. In shots of 'life as it is', the camera captures subjects without their notice, via hidden camera or distraction, like the sellers in the marketplace and the children watching the Chinese magician in *Kino-Eye*. And finally, though he disavows 'played cinema' and does not list it in his 'Field Guide', Vertov also takes shots of subjects who are aware of the camera and perform for the camera, according to the director's instruction. These last would include the pioneer children in *Kino-Eye* who put up the posters and Kopchushka's mother. In *Man with a Movie Camera*, they include the sleeping woman from the first chapter whose awakening is likened to the awakening of the city, and, importantly, the eponymous man with the movie camera himself, as well as the film's implacable editor. These staged shots orient the viewer to the position of the camera, both physically and ideologically.<sup>16</sup>

The woman on the chair in *News from Home* does not perform an explicit role in the film or on the street. Yet in contrast to the otherwise indifferent New York pedestrians, her challenging stare similarly serves to orient the viewer to Akerman's position. Rather than affirming the filmmaker's absence in the film, this woman's stare makes undeniable her presence on the city streets. It insists on



Fig. 5: A still portrait of a pregnant woman in three-quarters view: *Hotel Monterey* (Chantal Akerman, 1972)

acknowledgement from the filmmaker and from the spectator, an acknowledgement that would be both an ethical response to another's humanity, and an aesthetic response to the conditions of looking, framing and filming made possible by cinema.<sup>17</sup> Her seated pose also relates Akerman's cinematic project to that of portrait painting, an association the director herself makes in *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* (1996) when she recalls her mother's stories of her grandmother's 'huge' portraits of 'women who appeared to be looking out at the viewer' (Rosenbaum 2011).<sup>18</sup>

That film, an attempt at self-portrait via monologue and montage of her previous works, links the framing of Jeanne Dielman in her kitchen to Akerman's essayistic portraits of people in 'domestic interiors', which Steven Jacobs relates to Dutch interior painting (2011: 77–9). The first of these portraits can be found in another of Akerman's experimental New York films, *Hotel Monterey* (1972). Three consecutive sequences in *Hotel Monterey*, starting at 13:23 minutes, capture a still figure in a private room and iterate the formal possibilities of the classical portrait. The first is a dark-haired woman with her back to the camera who might be the filmmaker herself, the second, an older man in black jacket and bow tie, captured in full face, and the last, a pregnant woman seated in three-quarter view. The resonance of these static shots with portrait painting, especially in contrast to the candid shots in the elevator and corridor, suggests an investigation into what the absorptive aesthetics of portrait painting might hold for the cinema.<sup>19</sup> Each of these shots brings into focus the director's role as *metteur en scène*, a role that for Akerman is fraught with personal and ethical, as well as artistic, stakes. While not necessarily an explicitly feminist filmic strategy, these shots force the spectator to engage with the 'portraits' in the way that the subjects engaged with the female director.

In Vertov's films, the contrast between differing filming techniques, described in militaristic terms as modes of 'attack' with the camera, does the work of

enlightenment. Vertov's candid shots show the impact of his camera on the world around him, as when they literally awaken the homeless boys in the park in *Man with a Movie Camera*. The film also shows Mikhail Kaufman riding the fire truck, standing in an open car, riding a motorcycle and walking the streets, while cranking his lightweight Debrise camera, thus teaching viewers about the conditions of production of the film in front of them. These 'staged' shots serve to transmit and ensure the understanding of his films' political message.

Akerman's essay films, too, make viewers aware of the film's point of view, but they do so in order to orient them within the work of art, not to fix them within the world, ideology or nation as does Vertov. They reveal the director's encounter with the world as she sees it and it sees her, without assigning that point of view via reaction shot to a character or imposing it on her spectators as a foregone conclusion. 'The static camera is very instinctive for me,' stated Akerman in a 1998 interview with *The New York Times*; 'The viewer has to know what point of view the film is in. Most filmmakers have the point of view of God, like an omniscient narrator. For me, the static camera is a question of ethics, morality, politics' (in Smith 1998). This is why of all the 'General Instructions' to the kinoks, numbers five and eight, 'artificial' diversion and 'filming from above', do not find their way into Akerman's filmic vocabulary. Both violate the ethical principles of the camera that Akerman establishes for herself. Though recent readings of Vertov have emphasised the political and ethical 'bonds' that his films strive to create (see Fore 2013; Turvey 2013), these bonds have an ideological and proscriptive agenda. Akerman's essay films do not have the goal of bringing the spectator to consciousness within the framework of a specific ideological position, nor do they intend to transform the subjects she films. Indeed, rather than 'binding' the spectator to her subjects, her portrait shots confront the viewer with their strangeness and distance. While Vertov occupies a transcendent position as the organising consciousness of his films (or 'film-organizer' (*kino-razvedchik*), as he credits himself in *Kino-Eye*), Akerman constantly reveals her presence without asserting her omniscience.

*D'Est* might be seen as a limit case for this claim. The film leaves behind the implicitly psychoanalytic concerns of *News from Home* (the relationship between mother and daughter), and explores instead her mother and father's East European Jewish heritage. However, as in *News from Home*, *D'Est* makes these autobiographical concerns a means of exploring the ethical and aesthetic possibilities of cinema as a medium. While in *News from Home*, Akerman's mother's letters from Brussels, read by the director in French, orient the viewer to see the scene of New York City streets as the experience of an outsider, in the film *D'Est* considered in isolation (out of the context of the director's written commentary

and the installation created after the production of the film), only the camera serves to enact what Akerman subsequently identified as both a return to her roots and her irreconcilable estrangement from them. Shots that progress through German, Polish, Ukrainian and, finally, Russian soundscapes (unsubtitled), from countryside to city, the slow tracking camera on the Moscow streets and the fifteen static, long and searching medium shots of individuals in domestic settings may all be looking for the trace of deportations of World War II, the Stalinist purges, and the Soviet communist utopian project 'while there's still time' (Akerman *et al.* 1995: 17), but the film does not tell us this. The film eschews voice-over and any explicit markers of the director's identity or agency. Nothing but the director's name in the opening credits ('un film de Chantal Akerman') suggests that she is a woman and a Jew.

The 1995 installation makes explicit the film's intended identity politics, however much it is a politics 'that avoids projecting a stable, recognizable identity' (Margulies 1996: 194). The installation's first room projects *D'Est* in its entirety, and the second room breaks the film down into twenty-four scenes, grouped into eight triptychs, projected simultaneously. In the final room of the installation, the director tells the viewer explicitly what the film has repressed, in a monologue delivered in accented English:<sup>20</sup>

To write a film before knowing it. To write in order to close. To write a letter to the father from Kazimirz [sic] on the Vistula.

I went, then I wrote. Without understanding. Visions in passing. Dazzled by the summer. Travels by East Germany and by Poland. On the way I still passed the town where my mother comes from. Didn't see it, didn't look. (Cited in Lebow 2003: 41)

This 'I' offers the viewer the first look behind the camera at the film's author, orienting the film in a place and toward an addressee ('a letter to the father'). With this epilogue, the film becomes more explicitly an essay in the epistolary tradition, as an answer to her letters from home, one that she suggests she had planned to post from her mother's hometown, had she been willing or able to stop there.<sup>21</sup> It also becomes a film not primarily about the places and faces captured on film, but what is missing from the landscape and from the picture: the Jews of Eastern Europe, Akerman's grandparents, who perished at Auschwitz, and the director herself. In her powerful reading of the installation, Alisa Lebow calls it a 'transitive autobiography of a past life', one characterised by displacement and lack, and 'revealed indirectly through the face(s) of others' (2003: 46, 47). However, in my



view, Lebow takes too seriously the director's claim to fiction in the installation's title, positing the film not as a documentary record of the breakdown of the Eastern Bloc, but rather, as a narrative about evacuation, doomed masses and a catastrophe remembered and continuously experienced, never averted and ongoing. Read in this way, the film resembles Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) more than *Lettre de Sibérie* (*Letter from Siberia*, 1957).

Taking this hermeneutic stance toward the film fictionalises its narrative 'I', her family history and gender. Lebow would have us see 'Chantal Akerman' in the returned glances of her Eastern European subjects as 'a revenant coming back to haunt these people' (2003: 59), the subjective camera having become a ghostly time traveler, like the invisible narrator in Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russkii kovcheg* (*Russian Ark*, 2002). Asserting that the film (and Akerman's oeuvre as a whole) denies 'belief in the possibility of full presence' (2003: 65), Lebow proposes two possible consequences of this encounter: one, argued via Emmanuel Levinas, that 'Akerman might burst out of history, beyond the clutches of the past, into a transcendent realm of infinite possibilities' (2003: 59); and two, via Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, the negation of the author function in an act of 'historical rupture ... with its sights set on the past' (2003: 60).

Lebow prefers the second reading, but both options neglect the present tense of the act of filming, in which the female director frames and captures her subjects with the camera. It is this act that poises the work between narrative film and documentary and activates the processes of thought and dialogue that define the work as an essay film and as 'women's cinema' in the active, critical terms set by de Lauretis. Neglecting the presence of the filmmaker relegates Akerman's footage to the status of illustration or means to an end, privileging the act of the editor over that of the cameraperson. Yet Akerman's long duration shots, and the lack of a suturing reaction shot that would attribute these views to a character, insist that we think about who is behind the camera doing the looking and why. Rather than attempting to generate the illusion that she has captured an undisturbed slice of reality as if from a hidden camera, Akerman's shots remind us that she is there next to the camera, encountering her subjects in person. The long duration of her shots both reveals the impact she makes and allows that impact to settle so we can differentiate it from the everyday, itself made freshly visible by the encounter.

In so doing, Akerman rejects Vertov's utopian claims that the camera can ever capture 'life as it is' and that it might enact a transformative change on subject or spectator.<sup>22</sup> For Vertov, the intrusion of the camera was intended to reveal a level of reality inaccessible to the human eye. Vertov explained that he was '[n]ot "filming life unawares" for the sake of the "unaware", but in order to show people without masks, without makeup, to catch them through the eye of the camera in

a moment when they are not acting, to read their thoughts, laid bare by the camera' (1984a: 40). Akerman does not presume to 'lay bare' her subjects, but allows them to have their say and acknowledges the mediating presence of the camera. Rather than showing us the objective world in which she is moving as a 'film-fact', instead Akerman shows us the effects of the woman with the movie camera as she moves through the world. The spectator thus engages with the mundane scenes of the everyday to which Akerman constantly returns in her films, like the filmmaker does, with an openness to dialogue and recognition of all that limits what the viewer can know.

Certainly the people on the street whom she captures with her roving camera register her presence, and some react with bemusement, some with suspicion and some with outright hostility: 'Film me!' 'What are you photographing?' 'Did you get me? When can I see it?' 'What is this?' 'What program?' 'Maybe we should be smiling?' 'What are you filming? You ought to ask, and we'll answer.' 'What do you want?' 'Look – they're photographing.' 'Are you satisfied? What is this? Two hours and no bus. I've been standing here two hours and no bus. And you shut up.' 'So you're taking a picture of this mess, huh?' [*Bardak s'fotografiruet, da?*]<sup>23</sup> Children run alongside the road to follow the camera. People filmed at a railway waiting room cover their faces as the camera rolls by. As one watches these long tracking shots along streets, subways and train stations, some up to seven minutes long, the people's reactions become somewhat predictable, dependent on age and gender. Younger women and men may smile or pose, the women subtly, the male soldiers and policemen cockily. Some stare down the camera, some cover their faces. Older women often become hostile.<sup>24</sup>

At about forty minutes, a woman waiting for a bus in the Moscow winter vents her ire on the camera and crew: 'I am a war veteran, an invalid of the second class and here I can't get going anywhere for a whole hour. Great! Real nice. And don't you wave at me. What, should I show you my certificate? It's an outrage!'



Fig. 6: The angry veteran turns heads at the right edge of the frame: *D'Est (From the East)*, Chantal Akerman, 1993)

Akerman attributes the angry reactions to the fact that the car from which she was filming held up the bus, but also speculates that this was just a typical ‘big city’ response.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, she also proposes that perhaps ‘the passivity you see in *From the East* was related to seventy years of communism or Stalin’ (in MacDonald 2005: 261). In the absence of the reflections seen in *News from Home* and *From the Other Side*, it is impossible for me as a viewer to know exactly what the subjects on the street could see and to what exactly they are reacting. Do I really perceive the general hostility toward outsiders and the condescension toward women in the reactions of the passers-by, or am I simply remembering my own trip to Moscow that same year? Does the gender or nationality of her camera operator or driver (both male, the former French, the latter Russian) make a difference?<sup>26</sup> At any rate, the camera does not assume the objectifying gaze of narrative cinema, nor the ‘objective’ gaze of Vertov’s Marxist-Leninist filmic investigations. The subjects in these street scenes reject what Malcolm Turvey identifies as the ‘revelationist’ function of the movie camera, the conceit that the camera can reveal ‘the true nature of reality’ (2008: 1). ‘Caught unawares’, the angry veteran revolts also against the project of dialogue that Akerman opposes to Vertov’s promise of revelation. While Vertov presumes to create bonds between comrades in far-flung republics via montage and superimposition in the name of communist ideology (see Fore 2013: 9–13), Akerman uses the long take to show the impossibility of community and the failure of dialogue.

Akerman considered the incidental voices in German, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian captured in *D’Est* an element of sound composition, not dialogue, and none of these voices are translated or subtitled.<sup>27</sup> However, the film’s audible speech plays a central dramatic role in *D’Est*. The scene at the bus stop with the angry war veteran is underscored by the extradiagetic sound of the cello solo that begins softly at the start of the shot at 35:38 minutes, and then fades to an almost inaudible level around the moment when the angry veteran appears. In the place of voice-over, which might subordinate the video track and its diegetic sound to the director’s narrative and close it to the spectator’s interpretation, the music engages in dialogue with the voices of the crowd. In the monologue delivered in the final room of the 1995 installation version, Akerman describes the cello as the redemptive resolution of the film: ‘There is nothing to do. It is obsessive and I am obsessed. Despite the cello, despite cinema’ (in Lebow 2003: 42). If the cello represents or might be equated with the transcendent powers of cinema to affect or transform, the angry veteran represents the refusal of her obsessive, relentless camera to enact this transformation or come to transcendence.

The cello returns in the penultimate shot of the film, in which the cellist Nathalie Chakhovskaia performs a solo by the modern Soviet composer Boris

Tchaikovsky on an intimate stage in a wide shot. The performance commands the full attention of the camera, which captures the whole piece from the cellist's entrance to her bows, and, unlike the other static shots in the film, follows the cellist subtly to keep her in the frame as she stands to take her bow and accept an armful of roses from admirers. That the veteran and the cellist whom we see in the penultimate shot of the film are both women of about the same age – roughly that of Akerman's own mother – posits them as two possible outcomes for the film: the triumph of cinema as a medium of artistic transcendence or its failure as a means of dialogue or communication. Like the voice-over in *News from Home*, they generate an internal dialogue in the film that will not be resolved. Just as Akerman's camera glides on with its driver after the veteran's rant, leaving the Muscovites to wait for their bus in the cold dusk, the final shot of the film after the cello performance returns to the streets, to Akerman's obsession with her version of 'life as it is': everyday life, seen from a human level, and in full acknowledgement of the limitations of her cinematic eye. The beeping from cars and pop music emanating from a kiosk deflate the cello. A bus has arrived, but more people wait in the twilight. Akerman's car continues and the film ends mid-movement, without resolution, without transcendence.

Between the hostile reactions and the transcendent cello are seventeen scenes of individuals mostly framed in still poses, mostly indoors, mostly women. The presence of the camera inside their homes, their steady gaze at the camera and near immobility in most of these shots draw attention to the filmmaker's direction: 'So, yes, I asked people to do a few things, but I didn't contrive what they had to do. The film was directed slightly, with their complicity, and taking into account what they thought they could bring to the shooting' (in MacDonald 2005: 263). Interaction is implicit in these scenes, and, in one, a second teacup at the table suggests that the woman behind the camera might be an invited guest. Akerman's role and will as director, and even her gender, are made visible in these silent scenes. Akerman explains these scenes with reference to the second commandment's prohibition on idolatry: 'When you film frontally, you put two souls face to face equally, you carve out a real place for the viewer. So, it's not God-like. You contemplate something that's fixed' (in Brenez 2011). I understand Akerman to mean here that the subjects she contemplates in these portrait shots are their own, fixed persons, not the creation of the camera or author, and, therefore cannot be reduced to their representation on screen. Situated in the place of the director, the viewer is looked at as much as she looks.

Because Akerman is 'always very close to the image', that is, the camera, she is the other 'soul' engaged with her subjects. Their response to the camera cannot be disengaged from their response to her as a female director. Whereas a male director

of an essay film might use a woman's voice for the voice-over and produce an effect on the spectator specific to expectations and assumptions about the female voice, Akerman produces an effect that is specific to how her subjects engage with a woman. Her viewers are not only asked to see the world like a woman, but to be seen by the world like a woman. Her first still subject, a man in a stretched red tank top, smokes nervously and stares ambivalently at the camera. The subjects themselves give up none of their interiority, rejecting the notion that the camera can, as Vertov hoped, 'read their thoughts, laid bare by the camera' (1984a: 42). Therefore we as spectators cannot make sense of these scenes without imagining Chantal Akerman behind the camera in their reverse shot. These shots are the antithesis of 'life caught unawares', but they are not theatre or 'played cinema'.

Or are they? Akerman told MacDonald, 'I asked the woman who you see with her son, "What will you do when you go to see your son?" And I asked her to do what she usually did' (2005: 263). The resulting brief scene of a mother watching her grown son study at his desk at approximately 1 hour 32 minutes strongly recalls *Jeanne Dielman*. The woman slicing salami and bread at 1 hour 27 minutes, carefully framed by the tiles of the kitchen according to the rule of thirds, also mirrors the framing and actions of *Jeanne Dielman*'s heroine, whose every gesture Akerman orchestrated carefully (see Rosen 2004: 125) and insisted on filming from her own height and point of view (see Bergstrom 1977: 119). While both films might be seen as cinematic interpretations of the female everyday, one fictional and one documentary, what these shots index is not a 'genuine' performance of female behaviour, but the director's absorption in that work and her fascination, even obsession, with producing it from a subject, for the screen. *Chantal Akerman par Chantal Akerman* in fact juxtaposes these two kitchen scenes at the beginning of the montage titled 'Autoportrait', indicating that they refer back to the director's own experience of a gendered self. Both Akerman's fiction and non-fiction films might be seen as 'bordering on' the essay film in their



Fig. 7: The female everyday:  
*D'Est (From the East,*  
Chantal Akerman, 1993)

self-reflexive examination of cinema as a medium. Their systematic investigation of the author's presence as both organising consciousness and orienting body in the cinematic art form belies the possibility of the essay film's ideally critical relationship between camera and subject, spectator and screen.

Akerman's essay films lay out a thesis about where gender might be found in theories of essay film as form – not in its direct expression of subjectivity, nor in its negation of classical narrative forms; not in verbal commentary, as in the films of Marker, nor in visual manipulation, as in those of Vertov. In eschewing voco-centric essay techniques, her films instead engage the most important concerns of pictorial modernism. The posed portrait shots ask how cinema can capture empathy, inwardness, presentness and absorption, and how it can transmit these qualities. The horizontal montage of the image track and the sound track, sometimes synchronised, sometimes not, serves to acknowledge the director's attenuated relationship to the reality she captures while leaving the understanding of that relationship up to the viewer's interpretation. Akerman's turn to video installation art in museums and galleries worldwide that began in 1995 with *Bordering on Fiction* can be seen to reinforce the dialogue with pictorial art.<sup>28</sup> If the museum installation returns to cinema the aura of the work of art that it lost in the age of mechanical reproduction, it also strives to recover the auteur/e's presence in the age of video art. Chantal Akerman reminds us that what the camera indexes is not just reality, but the director's dialogue with that reality, a dialogue in which gender is acknowledged, but mutually negotiated, and therefore unfinalised.

## Notes

- 1 Dedicated to the memory and the presence of Chantal Akerman, 1955–2015.
- 2 See Margulies 1996: 150–3 and Corrigan 2011: 106–9. Arsenjuk, in this volume, also uses the film as an example of how the epistolary form as a canonical signature of the essay film defers the subjecthood of the author.
- 3 This essay was dated April 1991, and published both with the 2009 Icarus Home Video DVD release of the film and with the exhibition booklet published to accompany the video installation, *Bordering on Fiction* (1995).
- 4 The film was actually completed in three separate trips to Eastern Europe; see MacDonald 2005: 261.
- 5 These two shots are connected not just because of their content – a lateral tracking shot of an older woman with a bag – but because they are both visually marked out from other shots in the context of the film. In *D'Est*, this is the first time the camera moves and, in *Kino-Eye*, it is a shot that we see a second time, in

reverse motion.

- 6 Shot length data was taken from the Cinemetrics database found at <http://www.cinemetrics.lv> (accessed 31 October 2015).
- 7 Relevant here is André Bazin's association of depth of field and the long take with a cinematic realism that, in the reading of Daniel Morgan, 'constitutes a particular mode of responding to and articulating facts while respecting the reality of objects' (2006: 463). Malcolm Turvey associates Akerman's work with Bazin's description of neorealism, particularly noting the way in which the 'ontological equality' (2008: 312) of each shot grants the viewer autonomy in her films.
- 8 Kenneth White measures Akerman's shots in *News from Home* at 'between forty-eight and fifty-six inches from the ground – her personal height of view' (2010: 366). B. Ruby Rich gives this height a gendered significance (1994: 30).
- 9 Akerman speaks of her debt to Levinas in Akerman *et al.* 2012: 97, where she notes having attended his courses in Paris.
- 10 A crisp still image of this shot is figure 7 in White 2010: 375. White says he can see Mangolte as well in this reflection, but I can only make out the brief appearance of a hand that makes an adjustment to the camera.
- 11 Insightful interpretations of Akerman's presence and non-presence in her films have been informed by feminism (see Mayne 1990; Rich 1994; McFadden 2014), psychoanalysis (see Heath 1978 and 1981), identity politics (see Bergstrom 1999; Foster 1999), deconstruction (see Margulies 1996; Lebow 2003), phenomenology (see Pravadelli 2000) and Deleuze (see Walsh 2004; Bruno 2012) in various sub-combinations. Akerman's thematic preoccupations have followed a somewhat similar arc.
- 12 For a suggestive study of how and why female experimental filmmakers film their own bodies, see McFadden 2014.
- 13 White makes a similar argument in his outstanding essay on *News from Home*, which uses Panovsky's notion of 'perspective as an "objectification of the subjective"' to dispute earlier readings of the film that rely on the notion of the filmmaker's non-presence (2010: 366), though he is less interested than I am here in the question of body or gender.
- 14 See particularly shots 3 and 10, in which aggressive New York drivers seem to want to play chicken with the camera, swerving to avoid the camera at the last minute.
- 15 These are figures 4 and 5 in White (2010: 369), who groups this shot together with other glances at the camera as evidence of the structural importance of the camera's presence on the street, but I argue that her seated pose and the montage of two angles make this scene significant in a different way.
- 16 For an analysis of this internal contradiction, see Papazian 2009: 111–2.

- 17 I use the term ‘acknowledgement’ here in the sense proposed by Daniel Morgan in his reassessment of Bazin’s aesthetics via the philosopher Stanley Cavell and art historian Michael Fried (2006: 470–5). He proposes: ‘A film, if it is to be realist, must construct a style that counts as an acknowledgement of the reality conveyed through its photographic base’ (2006: 471).
- 18 Jonathan Rosenbaum connects this reminiscence with Akerman’s engagement with the Torah’s prohibition on graven images, suggestively characterising both ‘as a form of feminist rebellion’ (2011).
- 19 Jacobs proposes in passing (2012: 78) that Akerman’s still figures are absorptive in the terms of the art historian Michael Fried (1980). I would suggest further that in fact these images engage the dialectical relationship between looking away from and directly towards the spectator that Fried identifies as the crucial stakes of art from Chardin to Courbet to Manet. For a summary of Fried’s argument as it connects through to contemporary video art, see the introduction to *Four Honest Outlaws: Sala, Ray, Marioni, Gordon* (2011: 1–27). Tim Griffin also suggests a similarity between Akerman and Courbet (2012: 39–40).
- 20 I rely here on Alisa Lebow’s description (2003: 41–2), as well as the other articles cited here, and a number of exhibition companion volumes: the introduction to the 1995 exhibition guide (see Akerman *et al.* 1995: 7–12); *Chantal Akerman: Moving Through Time and Space* (Akerman *et al.* 2008); and *Chantal Akerman: Too Far, Too Close* (Akerman *et al.* 2012: especially 54–5). This monologue was performed in French in the European installations, in English in the American, both by the director herself. It begins with a passage from the Hebrew Bible read in Hebrew, then the translation.
- 21 Before World War II, Kazimierz was the Jewish neighborhood of the Polish city of Krakow. On Akerman’s family history, see Weiner 2008.
- 22 Papazian offers a clear description of Vertov’s project in this regard: ‘The special “indexical” relationship between the photographed object and its image on film (in which the photograph registers the actual existence of the object in real life) seemed to offer the possibility of circumventing not only verbal language, but representation itself as an artistic operation: specifically, the mediation of an authoring presence. The kino-eye would present life as it was, without the interference of any kind of artistic “vision”’ (2009: 71). On the propaganda effects of Vertov’s films, see Papazian 2014.
- 23 Thanks to Elizabeth Papazian for her help in deciphering and translating the voices in the film.
- 24 Strangely, Akerman asserts in an interview that ‘The people in Moscow in *From the East* reacted to me in the same way that the people in New York did in the seventies’ (MacDonald 2005: 262). Among the hundreds of people she must have



filmed on the streets and subways of New York in 1976, I notice only one who reacts with suspicion and anger. He appears on the subway train at 26:40 minutes. The marked and fascinating difference between the reactions of Muscovites in 1993 and New Yorkers in 1976 might confirm a view of these films as ethnographic or documentary, but I think the internal logic of each film transcends this reading.

- 25 Akerman explained in an interview: 'At the bus stop they were angry at me, but just because I was slowing their bus down. We were moving so slowly in the car that the bus had to wait for us. That's all.' (in MacDonald 2005: 261). The number of people complaining that they had been waiting for the bus for an hour or more (at approximately 39 min.) can certainly be seen as a general frustration with post-Soviet infrastructure, not just Akerman's car slowing the bus's arrival.
- 26 Akerman briefly describes working with the cinematographer Rémon Fromont (also known as Raymond Fromont) in an interview with Nicole Benez (2011).
- 27 Akerman stated in an interview that '[w]hile the texture of the soundtrack is very important in *D'Est*, there is not one word in the film' (in Akerman *et al.* 2012: 96). Further, the second room of the installation brings the film's sounds all together in an undifferentiated cacophony (see Lebow 2003: 40).
- 28 An insightful article on the implications of Akerman's installation art for feminist art is Charmarette 2013. On the relationship of her aesthetic project to installation art, see Bruno 2012.

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# Chapter 8

## ‘What Does It Mean Today to Be a Communist?’ Nanni Moretti’s *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* as Essay Films

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Mauro Resmini

We can no longer speak of the author and his fantasies because his fantasies are the result of a situation in which it is necessary to be two to create, very ephemerally, a *figure*.

– Serge Daney (1993: 166)<sup>1</sup>

The task of art is to separate, to transform the continuum of image-meaning into a series of fragments, postcards, lessons.

– Jacques Rancière (2006: 147)

### Looking for the Essay

Nanni Moretti is widely recognised as a film essayist, and indeed two recent studies on the topic in English include him in the global canon of the genre (Rascaroli 2009: 126; Corrigan 2011: 131–44). Yet, only a certain Moretti makes the cut: it is the Moretti of the 1990s, the diarist and chronicler of *Caro diario* (*Dear Diary*, 1993) and *Aprile* (*April*, 1998) – films in which, no doubt, the essayistic

dimension emerges most forcefully. But where does this leave the rest of Moretti's oeuvre with respect to the question of the essay? Is the essayistic in Moretti simply a discrete authorial phase in his filmography, an isolated moment of experimentation that stands independently from the films that precede and follow it? Or should we regard it as something that exceeds the boundaries of these two films, and whose dynamics and functioning inform in various ways the entirety of Moretti's cinema? If this is the case, as I wish to demonstrate, a different approach is needed: we must look for the essayistic precisely where we do not see it. However, it is less a matter of simply detecting its presence than of actively making it emerge. The distinction is subtle, but decisive: the aim is to exert some critical pressure on the filmic texts, somewhat 'forcing' them into revealing a concealed dimension. We must therefore expand the range of the investigation beyond its self-imposed limits to unexpected places. To do so, the analysis will focus on two films that, with one notable exception (see Costa 2004), are not typically cited as examples of the essay film genre: *Palombella rossa* (*Red Wood Pigeon*, 1989) and *La cosa* (*The Thing*, 1990).<sup>2</sup>

*Palombella rossa* revolves around a Communist politician and amateur water-polo player, Michele Apicella (played by Moretti), who suffers from severe amnesia as a result of a car accident. During a day-long game of water polo where his team is playing for the championship, Michele tries to remember who he is and reminisces about his past: his childhood, his time as a college student and his recent participation in a televised talk show where he gave a visionary speech of which he remembers nothing. Scenes from the past are interposed with dream-like sequences and conversations between Michele and various characters: his water-polo team coach, a journalist, a union leader, Michele's daughter, a couple of disillusioned militants, a Catholic activist, a friend from college and others. *Palombella rossa* premiered at the Mostra Internazionale del Cinema in Venice in early September 1989, approximately two months before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent 'Svolta della Bolognina' (the 'Bolognina Turn'), a popular shorthand for the political process inaugurated by Italian Communist Party (PCI) leader Achille Occhetto on 13 November of the same year that would eventually lead to the dissolution of the PCI and the birth of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS, Democratic Party of the Left) in 1991.

*La cosa* addresses a similar sense of disorientation, albeit from a different perspective.<sup>3</sup> In the autumn of 1989, at the height of the debate about the future of the party, Moretti took his camera to grassroots meetings of the PCI all over Italy: Francavilla di Sicilia, San Casciano Val di Pesa in Tuscany, Genoa, Naples, Turin, Milan, Bologna and Rome. After filming dozens of militant interventions and speeches on the redefinition of the party as a new 'thing' (*cosa*), Moretti and

his crew proceeded to assemble clips intercalated by brief cuts to black. Broadcast late night on the Italian public television network RAI on 6 March 1990, the film captured the sense of profound uncertainty that was shaking the party's base to its very core.

*Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* are widely considered 'twin films', and not without reason. Many critics in Italy and abroad have noted the thematic proximity between the two works, observing how both deal with the traumatic political event of the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the end of Communism, either by foreshadowing it (*Palombella rossa*) or by registering its consequences (*La cosa*) (see Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 136–46; De Bernardinis 2006: 97–117). But if *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* are twin films, they are certainly far from identical. While the former falls into the 'fiction film' category (if only with a certain uneasiness, as we will see), the latter openly positions itself as a documentary (influenced by *cinéma vérité*), characterised by fixed camera, limited editing, live sound and no voice-over commentary. This formal divergence is usually measured in terms of the subjective investment of the filmmaker.

Like many of Moretti's films, *Palombella rossa* is read as a profoundly personal, one might even say 'autobiographical' film – not only because Moretti allegedly directs himself as an avatar of himself as a person, but also because he lets his interiority speak in order to comment on political matters. On the other hand, critics have not hidden their surprise at the unusual sobriety of *La cosa*: where in the world is Moretti in this film? Where is his face, his body, his voice? The contrast is evident: to *Palombella rossa*'s deflagration of Moretti's hypertrophic ego into splinters of fantasies and memories, *La cosa* responds with a seemingly impersonal, anonymous account of the repercussions of a concrete historical event. Where, in the earlier film, the partiality of the subjective triumphs, in the later one it is the objectivity of the factual that takes centre stage. Looking at the films this way, what we have is a substantial continuity of thematic concerns (the identity crisis of the PCI and its militants) and a formal discontinuity that is explained by a variation in degrees of Moretti's subjective presence from one film to the other.<sup>4</sup>

I wish to argue that this perspective fails to problematise the question of the 'contemporary' as it is articulated in the two films. The inherent assumption of the majority of the films' critics is that of the historical present as a given, a substance that exists *objectively* – that is 'out there' – and that can therefore be perceived, apprehended and represented as such. In this sense, a work of art would be 'contemporary' insofar as it simply registers history in its unfolding, which is understood as already narrative in nature. This view overlooks the essential untimeliness that marks *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* – and, to some extent, Moretti's cinema in general.

To be sure, the PCI entered a phase of crisis well before 1989, but the fall of the Berlin Wall stands as a turning point in its downward trajectory – from that point on, calls intensified for a modernisation of the party's structure and a reorientation of its political aims toward a more generic reformism. In the two films, this historical event is bookended, put in parentheses and therefore, strictly speaking, absent from each. *Palombella rossa* is slightly ahead of the curve of history, imagining the impact of an event before it actually takes place; *La cosa* is slightly behind, stretched out to catch up with history, to make sense of what has already happened. The former comes too early, the latter too late, so that neither film is 'contemporary' to the event. And yet, this double untimeliness makes for a forceful intervention about the present: not a simple snapshot of history, but rather an attempt at thinking and representing the contemporary in the face of its evanescence.

In this sense, any reading that limits itself to situating the films in opposition to each other across a generic divide ('fiction film' versus 'documentary') shows its inadequacy. If we are to interrogate the complex ways in which history is represented in *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa*, we must rethink the relationship between the two films, radically displacing the binary of fiction film/documentary along with its burden of ingrained assumptions about subjectivity and objectivity. We need to look at the films together *and* separately: that is, as a single artistic gesture that circles around the present rather than merely 'presenting' it; and, at the same time, as a fundamental duality or split, for such is the form of the films' untimeliness. Moretti's work reveals how the historical event can only be grasped *ex-ante* *and* *ex-post*: its contours emerge in the separation between two related perspectives.

## The Diptych

I thus wish to posit a different kind of relationship between the two works – namely, that of the diptych. The etymology of the word evokes the idea of 'folding in two': literally, a diptych is 'a pair of hinged wooden tablets with waxed surfaces', or alternatively, 'a painting or carving on two panels, usually hinged like a book' (Collins English Dictionary). The two images fold onto one another, making it impossible to see them separately: one can only look at them together, side by side, when the diptych is open. In his *envoi* for the book on the essay film edited by Murielle Gagnebin and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, Jean-Louis Leutrat discusses the form of the diptych as constitutive of the essay as such. He argues that the essay as diptych is characterised by 'the division of a question that



moves' (*le partage d'une interrogation qui se déplace*) (2004: 238). The question that defines the essay exists solely in the already split form of two parts that are connected, yet separate. Also, the question moves or shifts (*se déplace*) as though the parts that constitute the essay were traversed by it – not, however, in a single sweeping movement, but rather in the division, or the 'fracture' (*schize*) (2004: 242), inherent to the form of the diptych.

In *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa*, this question can be thus formulated: 'What does it mean today to be a Communist?' It is the obsessive refrain voiced by Michele in *Palombella rossa*, but it haunts *La cosa* just as much: with varying degrees of sophistication and cogency, each intervention in the film is an individual attempt at probing the very conditions of possibility of naming oneself a Communist in 1989. Be it serially repeated by a fictional member of the PCI or rearticulated anew with each militant's intervention, the question gives shape to the sense of profound uncertainty and hesitation that seized Communist militants at the end of the 1980s. In this sense, the form of the diptych lets the historical-political dimension of *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* emerge in all its complexity. The collapse of Communism is not presented as an unproblematised historical fact; rather, it is displaced in the constant shifting of a question that is divided between a 'before' and an 'after'.

In this sense, the division inherent in the form of the diptych implies at once a fundamental discontinuity and a certain connection, for which the 'hinge' provides the ideal conceptual correlate: it brings two elements together and separates them at the same time – it *articulates* them, as a binding that allows a certain semi-autonomous movement. It stands in as the signifier of the fracture that divides the two parts; it evokes it through negation (it fills it, 'bridges' it). In this sense, the hinge stands as the essence of the diptych: a conjunctive disjunction between two elements that is irreducible to pure continuity or pure discontinuity.

Strictly speaking, neither *Palombella rossa* nor *La cosa*, taken individually, are essay films proper. But if we are looking at them separately, I want to argue, we are not looking at all. A diptych is only visible when open – that is, when the two images stand side by side, *opening themselves up* to the gaze of the spectator. Looking at the two films together as a diptych has the effect of estranging them, forcing our gaze into a strabismus of sorts: we contemplate the films obliquely, as though anamorphised. From this displaced perspective, *Palombella rossa* reveals a certain resistance to any reduction to the autobiographical or the purely fictional. By the same token, this new look makes visible unexpected essayistic intensities in *La cosa* that propel it over the narrow boundaries of the factual account. To paraphrase Leutrat, this perspective underscores a 'tending toward' the essay that, if not fully 'demonstrated', can be 'at least made perceptible'

(2004: 249). Thus, the dimension of the essayistic, along with the divided question that defines it, comes into existence in the division and conjunction of the two films – namely, at the hinge of the diptych. A ‘betrayal’ takes place, in a double sense: the films betray (forsake) their ‘proper’ generic place to betray (reveal unwittingly) the essayistic.

The wager, speculative in nature, is to see whether approaching the two films as a diptych reveals their ability to sustain a tension that avoids the risk of folding the work of interpretation back into the hypostatisation of a definitive meaning – i.e., Moretti himself, his ‘intention’, his ‘interiority’, but also ‘history’. What I want to emphasise instead is the way in which the formal and discursive qualities proper to the essayistic – its ‘structuration’ (Barthes 1973: 1015) – necessarily shatter any guarantee of the stability of meaning (including the Author and the Historical Narrative as primary guarantees of its origin), only existing in the precarious form of a question that displaces itself.

This perspective requires what we might call a *commitment to crisis*. Obviously, many a crisis is at the centre of Moretti’s reflections in both films: the crises of Communism, the PCI, the militants, Michele himself and so forth. But above and beyond any thematic reference, we might want to reach a little further and ask: Would it be possible – or even desirable – to locate in ‘crisis’ the governing principle of *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* as essayistic films? Moretti himself draws our attention to the semantic plurality and significance of the term, when the talk show host in *Palombella rossa* rattles off a list of synonyms of ‘crisis’ (*crisi*) from the dictionary: ‘Worsening, impairment, onset, paroxysm, modification, perturbation, difficulty, disarray, recession, depression, ruin, imbalance, upset, dismay, agitation, bewilderment...’ And then, mockingly, to Michele: ‘Congressman, which expression do you prefer for your party?’ A cut back to the water-polo game concludes the scene abruptly, but if we are to imagine Michele’s answer, it could well have been, ‘All of them’, signaling the pervasiveness and multiplicity of ‘crisis’ as a structuring idea caught in an endless metonymical transformation – less a meaning than a process. And what is this proliferation of the meanings of crisis if not a crisis of meaning itself, the impossibility of answering a question that displaces itself? Crisis, etymologically, is the *criterion* of the essayistic in Moretti: committing to crisis means taking crisis at its word, *losing oneself in it*.

What is at stake in this reading is nothing short of a definition of the political in the Morettian oeuvre. Films like *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* are widely regarded as examples of Moretti’s *cinéma engagé*, and while the meaning of this qualification tends to slightly vary from one critic to another, the shared assumption, especially in Anglo-American scholarship, is that Moretti’s

filmmaking is political insofar as it represents events or situations that have political relevance – i.e. the crisis of the PCI, the generational paradoxes of 1977 in *Io sono un autarchico* (*I Am Self-Sufficient*, 1976) and *Ecce Bombo* (1978), the victory of the centre-left coalition in the 1996 Italian general election in *Aprile*, the rise of Berlusconi in *Il caimano* (*The Caiman*, 2006), etc.<sup>5</sup> And even when a film does not revolve primarily around politics, the presence of the political is guaranteed by a character's joke, or a passing remark in Moretti's voice-over comment (as in *Caro diario*, for instance). Therefore, the political in Moretti is primarily seen as *thematic*, a matter of content, to the point where a film like *La stanza del figlio* (*The Son's Room*, 2001), which refrains from engaging with politics in its factual-historical concreteness, is to be counted as 'a *vacanza* (*vacation*) from a direct representation of Italy's social and political reality' (Bonsaver 2001/2: 180).

There is no doubt that Moretti's films have always shown a particular propensity for capturing the complexities of political shifts produced by recent historical events – crises, more precisely. The French critic Serge Toubiana coined a famous expression to capture this peculiar receptiveness: *Palombella rossa*, he writes, is 'the most contemporary film that we have been given to see in a long time, and a confirmation that Moretti is a brilliant seismograph [*sismographe de génie*]' (1989: 15). The metaphor – with its allusion to mechanical transcription – is not without its force, and indeed many commentators have appropriated it, implicitly or explicitly, to the point where the idea of Moretti's cinema as a sort of Kittlerian *Aufschreibesystem* has become almost an axiom.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, we must handle Toubiana's moniker with a certain care. The temptation might be that of reducing a film like *Palombella rossa* to a historical document, the unmediated imprint of a given event. To be sure, both films can certainly be read this way. Yet this interpretation hardly exhausts the complexity of the political dimension of Moretti's cinema. The seismographic process of inscription of the telluric movements of the real onto the surface of the work of art always implies a mediation, a formal transcoding. So the paradoxes of a chronologically and geographically situated political crisis are not merely registered by the films, but rather reconstructed and reenacted as the insistence of a more general interrogation: What does it mean today to be a Communist? The two films, in this sense, respond to crisis by adopting 'crisis' as their form.

Therefore, while it would be impossible to deny the significance of the representation of factual-historical politics in Moretti (consigning his films, as it were, to the historical archive of Italy), one of the most compelling dimensions of the political in films like *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* resides elsewhere – namely, in the question they articulate formally as a diptych.

## A Question That Displaces Itself

There is a certain vitality to the question ‘What does it mean today to be a Communist?’ in *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa*, which is why, to echo Leutrat, it moves. This vitality, however, has something of the quality of the undead. The question does not grow or evolve into something else. And yet it shifts, endlessly displacing itself from character to character, from scene to scene – and from film to film. This movement resembles a sort of machinic compulsion whose fundamental figure is the return of the same: its insistence possesses an obscene vitality that exceeds the boundaries of life and death and keeps coming back, relentlessly. In *Palombella rossa*, for instance, the question is attached to an obstinate repetition that immediately evacuates its meaning: in the talk show sequence, Michele reiterates the question multiple times, effectively reducing it to a senseless echo. Similarly, the militants in *La cosa*, when they do not ask the question as explicitly as one Bolognese woman does (posing the question directly: ‘What does it mean to have been Communists?’), still obsessively circle around it, shaping their interventions around the void left by the lack of a suitable answer.

This unrelenting, ‘undead’ return of the question points to a twofold set of problems. First, the question returns because there is no answer for it – that is, no way of objectively naming the historical situation of being a Communist in Italy (or anywhere else?) at the turn of the decade. The recurrence of the question, be it in the form of an actual repetition (*Palombella rossa*) or as a continuous allusion (*La cosa*), denounces the impossibility of ‘solving the riddle’ by clinging onto a stable, definite meaning. In fact, one could argue that the word ‘Communism’ appears in the diptych as either too full of meaning or too empty. In *Palombella rossa*, the dissemination of the word in various situations and *vis-à-vis* various interlocutors signals Michele’s inability to ‘say’ its meaning. His desperate attempts at establishing some coordinates to triangulate the sense of ‘being a Communist today’ only result in a frenzied proliferation of the question, which, in turn, is nothing but a symptom of the word’s own historically determined inadequacy to define a certain relationship between the individual and society. Being a Communist, today, no longer means anything: this is what prompts the film to rummage for shreds of sense in memories and fantasies – always *elsewhere*, because the ‘here and now’ (the present) ceaselessly reminds Michele of the fundamental emptiness of his own partisanship.

If in *Palombella rossa* the word ‘Communist’ is reduced to little more than an empty echo, in *La cosa* it becomes suddenly too full, too burdened with history. In other words, it means *too much*: too much to be abandoned, too much to be preserved. For some militants, the word is the common denominator of

an infinite set of personal and collective memories, experiences, struggles, a self-interpellation that guarantees, if only on an imaginary level, the coherence of a political belonging; for others, it is the memento of everything that went wrong, as it were, from Stalinism to the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The antithesis is evident: for one faction, there is no future without the past; for the other, there is no future if not without the past. Be it in the form of nostalgic attachments or hasty reckonings, the relationship of the militants with the history of the word 'Communist' remains deeply unresolved.

Secondly, in the two films the repeated displacement of the question must also be read as a *misplacement*: the 'undead' return of the question results not only in its uncontrolled proliferation, but also, and consequently, in its persistently being out of place. In *Palombella rossa*, Michele's attempts to interrogate the meaning of being a Communist is derided at the talk show, and variously misunderstood, pitied, dismissed or outright ignored by numerous characters at the swimming pool. So the question is everywhere, but nowhere appropriate – as though there was no 'right place' from which to ask it.<sup>7</sup>

This predicament reaches its ironic peak in *La cosa*, where the question is formulated at the grassroots meetings of the PCI. Indeed, one should ask: could there be a more proper place? And yet, this is where the question reveals its radical 'improperness' – literally, the quality of 'not belonging' anywhere. On a general (one could say, transnational) level, to talk about Communism at the cusp between the 1980s and the 1990s means inevitably colliding with the idea of Communism's own inactuality. But if 'Communist' means too much to the militants in *La cosa*, it is also because of the geopolitically and historically specific situation of the PCI. In a way, the trajectory of the PCI, always marked by a dominant reformist tendency – from Togliatti's 'Italian way' to socialism to the '*compromesso storico*' (the 'historical compromise' between the PCI and the Christian Democrats during the years of political terrorism), up to the dissolution of the PCI into a centre-left party – already encapsulates a certain contemporary opacity within the idea of Communism itself, at least in Italy. It thus prompts us to ask, somewhat redundantly: What does it mean to interrogate the meaning of 'being a Communist' from within the ranks of a party that – to paraphrase one militant's expression – stopped being *comunista* a while ago? Is this not a testament to the very impossibility of even asking the question?

This perspective points to a very specific paradox in the two films – namely, that of a question that is asked in public spaces and, at the same time, in complete isolation. Although Michele's meditations might be 'directed' to his interlocutors, they are really 'addressed' to no one in particular. Even in *La cosa* there is no immediate continuity or confrontation among the various interventions, so that the

film is less the chronicling of an unfolding discussion than a mapping of different positions taken in themselves, with their reciprocal proximities and distances. So, that which in *Palombella rossa* has the traits of existential solitude, in *La cosa* becomes a display of political atomisation, be it in the guise of a personal affective attachment to a long-gone idea of collectivity or an impulse to distance oneself from one's own past militancy that is just as individualising. This is not to say that the militants in *La cosa* lack what Mario Tronti (2007) calls '*l'orgoglio comunista*' ('Communist pride'); quite the contrary. The forceful display of this *orgoglio*, however, is to be understood within the larger framework of an impossibility of Communist militancy – precisely, that is, as the last meaningful remainder of a relationship between the militant and the party that is in an advanced state of decomposition. So while the reading of the film as a glorious moment of democratic confrontation is not without its value, I want to stress the oft-overlooked sense of a 'thwarted' or 'impossible' conversation that pervades it.

A certain idea of impasse thus emerges: in the diptych, the question about Communism has no appropriate place and no addressee. In this sense, it is not only a question without an answer – it is also, and more specifically, *a question that cannot be posed*. It can, however, be displaced, 'essayed'. It can be shaped into an undead presence that haunts every scene of the films, announcing itself as the emblem of a political impasse. But this emblem is inherently fragmented, heterogeneous: the constant displacement and misplacement of the 'divided' question determine the structuration of the texts by radically undermining their linearity. The result is the predominance in both films of a heterogeneity that nonetheless presents itself as organised, arranged – a logic of interweaving into which the essayistic 'question that moves' prolongs itself.<sup>8</sup>

## Interweaving

Let us tentatively define this logic as follows: in the films a formal structuration is at work in which fragments are juxtaposed in a movement of 'incessant counterposing' (*continuo contrapporsi*) (De Gaetano 2012): neither the homogeneity and self-identity of the classical Work, nor pure heterogeneity, but a texture of fragments, be it the drifts of memories and reveries (*Palombella rossa*) or a montage of musings, reflections and rants (*La cosa*). The essayistic form in both films emerges as the interweaving of fragments in which unity is a textual effect and not the expression of any authorial 'intention'. From Montaigne to Barthes, this has always been one of the tenets of the essay: the only identity is that of the plurality of difference, the only unity that of a text interwoven with divergences, detours,

excursions. The most critical consequence of this ontology of the essay, as Réda Bensmaïa notes, is the radical effacement of the concept of a unitary origin – be it ‘idea’, ‘thought’ or ‘intention’ (1987: 9).

In *Palombella rossa*, this essayistic interweaving takes the shape of a series of intersections between different temporal and spatial planes. It is as though the trauma of the initial car accident suspended time in its linear movement to conjure an image of time as synchronicity and vertiginous co-presence of different instants – a Deleuzian crystal-image. As a result, the narrative thrust of the film is tenuous at best, punctuated as it is with sparse turning points: a car accident; a bus trip from Rome to Acireale; a water-polo game; another car accident. In fact, this rudimentary narrative sequence – a skeleton, really – is less a description than a somewhat unwarranted abstraction that hardly gives a sense of *Palombella rossa*'s textual functioning. Throughout the film, narrative development is time and again hindered, suspended, deferred – not so much absent as ‘thwarted’ (see Rancière 2006: 1–20). The film runs against the grain of narrative: its substance is not narrative development, but a staging of its crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Let us consider the following sequence, which takes place early in the film, right before the start of the game. Michele's team is lined up at the poolside, pictured in a long shot that also captures the buildings around the pool. We see the youngest players on the team, two kids in their early teens, doing some stretching, and then Michele, kneeling close to the water, looking at them. Cut to a close-up of Michele as a kid, waiting at the poolside in what is presumably his first time at swimming school, his mother behind him. He is looking at other kids' parents, who are timing their sons' and daughters' performances and yelling at them to try harder. He then turns back to his mother, quickly exchanges looks with her and smiles. Cut to the pool, today: the camera follows Michele walking poolside, but it stops abruptly when two angered Communist militants appear and offer Michele some sweets, congratulating him for his intervention ‘on Tuesday’ and demanding that he give them ‘the names’. Michele remains silent, his bewilderment evident in a couple of close-ups. The militants then fly into a rage, at which point he turns around and walks away, but he is intercepted by another character, a union leader, who explains to him the importance of ‘directing’ the masses, so as not to waste the ‘antagonistic potential’ they embody. The union leader follows Michele into a narrow corridor and slowly, almost ominously moves forward, while Michele – who is still silent – backs away, as though intimidated. Before the leader can conclude his speech, Michele dives into a small canal that leads into the pool. A phantasmatic scene ensues, in which Michele and his teammates swim among colourful floating advertisements of bakeries and pastry shops, to the music of Nicola Piovani's soundtrack.



Fig. 1: Michele among advertisements for pastries: *Palombella rossa* (Nanni Moretti, 1989)

One can see how the logic of interweaving is at work here. The complete lack of transition between heterogeneous levels of reality makes it impossible to assign them to any diegetic hierarchy, so that the various fragments are not subsumed by the narrative fabric of the film, but instead maintain their relative autonomy. (The fragment is by definition unruly, it *resists*: it defies incorporation and interpretation – in a word, domestication). The swimming pool thus becomes the scene of a series of irruptions: characters, memories, fantasies materialise unannounced, cut across the surface of the film, taking Michele and the spectator by surprise.

But the ‘shock’ effect is also internal to each of the fragments. They are permeated by a certain performative exuberance, an excessive aura that bears the mark of aggression (the parents’ yells, the militants’ fit of rage, the overbearing union leader) or that of the extravagance of an imaginary drift (the floating advertisements) in which personal fetishes – such as Michele/Nanni’s beloved pastries – proliferate uncontrollably and a playful pacification meets a certain disorientation. In the first instance (aggression), the excess fills up the space, takes the air out of the shots: the possibility of fight is foreclosed, flight stands as the only option – hence Michele’s silence, coupled with a constant recoiling: looking back to his mother, walking away from the militants, diving into the pool to escape from the union leader.

Even in this cursory analysis, the fragmentation already suggests traces of continuity. Like threads weaving through a fabric, these assonances (a persistence of excess, Michele’s remissive demeanour) create unexpected continuities. A properly essayistic tension is thus established between the radical indiscipline of the fragment and unity as an effect of textual structuration.<sup>10</sup> In the scene in



question, the shock of a series of irruptions coexists with the (fragmented) unity of a discourse articulated through montage.<sup>11</sup> The cut – the only transition the film concedes – is not pure discontinuity, but a *division that unites*. Fragment after fragment, cut after cut, the process of interweaving as a form of the essayistic produces a certain relationality: not a mere cacophony, but a polyphony made of dissonances and contrasts.

Contrast and dissonance are also inscribed in the textual fabric of *La cosa* from the very beginning. Let us look at the first scene of the film. The words ‘*Sacher Film presenta*’ (Sacher Film presents) appear on a red screen similar to the one that opens *Palombella rossa*, while the faint bustle of many overlapping voices fades in. A shot in medium field follows: people sitting in a room fill up the frame, the majority in the audience, a couple at a desk, facing the crowd. The camera, positioned on the side of the audience, also shows a PCI flag stashed in a corner, while a PCI logo is visible on the wall. The bustle continues; the word ‘*segretario*’ (‘party leader’) is audible. Cut to a lateral close-up of a local party leader, sitting at the desk and addressing the audience: ‘...starting from this, from this great heritage, it sets for itself the objective to build a thing [*cosa*] ... a thing that is greater and – if you allow me the expression – more beautiful too.’ Cut to the audience: a militant is turned around, another (who is speaking) is partially outside the frame, a third is in the background. The camera becomes suddenly mobile, and tries to put the militant who is speaking at the centre of the frame. His index finger is presumably pointed at someone behind the desk. He raises his voice, visibly irritated. Cue Tracy Chapman’s song, ‘Mountains O’ Things’. In his rant in Sicilian dialect, the only audible words are the name of the city of Reggio Calabria and an angry order, ‘*ma vattene*’ (‘get out!’). After he leaves, the image cuts to the opening title (‘*La cosa*’) on a red screen.

The positioning of the scene within the economy of the text, after the production credits (‘*Sacher Film presenta*’) but before the opening title and the actual credits, marks it immediately as something that is played beforehand but that also implies or hints at what will follow: not merely a preamble but a *praeludium*, a prelude. For instance, the first shot (people taking their seats, local leaders sitting at a desk) is the beginning of a local PCI meeting, but also, metonymically, the beginning of *all* the meetings portrayed in *La cosa*. And what is the dyad composed of the two following shots if not a *précis* of the conflictual tension that traverses the entire film? A tension that is never simply registered, but staged and fleshed out – in a certain sense, *created*. Indeed, there is no direct temporal continuity between the two shots (the protester’s rant could very well be unconnected to the local leader’s intervention). But the film interweaves them, thus defining *en abyme* the contours of an irreconcilable split – immanent to the debate within *La*



Fig. 2a: At the party meeting



Fig. 2b: "A thing that is greater and more beautiful, too"



Fig. 2c: A militant responds: *La cosa* (Nanni Moretti, 1990)

*cosa* – between the acceptance (either optimistic or fatalistic) of the ‘new’ and an attachment (nostalgic or belligerent) to the PCI of the past.<sup>12</sup>

In the rest of the film, the juxtaposition of fragments produces similar continuity effects, but the intervention of editing takes on a different shape – namely, that of the *interstice*. Besides the red screens that announce the time and location of the meetings, the militants’ speeches are separated by brief cuts to black – a sort of ‘mediated’ juxtaposition in which the edges of the shots are prevented from coming into contact. Many commentators have dismissed these intermissions as

simply functional to the economy of the film: they elide drifts and cut superfluous bits within the general framework of an editing style that wishes to remain invisible. Typical, in this regard, is the critique of Antioco Floris:

The editing is very plain, almost austere in its essentiality. As though the author did not want to intervene to give a specific connotation to a moment or underline a position and wanted to limit himself to present things as they actually happened. [...] Moretti grasps the human dimension, rather than the historical-political implications of the debate, letting the feelings of the protagonists emerge with deep sentiment. (2012: 210)

But, we should ask, isn't a black interstice precisely a way of making editing perceptible? This is, after all, Godard's use of the cut to black: injecting a certain temporal substance – a duration – into the act of 'cutting' to dilate it into something that makes the cut itself visible. Yes, the cut in its irreducible negativity remains unscathed in the passage from image to black and vice versa (at the edges of the black, as it were). But the interstice gives body to discontinuity, thus forcing the spectator to come to terms with its fleeting and all-pervasive presence. In this sense, editing in *La cosa* might well be 'plain' (*sobrio*) but it is far from insignificant.

A specific moment in the film reveals the incompleteness of the 'economical' interpretation of the editing in the film. In the intervention of the film's last speaker in Rome, something surprising happens. While he is explaining how he understands his own difference as a Communist ('I am a Communist and my ideal is the abolition of private property [...]. I want the means of production to be collective'), the image suddenly cuts to black to then return to the speaker, who continues his intervention. The interstice, however, *does not excise anything from the speech*: it is not an elision for dramatic purposes, but a handful of black frames that deliberately interrupt the movement of an otherwise continuous shot (this is evident from the position of the speaker's body and the coherence of his statements). As in Godard, it functions as a sort of punctuation, a spacing that interrupts the flow of the discourse.

This faux interstice – replicated less than two minutes later – prompts three reflections. First, the 'economical' interpretation of the montage in *La cosa* is untenable, along with the ideological corollary of Moretti's alleged aesthetic of immediacy that would let the 'feelings of the protagonists' emerge. In other words, *the interstice matters in itself*, not only in relation to what it eliminates. Second, and relatedly: this specific incarnation of the cut to black – which, if we recall, comes at the very end of the film – casts new light on all the other interstices that punctuate *La cosa*. In the textual economy of the film, the interstice is configured

as a lack. Not only, however, in the sense of the signifier of an absence, a sign that stands in for what is excluded from the film; but also, and primarily, as an absence of image and sound – the emergence of silence in an otherwise endless speaking. As such, it is the sign of a recurrence of a non-meaning around which the essayistic dimension of the film is articulated – which brings us to the third point. When analysed closely, the textual structuration of *La cosa* resists any attempt to domesticate it into simplistic taxonomies: not only does it refute any claim of naïve realism, but it also complicates any reading of the film as the demonstration of a thesis or as the manifestation of the interiority of the Author. *La cosa*, in other words, cannot be understood as a mere succession of fragments of the real selected and edited to prove a point, or to express the director's 'deep sentiment'.

So, any understanding of *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* (or any Moretti film) that casts them as mere expressions of what the Author thinks or feels is ultimately misleading – and it is a short step from there to reducing the entire Morettian oeuvre to one colossal autobiography (see Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004: 14–45). The persuasiveness of this reading, along with its undeniable popularity, stems from a certain idealistic allure: the meaning of the filmic text would allegedly reside outside the text itself, in the transcendental dimension of authorial intention.<sup>13</sup> But studying the essay as a form necessarily means reaffirming the autonomy of the text – it means positing the idea that the essay, as a form, can think. But how are we to define this essayistic thought?

## Athetic Thinking and the Labour of the Essay Film

So far, we have seen how the essayistic in *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* assumes the form of the diptych, animated by 'a question that displaces itself'; from this essayistic configuration derives a specific structuration of the text (interweaving) in which heterogeneity and a precarious unity coexist. The further step we need to take has to do with the relationship between thought and the essay form.

Traditionally, the essay film has been associated with thinking and thought, and variously named a 'form that thinks' (Godard in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (*History(ies) of Cinema*, 1988)), a 'way of thinking', to quote the title of Bellour's article (2011), or a '*pensée en acte*' ('thought in action'; Moure 2004: 37). What all these denominations have in common is their emphasis on the immanence of thought to the concrete formal organisation of the essay itself, so that this '*pensée en acte*' is not to be understood as the illustration of a preexisting idea, but rather as an act of thinking in its own right, caught in its textual formulation. In *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa*, it is as a result of the uniting division that underpins the

form of the diptych that this *pensée en acte* comes into existence. Looking at the two films as a diptych unlocks the possibility of essaying crisis, of thinking it in its historical unfolding.

From this perspective, I wish to suggest that the *pensée en acte* in the two films emerges as essentially 'athetic' – that is, without a thesis as originating Idea but also, from the Greek *tithenai* (to place), non-located, without a place. Like the question that, divided, displaces itself through the diptych, this athetic thought has no proper place. It shifts constantly, circling around a radical impossibility, an object that attracts it and at the same time escapes its grasp absolutely. In *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa*, this object is the historical present marked by a traumatic political crisis.

The athetic thought in the films manifests itself as a movement and, in one and the same gesture, as the negation of that very movement: it is what Derrida (1987) calls '*pas de démonstration*' (a pun on the French for 'step' that also means 'not'). Its sign is a certain tentativeness that reflects the etymology of 'essaying' as 'attempting', a process of 'the trials and errors of consciousness' (van der Keuken 1992: 36, quoted in Bellour 2011: 51) or, in the case of *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa*, of drifts and cuts. In this sense, the two films are not simply a stage for the recurrence of a question of immense historical and political significance nor a mere formal excursion into the limits of narrative, but an attempt at thinking them together as a way of representing a crisis. Therefore, 'committing to crisis' means committing to a specific, precarious form of thinking without guarantees, with no origin that is not immanent to the text (not the Author, nor the Personal, nor History) and no place other than endless displacement.

For this very reason, thinking athetically is a daunting task. Thinking crisis – and putting thought itself, its linearity, in crisis – implies a work of doing and undoing, of springing forward and recoiling. It means embracing fragmentation without giving in to it, and committing to a question, knowing that it may be impossible to answer it. It is a delicate balance that requires constant work: what we might call, in homage to Thierry Kuntzel's famous '*travail du film*' (1972), a 'labour of the essay film' – bringing together repetition and heterogeneity, the haunting return of a question and the fragmentation of a thwarted narrative, to imagine a way of thinking the present as crisis. This labour of the essay film entails the idea of a sustained effort and the kind of exertion and fatigue associated with it, something film editor Mirco Garrone echoes in a remarkable parallelism when he recounts how it took him and Moretti nine months just to edit *Palombella rossa* (and, in similar terms, how the shooting itself was exhausting: Moretti not only had to act and direct, but also to swim and float in the pool for hours) (seer Chatrian and Renzi 2008: 120; Gili 2001: 72–3).

It also means resisting what Serge Daney, writing about *Palombella rossa*, calls an ‘asphyxiating desire to say everything’ (1991: 232 n15). Already in itself the expression captures the sense of a struggle: there is no such thing as ‘saying everything’, only a desire to; and this desire can become ‘asphyxiating’, suffocating altogether any attempt at saying, if only something. And yet this ‘saying’ exists only in the working through of its own impasse, between the repetition of a question that is always misplaced and the precarious interweaving of a series of fragments. So, contrary to what Fabienne Costa argues, *Palombella rossa* (and, we should add, *La cosa*) does not embody a notion of the essayistic gesture as ‘freedom’ or ‘absence of rules’ (2004: 187), but rather the fatigue of saying something about the present in the face of its impossibility. Michele himself points to this conundrum right after a strenuous match-up with Budavari: ‘If I translate what I have in mind in a simple formula, I fail.’ Not sinking, nor swimming: to quote Daney, it is more like floating, for ‘floating is still labour’ (*flotter, c’est encore du travail*); 1991: 165).

### *Per Partito Preso*:<sup>14</sup> In Guise of a Conclusion

How to conclude an essay about two films that ridicule the very idea of a conclusion? *Palombella rossa* ends with another (fatal?) car accident and the image of Michele and the other characters motionless on a hill, reaching toward a papier-mâché rising sun while Michele as a kid laughs uncontrollably: the closure effect produced by the circularity of the accident is immediately undermined by the mockingly messianic appearance of the sun and the kid’s reaction to it. Similarly, in *La cosa* the intervention of the last militant wraps up with a joke (‘what the fuck did you conclude?!’) about the absurdity of drawing ‘conclusions’ after a heated debate where agreement seems impossible.

For Moretti, committing to crisis also means preserving it as an organising principle, and therefore refusing to neutralise his representations of impasse with consolatory solutions. In fact, we might read the endings of the two films as distinct but intertwined arguments about the ultimate impossibility of imagining the meaning of ‘being a Communist’ today. In *Palombella rossa*, this impasse takes the shape of a grotesque stillness: crushed between a nostalgic past and a future as a parodic fantasy of revolution, the political present can only be represented plastically as a moment of frozen longing, a tension that forces the subject into paralysis. The last shots of *La cosa*, on the other hand, suggest the idea of a conversation that continues indefinitely: the meeting has ended, and the camera moves among the participants standing in the room; the discussion is still

ongoing, and the indistinct hum of their voices remains audible after the credits start to roll. But one has the legitimate suspicion that this might be less a celebration of a productive confrontation than the effect of a deadlock. Indeed, before the image cuts to the credits, the camera lingers on a couple of militants who are discussing the situation of the PCI precisely in these terms: 'If you go ahead, you lose a segment of the party; if you go back, you'll have everybody coming at you.'

But while it is crucial to understand the fundamental pessimism that permeates the two films, it is just as important to dispel any suspicion of cynicism. *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* are not entomologies of a crisis: their *pensée en acte* is far from a detached, nihilistic dissection of the present. On the contrary, this essayistic thought lets itself be profoundly affected by the consequences of its own unfolding. The films do not limit themselves to registering the collapse of the idea of Communist militancy; they also suggest that this very crisis produces a remainder that exceeds any merely diagnostic dimension. The films are able to capture this remainder as an unspecified 'desire for collectivity' that signals its presence in the crowded rooms and impassioned interventions of *La cosa*, as much as in Michele's confession in the locker room at the end of *Palombella rossa*:

I was expecting more from life, more and better ... although this pizza, the locker room ... the locker room: this is the reason why I played water polo for twenty-five years, a sport that I don't even like that much ... but these away games, the bus trips, the service stations, the insults and spitting from the crowd, the opponents kicking you ... well, all this is just beautiful.

In the two films this attachment to an idea of collectivity takes on different shapes. In *La cosa*, there is a recurrence of the autobiographical: the worker who moved to Turin when he was young and found support and help with the local militants; the woman who, already working at the age of eleven, asked her mother why there were rich and poor people, and found the answers she was looking for in a PCI leaflet; and so forth. *Palombella rossa*, on the other hand, is punctuated by ephemeral moments in which the crowd and the players suddenly gather around splinters of popular culture, 'funny utopias that unite the individual and society in an uncertain yet intense way' (Morreale 2012: 80), such as the ending of David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) screened on a television at the swimming pool's bar; or Italian *cantautore* (singer-songwriter) Franco Battiato's '*E ti vengo a cercare*' ('And I Come Seeking for You'), sung by the crowd while Michele is about to shoot the decisive penalty. In the two films, the possibility of imagining a collectivity necessarily passes through these bottlenecks in which a certain intensity of desire becomes fetishistically fixated on inadequate objects.<sup>15</sup>

But however confused or nostalgic, this desire for collectivity stands out in the barren political landscape of the late 1980s. In the face of the waning of the meaning of the word 'Communist' (along with the possibility of interrogating it altogether), this desire is at the same time the symptom and the remnant of a larger need for coordinates to map the position of the individual in relation to society at large. But in the context of Communism, the individual's position within society has always been grounded on a necessarily partisan conception of what society is, and what it ought to be. It is as though in the films of the diptych the evaporation of the meaning traditionally associated with Communist militancy has laid bare the pure structure of partisanship as a commitment that is inherently partial and conflictual ('I am a Communist!' says Michele, who doesn't remember anything else, confidently) and that might be reduced to emptiness, but not necessarily to futility. In this sense, the moment of truth of partisanship would be the moment of crisis of imaginary identifications – when partisanship is all that is left. This is the other side of *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa*: that of partisanship in spite of all.

In hindsight, it would be only natural to read this partisanship for partisanship's sake (in Italian, one would say *per partito preso*) as a lucid reconnoitering of the ground zero of the public debate about Communism at the turn of the decade. The diptych was a witness to the advanced state of deterioration of the political discourse on Communism, capturing the terminal phase of an impasse that would soon turn into the total eclipse that lasted throughout the 1990s and most of the 2000s. It is not until 2009 – exactly twenty years from the release of *Palombella rossa* – that we observe a resurgence, however tentative, of the discussion on the topic, in concomitance with the two conferences on 'The Idea of Communism' in London and New York (to be followed by Berlin in 2010 and Seoul in 2013) that brought together some of the world's leading Marxist theorists. While the question that moves remains the same as Moretti's, the hope rekindled by these events is that we can find again a place from which to ask it.

## Notes

- 1 Emphasis in the original; my translation; unless otherwise noted, all translations from French and Italian are mine.
- 2 Though widely used, 'Red Wood Pigeon' and 'The Thing' (like 'I Am Self-Sufficient' and 'The Caiman', which appear later in the essay) are not official translations of the original Italian titles.
- 3 'La cosa' ('the thing'), epitome of the amorphous, is the makeshift name PCI leader Occhetto gave to the political party under construction that was to arise



from the ashes of the PCI. One can see the reason for a certain anxiety among the militants regarding the name: in Freud and Lacan, 'das Ding' evokes the uncanny, the at once unbearably familiar and all-too-alien. To say nothing of the shape-shifting monster in John Carpenter's 1982 horror flick *The Thing*...

- 4 Ever self-sufficient as in the title of his first feature film (*Io sono un autarchico*), Moretti has written and starred in all the films he has directed so far. The blueprint for this brand of filmmaking was set already at the early stages of his career, with the shorts *La sconfitta* (*The Defeat*) and *Pâté de bourgeois* in 1973, and then developed into a style that today is as widely recognised as it is disparaged for its alleged narcissism.
- 5 See, for instance, Mazierska and Rascaroli 2004; and Bonsaver 2001/2.
- 6 *Aufschreibesystem* meaning literally, 'system of writing down' or 'notation system': a technology that allows the recording and storing of relevant data.
- 7 It is also worth noting that this impasse of a question without a proper space determines the presence of comedy in *Palombella rossa*. In a film that 'is set poolside and in which nobody pushes anybody and nobody falls into the water accidentally or for comic effect' (Daney 1993: 165), it is the impropriety of the question that generates the laughter. So, the sense of incongruity produced by the emergence of the question in inappropriate places (i.e. the conversation between Michele and Imre Budavari during the game) is as humorous as the sense of inanity and impotence that permeates the same emergence in places that should be appropriate but are not (the interview, the talk show).
- 8 Consider, for instance, these passages from Adorno: 'In the essay ... thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet; '[The essay's] transitions disavow rigid deduction in the interest of establishing internal cross-connections, something for which discursive logic has no use' (1984: 160, 169).
- 9 Roberto De Gaetano (2012) observes a similar configuration of narrative impasse in the film, and proposes to read it as the final stage of a trajectory inaugurated as early as in *Io sono un autarchico*. According to De Gaetano, several of the recurrent traits in early Moretti – the reliance on an episodic structure and the recourse to characters as masks in particular – literally 'explode' in *Palombella rossa*, where narrative coherence nearly disintegrates and masks proliferate uncontrollably. De Gaetano identifies in the 'grotesque' the sign of this aesthetic extremization, the coagulant that obstructs the linear flow of narrative. One can hardly dispute the prominence of the grotesque in Moretti: it is the locus of a certain critical distance, a deliberate magnification and deformation of reality that creates a space from which the latter can – and must – be criticised (and De Gaetano is certainly right to trace back the genealogy of the Morettian grotesque

not so much to the unapologetic vitalism of Fellini, but rather to the dark and cruel visions of Risi, Petri and Ferreri). Yet the grotesque seems to be just one term of the formal equation in *Palombella rossa* – the other being the diptych structure the film constitutes with *La cosa*.

- 10 Indeed, one could further pursue the search for continuities in the sequence in question. For instance, in the ‘opening’ irruption, namely, the childhood memory, Michele’s fleeting look at his mother and subsequent smile clearly suggest a need for reassurance in the face of the other parents’ brutal incitements to their sons and daughters – a reassurance about his mother’s *difference*, and therefore Michele’s own. Does this fragment not mirror and anticipate the predicament of Michele as an adult, as silent and perplexed as his young self when confronted with the aggressiveness of the militants and the union leader? Is it not possible to draw a parallel between that fleeting look and Michele’s dive into his own fantasy – a pool crowded with comforting images of sweets and pastries – as a way of reassuring oneself of one’s own difference? This all too brief discussion can easily be extended to the entire film. Even what I have implicitly posited as the primary irruption is not quite that, for it is already implicated in the two shots that precede it – namely, the two kids stretching and the close-up of Michele looking at them sideways. And even before that, one of the two kids is the only player left to listen to the coach’s instructions.
- 11 Of course, montage in general hinges on a dialectic between unity and division. What I am highlighting here is the specific idea of a unity that emerges from echoes and assonances rather than from continuity, and that coexists with a series of irruptions. In this sense, in Moretti fragmentation conceptually pre-dates any sense of unity – the opposite of what happens in classical Hollywood, for instance, where a unity presented as pre-existing (be it spatial or temporal) is fragmented into discrete shots. This is why in Moretti we can talk about ‘unexpected continuities’, whereas in classical Hollywood continuity is always assumed or implicit.
- 12 *Pace* the critics who see no aesthetic mediation at work in the film (see Floris 2012), the contrast between the militant and the local leader is also carefully framed on a formal level: the fixity of the local leader in a lateral close-up (almost an effigy!) versus the exuberance of the militant, accentuated by the movement of the camera; a paced, almost theatrical declamation versus a sudden outburst, with all the spontaneity semantically associated with the use of dialect.
- 13 To my knowledge, in the Anglo-American context only Alan O’Leary has been able to resist the temptation to conflate author, persona and character in Moretti, while also calling for a more nuanced approach to the question of autobiography. In his review of Mazierska and Rascaroli’s *The Cinema of Nanni Moretti*

he writes: '[W]e can understand the Morettian persona in its various guises as a Maguffin, as stylistic *donnée*, the hanger upon which fragments of observation may be suspended in order to give the impression of coherence [...]. Realizing this, we can resist the temptation to see the autobiographical elements in the films as amounting to a portrait of the *man* and emphasize their projection of the *citizen* or *subject*: the constructed personality that suffers and embodies history rather than being the spurious origin of the situations portrayed.' (2005: 210–11). For O'Leary, what needs to be avoided is precisely 'a humanist conception of the originating consciousness of the auteur' (2005: 211) – a concern that clearly resonates with the purposes of the present essay.

- 14 The locution plays on a double entendre: 'partisanship for its own sake' and, more literally, 'for a party that is taken'.
- 15 Rosa Barotsi and Pierpaolo Antonello detect a similar desire at work in Moretti's film, and observe that *Palombella rossa* emblematically encapsulates the need to communicate and to find new words that could reconstruct the lost memory of the individual as a synecdoche of the collective, as well as the need to overcome the vacuity of political discourses with a renewed desire for new political elements and a new community' (2009: 199).

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# **PART THREE**

The Essay Film as Utopia

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# Chapter 9

## Mohamed Soueid's Cinema of Immanence<sup>1</sup>

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Laura U. Marks

Near the beginning of Mohamed Soueid's *Nightfall* (2000), the voice of the filmmaker's old comrade Bassem recites a poem he has written, while another friend prepares them a meal in an underground auto-repair shop. As tiny fish sizzle in oil the poet intones: 'I am Bassem, the sad smile – I am the conscience of the people, the wound of the city.' Soueid's camera attends to his friend's careful hands squeezing lemon and carefully garnishing a dish of hummus, as the gentle voice continues, 'I am the thirst of the glass, the wind of the sail...' What matters in this carefully edited scene, we feel, is *this* meal, this poem to be savoured and critiqued, these little fish from the depleted Mediterranean, laid to drain on today's newspaper. The long slow passion among these old friends, unified around the dismal failure of their political ideals, gathers around and is expressed through acutely experienced micro-events. 'Have you tried these peppers – called the lady's clit?... No?... Why don't you get haemorrhoid surgery...?'

Passion, compassion, a love of lost or unlikely causes, and a taste for slapstick are all aspects of a certain approach to the virtual that Mohamed Soueid embraces in his personal documentaries. His films focus on seeming inconsequentialities in a way that evokes vast regions of unacknowledged histories and unspoken desires. Soueid's films hint at the virtualities immanent in the actual.

Since the 1980s Soueid has been a central proponent of the experimental video documentary movement, which is perhaps Lebanon's greatest contribution to





Fig. 1: Virtualities immanent in the actual: *Nightfall* (Mohamed Soueid, 2000)

contemporary Arab and world cinema.<sup>2</sup> Soueid's effort to assist the circulation of Arab independent cinema is defined by the same obstacles that shape his own oeuvre: a deep love of the cinematic, usually forced to content itself with the cheap video medium; an urgency to democratise the Arab media, shaped by the circuitous and by no means evident path by which Arab alternative media reaches its audiences. This chapter discusses Soueid's Civil War trilogy, the feature-length experimental documentaries *Tango of Yearning* (1998), *Nightfall* and *Civil War* (2002). I venture to qualify as 'atomist' Soueid's particular method of summoning the virtual from the actual: namely, as though through a tissue of sentimental absurdities he is able to draw the outline of political and philosophical truths that otherwise would not be recognisable. I consider atomism to be just one of the 'manners of unfolding' through which films approach their subject, which is infinite and unknowable in itself. Other approaches range from treating the subject as entirely inaccessible, to considering that it will yield to interpretation but only with great difficulty, to treating it as continuous and easily accessed. These approaches correspond in turn to Islamic cosmologies – radical aniconism, Isma'ili theology and Islamic Neoplatonism – that can be mapped onto contemporary secular art forms.<sup>3</sup> What distinguishes an atomist approach is that it adopts a fragmentary form and defers speculation about causality. Many essay films take this approach.

Soueid's rich trilogy invites many kinds of reflection and emotion. It could be interpreted through a psychoanalytic optic, as a mapping of the unexpected sites in which the repressed in Lebanese society pops up to assert itself, while the narrative is structured by a symptomatic slalom course of declarations and disavowals.

It would respond to a Foucauldian archaeological analysis of how certain discourses deform the horizon of the Lebanese thinkable, if only to crumble into one another. It is not unfamiliar with Walter Benjamin's practice of interpreting the failures of ideology from the ruins of its demise.

But Soueid's Civil War trilogy – like the city of Beirut itself – is already performing a psychoanalysis. It is already archaeological. It knows all about ruins. These critical methods speak alongside his work as much as they interpret or excavate it. In this chapter, I invite you to think about this work in terms of a model of virtuality and immanence, that is drawn not only from Western philosophy but also from Islamic atomism, a now-dissipated philosophical tendency that nonetheless leaves traces in Islamic thought. In doing this, I do not mean to pull Soueid's work into an Arab intellectual genealogy. He certainly wouldn't wish that; his cinema has as much in common with Franz Kafka, the Dada poets and his beloved Nicolas Ray as with concepts from Islam, if not more. The historic movement of Islamic atomism is as useful for analysing non-Arab arts, such as contemporary computer animation or 'neo-Baroque' cinema, as it is for describing tendencies in Lebanese documentary (see Marks 2010: 189–218). The connection between the two is neither arbitrary nor exclusive. Soueid's documentary trilogy favours this-ness, absurdity and indirection as ways to flirt with the deep first causes of love, war and cinema.

## An Atomist Theory of Cinema

The tradition of atomism offers a strong analytical model for Soueid's trilogy, and indeed for many other films of our time, including those essay films that cherish the fragments they observe as more potentially significant than they can know. Long before modern philosophers such as Henri Bergson (1991) and Gilles Deleuze (1989, 2001) posited that the virtual is immanent in the actual, Arab philosophers had posited a number of ways of conceiving of this relationship. They also invented ways to conceive of God as a kind of plane of immanence, or an infinite virtuality from which all actualities precipitate. Early Islamic thinkers, many associated with the Abbasid caliphate based in Baghdad, established a number of philosophical tendencies that would go on to travel westward, transform or dissipate. For the Islamic Neoplatonist philosophers (*falasifa*), such as Al-Kindi (d. 866) and Al-Farabi (d. 950), as for their Greek ancestors, things in the universe exist in a relationship of latency and manifestation, or emanation (see Leaman 2002). Less known in the West are the *kalâm* or dialectical theologians, who sought to establish a rational basis for Islam. Their main protagonists, the

Mu'tazili, active in ninth- and tenth-century Baghdad and Basra, developed an atomist theory of matter. Mu'tazili atomism may have derived from oral transmission of the Greek atomism of Leucippus, Democritus and Epicurus, but it differs radically in numerous aspects (see Dhanani 1996: 167–9). While the *falasifa* emphasised the underlying connective structure of matter, the Mu'tazili atomists developed an extreme version of the randomness and disconnectedness of matter.

The dominant physical theory in the ninth and tenth centuries was that all bodies are composed of atoms and the accidents (such as temperature and colour) that befall them, though there was great disagreement among the *kalâm* theologians about how this occurred. Abu al-Hudhayl al-'Allaf (c.750–840), leader of the Mu'tazili in Basra, argued that continuing to exist is an accident. As al-Ash'ari summarised, Abu al-Hudhayl 'claimed that the accident of continuing to exist is God's command to the thing: Continue to exist! (*ibqa*). The same applies to the continuation of the body and the continuation of the existence of all the accidents which can continue to exist for an extended duration' (al-Ash'ari, *Maqâlât*, quoted in Dhanani 1994: 44). The Basrian Mu'tazili held that God annihilates bodies or atoms not by commanding them, 'Cease to exist!', but by creating their contrary, the accident of ceasing to exist (*fana*) (see Dhanani 1994: 47). Thus if God commands it, my chair would disappear from under me, my nose and ears would change position, or our entire universe would disappear.

These philosophers emphasised the *unknowability* of the relationship between the infinite, unknowable Deity and his finite creation. Atomism in modern Western philosophy is similarly characterised by fragmentary experiences that are not connected in depth, though it lacks the theological founding of Islamic atomism. Thus the knowable world of David Hume is 'a harlequin world of multicolored patterns and non-totalizable fragments where communication takes place through external relations' (Deleuze 2001: 38). Alfred Whitehead repeatedly characterises as atomist his cosmology in which the universe is an interconnected flux of 'actual entities' and 'actual occasions' (1978, *passim*).

Islamic atomism and the dialectical theology of which it was a part led to two radically divergent traditions. To simplify a complex history, one tradition, after the transformations wrought by the conservative theologian al-Ash'ari (d. 965), discouraged attempts to interpret the meaning of God's actions and emphasised community solidarity over metaphysical argumentation. It came to be more associated with Sunni Islam. The other maintained the Mu'tazili emphasis on rational enquiry, interpretation and distinguishing between latent and manifest meaning. This tradition is more associated with Shi'a Islam.

Shi'a Muslims in the Arab world thus draw on a long intellectual tradition of questioning, interpretation, resistance to oppression and political anti-quietism.<sup>4</sup>

This Shi'a critical tradition, which was dialectical long before Marx (or Hegel), has much in common with secular criticism drawn from Marxist dialectics. Soueid's trilogy makes numerous references to the Shi'a resistance parties Hizbollah and Amal that in some ways inherited the secular politics of resistance of the Lebanese left.<sup>5</sup>

An Islamic aesthetics of cinema based on atomism, characterised by a dynamic of appearance and disappearance, has indeed been broached by a handful of writers. Jalal Toufic (1999) argues that such aesthetics are at work in the films of Sergei Paradjanov, for example. Khemais Khayati quotes the poet Salah Stétié to assert that 'the conception of Islam is well represented in a film as prestigious as ... *Last Year at Marienbad*' (1996: 61; my translation). We might also see Islamic aesthetics at work in the jewel-like, magical fables of Tunisian filmmaker Nacer Khémir, such as the stunning *The Prince Contemplating His Soul* (2005), where the actual and virtual intertwine to create 'a world where the real and the magical become one and the same' (Awadalla 1995: 252).<sup>6</sup> We come upon them in the videos of Mounir Fatmi, who animates words and letters to give rise to invisible being yet also criticise unthinking belief. As these examples suggest, atomist approaches to causality cross filmic practices from experimental to fiction to documentary. Not all essay films are atomistic, but atomism is one essayistic approach that occurs across practices and genres.

Though I ascribe an Islamic source to atomistic aesthetics, it can be observed in cinemas from any nation, both fiction and documentary, in which loose causal relationships occur in a universe whose laws of causality seem unknowable. Atomism can 'explain' a world where real-life ramifications are felt at a great distance from their causes – from fads to famine to freakish weather. These causes, which include the movements of global capital and the formation of political alliance, are sometimes even opaque to their agents. Atomist films, being unable to generalise, focus on singularity. Films that appear fragmentary, that place emphasis on the singular, that refuse or seem unable to account for relationships between cause and effect, that resort to magic or alternative logic, may all be analysed as atomist: films such as Martin Scorsese's *Casino* (1995), Abderrahmane Sissako's *Heremakono (Waiting for Happiness)*, 2003), Wong Kar-Wai's *Chun gwong cha sit (Happy Together)*, 1997), Julio Medem's *Los Amantes del Círculo Polar (Lovers of the Arctic Circle)*, 1998) and Miranda July's *The Future* (2011). Some atomist films just observe the disconnected world, while others, including Soueid's films and other essay films, use the appearance of disconnection as a basis for critique. It is no anachronism that a theory that was developed in the ninth century to account for the inexplicable actions of an unknown and all-powerful God is newly relevant in our deeply interconnected, yet apparently fragmented, contemporary world.

Every manner of unfolding is a plane of immanence that shapes how actualisations occur. The plane of immanence of Islamic atomism poses the tortuous difficulty and humbling uncertainty of trying to draw relationships between virtual and actual, the unknown infinite and the singularities that arise from it. The atomist attitude is one of deep suspicion.

## Atomist Lebanon

Lebanon is a country whose vulnerability to outside powers and internal divisiveness make it impossible to assert a unified narrative of the nation's history or to confidently draw causal connections between historical events. There has been no agreement as to the facts of what happened during the civil war (1975–1990), no Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and no official strategy for healing from the war's savage effects. The political upheaval surrounding the murder of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri on 14 February 2005, the rise of Hizbollah and the many other historical events resulting from complex relationships between agents inside and outside the country underscore the country's utter vulnerability to the whims of international powers.

In the post-civil war era, it was already impossible for documentary filmmakers to identify historical events and fix blame. Now this situation is only exacerbated. Insofar as Lebanese documentarists are able to continue to function at all, they continue to work in essayistic modes that imaginatively stretch the truth, mixing documentary, fiction, personal and conceptual approaches. They confront the country's history like a plane of immanence, where facts that are known and demonstrable are less politically salient than the teeming sea of virtuals, events that have been bulldozed over, witnessed only by the dead and disappeared, forgotten in the official history that seeks to reinsert Lebanon into the global economy, and even forgotten by the participants in the war – for who can afford to live with an open wound? The Lebanese civil war was just one configuration of the deep external and internal conflicts that continue to destabilise this small country.

## Cinema in Soueid's Plane of Immanence

Soueid's *Civil War* trilogy prods the actual in order to make the field of virtuals from which it appeared briefly perceptible. He lays a sound track of growling, howling animals over his shots of Beirut pedestrians, as though to suggest the bestial nature under the city's civilised veneer (in *Civil War*). He draws out the

packaged evening news by pairing a female announcer with a male ‘sign language interpreter’ who gives the sense of political events, namely hypocrisy, greed, senseless sacrifice, drinking and boobs (in *Tango of Yearning*).

Immanent in all Soueid’s films is the cinema itself. His video documentaries are practically deformed by his love of cinema – laboriously sound-image montaged, crammed with cinematic references and bursting with histrionic performances by real people. For Soueid, cinema is always trying to be reborn in Beirut, after the wartime destruction of the downtown movie palaces, the post-war relocation of theatres to the Christian city of Jounieh in the north – a cinema always borrowed, from Hollywood, Europe, Bollywood and Hong Kong, tentatively held, and all the more passionately cherished, a cinema about whose slight but passionate history in Lebanon Soueid himself wrote the book (Soueid 1986, 1993, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). He includes in *Tango of Yearning* an interview with Abu Mohamed, owner of the Cinema Dounia, who kept screenings going during the war, complete with ladies-only afternoons; now he shows mostly kung-fu movies.

As in many fiction and documentary films from countries that do not have a film industry, the struggle of making the film is itself the subject of the film, especially for the first work of the trilogy. *Tango of Yearning* is about Soueid’s thwarted love and broken heart, the TV series he directed for Télé-Liban, *Fond of Camilia*, about the short-lived Egyptian actress Camilia (Lilliane Victor Cohen) and the attempts to maintain a culture of cinema in Beirut after the war. His friends recall how they first met at cinema clubs during the war, and the series of German silent films Soueid presented. The camera surveys the cave-like interior of the abandoned Orient theatre, and witnesses from across Martyr’s Square as the great edifice is dynamited.

## War in Soueid’s Plane of Immanence

In *Nightfall*, Soueid with due modesty presents himself as a former member of the pro-Palestinian Fatah Youth Brigade. Membership in this militia during the civil war signified solidarity with the Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon since 1948, as well as with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Yasser Arafat, who had decamped to West Beirut after being expelled from Jordan in 1970. It represented pro-Palestinian and secular pan-Arab sympathies; it ran counter to Lebanese nationalism, and other Lebanese parties, especially the Maronite Christian right-wing Phalange (*Kata’ib*) party, which attributed the origins of Civil War to the divisive presence of the PLO in Beirut. Having belonged to the Fatah Youth Brigade marks a person for the hatred of nationalists,



Fig. 2: The blondes of Starbucks: *Tango of Yearning* (Mohamed Soueid, 1998)

the suspicion of Christians who were not with the left, the wariness of those associated with Muslim militias and the ridicule of all who abandoned wartime idealism for a more survivable strategy of *realpolitik*.

Now, having moved to Ashrafieh, the largely Christian neighborhood in East Beirut, Soueid acknowledges how strange it is that 'I live in a building I used to shoot at.' In Ashrafieh he confronts the Frenchification of much of Arab life, summarised in the fact that a local shop has renamed *kneffeh*, the quintessentially Lebanese heavy breakfast cheese pastry, '*galette du matin*'. This absurd term, for a snack that could never be mistaken as French, indicates the French colonisation of Lebanon, particularly Christian Lebanon, the disavowal of the simplest ingredients of Arab life and a refusal of Arab identity altogether (as among those Lebanese who state they are descendants of the Phoenicians, not the later arrivals from the Arabian Peninsula). He watches the Frenchified blondes at Starbucks. He relates that his neighbour refuses to respond either to an Arabic '*sabah al-khayr*' or a French '*Bonjour*', instead cranking up the anthem of the Phalange militia on the stereo. Soueid observes the elderly denizens of Ashrafieh, hatted and coiffed and walking little dogs, with compassion as though for an endangered species. Through the singularity of '*galette du matin*', Soueid teases out tensions that underlaid the war and persist to the present.

These tensions also animate the third film of the trilogy, *Civil War*, which investigates the mysterious death of Soueid's cinematographer friend Mohamed Douybaess. (As Soueid remarks, 'There are too many Mohameds.' When he calls the name 'Mohamed' on the street in Beirut, five people turn around.) The film



Fig. 3: Stress causes cavities: *Civil War* (Mohamed Soueid, 2002)

gently skirts the memory of this shy man, who took care of his siblings after the death of their father, smoked five packs a day and didn't like to be photographed. Five months after Mohamed Douybaess disappeared, his body was found in an abandoned building, and he had to be identified by his dental records. A terrible irony is that Douybaess was obsessed with his dental hygiene and retained at least two dentists. Soueid interviews them and listens as they expound on the teeth of the Lebanese people, circumlocuting the cause of Douybaess' death. According to the dentists, Lebanese have the highest rate of tooth decay in the world. Thoughtfully smoking, his dentist Sahar tells how stress causes a sudden '*explosion de caries*' (outbreak of cavities) in mouths that were healthy just six months earlier.

Sahar's observation shows that it is not the speaking mouths, but the mute and painful teeth of the Lebanese people that tell the story of their post-war experience: stress, fatigue, living with uncertainty. Indeed, people come to her office to break down and cry because there is nowhere else they can do it: the famous Lebanese sociality is not strong enough to bear the waves of suffering in the war and its aftermath. Though a vast proportion of Lebanese have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder during and since the civil war, few seek psychotherapy because of the associated social stigma. So the symptoms of stress all come to the surface in the dentist's chair.

The explosion of *caries* in Lebanese teeth is certainly a collective *symptom* of the unfinished trauma of the war and its aftermath.<sup>7</sup> But Soueid treats it as more, and less, than this. That teeth can lead to a diagnosis of the causes and effects of war is not the answer to how to understand the history of the civil war. It is one



of a potentially infinite number of paths among seemingly unrelated singularities, from which a pattern emerges.

In Soueid's universe, relations of causality are pervasive and indirect. Actual events are laid in atom by atom like tesserae – a slight shift of the kaleidoscope, and relationships among these fragments shift as well. So on 11 September 2001, Lebanese people were mourning the death of beloved Egyptian actress Souad Hosni. A clip of one of Hosni's films is keyed in to a window, alongside shots of everyday activities in Beirut like watering plants and emptying a bucket of suds. On the soundtrack the filmmaker calls to his dead friend 'Mohamed! Souad Hosni is dead!', and his voice carries over footage of the devastation of the World Trade Center. Over the mushroom cloud of dust and the survivors weeping in the street, Soueid calls out urgently 'Mohamed! Mohamed!'

Soueid's montage hints that the event that for many Americans demarcated history into a before and an after, was for others, especially people who had seen massacres carried out on their own land, a day like any other day. Tragedies occur on different scales, everywhere and always. Woven through it all are Mohameds; perhaps the filmmaker is also pronouncing the name of Mohamed Atta, the first identified of the 9/11 terrorists. This startling juxtaposition is followed jarringly by a shot of a lithe woman in a camouflage bikini rappelling onto a concert stage. It is the Lebanese pop singer Katia Harb who, after a glitzy and acrobatic dance



Fig. 4: "Mohamed! Souad Hosni is dead!"

number, intones the slogan of the Lebanese National Forces: ‘Honor, loyalty and sacrifice.’

A theme begins to arise among these kaleidoscopic fragments. Earlier scenes showed a militarised Lebanon. Portraits of the late Syrian president Hafez al-Assad and his rather less magnetic, but living, son Bashar, dourly preside over public spaces, still maintaining the Syrian presence in Lebanon in 2002. Mobile shots of busy downtown Hamra Street reveal an astonishing number of Beirut women wearing some version of camouflage print.<sup>8</sup> Lebanon has not ceased to be at war, as these shots indicate, and as Katia Harb’s busy patriotism underscores. Soueid’s method calls to mind the paranoid-critical method of Salvador Dalí, in which everything that the subject perceives is analysed to be, in some way, about the subject. This method is also common in Lebanese popular discourse. Since official history conceals more than it reveals, since the news media must be read between the lines and since nobody divulges all they know, a touch of paranoia fosters critical thinking and aids in daily negotiations of the world.

In the single fictional segment of *Civil War*, a woman (Carmen Lebbos) approaches the filmmaker in a café and proposes that he adapt the thousand-page novel she is writing about her life. Elegant and emphatic, neurotic yet profoundly insightful, she typifies the atomism of contemporary Lebanese society. A wealthy, divorced woman, deprived (like many Lebanese divorcées) of access to her son,

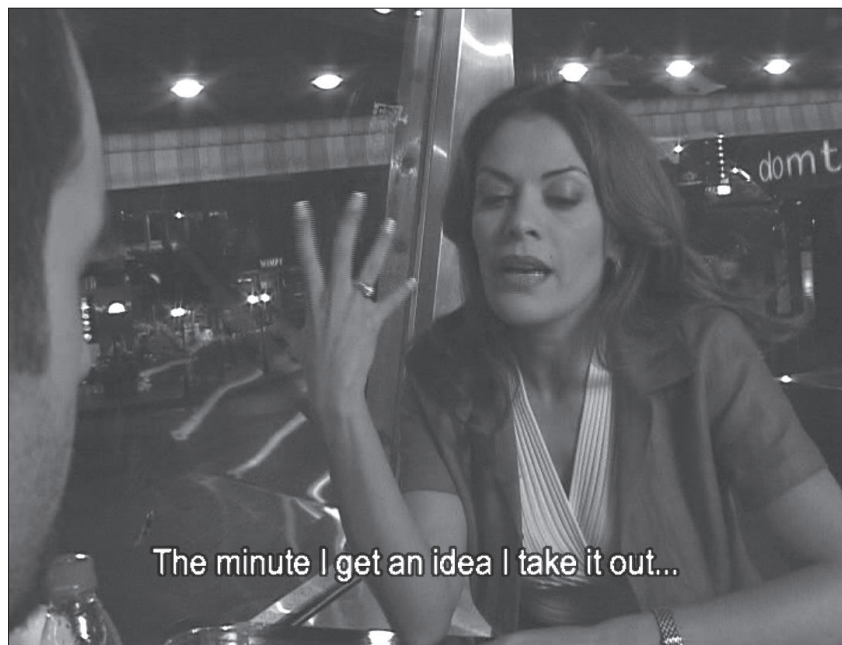


Fig. 5: Analyzing the causes of the civil war at Modca’s café

she now trusts only the fidelity of 'Maro' – a man who sounds like her lover but is in fact, we learn, her chauffeur. In her fast-paced monologue to the unseen filmmaker, the woman makes deft connections between overindulgence in sweets, repressed sexuality, poor dental hygiene and the eroticisation of violence. No political analyst need be called in to explain the myriad causes of the civil war and the reasons it is not over: it is there to be read from a dish of profiteroles at Modca café.

## Love in Soueid's Plane of Immanence

Soueid's films are drawn to obsessive characters, people whose neuroses and tragedies make them truthful historical subjects. 'Subjects' in his films are knots of tics, bad habits and accommodations that allow them to deal, not without flair, with impossible situations. They are not so much psychological subjects as knots in a political field, their individual neuroses the manifestation of political traumas.

In *Nightfall*, the characters take the disaster of the Lebanese civil war deeply personally, as the failure of their political ideals. These former members of the Fatah Youth Brigade saw their secular, socialist and pan-Arab goals crumble humiliatingly in the factional and international power grab that the civil war became. Now, they wonder at their decision to join the Palestinian resistance rather than the Communists or a Lebanese left-wing party, without regretting it. They recall the Youth Brigade's Maoist mandate that fighters must serve the people, and how this distinguished them from the militia bullies who would jump the queue in bakeries. Then, Fatah stood for the Arab nationalism of Gamal Abdel Nasser; now, they carefully distance themselves from what Fatah has become (in 2000) in the West Bank. Ten years after the end of the war, they divert their frustrated appetite for justice into drinking, nostalgia, poetry and tender unrequited love. Visiting the grave of a comrade, Bassem muses, 'We aren't orphans of Fatah but of ourselves.'

*Nightfall* does not analyse the fall of Arab left politics. Even the romantic stance of the former fighter, alone with his ideals, is undermined when Abou Hasan, Bassem's creative mentor, criticises his friend thus: 'You hug your poem so tightly it crumbles away. Your best poetic quality is that you recite the poem foolishly.' The Civil War trilogy is not looking for the causes of the war, or anything else, so much as observing its effects in the particularities of everyday life.

Norman Saadi Nikro describes movingly, and in markedly atomistic terms, the result of Soueid's reflexive critique: 'As a sculptor, Soueid chisels at a piece of wood or stone, though discards the central piece, collecting the wasted fragments as a disjointed narrative that ultimately fails to smooth over the cracks and

fissures. The remainders work as reminders, so that the bits and pieces are invested with a capacity to signify emotional complexes' (2012: 149).

Soueïd himself is the ultimate affective filter of all these lives, histories, injustices and frustrations. *Tango of Yearning*, the first and most personal of the three, returns obsessively to Mohamed's unrequited love, narcissistically interviewing friends about himself, the absurdist television series he directed, *Fond of Camilia*, and their thoughts on love, and examining how it was possible to grow up a cinephile in wartime Beirut, as he did. His friends narrate his failed love story with a woman he calls 'the real Camilia' with affection and frustration. An actress from the TV show, Samar, delicately wreathed in cigarette smoke, explains gently that he smothered Camilia with his adoration. In *Nightfall* Abou Hassan tells how, over the course of forty years, he learned that it is a fine thing to hold a woman's breast, but better still to hold an arak glass. Later he instructs Mohamed, 'Hold the camera like a daughter born to a woman who's been sterile for twenty years – with that much love and tenderness.' And in *Civil War*, a friend of the deceased Mohamed Douaybess tells how he used to take care of his camera so tenderly, as though it was his girlfriend.

Soueïd's trilogy suggests that war is a redirection of love, or at least erotic intention. Witness the prevalence of camouflage-patterned lingerie in *Civil War*, in which film Douaybess's survivors note that he suspected that sexual frustration



Fig. 6: Samar's explanation: *Tango of Yearning* (Mohamed Soueïd, 1998)

was one of the causes of war. In *Nightfall* we meet Soueid's friend Fadi, who, whenever he has a fight with one of his girlfriends, shaves his head and donates blood. If things are really bad, he vows to carry out a martyrdom mission for Hizbollah (this is in 2000, before Hizbollah renounced suicide missions) – in an impressive, if facile, translation of erotic frustration to military violence.

Each of these films is marked by a hesitation in the face of romantic attachments to women and a redirection of love to other things – not to violence, but to friends, the cinema and 'that dangerous toy', the camera. There is a kind of feminisation that happens, as though Soueid, rather than pursuing women, prefers to suffuse his films with them. In *Civil War*, it is women, real and fictional, who provide the most penetrating analyses of the complex political situation. In *Nightfall*, Soueid's reminiscence of his years as a fighter and his post-war political disillusionment is spoken in voice-over by a woman. The impression I get is not that Soueid is appropriating women's voices – even when they are speaking his words – but rather that his insight and experience make more sense when spoken by a woman. Soueid's 'becoming-woman' helps to make him less an agent of causality and more a surface or filter on which the many events he witnesses can play out. Thus even the almost embarrassingly intimate *Tango of Yearning* tells us less about Mohamed and more about the war, the cinema and love. Soueid's trilogy does not treat the filmmaker as a subject to be analysed but as a field for the investigation of – something else. He offers himself as a 'plane of immanence' in which to discover other things.

Saadi Nikro's acute interpretation of *Tango of Yearning*, which draws on an earlier version of this essay on Soueid's atomism, deepens the analysis of Soueid's fragmentary method. In Nikro's analysis, Soueid carries out an unmaking and remaking of the self in a fragmentary form that is open to becoming-other. Amid the debris 'the self comes to realise that it has been more of a subject to history than a maker of history' (2012: 154). Thus Soueid's opening of himself as a plane of immanence yields not an examination of his psyche but an opportunity to recognise the limits of sovereignty for him and his fellow citizens during and after the war years. This method of using one's own self as the material to be deconstructed, as the basis for critique of broader ideals and certainties, is as painful as it is effective.

'In love as in war,' Soueid says in *Tango of Yearning*, 'we utter slogans that fall meaningless when it's over.' At the end of *Tango of Yearning* a close-up fixes a man at the wheel of a car that is not moving forward but jostling from side to side. The camera pulls back to show that the car is an abandoned wreck, and its unhabitual movement is caused by two other fellows rhythmically bouncing it and its passenger. Life is like that in Mohamed Soueid's world: a ride that does not go forward but moves at the whim of (not necessarily hostile) outside forces. It is

the trials of love, as much as the whims of politics, that frustrate intention, break down causality and prepare us with a kind of humility in the face of the universe.

Every 'atomist' film is still atomist in its own way, in that it chooses its own principles to trace connections among all these fragments. Mohamed Soueid chooses a route among war, love and cinema, making himself the membrane across which the connections play out. He shows an earnest love of singularities, especially people, their faces, their voices, their teeth; also of absurd coincidences. Despite his practical left politics, his work does not evince much faith in fundamental political principles, or any other large-scale explanation. In Soueid's work a sense of what is latent or immanent is given by the sense that the world of singularities is somehow disjointed. It is as though events could have been thrown up in a different order; as though the universe could turn over its surfaces like a lenticular billboard.

Yet ultimately, the films indicate that these fragments are not atoms separate from the world but monads, points connected with all other things. I bring in the concept of the monad at this late point in the essay to underscore that seemingly isolated events are actually peaks of folds, using Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's concept of a cosmos in which all souls are connected to each other through their bodies (which are also made of souls). As Leibniz describes it, a monad is a single soul that innately includes the entire universe, as the infinitesimal implies the infinite. Each 'imitates [God] as much as it is capable. For it expresses, however confusedly, everything that happens in the universe, whether past, present, or future' (1991: 9).

The feeling of intensity in so many moments of Soueid's trilogy, as though something is trembling on the verge of expression, can be characterised as a 'micro-perception'. Microperceptions are the tugs of other monads, even quite distant ones, on the monad's body; they usually lie below awareness but can be amplified. Soueid's films draw out the folds in the soul, feelings below the threshold of awareness that he teases into perceptibility.<sup>9</sup> Each of Soueid's singularities – carefully fried fish, a pretty dentist explaining the etymology of 'filling', the moist eyes of Bassem, a vigorous debate about the colour of Anwar El-Sadat's eyes and the freshly washed shirts of a dead friend, hanging to dry in the breeze – tingles with its connections to a latent existence. Thinking like an atomist, the viewer can simply enjoy these presences without questioning, or she can take the risk of interpreting its manifest signs.

## Notes

- 1 With permission from MIT Press. This essay is a revised version of a chapter from *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,

- 2015) and an article in *Jump Cut*, 49 (2007).
- 2 On Lebanese experimental documentary, see for example Chad Elias (2011), Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatar (2007), Laura U. Marks (2000), Laura U. Marks (2015a), Tess Takahashi (2015) and Mark R. Westmoreland (2013).
  - 3 On these and other manners of unfolding see Laura U. Marks (2010).
  - 4 See the discussion of Shi'a theology in the chapter 'Can Cinema Slow the Flow of Blood?' in Marks (2015a), 135–46.
  - 5 On the links between Communism and Hizbollah see the chapter 'Communism, Dream Deferred' in Marks (2015a: 97–134).
  - 6 Viola Shafik (1998: 53) notes that Khémir's oeuvre is one of the few in Arab cinema that pursues the aesthetics of Islamic art, particularly of the Persian miniature.
  - 7 Walid Ra'ad is perhaps the Lebanese artist who has most consistently pursued a psychoanalytic understanding of the Lebanese historical trauma.
  - 8 As in Su Friedrich's *Rules of the Road* (1993), in which the filmmaker, having been deserted by her lover, sees the latter's wood-paneled station wagon all over town and captures several of these cars in a single mobile shot; so Soueid observes camouflage garbing women of many shapes and sizes, living and plastic, in a single deft pan of the busy sidewalks of Hamra Street.
  - 9 I pursue the monadistic interpretation of Soueid's films in Marks (2015b).

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# Chapter 10

## Inside/Outside: Nicolasito Guillén Landrián's Subversive Strategy in *Coffea Arábiga*<sup>1</sup>

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Ernesto Livon-Grosman

What usually makes documentaries so easy to understand is the arbitrary limitation of their subject matter. They describe the atomization of social functions and the isolation of their products. One can in contrast envisage the entire complexity of a moment which is not resolved into a work, a moment whose movement indissolubly contains facts and values whose meaning does not yet appear. The subject matter of the documentary would then be this totality.

– From *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* (*On the Passage of a Few Persons through a Rather Brief Period of Time*),  
(Guy Debord, 1959)

The thirteen documentaries that constitute the available work of Cuban filmmaker Nicolás Guillén Landrián (1938–2003) pose the immediate question of why his work has received so little critical attention, given his status as a cult figure in Cuban film history.<sup>2</sup> His films circulated underground in tapes and DVDs and every possible format, although it was not until the late 1990s that they began to be shown again – first outside, and then in, Cuba. The boundaries imposed by censorship and the informal sharing of his films contributed to the circulation

of Guillén Landrián's work for many years and was especially important for new generations of filmmakers. More often than not, censorship of a work of art that has already been published actually has increased viewer interest.<sup>3</sup>

However, despite his influence through underground channels, and the fact that Guillén Landrián has often been compared to Santiago Alvarez, a key documentary filmmaker at the Cuban Film Institute (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográfica, henceforth ICAIC) because of their shared interest in formal experimentation, critical work on Guillén Landrián's films is conspicuously absent. In part, this is because of the institutional censorship that has surrounded his work and public persona, but it is also because of the aesthetic and political challenges posed by his films. The unconventional form of some of his documentaries was shocking for the Cuban cultural establishment not only because of the films' disruptive montage, but also because of his fusion of public and private spheres, which went against the grain of established notions of what social documentary ought to be in the context of the Revolution. This formal experimentation became a political challenge – not only through the absence of a singular master narrative *per se*, but also through the paratactic quality of his editing. The coexistence of many themes in each of his films, the irony and the recurrence of a personal, at times intimate, point of view, turned the reception of his documentaries into an institutional silence that has lasted three decades, and yet his work has transformed filmmaking and made him a cult director for the newest generations of documentary filmmakers in Cuba.<sup>4</sup>

Guillén Landrián was known as *Nicolasito*, as a way of distinguishing him from his uncle, Nicolás Guillén (1901–1989), one of the most celebrated Cuban poets of the twentieth century. He studied with Theodor Christensen and Joris Ivens, both of whom were directly involved in the training of the first generation of documentary filmmakers to come out of the newly founded ICAIC (1959).<sup>5</sup> One of the first cultural decisions of Fidel Castro's administration was to create the ICAIC, with the understanding that film would be one of the most relevant cultural activities of the Revolution. In order to establish and develop the Film Institute, the Cuban government hired and invited important figures from the post-war Italian cinema to train the new generation of filmmakers. The key player in shaping ICAIC was Cesare Zavattini, one of Vittorio De Sica's main scriptwriters. Zavattini, who had already been in touch with the revolutionary leaders before the Revolution, brought to ICAIC the experience and social sensibility of Italian post-war cinema. The impact of Italian Neorealism on the development of Revolutionary Cuban film helps us to understand the role that European film played for the younger generations of Latin American filmmakers who screened their work at the newly founded ICAIC. *Nicolasito*, who first trained as a painter,

became part of this new generation of filmmakers by working in some of the ICAIC's many productions.<sup>6</sup>

Among the multiple European filmmakers who visited Cuba in the early 1960s, two are key to understanding Nicolasito's film poetics: Agnès Varda and Chris Marker, both of whom travelled to Cuba in the first years of the Revolution and worked collaboratively with Cuban filmmakers. For example, Marker shot *¡Cuba Sí!* (1961) with the help of ICAIC, and Sara Gómez, another extraordinary filmmaker from that first generation, would be Varda's assistant director in *Salut les Cubains* (1963).<sup>7</sup> Nicolasito, among other filmmakers and technicians, was already part of ICAIC when Marker was making his film. These filmmakers influenced the emergence of new practices in documentary filmmaking because during the first few years of the Revolution, Cuba became an international travel destination for the politically minded. This attraction dwindled after 1962, but by then a large number of French intellectuals had visited the island.

In an interview with Manuel Zayas in collaboration with Lara Petusky Coger and Alejandro Rios, Nicolasito describes Fidel Castro's reaction to the premiere of one his films, *En un barrio viejo* (*An Old Neighborhood*, 1963):<sup>8</sup>

[R]ight from the beginning when I started at the ICAIC, at the premiere of *En un barrio viejo*, he said: 'Damn, you'd think *En un barrio viejo* was made by a French director.' Imagine saying this at that time! That's what Fidel Castro said about *En un barrio viejo*. (In Zayas et al. 2011)

The influences from French cinema of the 1960s, like the one pointed out by Castro, provide a frame of reference for Nicolasito's more experimental films and help us look at his work in an international context, making it possible to consider him as part of a long list of essay film directors that includes Marker and Varda as key figures. Despite, or maybe because of, his falling out with the Cuban establishment during the late 1960s and early 1970s, his films circulated, sometimes through an informal underground network of distribution, and became a reference for independent Cuban filmmakers who looked at his films as an alternative to ICAIC's overdetermined aesthetic.

Those European influences can be traced to certain cinematographic strategies: the deliberate use of still photography and the inclusion of extreme close-ups of people looking directly at the camera. Documentaries, such as Varda's *Salut les Cubains*, that make extensive use of stills and Marker's outspoken defence of close-ups are, if nothing else, a suggestive affinity.<sup>9</sup> Both directors were photographers before becoming filmmakers, and thus served as precursors for Nicolasito's work, which helped to establish concrete aesthetic bridges between Cuban and

European practices that go beyond the personal contacts among filmmakers.

The ambivalent and sometimes controversial reception of Nicolasito's films can be seen as a direct consequence of the Cuban Revolution's instrumentalist conception of the relation between art and politics at a time when the cultural establishment was defining its own version of politically engaged cinema in general and the documentary form in particular. The censors who ultimately banned Nicolasito's films were never able to articulate the reasons for their discomfort, which was quite likely triggered by the combination of a predetermined political agenda and the disconnection from other political practices and discussions about film, art and politics that were taking place outside of Cuba.

The decade of the 1960s was an expansive time for the European and Latin American left, and 1968 in particular was a year that opened discussions that moved political discourse away from more rigid, Soviet versions of social realism.<sup>10</sup> Maybe the best example of the efforts to assimilate European influences is one of Cuba's most celebrated films, *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*, 1968) by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. The film tells the story of an upper middle-class Cuban who decides to stay on the island after his family and friends flee the Revolution. The main character confronts his own doubts about the political structure, and as he does so, he begins to understand the revolutionary process. The film walks a fine line between criticism and eulogy, to the point that it was seen outside Cuba as both critical of Castro's government and a very positive portrait of a citizen's ideological transformation from a Cuban point of view. The film, with a French New Wave aesthetic and a clear political commitment to the Revolution, is an interesting case because it is formally experimental at the same time that it makes an indirect criticism of leftist intellectual artists by showing avant-garde paintings in the negative context of the main character's bourgeois apartment.

The ICAIC played an ambivalent role itself as it started to standardise its own production but at the same time supported other Latin American leftist filmmakers who were openly experimental.<sup>11</sup> Taking into account the larger context of Latin American film criticism and production in the late 1960s can help us to situate Nicolasito's work. Glauber Rocha's Brazilian Cinema Novo, Mexican Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (*The Mole*, 1970) and in particular *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968) by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (an Argentine documentary that moved away from neorealism and established a relation between art and agency that was not present in other documentaries of the period) are just a few of the films that introduced a new more experimental aesthetic in the context of the emerging Third Cinema movement.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth looking at Nicolasito's films in the international context of other contemporary documentaries, such as Varda's and Marker's, in order to better

understand Latin American social documentary films in the 1960s and 1970s. Even more importantly, it is necessary to realise that some of the political diversity – which turned at times into antagonism – within the Latin American left was not so different from that in Europe. It suffices to recall that Régis Debray, who disagreed with Guy Debord in the 1970s, also published *Revolution in the Revolution?* in 1967 while in Bolivia with Che Guevara. Or that the Cuban Film Institute wanted to edit the last sequence of Part One of *The Hour of the Furnaces* because a four-minute close-up of a dead Che Guevara in Bolivia was not good for Cuban morale.<sup>13</sup>

The late 1960s was also when Guy Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967).<sup>14</sup> Debord put into print the notion of spectacle and in particular of *détournement*, a concept already in circulation in the late 1950s and available to the French filmmakers who went to Cuba at the beginning of the decade. *Détournement* is defined by the *Internationale Situationniste* as ‘the reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble’ but with the requirement that this new arrangement should generate new meanings (SI 1959 1959). Quite often Nicolasito’s films excel at displacing images and sounds, which take on a different meaning when reinserted in a new context. During the late 1960s, Latin America had already seen other forms of *détournement*, such as, for example, some of the works produced by the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires and later on in 1968 the collective art show known as *Tucumán Arde* – both examples of art practices that explored the experimental without detriment to the political.<sup>15</sup>

In 1966, and in a very different context from Cuba’s revolutionary ICAIC, Oscar Masotta and Roberto Jacoby, both active participants in the Di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires, decided to produce a work known as the ‘antihappening’ in which they gave the media press releases and images of a performance that did not actually take place. This gesture was not far from some of the performances of the first Situationists. Nicolasito’s *détournement* – such as the inclusion in *Coffee Arabica* of a brief interview with a woman waiting for a bus who answers a question about coffee growing in Bulgarian, without providing any translation or subtitles, or his insistent references to dancing as a worker’s activity – created a disjuncture in form and content from the homogeneous view of culture that permeated the Revolution. It is useful to remember that while Masotta and Jacoby could see themselves and the Di Tella Institute as outsiders from the establishment, Nicolasito was working within the most successful institutions of the Cuban Revolution and was, in a peculiar way, an insider.

It is in that context, and in anticipation of the revolts of May 1968, that Guy Debord’s Situationism, a movement that from its creation searched for a balance between formal experimentation and radical politics, became an important point

of reference. At that time in Cuba, Nicolasito had produced and screened *Coffea Arábiga*, which echoes a critique of the spectacle in a Debordian sense. Although there are no known connections between Nicolasito and Debord, it seems to be a case of what Wittgenstein calls ‘family resemblance’.<sup>16</sup> I am proposing that some of the more experimental strategies used by Nicolasito were ‘in the air’ at the time and that his contact with French Left Bank directors such as Marker and Varda created an environment of familiarity with other film aesthetics absent from ICAIC’s more traditional films.<sup>17</sup> This kind of poetics was not expected by the cultural establishment, and was far more challenging than any form of parody or direct criticism of the Revolution. Although it is the rhetorical term used to explain the cause of the negative official reaction to his films, I would argue that parody is not the main trigger of this official discomfort with his work.<sup>18</sup>

Of his thirteen films, five come across as the most experimental and controversial: *Reportaje* (*Interview*, 1966); *Desde la Habana ¡1969! Recordar* (*Remembering Havana 1969*, 1969); *Taller de Línea y 18* (*Taller de Línea Street and 18th Avenue*, 1971); and the most admired of all, *Coffea Arábiga*, from 1968. *Coffea Arábiga* is an educational film commissioned by ICAIC as part of the Popular Encyclopedia Series. The film was intended as a didactic tool to promote a government plan for a coffee plantation belt around the city of Havana.<sup>19</sup> The coffee project conveyed an important political message of diversifying agriculture and reducing Cuba’s dependency on sugar production and single crop farming. Fidel Castro regarded the plan at the time as one of the major changes set in motion by the Revolution: for this reason, Nicolasito’s film carried a significant symbolic weight. And indeed *Coffea Arábiga* does fulfill the request for an educational film by showing all the necessary steps to produce the coffee crop, from the preparation of the fields up to the roasting and the actual drinking of the coffee. The film’s montage brings into the picture the people who harvest, dry and roast the coffee. One of many examples of this careful braiding of the human component into the process of coffee production as an integral part of that process is the sequence dedicated to the illnesses and plagues of the coffee plant, where shots of a foot and a mouth covered with sores and blisters are interspersed among stills of sick coffee leaves. This inscription of the human among the plants and their processes is one of the ways Nicolasito used to introduce an essayistic commentary that breaks with the straight narrative line of an institutional documentary.

When the 18-minute film *Coffea Arábiga* was first screened in 1968, Nicolasito had already directed several short documentaries: *An Old Neighborhood*, *Ociel del Toa* (*Ociel from the Toa River*, 1965) and *Retornar a Baracoa* (*To Go Back to Baracoa*, 1966). For personal as well as production reasons, *Coffea Arábiga* initiates a second phase in his work as a filmmaker. In the mid-1960s, Nicolasito had been jailed and

sent to a mental hospital.<sup>20</sup> The accusations against him ranged from voicing his desire to leave the island, to smoking pot, to his personal music preferences, something that would become an important component in *Coffea Arábiga*'s soundtrack. At the end of this ordeal, when he was coming out of medical 'treatment', and after being indicted for 'ideological deviancy' – a euphemism for counterrevolutionary activity – Nicolasito told the Cuban Film Institute that they should let him make films or allow him to leave the country.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Christensen's intervention, ICAIC decided to bring him back and sent him to work on the Popular Encyclopedia Series, where he was asked to film *Coffea Arábiga*. The fact that the film was commissioned should lead us to regard it as different from his other documentaries because of the limitations and challenges that accompany commissioned work. Nicolasito explained as much in the interview with Manuel Zayas:

They asked me to make *Coffea Arábiga*, which was the most problematic documentary I made in this period. I went to the department of scientific-technical documentaries as a sort of concession to the management of the ICAIC, since they were taking me back. But, for example, *Ociel del Toa* wasn't by commission, *Retornar a Baracoa* wasn't by commission, *Los del baile* wasn't by commission, *En un barrio viejo* wasn't by commission. These were documentaries I made freely, that I chose and produced. (Zayas *et al.* 2011)

This implied restriction and context of production made *Coffea Arábiga*'s formal experimentation a more obvious departure from the didacticism of the genre and by extension a testing of the limits of censorship. In this case, the institutional status of this commission was an opportunity for Nicolasito to explore a new approach, one that would change the rules of the game. In a sense, *Coffea Arábiga* should also be seen in the larger context of the aesthetic shift by which Latin American documentaries were exploring different formal strategies, moving away from the more dominant model of Neorealism. I am thinking in particular of the difference between two Argentine films: Fernando Birri's *Tire Dié* (*Toss Me a Dime*, 1960) and Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces*. The first is rather linear in its narrative approach, while the latter is more willing to explore the relation between formal experimentation and political commitment, echoing Alexander Medvedkin's cine-train, as it was shown in factory meetings as part of the editing process.

Nicolasito departs from the more instrumental conception of cinema that was representative of the ICAIC in the 1960s, whereby film was seen, for the most part, as a reflection on the most pressing issues of the revolutionary process. The film resembles Santiago Alvarez's work in the sense of urgency and need for agency



that can be found in *Now* (1965) or *LBJ* (1968), while at the same time bracketing the call for revolutionary action by quietly counterpointing the collective to the individual. This tension between public and private spheres becomes assertive in content and daring in form – a balancing act of fulfilling an institutional agenda while transforming it into a personalised essay documentary – and makes it a film difficult to accept and too uncomfortable to ignore.

I would argue that around this time, in Latin America, the essay film acquired the unfair reputation of lacking political commitment, the rationale being that the essay film was a case of *auteur* cinema and was seen as an example of a bourgeois aesthetic – an ideological suspicion not far from the distrust directed at experimental art.<sup>22</sup> This logic worked well in the context of the Latin American Third Cinema of the 1960s, which was synonymous with militant cinema. Films like *Nicolasito's* were not considered to be essay films and thus avoided overt censorship. *PM* (1961), however, a film by Sabá Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal that shows the nightlife of the port, with its bars and dancing activity and, like *Nicolasito's*, shifts away from the collective into the private, became the most relevant cinematographic example of censorship in the context of 1960s, as the censors read it as nostalgia for that nightlife that defined Cuba before the Revolution. A few months later, Fidel Castro defined the boundaries of what was possible and what was not with one of his most famous one-liners: 'within the Revolution everything goes, against the Revolution, nothing.'<sup>23</sup> It was then clear that, although the boundaries of the political realm of the Revolution were not always well defined, the very existence of ideological limits on those terms allowed for censorship. This was the political context in which *Coffea Arábica* was produced.

The film's essayistic quality comes from its use of *détournement*, in the Situationist meaning of losing 'its original sense while at the same time putting forward another meaningful ensemble that confers to each element a new scope and effect' (SI 1959 1959). The concept of *détournement* provides a way of understanding *Coffea Arábica* as a documentary that departs from more linear political films produced at the time. It upsets political practices that were starting to show rigidity, and it does so, to return to Debord's opening quote, by presenting 'the entire complexity of a moment which is not resolved into a work' and preventing ideological recuperation. The essayistic quality of *Nicolasito's* films arises in part from their departure from pure, descriptive objectivity and their use of a montage that furthers interpretation. In what follows, I will explore three moments within the film in which *détournement* blocks ideological recuperation: the representation of the private sphere, the political implications of formal experimentation, and the metaphorical critique of a power structure.<sup>24</sup>

## First Scene: The Public and the Private

An Afro-Cuban woman is sitting in front of a mirror. She is setting her hair in rollers while listening to the radio. The sequence is made up of stills of her sitting in front of a mirror as a male voice recites a melodramatic poem in the background.<sup>25</sup> The poem is followed by a revolutionary song played over interspaced images of posters promoting the place of women in an upcoming harvest and still images (framed as medium shots) of women with hair rollers. The parallel presentation – the intimate moment, the sentimental voice reciting the poem and the recurring image of hair rollers – bridges the private moment of a single woman listening to the radio with that of a group of women associated with harvesting, thus refusing a hierarchical order.

If *Coffea Arábica* challenges spectacle in the Situationist conception of the term, it also erases the hierarchy between private and public, placing them at the same level of priority, thereby calling into question, or at the very least bracketing, what it means to be revolutionary in the everyday sense of the Cuban Revolution. The film's detours, which do not interfere with narrative development, are what distinguish *Coffea Arábica* from most Cuban documentaries of the time.

Occurring halfway through the film, this sequence of an Afro-Cuban woman listening to the radio while combing her hair effectively turns on its head the opposition between productivity and leisure. The sequence builds in a way that extends this private space to all the other women who tend the coffee crop, while they listen to radio poems, do their hair up in rollers, and share conversations – all of them non-productive activities.<sup>26</sup> This kind of portrayal of everyday life on



Fig. 1: Woman with hair rollers listening to the radio: *Coffea Arábica* (Nicolás Guillén Landrián, 1968)

equal footing with more revolutionary activities connects the two sequences of listening to the radio and the harvest and roasting of coffee beans. Nicolasito's film does not portray leisure as parceled out in the way Lenin prescribed for revolutionary workers: a third of the day dedicated to work, a third to leisure and a third to rest. Instead, Nicolasito presents leisure and the notion of *fiesta* as practices that exist in their own right, as is the case with a later sequence dedicated to dancing.

For the Cuban Revolution the notion of *fiesta* was in itself a contentious issue. In the opening sequence of *Memories of Underdevelopment* – which was shot by Gutiérrez Alea with the help of Nicolasito – a street party ends with a gunshot.<sup>27</sup> This sequence, which is very different from the rest of the film, captures the conflict between the idea of *fiesta* and the Revolution. It was after all a Revolution that wanted to end sugarcane's monocultural practices and the dependency on US political interests as much as the nightlife associated with the political corruption of prerevolutionary days. Returning to *Coffea Arabica*, the hair combing sequence's focus on the radio is not so much a nostalgic turn back to the merry pre-revolutionary 1950s as it is a defence of expenditure over production, of free private time over collective work. The film is deliberate in its way of balancing public discourse aimed at reaching new goals with the joyful present of a realised Revolution.

## Second Scene: Sound and Image

*Détournement* is also present in a sequence that plays out the relation between word and image by showing letters and words on screen while an intradiegetic off-screen voice, that of an agricultural engineer, reads the technical requirements for planting coffee over the sound of a typewriter. In the beginning, the words on screen match those being heard. As the sequence progresses, a different text appears on screen: it can be read but not heard, and becomes intertwined with the engineer's recommendations. The two texts that creep in are revolutionary slogans, 'Dale duro a los yanquis' ('Hit the Yankees hard') and 'Pin, pon, fuera, abajo Caimanera' ('Hey Hey Ho Ho the Caimanera has to go'), but their inclusion raises more questions than answers.<sup>28</sup> Does political discourse exist at the same level as technical description? Are these slogans reduced to the same kind of pragmatic rules necessary for a coffee plantation? Or is it that agricultural practices acquire a different meaning when juxtaposed to revolutionary slogans? Like the peelings that the Lettrists performed on Paris street posters, revealing new compositions by exposing the images behind the images, Nicolasito's work unveils not a hidden text but a relation of power between two forms of public discourse, forcing the image of the typed text to depart from the sound of the voice that it pretends to

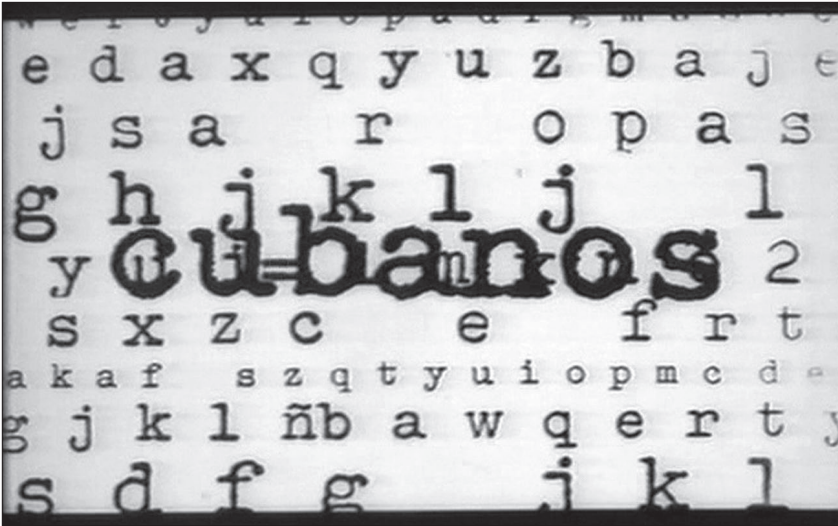


Fig. 2: *Détournement*: relation between sound and image.

represent.<sup>29</sup> The images and sounds of the words do not coincide. Although in the particular case of *Coffea Arábiga*, the separation between image and sound contains political references, the sequence implicitly questions the relation between voice and truth and seems to suggest that writing is capable of saying something more than what we hear.

### Third Scene: Revolution within the Revolution

Nicolasito's films have always been known for their sound editing, for how the director manipulates and layers extradiegetic sound to the point that each soundtrack becomes a component in its own right, as opposed to a mere emphasis of the image. In one of the most striking sequences of the film, *Coffea Arábiga* superimposes the Beatles' song, 'The Fool on the Hill' with the image of Fidel Castro climbing upon a podium. At first, we are surprised by the contrast between the leader and the lyrics of the song, and the disconcerting fact that the film uses a song by the Beatles at a time when rock 'n' roll in general, the Beatles in particular, was banned from Cuba. Yet, in the context of the film, the lyrics establish a new meaning when juxtaposed with Fidel's image, adding a political connotation that was certainly not there before *Coffea Arábiga*:

Well on the way,  
Head in a cloud,

The man of a thousand voices talking perfectly loud  
But nobody ever hears him,  
Or the sound he appears to make,  
And he never seems to notice,

But the fool on the hill,  
Sees the sun going down,  
And the eyes in his head,  
See the world spinning 'round.<sup>30</sup>

More extraordinary perhaps is the fading in and out of Fidel Castro's close-up with coffee flowers superimposed on his face, turning the leader into a flower child – same beard, different revolution. The implicit reference to one revolution within another is perhaps the ultimate *détournement* because the gesture dismantles the authority of the leader, the party, the state, all components of Castro's public persona while retaining the appreciation of a radical change.<sup>31</sup>

Nicolasito's work in general and *Coffea Arábiga* in particular managed to open the possibility of a different kind of political documentary within the Revolution. To paraphrase Debord, the film exposes and questions the spectacle of the Revolution, the social relationships between people mediated by images. *Coffea Arábiga* questions the emphasis on productivity, leadership, war making and so on – the way these themes are represented and the images that connect them – but without preaching and by granting its audience autonomy to interpret the images. The film

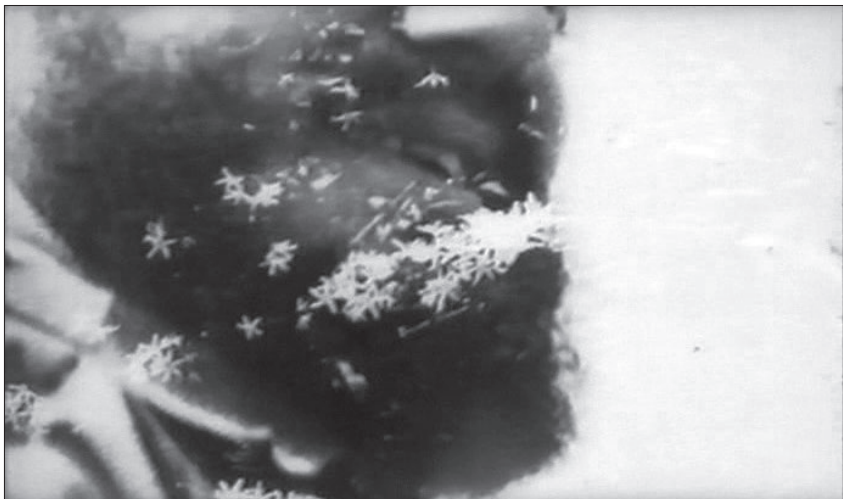


Fig. 3: Extreme close-up of Fidel Castro with coffee flowers.

questions how we have constructed the history of Latin American film by enquiring into the now-canonical classification of a Third Cinema aligned with the Cuban Revolution. *Coffea Arábica* could be read as a critique of how militant cinema ended up as a party tool, reducing rather than expanding its possibilities. One of the most important issues it underlines is the extent to which its essay film quality resists didacticism and challenges an institutional, more organic (in the Marxist sense of the term) definition of what a documentary ought to be at that time.

The most relevant aspects of *Coffea Arábica* are the same that define it as an essay film: the subjective approach and the experimental quality of its editing. Timothy Corrigan comments on the historical relationship between the experimental and the subjective:

From the beginning of film history, films sketch these essayistic predilections as the transformation of personal expressions 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 rearticulated with the advances of sound as a destabilized voice in the 1930s and 1940s. (2011: 55)

In Nicolasito's last interview, Zayas asked him about his departure 'from the revolutionary epic' and the origins of his aesthetics. His answer brings together the experimental and the subjective as a departure from the institutional organic nature of other documentaries:

I was trying to make films that were unlike others, that would not coincide with others, my own very personal work. [...] From the concern of establishing a position within the industry, I dared to do things that were not looked upon favorably, because it was a matter of films about the Cuban people, at those times, they had to at least be made with elation, and I didn't have that. (Zayas *et al.* 2003)

Even if it was not 'made with elation,' *Coffea Arábica* does display a daring commitment to explore what Theodor W. Adorno, in his definition of the essay form, describes as a desire to look for what is not being seen as much as for a transgressive impulse: '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' (1991: 23).

Making visible the shortcomings of the coffee plantation project, which Nicolasito considered a failure, while articulating a critique of the official discourse, was a heretical gesture because it departed from the collective toward the personal.

That distancing in turn translated into *Coffea Arábiga's* formal challenges. Nicolasito's work is a perfect example of Hito Steyerl's characterisation of the image as an agent of change not only as a document of a reality but as the mechanism by which a reality is created (see Oroz 2010). In *Coffea Arábiga's* case, its images disrupted the homogeneity of the official discourse connecting the collective and the personal, creating a different reality that in this film is inseparable from the essay form. That kind of thinking, which Debord formulated in *The Society of Spectacle*, was not acceptable for the Cuban political establishment of the 1960s and 1970s.

Today, at a time when most of the Latin American left has turned populist, and it has become less clear what producing a critically engaged Latin American cinema might mean, Nicolasito's films help us to have a more encompassing view of what has been done in the past and what is possible today, as well as provide us with a way to reconstruct the missing history of the essay film in Latin America.

## Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this chapter was first published in Spanish in *La Fuga* as part of a special issue on Nicolasito edited by Julio Ramos and Dylon Robbins. During the writing of this new version, I benefited from the extraordinary generosity of Ruth Golberg, Eyda Merediz and Julio Ramos.
- 2 In addition to those thirteen available films, there are another five allegedly considered missing, as there are no copies in the Cuban archives: *Congos Reales* (1962); *Patio Arenero* (1962); *El Morro* (1963); *Rita Montaner* (1965); *Expo Maquinaria Pabellón Cuba* (1969).
- 3 In an email exchange dated 24 August 2015, Michael Chanan, author of *Cuban Cinema* (2004), mentioned that in the UK, films by Nicolasito started to circulate around the year 2000. I am grateful to María Caridad Cumaná, a Cuban film scholar, for the date of the first Cuban screening which reopened the official circulation of Nicolasito's films. The screening took part in 1999 as part of a Cuban film retrospective organised by the Cuban Film Archive (Cinemateca de Cuba) and curated by Ivan Giroud.
- 4 The challenging aspect of Nicolasito's films becomes even more puzzling when one takes into account that ICAIC was by far one of the cultural institutions that were more politically flexible and interested in experimental work. Among others, Santiago Alvarez's *Now* (1968), Tomás Gutierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) and Humberto Solás's *Lucía* (1968) are film highlights of the 1960s that did not shy away from formal experimentation. It is important to emphasise the scope of Cuba's film production during the first decade of

- the Revolution. For an extended history of Cuban film after the Revolution, see Chanan's encompassing study *Cuban Cinema*.
- 5 A politically committed filmmaker, Christensen was known for his emphasis on sound editing. He taught documentary filmmaking to the first class of film students to come out of ICAIC. He was a fundamental influence for Nicolasio's aesthetic choices and helped him come back to filmmaking when he emerged from psychiatric institutionalisation. For Nicolasio's description of his relationship with Christensen, see *Es el fin pero no es el fin (It's the End but It's Not)* (Jorge Egusquiza Zorrilla and Víctor Jiménez, 2005).
  - 6 For a detailed study on the influential presence of European filmmakers in Cuba during the first years of the Revolution, see José Antonio García Borrero's *Outsiders in Paradise: Foreign Filmmakers in Cuban Cinema of the 1960's* (2009).
  - 7 For films by Sara Gómez, see *Una isla para Miguel (An Island for Miguel)*, (1968) and *De cierta manera (One Way or Another)*, (1974).
  - 8 Manuel Zayas's excellent blog contains several entries dedicated to Nicolasio's work. Zayas is also the director of *Café con leche* (2003), a film about Nicolasio.
  - 9 Marker's explicit defense of the use of close-ups in documentary making can be found in *Sans Soleil* (1983). His interest in capturing the gaze of people he portrayed can also be found in his early films. There is a photographic logic behind Marker's comment; after all, one of the rules of the photographic portrait is to focus the image on the subject's eyes.
  - 10 This split within the Left could in part explain Cuba's official reception of Nicolasio's work. The official rhetoric in defence of the Revolution and in resistance to the US blockade moved further and further away from a European Left that wanted to reclaim a critical discourse while moving away from the Soviet Union. Varda's own awareness of the difference between those first years of the Revolution and its transformation through the subsequent decades is clearly described in her presentation of the digital edition of *Salut les Cubains*.
  - 11 This two-faced cultural politics did not come without frictions. Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha, who became a friend of Nicolasio, was welcomed as someone in favour of a revolutionary change in his own country, but his personal style would have been unacceptable in a Cuban artist.
  - 12 Rocha's films were able to advocate for formal experimentation and political commitment with the same intensity. Among his better-known films are *Deus e o Diabolo na terra do sol (Black God, White Devil)*, (1964) and *Terra em Transe (Entranced Earth)*, (1967). His last film *A idade da terra (The Age of Earth)*, (1980) is a possible example of the Latin American essay film. Rocha also wrote extensively on film and politics. For more on his writings, see Rocha 2003. For an extensive survey of Latin America's documentary films and their political engagement



during the 1960s and 1970s, see Burton 1990.

- 13 I owe this reference to a conversation with Mariano Mestman, who worked on the correspondence between Fernando Solanas and ICAIC. In the end, and after much back and forth, ICAIC decided not to cut *The Hour of the Furnaces*.
- 14 The first print edition of *Society of the Spectacle* was published in 1967, and Debord made a film with the same title in 1973. This adaptation to film includes a sequence (6:05 to 6:36) featuring Debord's voice over the image of Fidel Castro in a TV studio saying: 'The spectacle presents itself as an enormous indisputable and inaccessible positivity. It says nothing more than "what appears is good, what is good appears". The attitude that it requires as its principle is this passive acceptance that it has already obtained in its manner of appearing without reply, in its monopoly over appearance.'
- 15 An extended and rigorous account of *Tucumán Arde* in particular and this period in general can be found in Longoni and Mestman 2008.
- 16 Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblance is mentioned in *Philosophical Investigations*: 'I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and crisscross in the same way. – And I shall say: "games" form a family' (1992: 32).
- 17 Marker's influence could also be traced back to the publication of the production diary of Marker's *¡Cuba Sí!*, printed in 1961 by *Cine Cubano*, ICAIC's film journal. The article, written by Eduardo Manet, who is listed as a member of the film crew, describes Marker's shooting and emphasises his interest in close-ups, a strategy that became characteristic of Nicolasito's own style. It is quite possible that Nicolasito did not only see the films but also read the article. I owe this reference to Cuban documentary filmmaker Diana Montero Rodríguez. For a complete transcription of *¡Cuba Sí!*'s voice-over, see Marker 1967: 143–69.
- 18 In his interview with Manuel Zayas, Nicolasito describes the reception of *Coffea Arabiga* as the product of an interpretation that did not reflect his idea behind the film: 'Among the official spectators, someone didn't like the song "The Fool on the Hill", though it worked very well. And apparently I had to pay for this. Something that I did with such elation and dynamism, the result was ironic, a mockery for some of the coffee project' (Zayas *et al.* 2011). Santiago Álvarez's *LBJ*, also from 1968, is a clearer case of irony and even parody in a political documentary. But whereas Álvarez's irony in *LBJ* is directed toward an American president and therefore is an acceptable rhetorical tool, the essayistic quality of Nicolasito's film allows him to go further by questioning an official project.
- 19 *Coffea arabica* is a variety of coffee, known for its resistance to illnesses, that grows better in high altitudes. The plantation program, *Cordón de la Habana*,

- that originated Nicolasito's film took place at sea level. One could argue that the failure of the plantation program was already imbedded in the name.
- 20 The exact dates of his institutionalisations are lost but we know that he spent at least eight years between psychiatric treatment and political detention.
  - 21 For a detailed account of Nicolasito's time in and out of political detention and psychiatric treatment, see Raydel Araoz and Julio Ramos's excellent documentary *Retornar a la Habana con Guillén Landrián* (*To go back to Havana with Guillén Landrián*, 2013). This film, centred on Nicolasito's widow Gretel Alfonso, helps to better understand his relationship with the Cuban establishment. See also Ramos 2011.
  - 22 A list of Latin American essay films would have to include Raúl Ruiz's *L'Hypothèse du tableau volé* (*The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, 1978) as well as most of Eduardo Coutinho's films, in particular *Cabra marcado para morrer* (*Twenty Years Later*, 1964–84), one of the earliest examples of a Latin American essay film with an uncompromising political agenda.
  - 23 This is one of Castro's most quoted sentences from what is known as 'Palabras a los intelectuales' (Words to the Intellectuals, 1961). For a complete English translation of this speech, see: <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610630.html> (accessed 5 August 2015).
  - 24 Clips for each of these sequences can be found at the following links, or at Livon-Grosman 2013: CLIP 1 – Woman combing her hair: <https://vimeo.com/surynorth/coffee-arabiga-radio-clip>; CLIP 2 – Dancing: <https://vimeo.com/surynorth/coffee-arabiga-baile-clip>; CLIP 3 – Ing. Bernaza: <https://vimeo.com/surynorth/coffee-arabiga-ing-bernaza-clip>; CLIP 4 – The Fool on the Hill: <https://vimeo.com/surynorth/coffee-arabiga-beatles-clip>. Clips are from the DVD edition of *Coffea Arábiga*, Volume 9 of the *Cuban Cinema Classics* series curated by Ann Marie Stock. For more information on this series, see <http://www.cubancinemaclassics.org/about-ccc.html> (accessed 7 November 2015).
  - 25 The voice on the radio recites: 'Life goes by. The world turns. Perhaps your soul and mine will each go its way ... but memory is born – and abides. And even if longing were to dwindle and one day our flame be extinguished, as long as I can dream – and refresh my dreams on harmony's pathway – I will hold on to the sweet melancholy of those conversations in the shadows and those kisses on the boulevard' (translation by Dwayne Carpenter).
  - 26 There is a beautiful scene where two women walk back and forth, drying the coffee beans, while a non-diegetic soundtrack mimics the murmur of their talking as they work.
  - 27 In a recent phone conversation with Nelson Rodriguez, the editor of *Memories of Underdevelopment*, he confirmed that during the shooting of the opening

sequence Nicolasito acted as Alea's assistant director. Nicolasito's signature can be seen in the close-ups of the dancers' faces and in particular in the long shot of a black woman dancing and looking at the camera that ends the sequence.

- 28 'Caimanera' is the name of the nearest town to Guantánamo's US Army base. The name is associated with the US military occupation of the island. The phrase is a variation of 'Yankees, Go Home'.
- 29 In fact, Lettrism is closely related to the *Internationale Situationniste* and to Guy Debord. The particular technique of reverse collage by which the Situationists unveiled posters and created new ones based on redrawing around existing images could be a partial description of Nicolasito's treatment of words on screen. A good example of this technique can be found in the work of French artist Jacques Villeglé.
- 30 'The Fool on the Hill', credited to John Lennon and Paul McCartney, was recorded in 1967. According to McCartney the song was written thinking of a character like Maharishi Yogi ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Fool\\_on\\_the\\_Hill](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fool_on_the_Hill) (accessed 5 August 2015)).
- 31 According to Nicolasito's own account in *It's the End but It's Not* (2005), he was aware that a film such as *Coffea Arabica* implied a critique of Cuba's political establishment in general and of the coffee plantation project in particular. In an unpublished interview, Justo Vega, one of Nicolasito's film editors, described the director's transgressive editing style as a consistent and deliberate choice.

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# Chapter 11

## American Essays in How to Build a Home: Thoreau, Mekas, Proenneke<sup>1</sup>

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Oliver Gaycken

The essay ... does not measure what is by some eternal standard, rather by an enthusiastic fragment from Nietzsche's later life: 'If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in ourselves nor in things: and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harpstring 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.'

Theodor W. Adorno (1984: 170–1, citing Nietzsche 1968: 532–3)

Richard Louis 'Dick' Proenneke took to the woods at Twin Lakes, Alaska, in the summer of 1968. He went to live alone, taking with him some supplies, tools for constructing a cabin and photographic equipment that included a Bolex 16mm camera. Proenneke lived in the cabin he built for the next three decades, and he regularly documented his life with photographs and film. On 14 December 1969, Jonas Mekas screened the first installment of a film project that he called *Diaries, Notes and Sketches (Also Known as Walden)*, which drew on material he had shot during the period from the spring of 1965 to the summer of 1968. The



Fig. 1: Dick Proenneke with his Bolex: *Alone in the Wilderness* (Bob Swerer, Sr. and Richard Proenneke, 2003)

juxtaposition of these two individuals and their engagement with a form of filmmaking that has been described as ‘diaristic’ frames a series of reflections that relate to the ongoing attempt to determine the parameters of the essay film. In his important book on the essay film tradition, Timothy Corrigan (2011) accords a fair measure of attention to certain American filmmakers, including Mekas, as well as Ross McElwee and Thom Andersen, but the bulk of his examples come from European cinema. A comparison of Proenneke’s film work with Mekas’s allows aspects of both men’s filmmaking practice – their relationship to nature as well as their shared affinity with Henry David Thoreau – to emerge as the basis for the claim that these filmmakers participated in a specifically American form of the essay film. This constellation – Thoreau / Mekas / Proenneke – involves not only a shared interest in the relationship between art and nature but more importantly a valorisation of quotidian forms of work and attention as a means for transforming aesthetic experience. Ultimately, this chapter will relate this American form of the essay film to American transcendentalism, elaborating on a link that P. Adams Sitney forged when he underscored the cinematic avant-garde’s inheritance of a crucial transcendentalist project, namely, the ‘transformation of Necessity into a category of poetics’ (2008: 5).

When Jonas Mekas screened the first version of a film project that he described as an initial ‘rough draft’, *Diaries, Notes and Sketches (Also Known as Walden)* ran over three hours and set the parameters for the cinematic method that defines his career.<sup>2</sup> Sitney argues that ‘diary film’ or ‘home movie’ can be misleading terms by which to designate Mekas’s work, which is why he proposes the term ‘avant-garde quotidian lyric’ (2002: 425). Regardless of how one designates it, what is crucial about Mekas’s work is how his films both redefine the field of action for filmmaking by locating it in the process of chronicling everyday experience, and how their formal agenda estranges typical understandings of the quotidian.

Instead of the everyday as the domain of the unexceptional, of boredom, of experience that is the antithesis of the category of art, this kind of filmmaking seizes upon the domain of the diary/home movie as an opportunity for the reinvigoration of aesthetic experience.

Sitney characterises Mekas's artistic practice as 'exercises in Romantic autobiography' (2002: 339), by which he means that they are suffused with a sense of innocence lost, then pursued, but ultimately unattained.<sup>3</sup> Both Sitney and David James relate the outlook of English Romanticism to American transcendentalism, particularly in attempts to redress the loss of experience in modernity.<sup>4</sup> James summarises the common attributes in the following way: 'From these [the English Romantics and the American transcendentalists] were inherited both the prototypical situation of the modern artist (the artist *as such*) and the categories of artistic practice: the work of art as an organic unity, formally autonomous and created in either a community of other artists or rural solitude, proposed as the palliative for the alienation of demythologized modernity in general and industrial culture in particular' (1992: 145).

Mekas's goal of eradicating the distinction between work and life and thereby healing the rift between labour and leisure caused by capitalist modernity resonates with the reasons Henry David Thoreau gave for his experiment in *Walden*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (Thoreau 1854: Chapter 2, 'Where I Lived, and What I Lived for')

Thoreau's two years in relative solitude by Walden Pond were an exemplary instance of Emersonian self-reliance. Mekas's and Proenneke's specific engagements with Thoreau will be discussed in more detail below, but we can note here the initial similarity of a commitment to deliberate living that calls for mediated reflection on everyday experience. Both Mekas and Proenneke saw in Thoreau a model for addressing the question of how to live, of how to integrate nature and experience into modern life. Whereas Thoreau's formal means of achieving this kind of experience came via writing, Mekas and Proenneke extended the form of essayistic reflection into the domain of cinema.

## Destination – Back & Beyond

Dick Proenneke wrote ‘Destination – Back & Beyond’ on the back of his camper with a felt-tipped marker as he made his way to Alaska to build a cabin in late March of 1968 (see Proenneke 2010: 85). ‘Back’ is on the one hand a straightforward reference – he was going back to a certain location, an area known as Twin Lakes, which he had visited many times before and where, during the previous summer, he had scouted a location and cut logs that would serve as the building material for a cabin. ‘Back’ also certainly suggests ‘back to nature’, a return to a more harmonious relationship with nature. But Proenneke was neither a hermit nor a survivalist; his ‘back’ did not involve a desire to return to a pre-industrial state. As much as he was eager to leave certain aspects of modern life behind him, especially the strictures of a paying job, he remained socially active and did not eschew technology. The ‘beyond’ can thus be thought of as a state of mind as much as a place, a life that allowed for a different kind of openness to the world. What this attitude can entail is illustrated by an anecdote related to John Branson, Proenneke’s editor, which was told to him by Raymond Proenneke, Dick’s brother. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police stopped Proenneke as he drove to Anchorage. The RCMP officer ‘pulled him over because he was driving very slowly and the officer thought he might be impaired. In fact, [Proenneke] was driving slowly so he could take in the grand scenery along the road’ (Proenneke 2010: 184, n2). This image of Proenneke arousing the suspicion of the police for going too slowly is a fitting emblem for someone who was in sync with a different rhythm, evoking Thoreau’s ‘different drummer’. The occasion also indicates Proenneke’s particular investment in vision, and in *One Man’s Alaska* (National Park Service, 1977) he recalls an industrial accident that nearly blinded him was the event that prompted his move into the woods in the first place: ‘I decided that I would quit this racket ... and I would go to Twin Lakes, and I would build me a cabin, and enjoy my eyesight a little bit, if I had any left’.

Beyond seizing the opportunity to see what he could see, Proenneke explained his decision to live in the wilderness in the film compiled from his film diaries (*Alone in the Wilderness*, Bob Swerer and Richard Proenneke, 2003), in the following terms:

I suppose I was here because this was something I had to do. Not just dream about it but do it. I suppose, too, I was here to test myself. Not that I had never done it before, but this time it was to be a more thorough and lasting examination. What was I capable of that I didn’t know yet? Could I truly enjoy my own company for an entire year? And was I equal to everything this wild land could throw at me? I had seen its moods in late spring, summer, and early fall, but



what about the winter? Would I love the isolation then, with its bone-stabbing cold, its ghostly silence? At age 51, I intended to find out.

Proenneke's reasons for moving into the woods resonate with Thoreau's; his 'more thorough and lasting examination' recalls Thoreau's living 'deliberately' and putting 'to rout all that was not life'. Proenneke's self-test, then, can be seen as a form of experiment, 'an essay', as it were. As we shall see, Proenneke also shared with Thoreau the desire to seek out a particularly rich form of lived experience, in Thoreau's words, 'to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life'. Indeed, in these statements of purpose, both Proenneke and Thoreau are making what amount to declarations of independence; it was no coincidence that Thoreau's move to the woods occurred on 4 July. Proenneke, following Thoreau, performs a quintessentially American gesture of self-founding and self-discovery, leaving America behind only to discover it anew.<sup>5</sup>

Proenneke built his cabin over the course of the summer of 1968, using only the hand tools he had brought with him. He lived almost continuously in his cabin for more than thirty years, with occasional trips to the lower forty-eight. He lived alone, although he did receive guests frequently and was an energetic writer in both his voluminous journals as well as in frequent letters to a large network of correspondents. Indeed, Proenneke produced a massive volume of writing. His own description of his accumulated journals was to note their weight – 90 pounds; his editor supplies the more conventional measure, stating that the journals contain approximately 1.6 million words (see Proenneke 2005: viii). The quality of the writing is as noteworthy as the quantity, however; Proenneke had a knack for unadorned but novel metaphors – 'It happened with the suddenness of a broken shoelace' is how he describes catching a trout. In *Alone in the Wilderness* he describes he describes how the ends of the logs of his under-construction cabin stick out 'like the quills of a riled porcupine'.

Proenneke also documented his life with his still and motion-picture cameras. Before his death, Proenneke gave his footage to a friend, Bob Swerer Sr., who assembled some of Proenneke's material into several films, the best known of which is *Alone in the Wilderness* (2003), which covers the first year Proenneke spent in Alaska by himself, as he constructed his cabin and lived through the winter. *Alone in the Wilderness* primarily uses Proenneke's 16mm footage, but it does contain a handful of shots by Bob Swerer Sr. and Jr., Ray Proenneke (Dick's brother) and Tom Grey, an associate of the Swerers. The soundtrack consists of excerpts from Proenneke's journals and *One Man's Wilderness*, the 1973 book by Sam Keith, a writer who published an edited and expanded version of Proenneke's journals, read by Swerer Sr.

*Alone in the Wilderness* bears witness to Proenneke's extraordinary craftsman-

ship; he built the walls of the cabin in ten days. He ripped his own boards for the interior; the entire structure, complete with a stone chimney, was constructed over the course of the summer, and he moved into the cabin on 1 August 1968. By focusing on the initial construction of the cabin, however, *Alone in the Wilderness* de-emphasises the entirety of Proenneke's life in Alaska. Its account places a premium on one-time, finite tasks as opposed to his long-term effort to live differently. Furthermore, the title makes the same distortion as that made by any understanding of Thoreau that places an emphasis on solitude. Neither Thoreau nor Proenneke was a hermit; their moves to the wilderness were less an attempt to avoid civilisation than a method to induce a more 'deliberate' life.

James's distinction between Mekas's keeping of a 'film diary' from which he creates a 'diary film' is helpful for understanding Proenneke's film work as well:

The *film diary* inaugurated functions for the apparatus that radically refused both industrial and orthodox avant-garde usages, with the extravagances, deficiencies, and contradictions of the new (non)genre challenging the hegemonic forms of the medium in a new private practice of cinema that integrates it into the praxis of life. The *diary film* returned that private practice to a public context and to the manufacture of a product, an aesthetically autonomous work of art. (1992: 16–17)

Whereas Mekas repeatedly realised the transition from film diary to diary film, Proenneke rarely, if ever, provided a 'diary film' version of his film diary practice. Indeed, although Proenneke did lecture with his films and slides occasionally, those performances were not recorded, and the guiding force behind the Proenneke films currently in circulation is Bob Swerer Sr. In what follows, it should be kept in mind that the Proenneke I see is glimpsed at times through or even in spite of the image of Proenneke presented in *Alone in the Wilderness*. And as the juxtaposition of Mekas with Proenneke will suggest, *Alone in the Wilderness* gives us one but certainly not the only and perhaps not the most interesting view of Proenneke's experimental domesticity. In a fashion similar to how Thoreau's *Walden* has been seen as a distillation but also a distortion of the more 'essayistic' qualities of his journals, the raw materials – Proenneke's footage, his photographs and his journals – represent a 'wilder' work than *Alone in the Wilderness*.<sup>6</sup>

How to...

Much of what Proenneke shot can be described as process films, discrete sequences



Figs. 2a–f: Dick Proenneke fashioning door hinges: *Alone in the Wilderness*

that documented the steps he took to construct his cabin and create an infrastructure for his basic needs (complete with an icebox cut into the permafrost). To watch how Proenneke carves handles for his tools, how he notches the logs that will form the walls of the cabin, how he constructs the hinges of his door out of a gnarled stump, is to bear witness to exceptional ingenuity (indeed, John Branson asserts that Proenneke is a ‘mechanical genius’ (in Proenneke 2005: xiv)). In this sense, film participated in his experiment of living alone in Alaska as a witness, constituting a moving-image counterpart to the voluminous letters and journal entries in which he detailed his daily routines and observations.

This use of film to document routines as opposed to events constitutes an essential similarity between Proenneke’s work and what Michael Renov has argued

is a key aspect of Mekas's filmmaking practice. The emphasis on process also places the relationship to the essayistic into sharper relief. As Renov writes about Mekas, 'The interminability of the essay follows from the process-orientation of its activity, the mediation of the real through a cascade of language, memory, and imagination' (1992: 217). Proenneke was not content only to build and hike and live in the Alaskan wilderness. Instead, he did these things in concert with the constant mediation of writing, photographing, filming. So while the footage Proenneke shot of himself working with wood or hiking through the woods on the one hand can seem like a straightforward documentation of his activities, reminiscent of the 'typical' home movies that document birthdays and holidays, it is important to bear in mind that he filmed all of these activities by himself, using a timer feature on his camera. In other words, Proenneke performed all of these activities for the camera, demonstrating the process of putting together (and then living in) his new home.

A chasm might seem to yawn here between Proenneke's self-conscious documenting of his home-building skills and Mekas's insistence on improvisation and spontaneity, as in this passage:

When one writes diaries, it's a retrospective process: you sit down, you look back at your day, and you write it all down. To keep a film (camera) diary is to react (with your camera) immediately, now, this instant: either you get it now or you don't get it at all. To go back and shoot it later, it would mean restaging, be it events or feelings. To get it now, as it happens, demands the total mastery of one's tools (in this case, Bolex): it has to register my state of feeling (and the memories) as I react. Which also means that I had to do all the structuring (editing) right there, during the shooting, in the camera. (As cited in Sitney 2002: 340).

But Mekas was not as wedded to improvisation as this pronouncement might suggest. This statement ignores how intricately involved Mekas was in the process of editing the diary films – which contain post-production effects (superimpositions, dissolves); slight liberties with chronology; and crucially, a complex and entirely postsynchronous soundtrack. As Renov notes about Mekas's later diary film *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976):

*Lost* exceeds its roots in improvisation, in the capture of an uncontrolled reality, in a wished-for fusion of art and life. At last, it is through its character as essayistic work that the film yields its surplus. Vast in its purview, elliptical in its self-presentation, complex in its interpolation of historical substrata and

textual voices, the film struggles with ‘the old problem – to merge Reality and Self, to come up with the third thing.’ But *Lost* resists the snares of resolution or completion, even in the dialectical beyond. (1992: 237, citing Mekas 1978: 192)

This resistance to resolution and completion in the dedication to an open-ended, continual usage of cinema as a means to chronicle life unites Mekas and Proenneke. And Mekas would reverse his initial valorisation of spontaneity as the crucial aspect of his filmic practice, noting:

At first I thought that there was a basic difference between the written diary which one writes in the evening, and which is a reflective process, and the filmed diary. In my film diary, I thought, I was doing something different: I was capturing life, bits of it, as it happens. But I realized very soon that it wasn't that different at all. When I am filming, I am also reflecting, I was thinking that I was only reacting to the actual reality. I do not have much control over reality at all, and everything is determined by my memory, my past. So that this ‘direct’ filming becomes also a mode of reflection. Same way, I came to realize, that writing a diary is not merely reflecting, looking back. Your day, as it comes to you during the moment of writing, is measured, sorted out, accepted, refused, and reevaluated by what and how one is at the moment when one writes it all down. It's all happening again, and what one writes down is more true to what one is when one writes than to the events and emotions of the day that are past and gone. Therefore, I no longer see such big differences between a written diary and the filmed diary, as far as the processes go. (1978: 191–2; quoted in Renov 1992: 234)

While there is, then, a significant difference in the effect of Mekas's *Walden* and Proenneke's *Alone in the Wilderness*, there is nonetheless an underlying similarity in the process, in the relationship between the filmmaker's life and the activity of filmmaking. This emphasis on process resonates with Georg Lukács's reflections on the essay form: ‘The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict ... but the process of judging’ (as cited in Renov 1992: 217). For Proenneke and Mekas both, cinema is a form of celebrating and commemorating their *ars et techné*. On one level a film about how to build a cabin, *Alone in the Wilderness* more importantly, like Thoreau's *Walden* and Mekas's *Walden*, is a film about how to live.

Like the tasks involved in building the cabin and maintaining his existence in a remote location, Proenneke's writerly and cinematic home-building is best understood as an experiment in living; they are all answers to the question: What

happens when the everyday is precisely what is at stake, when quotidian routines are subjected to a process of estrangement and renovation? Here we confront two senses of the notion of ‘domestication’. On the one hand, to make domestic, part of the home, a docile integration into the boring everyday, a closing in/off: that is the somewhat limited and limiting sense that emerges as the dominant in *Alone in the Wilderness*. On the other hand, though, domestication or homemaking in the way practiced by Thoreau, Proenneke and Mekas means an opening out, whereby the world around becomes part of the home, where home is redefined and reconfigured to be something new and strange and wonderful.

### Clutch the Rainbow

One invocation of Thoreau that crops up in Proenneke’s journals occurs when he is describing making a plaster cast of wolf prints. He writes: ‘It worked perfectly and I took movies of the whole operation. I think Henry David Thoreau hit the nail on the head when he wrote, “The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as indescribable as the tints of morning and evening. It is a little stardust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched”’ (2010: 24, citing Thoreau 1854). A noteworthy feature of this entry is the prominence of recording media. The activity of making a cast of a paw print, a type of sign that belongs to the category that Charles Sanders Peirce designated ‘indexical’, is one form of image making, and in a further layer of inscription, Proenneke enlists cinema to document the act of making a copy of a natural sign. Furthermore, the content of the quotation from Thoreau espouses precisely the cosmic dividend of such activities, encounters with indescribable nature that are nonetheless something to be recorded or ‘clutched’. In another journal entry, Proenneke describes his dinner of trout and biscuits and again brings Thoreau and recording technologies together:

The grease good and hot and it worked fine and the biscuits browned just right. That man Thoreau was quite a guy. I wonder how he was with sourdough. I’ll bet he would come visit a second time if he sampled my biscuits. They looked so nice I set the whole meal – trout, biscuits, honey and butter all on a box and took a Kodachrome with both 35mm and 8mm. (2010: 22)

These moments were worthy of documentation on the one hand because of their unusual quality (the plaster casting works ‘perfectly’ and the biscuits are ‘just right’); and it seems that Proenneke often made meals that pleased him, because there are many images of food among his photographs. But these moments of

Fig. 3: Sourdough pancakes  
with syrup and bacon;  
photograph by Dick Proenneke:  
*One Man's Wilderness*  
(Sam Keith and Richard  
Proenneke, 1973)



perfection occur in the flow of everyday events; they have to be snatched from the oblivion that is the quotidian's fate.

Indeed, an aesthetic tendency shared by Proenneke and Mekas comes into view around the importance of a particular form of observation that aspires to clutch the rainbow. David James has noted that Mekas's 'precise idiolect' in *Walden* is centred on 'a preoccupation with close-ups' (1992: 157). *Alone in the Wilderness* contains numerous close-ups that Swerer uses primarily as interstitial transitions. Taken together, these images constitute a recurring tendency in Proenneke's work that deserves to be singled out as something more than connective tissue. A passage from Proenneke's journals quoted in *Alone in the Wilderness* helps make the underlying ethos of these observational moments explicit: 'Close at hand, the mosses and grasses were full of tiny flowers. It is another world of beauty. The more I see as I sit here among the rocks, the more I wonder about what I am not seeing' (from *Alone in the Wilderness*). This way of looking at things represents an enrichment of the everyday by means of looking closer, a humbling view of the cosmos that leads to and is fueled by unending curiosity. Jean-Jacques Lebel has described Mekas's 'perception system' as 'an innovative gaze of radical singularity focusing on intimate details and intimate events' (2012: 19). And while Lebel is writing specifically about the 'Cassis' sequence of *Walden*, this observation can also serve as a general observation about how Mekas sees the world.

As Mekas described his own process, 'the camera now picks up glimpses, fragments of objects and people, and creates fleeting impressions, of both objects and actions, in the manner of the action painters. A new spiritualized reality of motion and light is created on the screen' (1972: 191, quoted in James 1992: 156). Sitney has noted that Mekas's filmmaking created 'a new cinematic genre of autonomous serial illuminations of the time, place, and mood of a fleeting moment. [...] The fragmentary style ... continually reminds the filmmaker and the viewer of the superabundant, ungraspable welter of events surrounding him and us' (2008: 95). For Mekas, Sitney argues, these moments bear witness to cinema's ability to

capture fragments of a shattered paradise (2008: 96–7). ‘If Walden is a name for home, and for what you see, it is a state of mind, an investment in the present moment just as it is undergoing revaluation under the threat of destruction. In later volumes of the film diary, he will sometimes call this state paradise’ (2008: 90).<sup>7</sup>

The fragments of paradise that *Walden* contains are primarily to be understood in relationship to nature. As Scott MacDonald has pointed out, Mekas’s invocation of Thoreau should be understood against the backdrop of the threat to nature by certain forms of technology and industrialisation.<sup>8</sup> In the same way that Thoreau used Walden Pond as a vantage point from which to contemplate, and to avoid, the speed and encroachment of an increasingly industrialised urban experience, so, too, Mekas used Walden as an emblem for a lost connection to nature in his rural Lithuanian childhood. Mekas’s wilderness is located within the city (i.e., in Central Park), in a piece of technology (his Bolex) and, most importantly, in his mind; as MacDonald notes, ‘Mekas’s camera is a twentieth-century version of Thoreau’s house by the pond, and the legendary frugality of Thoreau’s budget in “Economy” finds its modern echo in Mekas’s low-budget, high-art “home movies”’ (2001: 236).

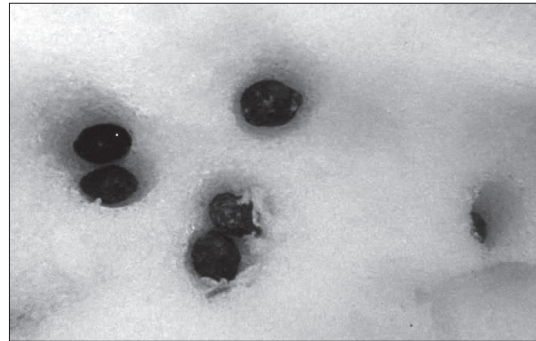
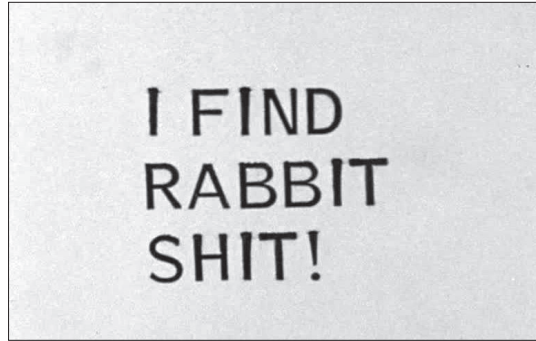
So while Mekas’s location in the urban metropolis might seem to mark a significant difference from both Thoreau and Proenneke, his work retains underlying natural-history qualities – the film’s seasonal structure, the frequent notations of the weather, and the interest in flowers and trees.<sup>9</sup> Another example of Mekas’s relationship to what we might term a scientific form of observation occurs during his visit to Stan Brakhage’s house. During a walk in the woods, Mekas makes a discovery.<sup>10</sup> This unassuming moment might seem a parody of wildlife observation, but it is also an encrypted reference to Mekas’s previous oeuvre, referring both to his attempts in the early 1960s to create visual equivalents of the haiku form, a project he entitled *Rabbitshit Haikus* (1962), and an anecdote he told in some of the *Haikus* where the discovery of rabbit droppings plays an important role.

Do you know the story of the man who couldn’t live anymore without the knowledge of what’s at the end of the road, and what he found there when he reached it? He found a pile, a small pile of rabbit shit at the end of the road. And back home he went. And when people used to ask him, ‘Hey, where does the road lead to?’ He used to answer: ‘Nowhere, the road leads to nowhere, and there is nothing but a pile of rabbit shit at the end of the road.’ So he told them. But nobody believed him. (Mekas, quoted in Sitney 2008: 94)

He used to work, like everybody else, and then stop and look at the horizon. And when people used to ask him, ‘Hey, what’s wrong with you? Why do you



Figs. 4a–b: Jonas Mekas discovers rabbit shit: *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches (Also Known as Walden)* (Jonas Mekas, 1962)



keep looking into the distance?’ he used to tell them, ‘I want to know what’s at the end of the road.’ ... No, he found nothing, nothing at the end of the road when later, many years later, after many years of journey he came to the end of the road, there was nothing, nothing but a pile of rabbit shit, not even the rabbit was there any longer, and the road led nowhere. (Mekas, quoted in Sitney 2008: 94–5; ellipsis in original)

In both versions of the rabbit-shit story, the droppings serve as an answer to the question, What is at the end of the road? And in both versions, the rabbit shit serves as an ironic deflation of the urge to know what comes at the end, a grounded riposte to teleological desire. In this sense, the discovery of rabbit shit in Mekas’s work seems linked to the essay’s more general commitment to open-ended process. Mekas, as opposed to the figure in the story, is not concerned with finding out what is at the end of the road. And as his exclamation point indicates, instead of the discovery of something less than glorious serving as a slap in the face, he celebrates the appearance of everyday shit.

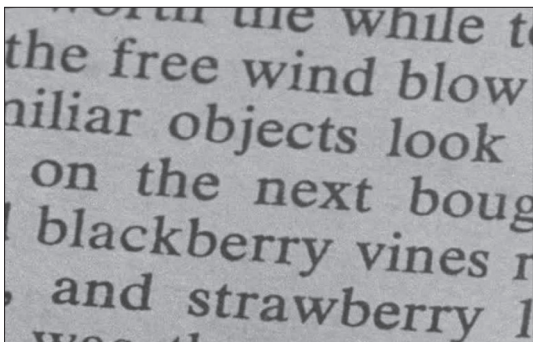


Fig. 5: *Walden in Walden: Diaries, Notes, and Sketches (Also Known as Walden)* (Jonas Mekas, 1962)

## How to Make a Home

Mekas repeatedly cites Thoreau's *Walden* in his *Walden*. The references appear as close-ups of a printed page, framed so that individual words are clearly legible but complete sentences are not. To initiate the conclusion of this chapter, I will focus on the second time Mekas cites Thoreau.<sup>11</sup> The section of Thoreau's text in which this passage is located begins with the following lines, 'I had this advantage, at least, in my mode of life, over those who were obliged to look abroad for amusement, to society and the theatre, that my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel. It was a drama of many scenes and without an end' (Thoreau 1854: Chapter 4, 'Sounds'). The section goes on to a description of Thoreau's pleasure in housekeeping. He describes how, when he sets his furniture outside in order to clean his house, it takes on a different appearance, 'so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house' (ibid.).<sup>12</sup> Thoreau's experiment in living at Walden transformed daily drudgery into a source of 'amusement' that had the ability to transform everyday domestic objects into quasi-animate things that suggest a profound relationship to the natural world. Proenneke's life and filmmaking similarly made nature into an extension of his domestic space. What is remarkable about Proenneke's domesticity is at once its familiarity, the way he creates a facsimile of an ordinary life – the kitchen, the hearth – and simultaneously the many profound differences from ordinary life – from the bird companion who shares his meals to the fact that he finds 40 degrees F a cozy indoor temperature.

The suggestion is that the process of making a home is ongoing and transformative. As Thoreau writes immediately after the introductory sentences to the section quoted above, 'If we were always, indeed, getting our living, and regulating our lives according to the last and best mode we had learned, we should never be troubled with ennui. Follow your genius closely enough, and

it will not fail to show you a fresh prospect every hour' (ibid.). Stanley Cavell has commented on this aspect of Thoreau's *Walden*, whereby the attention to the present and all forms of activity transforms the importance and location of aesthetic endeavour:

Each calling – what the writer means (and what anyone means, more or less) by a 'field' of action or labor – is isomorphic with every other. This is why building the house and hoeing and writing and reading (and we could add, walking and preparing food and receiving visitors and hammering a nail and surveying the ice) are allegories and measures of one another. All and only true building is edifying. All and only edifying actions are fit for human habitation. Otherwise they do not earn life. If your action, in its field, cannot stand such measurement, it is a sign that the field is not yours. This is the writer's assurance that his writing is not a substitute for his life, but his way of prosecuting it. (1972: 60)

Thus Thoreau's *Walden* emerges as a model for how filmmaking can connect the filmmaker to nature in a manner similar to writing in a manner similar to building a cabin. Although Mekas is not living in a remote Alaskan location, his '*Walden* is the terrain where he is at home making movies' (Sitney 2008: 91). 'I live, therefore I make films. I make films, therefore I live. Light. Movement. I make home movies, therefore I live. I live, therefore I make home movies' (Mekas, *Walden*). As Sitney writes about this pronouncement in *Walden*, 'The chant about home movies is a fool's cogito. *Home* is the complex word in that formula; for when Mekas raises making intimate, amateur films to an existential principle, he is also confessing that making films of home is his mode of living' (2008: 88). Indeed, 'I thought of home' is the only repeated intertitle in the film, figuring near the beginning and near the conclusion. The primacy of thinking of home indicates how the film itself is part of a continual process of searching for home, a continually deferred search that leads instead to making a home (in or via) cinema.

So while a difference between Mekas and Proenneke might be construed as the former making art while the latter did not, I find that Mekas's own thoughts on his relationship to the category of art helpfully complicate or even obliterate this dichotomy: 'It is important to know that what I do is not artistic. I am just a filmmaker. I live how I live and I do what I do, which is recording moments of my life as I move ahead. And I do it because I am compelled to. Necessity, not artistry, is the true line you can follow in my life and work' (Mekas, quoted in O'Hagan 2012). Mekas, as James contends, seeks to 'transcend art', to be 'completely noncritical, and be anti-art, anti-cinema' (1992: 159). Indeed, Mekas's position embraces and in a rather startlingly direct way calls for and to Proenneke: 'The

day is close when the 8mm home-movie footage will be collected and appreciated as beautiful folk art, like songs and the lyric poetry that was created by the people. Blind as we are, it will take us a few more years to see it, but some people see it already' (1972: 83; quoted in James 1992: 159). While Proenneke has not been recognised as a figure in the history of the avant-garde, his practice of making images also deserves to be included in accounts of practitioners who have used cinema in the service of transforming perception. A final quotation from Proenneke's journals can serve to highlight the commonalities shared by Thoreau, Mekas and Proenneke, especially their shared emphasis on the primacy of sensory and everyday experience:

I have found that some of the simplest things have given me the most pleasure. They didn't cost me a lot of money either. They just worked on my senses. Did you ever pick very large blueberries after a summer rain, walk through a grove of cottonwoods, open like a park, and see the blue sky beyond the shimmering gold of the leaves? Pull on dry woolen socks after you've peeled off the wet ones? Come in out of the subzero and shiver yourself warm in front of a wood fire? The world is full of such things. (National Park and Preserve Alaska n.d.)

This emphasis on simplicity and the experimental cultivation and appreciation of being at home in the world unite Thoreau, Mekas and Proenneke, who together sound an affirmative note signaling the enthusiastic production of fragments that constitute their process of homemaking.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the Northeast Historic Film summer symposium for providing an opportunity to present an earlier version of this research. Thanks are also due to John Branson and Kathryn Myers of Lake Clark National Park, Alaska, for answering questions about Dick Proenneke and providing me with images.
- 2 'Because laboratories confused prints and printing materials, Mekas took the serial title *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* off the installments of his diary after *Walden*. However, he considers all of his works in both film and video, excepting *Guns of the Trees* and *The Brig*, as parts of that composite film' (Sitney 2002: 452 n16). Sitney also takes note of several other films that prefigure Mekas's emphasis on the personal: Marie Menken's *Notebook* (1963); Stan Brakhage's *Songs* (1964); and Joseph Cornell's understanding of filmmaking as a personal activity (2002: 225).

- 3 Mekas's continual return to the theme of his inability to seize the beauty of the present leads Sitney to describe his work as a 'threnody' as well (2002: 424).
- 4 American transcendentalism designates the flowering of literature and philosophy in America around the middle of the nineteenth century, particularly in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. The classic discussion of American transcendentalism is Matthiessen (1941).
- 5 Mekas, too, performs this gesture; as David James notes about Mekas, 'In discovering a home in cinema, [Mekas] discovers an America, an individual reenactment of the origin of the nation' (1992: 175). James cites Stanley Cavell's observation about the significance of Thoreau's move to Walden occurring on 4 July. Also interesting to note is that the gift of a copy of *Walden* was generative for both Proenneke and Mekas. Proenneke said that the gift of a copy of Thoreau's *Walden* laid at the origin of his decision to live in the woods, 'Her [Rose Nadeau of Maine] gift of the book *Walden* was my start on this wilderness adventure' (2005: 69). Sitney notes that Peter Beard gave Mekas a copy of *Walden* in 1962 (while Mekas was shooting *Rabbitshit Haikus*) (2008: 84).
- 6 See Cameron 1985 for a reading of the differences between *Walden* and the journals. David James argues that Mekas's *Walden* ultimately resembles Thoreau's journals more than *Walden* itself (1992: 163). Christian Lebrat also notes that Mekas's *Walden* has an 'irreducible, wild character' (Chodorov and Lebrat 2009: 10).
- 7 'It [nature] *is* threatened, but in the end it's up to us to keep those little bits of paradise alive and defend them and see that they survive and grow' (Mekas 1992: 101, quoted in MacDonald 2001: 236).
- 8 MacDonald notes that 'the centrality of the idea of nature in the literary and the cinematic versions of *Walden* ... accounts for Mekas's decision to use Thoreau's work as the central, guiding metaphor of his film' (2001: 234).
- 9 For a thorough examination of Thoreau's profound engagement with scientific thought and practice, see Walls 1995. In terms that point to the attributes that unite Thoreau with Mekas and Proenneke, she writes, 'Thoreau's consilience of an Emersonian insistence on higher or spiritual ends with a Humboldtian, worldly empiricism resulted in not just a new "fact" or new literary work but an experimental new genre, conceptually avant-garde even in our own time' (1995: 179).
- 10 Frame enlargements (reproduced in Sitney 2008: np), presumably from Mekas's own print, reveal a textual variant of the intertitle, which there reads, 'I find the rabbit shit!' The presence of the definite article in this version points more insistently at the anecdote.
- 11 The image contains the words 'blackberry vines', which locates the passage in chapter four of *Walden*, 'Sounds'. A more rigorous reading of all the citations in

relation to the film may well yield interesting insights. The first appearance of a textual citation, for instance, cites chapter six of *Walden*, ‘Visitors’, section 13, where Thoreau describes a Canadian woodcutter who visits him, a description that sounds like a description of Proenneke. Here, for the interested reader, are the locations of all the citations, using the time code from the Re:Voir DVD version of the film: 19:58—from chapter 6, section 13; 48:47—from chapter 4, ‘Sounds’, section 3; 52:07—from chapter 9a, section 15; 1:03:15—from chapter 9a, section 5; 1:08:09—chapter 15; 2:26:50—chapter 17; 2:28:00—chapter 15; 2:35:23—chapter 4; 2:44:58—chapter 14; 2:46:25—chapter 2; 2:46:37—chapter 9a. The citation from ‘Civil Disobedience’ occurs at 2:30:58.

- 12 This changing of perspective is a key component of Sitney’s invocation of Emerson as a source for the American avant-garde: ‘Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable is the picture’ (Emerson 1849, quoted in Sitney 2008: 8).

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# Chapter 12

## ‘to speak, to hold, to live by the image’: Notes in the Margins of the New Videographic Tendency

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Luka Arsenjuk

1.

The heterogeneity and the unstable nature of the term ‘the essay film’ warrant that we, at least initially, approach it by way of a negative definition. It has become common to say that the genre of the essay film contains all those films that cannot be confidently placed into any cinematic genre (fictional or documentary). Such a definition names the film essay as an absence, or inversely, as an excess or a remainder left by the side of the cinema’s system of genres. If we assume that today the condition of cinema remains tied to the fate of its genres – even as the function of the genre system presently finds itself in complete disarray – then we might further recognise in the essay film a sort of non-cinema, a non-place where the system of cinema loses its coordinates, or a limit at which cinema turns upon itself.

In a further turn, it is possible to reverse such a negative characterisation. Not so much to produce from it a positive definition, but to give a different sense to the initial perception of the essay film that it offers. For one can say that, if the ‘genre’ of the essay film contains what does not belong to the system of cinematic genres, it is because the essay film is about the genre of cinema as such. What is at



stake in the essay film is not simply the existence of one cinematic genre among others, but *the attempt at a generic conception of cinema*, a conception of cinema beyond or simply apart from its typical divisions. The fact that the film essay has no proper place within the conditions of cinema must have something to do with the essayistic desire to emancipate these conditions themselves. The essay film names a form in which cinema seeks to escape from the condition of its genres in order to experiment with its non-classifiable capacities by attempting to turn itself into its own, singular condition.

I wish to place the stress here on the meaning of the essay as ‘attempt’, which signals both incompleteness and exertion of effort, labour without the guarantee of a result. It is, however, important to separate the notion of the essay as attempt from the way the term might get caught up within the binary of success and failure. An essayistic attempt is precisely the construction of something to which the value of this particular binary, success/failure, cannot apply, for it is impossible to view the essayistic effort unequivocally as either accomplished or botched. The status of the essay-attempt is better grasped in relation to a different opposition, namely that of the possible and the impossible. The essay form belongs to the post-Romantic, modern horizon, within which form presents itself as something possible only if it passes through or touches on the point of its impossibility. Like the novel, for instance, the essay is characterised by the inseparability, the necessary co-articulation in the experience of form, of the possible and the impossible. The essay is an attempt in the precise sense that its form delineates the contours of an impossibility, yet this delineation of the impossibility has the strange effect of transforming and reorganising the very field of formal possibilities within which we move.

If the film essay mounts an attempt at emancipating, experimenting with and freely determining its own conditions in order to expand what is possible in cinema, then it is also necessary to relate this essayistic expansion of possibilities to the persistence of a certain experience of impossibility – the impossibility of cinema to become precisely such a purely emancipated, experimental and freely self-determining subject; the impossibility of cinema to be fully, positively itself. We can find an example of something like this in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (*History(ies) of Cinema*, 1988–98). For not only is Godard in his masterpiece after a generic and singular idea of cinema and its (hi)stories beyond this or that genre, his long videographic essay also revolves around the articulation of the im/possibility of cinema to be itself or to be adequate to its own historicity. The idea of Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is that cinema should have been otherwise and that another possibility of cinema (a cinema aware of the iconic power of its images) can retroactively be reconstructed from cinema’s actual history in the twentieth century (cinema that enslaved images in the service of stories and

plots sold by the film industry). Yet Godard's very gesture implies that the idea of cinema he constructs needs to also appear as an impossibility (and not merely a failure), since were it simply possible from the start, the work of his essay would be superfluous or unnecessary. 'Godard makes with the films of Murnau, Lang, Griffith, Chaplin, or Renoir the films they did not make, which are the films Godard would not have been able to make had those directors already made them, had they come ahead of themselves so to speak' (Rancière 2006: 185–6).

As the above definition and the example of Godard suggest, I wish to emphasise the element of formal reflexivity as decisive for the question of the essay film and the videographic essay. The essay film, regardless of what it is purportedly about, is always also a formally reflexive attempt in which cinema is, from the perspective of its limit, turned upon itself in a manifest desire to bring to light its non-classifiable capacities. This reflexive formal gesture does not make cinema something complete or fully present to itself, but seeks to produce a new possibility out of the impossibility of cinema's completeness or self-presence, or its coincidence with its own history. Reflexivity does not name the form's operation of circular closure. Any reflexive movement namely necessarily implies a certain doubling, division, splitting, heterogeneity – an impossibility of the reflected thing to ever simply coincide with itself.

## 2.

The definition of the essay film that foregrounds the element of formal reflexivity and the essayistic articulation of the im/possible needs to be distinguished from the understanding of the essay film that has become predominant today, according to which the essay in cinema stands above all for a form of personal cinema. According to the personalist definition, the peculiar formal strategies of the essay film can be explained by the fact that the essay follows neither the impersonal conventions of fiction nor the objective commitments of the documentary, but rather the embodied presence of an author or of an authorial intention, which appropriates for itself the enunciative work of the film as a whole. As Laura Rascaroli describes it:

At the level of textual commitments ... 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. [...] This authorial 'voice' approaches the subject matter not in order to present a factual report (the field of traditional documentary), but to offer an

in-depth, personal, and thought-provoking reflection. At the level of rhetorical structures, in order to convey such reflection, the cinematic essayist creates an enunciator who is very close to the real, extra-textual author; the distance between the two is slight, as *the enunciator quite declaredly represents the author's views*, and is his/her spokesperson (even when hiding behind a different or even multiple names or personas). [...] The narrator of the essay film voices personal opinions that can be related directly to the extra-textual author. (2008: 35; emphasis added)

It is important to insist on the difference between this type of personalist definition of the essay film, for which the essay may ultimately be defined as a representational discourse of the (authorial) ego, and the view of the essay as a formally reflexive attempt of the im/possible. The great value of Timothy Corrigan's book, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (2011), lies in the fact that it stages the opposition between these two understandings of the essay film. Though Corrigan also predominantly defines the essay film as a form of personal expression,<sup>1</sup> there appears in the final chapter of *The Essay Film* another radically different definition, which goes explicitly against the personalist one, and which corresponds to the reflexive characterisation of the essay form. Corrigan, borrowing the term from André Bazin, calls this other type of essay film 'refractive': 'refractive essay films concentrate the representational regime of the essayistic on the cinematic itself in order to distill and intensify the essayistic by *directing it not, for instance, at portraits of human subjectivity* or the spaces of public life but at the aesthetics or, more exactly, the anti-aesthetics of representation that always hover about essay films as a filmic thinking of the world' (2011: 191; emphasis added). That is to say, the refractive essay involves a bracketing of the representational task (film's enunciation representing the author's view) in order to reflexively explore cinema's formal and representational strategies for themselves.

It is clear that what is involved here are not merely two different categories of the essay film, but rather two mutually exclusive and antagonistic definitions of what the term as such is supposed to mean (representation v. reflexivity/refraction). Corrigan defines refraction as the work of fragmentation and montage, which does not unite the film's enunciation from a single instance, but breaks the filmic object 'into a million of facts' and works as a 'multiplication' of the object, a 'centrifugal' dissemination of an otherwise 'centripetally' organised work, 'pulling the work apart ... breaking up its component parts' (2011: 190). One may again think of Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* and imagine the operation of refraction, which 'breaks up and disperses the art or object it engages, splinters or deflects it in ways that leave the original work scattered and drifting across a world

outside' (2011: 191). Corrigan's description suggests that the refractive film essay treats the reflexive possibilities of its object (another film or a set of films) precisely by making it in some sense impossible as a self-standing or self-enclosed representational entity – a Work, unified authorial Intention, an expression of Personality.

The reason it is important to insist on the irreconcilable tension between the two definitions of the essay film – the personalist and the formally reflexive – lies in the fact that they are too commonly taken as signifying one and the same thing. Most often, the aspect of formal reflexivity becomes simply folded into the moment of personal seizure of cinematic enunciation. We often mistakenly understand the reflexive or the refractive operations of the essay form as marking the presence of a personal or authorial intention. We assume that it must be some deeply individual and highly conscious intervention that manifests itself in the mode of formal reflexivity (which we often mark by calling a film 'difficult'). So that the formal reflexivity of an essay film can then be interpreted as a signature of the film's author – or, alternatively, as preparing the place of the spectator, the author's surrogate, who will take on the task of deciphering the form's enigmatic turns and secure their meaning within the scope of a single consciousness.

Contrary to such folding of formal reflexivity into personal intention and authorial expression, the lesson of the essay film is rather the following one: formal reflexivity or the refractive nature of the essay film is not a sign or a manifestation of the presence of the author or authorial consciousness, a sovereign personal instance in charge of the enunciative gestures of a film, but on the contrary a mark of a deadlock of personality, its breakdown and frustration. In other words, the possibility of subjectivity in the essay form appears in relation to the impossibility of personal or authorial expression. Something reflects in the essay film, but it is not an author or a consciousness. The subject of reflection to which the essay form gives shape is one of constant attempts at self-positing that however get displaced and thwarted by the intervention of formal operations, by the film's reflexive movement, behind which we may fantasise the presence of a controlling subject (an Author, a personal vision), while in reality it is these operations and gestures themselves that produce the subject as their effect. That is to say, the essay form is not about the being of an expressive or an intentional consciousness – a subject-Author coinciding with the film's enunciation – but about the inability, the impossibility of being such a subject. It is only out of the blockage and the impossibility of a personal possession of the film's enunciative capacity that it becomes possible to speak of the subjectivity of an essay film.<sup>2</sup>

Many great essay films, after all, share in the strategy of doubling (or multiplying) their 'personalities' – an operation that needs to be taken as literally as possible.<sup>3</sup> Think, for instance, of Patrick Keiller's *Robinson Trilogy*, whose films

– *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997) and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010) – feature an unnamed narrator (voiced by Paul Scofield in the first two films and Vanessa Redgrave in the third) and an unseen character by the name of Robinson whose excursions and eccentricities we follow. Why should one give any representational priority to the ‘author’ in relation to these films that organise so carefully a constant displacement between authorship, narrative focalisation and protagonicity? In Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* (1977), Akerman’s voice-over speaks not of her own immediate experience, but rather repeats the judgemental and guilt-inducing discourse of her mother, whose letters, sent from Belgium, Akerman reads over the images of New York. We may presume that the purpose of the epistolary form, and the reason why it is often deployed by the essay film, consists in disengaging enunciation from any single personal point of view, since the epistolary by necessity requires a disposition close to Bakhtinian dialogism, in which at least two ‘personalities’ need to alternate, overlap or struggle with each other for the sense of the form to emerge. Someone else’s speech, received in the form of the letter, hijacks a voice-over, which can in this way represent its own source at best only indirectly. In contrast to the dialogic drama of ‘personalities’ that takes place in the voice-over, the images of New York in *News from Home* follow the abstract pattern of the city’s grid. It is almost an understatement to describe these images as ‘impersonal’ (cold, mechanical, indifferent). From them “‘experience’ has been removed; the anecdotal and its individual subjects have been omitted’. Through the combination of the images of the city, ‘form is present ... in the sheer brutality with which the abrupt displacements of the camera position us in successive spaces’ offering the viewer ‘a zero degree “realism”, in which *an infinity of subject-position investments* is left open’ (Jameson 1990: 172, 173; emphasis added). The essay film is, in other words, acutely aware that ‘personality’ means first of all a mask; and that the enunciation of an essay film emerges not out of representing or expressing some originary authorial intention, but out of putting on an ensemble of masks, a doubling or a multiplication of ‘personalities’, which take up a relation to an essentially impersonal milieu.

What the personalist interpretation of the essay film effectively does is to perform a *privatisation* of cinema’s enunciative capacities, which I have just described as a set of masks within an impersonal setting. This conceptual operation of privatisation formally resembles other privatising aspirations that characterise so much of contemporary ideology. One may, for instance, speculate on the ideological function performed by the personalist position by setting it side by side with a set of structural changes in the organisation of knowledge production that have in recent years come to affect the study of film and the historical humanities in the university more broadly. To put it somewhat bluntly, in a situation in

which the negative-critical dimension of thought (thought's formal reflexivity) is progressively erased by the demands of utility, instrumentality, measurable effectiveness and profitability – in which, in other words, our public use of reason (to use Kant's ancient term) gives way to reason's private manipulations – in such a situation, intellectual projects seeking to valorise the private or the personal gain unprecedented strategic and institutional currency. For this reason, the desire to separate enunciation, filmic or any other kind, from its capture by the personal and the private becomes in our moment a necessary element of the self-respecting intellectual or critical project.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.

The importance of the film essay's formal reflexivity as a question and a problem is today, on one hand, related to the general increase in the visibility of the essay film as one of the most creatively significant domains of contemporary filmmaking and an object deserving of specific attention in academic and scholarly work. On the other hand, it is possible to direct the topic in a more focused way and use it to address the relatively recent appearance within the field of film studies of a new tendency of digital videographic essayism, which is asserting itself as a legitimate form of film scholarship and research. It is perhaps not wrong to suggest that with the establishment of *[in]Transition: A Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* – a project launched with the support of *Cinema Journal* at the annual conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in 2014 – a certain threshold has been crossed in the disciplinary recognisability of videographic essayism, which has to now be taken up not only as a relevant object of study, but as itself presenting a possible mode in which to perform the work of enquiry, scholarship and research on cinema.

What I will simply call the new videographic tendency or the new videographic essay (where 'the new' is merely a chronological marker and is by itself not meant to suggest any specific determination of value) presents in terms of its subject matter a rather diverse and uneven field. One finds in these attempts at a digital-videographic exploration of cinema a focus on *auteurs* and style (see Zoller Seitz 2009); interpretative homages to individual films (see Grant 2009); thematic analyses (see Carvajal 2014); studies of generic motifs (e.g. the car chase sequence) (see Aradillas and Seitz 2011); expressions of fandom (see Vishnevetsky 2012); reconstruction of fetishistic cinephiliac details (see Keathley 2011); works of a more experimental sort (see Malcolm 2007; Álvarez López and Martin 2014); entries in an emerging virtual dictionary of film techniques (e.g. the evolution of

the dolly zoom) (see Nedomansky 2014); and finally, more ambitious attempts to analyse historical tendencies, ones that concern past cinematic movements (see Kogonada 2013) as well as those that characterise the state of contemporary cinema (see Stork 2011).

Even from a cursory glance one is able to note that the field of the new videographic essayism is far from unified and that it appears instead as a multiplicity of more or less interesting exercises. It does not seem very useful to attempt at this point some sort of systematic mapping of this emerging field, which has not yet produced the paradigmatic cases that would offer us something like a set of immanent keys to the interpretation of the tendency as a whole. Rather than getting lost in the multiplicity of its examples, the phenomenon might better be used as offering an opportunity to raise the problem of the concept of the videographic essay as such and as it relates to the question of essayistic desire in film and videography. Some of the new videographers appear conscious of the question of the essay form and identify themselves with the difficulty it presents, while others do not pay explicit attention to it and use 'essay' as merely a useful category for describing their work, which they feel to be at odds with other possible classifications. Nevertheless, it is in relation to the concept of videographic *essayism* that a certain self-consciousness or self-understanding of the new tendency is currently being produced. What are its characteristics? How does this new essayistic situation relate to a previous one? Might taking up a longer perspective on the question of filmic and videographic essayism, one that allows us to remain somewhat indifferent to the calls of the new, offer something productive to the emerging tendency?

#### 4.

The sense of novelty in the new videographic tendency can be attributed to at least two distinct factors. First, there is the close relationship of the new videographic essayism to the increasing availability and ease of use of digital technology (the internet, DVDs, computer tools and programs for the manipulation of images and sounds, etc).<sup>5</sup> The new videographic essay, for now essentially a short form, is primarily an internet phenomenon and as such seems to be inevitably pushed to partake in the discourse of the networked, the convergent, the participatory-democratic, open and plural... It is important to note this fact, since at least in the modernist and late modernist guise – in the paradigmatic case of Godard's *Histoires(s) du cinéma*, for instance – the videographic essay form signifies exactly the opposite: not short, but long; not networked, but unworked; not convergent,

but disjunctive and specifying; certainly not participatory or in any obvious way 'democratic', but instead difficult and obscure, 'aristocratic', singular and resistant.

Due to its status as a manifestation of a euphoric 'digital utopianism', the language of the new videographic tendency revolves primarily around the promise of new possibilities, a rhetoric of excitement, in which the question as to what extent the new videographic possibilities of treating cinema might in some essential way be related to – and, indeed, dynamised by – the impossible does not get posed. This gives the new videographic tendency a strangely unmotivated appearance. A new possibility? Perhaps. But a possibility of what, and in relation to what impossible idea of cinema, exactly? If *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is driven by the impossibility of a certain idea of cinema – which must thus find its tentative historical possibility in Godard's singular videographic project – it remains for now completely obscure what kind of impossibility – and thus to some extent also what new possibilities for cinema, what new idea of cinema – lies at the heart of the new videographic tendency. As is rather common in much of our digital media culture, the new videographic tendency offers a sense of novelty without presenting us with the force of this novelty's im/possibility. And the sheer proliferation of new videographic essays – a feature that should be included among the phenomenon's crucial formal traits – can in this sense be read as a symptom marking the lack of a deeper sense of necessity that for now colours the project as a whole.

Secondly, the sense of novelty in the new videographic tendency relates to the blurring of the demarcating line that separates the theoretical from the artistic practice of filmmaking. The discourse on the new videographic essay concerns itself with the possibility of transforming the nature of our theoretical and critical knowledge of cinema, of in some sense re-aestheticising it. The new videographic tendency is attempting to integrate artistic practice into the field occupied by more conventional forms of study and research. The essay and the essayistic signal in this instantiation a certain new possibility for the unity of criticism and art. What is to be overturned is the division between analysis and what may be called the experience of cinema in its emphatic sense. The new video-graphic tendency – renegotiating criticism's pact with cinephilia on terms that no longer put the latter out of favour – makes a wager not on the critical distance, which the negative gesture of thought assumes in relation to the aesthetic object, but instead on a certain figure of confusion: of consciousness and the object, knowledge and experience, research and practice, analysis and creative synthesis, thought and materiality, form and feeling, concept and affect, abstractions of language and embodied sense perception.

Such is the argument put forth by Catherine Grant in a text in which she describes her own encounters with the practice of videographic essayism: 'I will



argue that digital video is usefully seen not only as a promising communicative tool with different affordances than those of written text, but also as an important emergent cultural and phenomenological field for the *creative practice* of our work as film scholars' (2014: 49; emphasis in original). Writing about one of her short videographic essays, focused entirely on the final sequence of Claude Chabrol's *Les Bonnes femmes* (*The Good Time Girls*, 1960) – the scene in which, following the murder of one of the film's protagonists, an anonymous young woman, introduced to us for the first time, dances under a glittering ball and suddenly, in the film's final violent gesture, looks at the camera – Grant describes her own essaying in the following way:

[R]eworking this extracted scene, reacting to it materially ... was exactly where I relived an especially dramatic 'cinephiliac moment' [...]. This (for me, uncanny) experience of repeatedly handling the sequence in and out of its original context did indeed produce new affective knowledge about it regarding the film's explorations of temporality and temporal experience [...]. Looking back now at this work, the creative digital context of the research allowed space for the establishment and working through of an unusually vivid relationship of aesthetic reciprocity with *Les Bonnes femmes*. (2014: 54–5)<sup>6</sup>

The passage imagines videographic research as the establishment of 'aesthetic reciprocity' between the essayist and the artistic object (the segment of a film), on which the videographer's work is performed. The space of the new videographic essay is, according to Grant, a space within which the gap between the critical endeavour of the film researcher and the aesthetic status of the work is abolished, retrieving through this gesture a certain experience of relational intimacy between the film and the videographer, and of the videographer with herself.

I find it important to note that the establishment of 'aesthetic reciprocity' and the attainment of an 'affective knowledge' of the scene from Chabrol's film are asserted here despite the presence in the passage of a reference to the uncanny, which would suggest an experience of exactly the opposite kind: an interruption of reciprocity with the object and the emergence of an affect – anxiety – troubling in its effects, precisely because it does not produce knowledge, but rather pokes a hole in it. The uncanny accompanies an object that is neither intimate nor external, but rather *ex-timate*: it is 'placed' in such a way that it is impossible to locate it either inside or outside, nor is it possible to say that it occupies the domain of transition between the two. The uncanny object is the point at which the mediation between the inside and the outside, the transition between interiority

and exteriority, comes to a halt, thereby preventing the establishment of a relation or the setting up of any reciprocal linkage between the subject and the world.

Despite describing it as uncanny, Grant effectively transforms the anonymous character's look at the camera at the end of *Les Bonnes femmes* from an anxiety producing moment – a moment of ex-timacy (the film is neither inside nor outside itself, but precisely in the breakdown of the mediating movement between the two) – into a moment of relationality and reciprocity with the film.<sup>7</sup> What Grant presents as a description of her individual experience carries a larger, conceptual determination of the new videographic practice. The work of videographic essayism, 'repeatedly handling the sequence', figures here as a gesture of turning the uncanny moment – emphasised by Chabrol through the use in the scene of a glittering disco ball, a strange nocturnal sun that reflects and refracts without mirroring its surroundings – into something that resembles a fetish, a disavowal of anxiety and disrupted reciprocity, which in turn supports the videographer's personal relationship to the film as much as it reaffirms the consistency of her personal experience. Grant says: 'In its original duration, the scene powerfully stages, for me at least, an instance of, as well as an occasion for, what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has called the "aesthetic moment", when "the subject is captured in an intense illusion of being selected by the environment for some deeply reverential experience"' (2014: 65). Described in this way, videographic work belongs fully in the dimension of the imaginary. It offers the illusory valorisation of the videographer's ego, which feels itself chosen by the filmic object. The anxiety-producing breakdown of intimacy – staged particularly forcefully in moments in which a character looks at the camera – is filled up by a sense of 'reverential' proximity, which seems to refer to something very different than the *uncanny* proximity of an object we find unbearable or intolerable.

What is rather striking about this notion of videographic essayism, whose supposed intensity lies in the reassertion of aesthetic reciprocity and the suffusion of the videographer with the imaginary force of the filmic object, is that it makes any element of formal reflexivity, which is where the entire exercise began, disappear from our view. In the wish to reattach the umbilical cord that leads to the filmic object, there disappears the anxiety of a gap, in which critical reflection and the theoretical intelligibility of the filmic object could be established. We are left with the assertion of an '*affective* knowledge', which however seems to teach us very little, for it is either too full (due to the intense plenitude of the intimate and personal, 'cinephiliac', most likely unrepeatable, experience with the film) or too empty (due, perhaps, to our inability to feel ourselves equally chosen by the filmic object in question).

## 5.

Film-theoretical research as an analytical and critical project has historically rested on the idea that our grasp of a film depends essentially on a gesture of negativity, which must first break the relation of aesthetic reciprocity between us and the filmic object in order to open the space for formal reflection. For a critical approach, the object is not immediately given and vividly present, but lost, obscured, divided – indeed, something impossible, whose possibility needs to be (re)constructed and (re)conquered within the ‘grey on grey’ of our theoretical discourse. Precisely such an object – an object that has lost its vividness, that stands in refusal of reciprocity and that dispossesses us of ourselves – has in the past propelled some of the most remarkable film-analytical essayism.

In the writing of Raymond Bellour, for instance, the essayist’s task appears in the form of a project whose starting point is the devastation of reciprocity with the filmic object. In his famous essay, ‘The Unattainable Text’, which dates back to 1975 – importantly for us, to a period before the spread of video, let alone of digital and computer technology – Bellour describes analysis and study of any type of art as dependent on the possibility of the transformation of the aesthetic work into a text: ‘[A]s soon as one studies a work, quotes a fragment of it, one has implicitly taken up a textual perspective, even if feebly and one-dimensionally, even if in a restrictive and regressive fashion, even if one continues to close the text back onto itself’ (2000: 21). The textual perspective of analysis transforms the aesthetic materiality of a work into a textual fabric by breaking it up into quotable fragments; it dissolves the work and places it within the condition of quotability incommensurable with the work’s aesthetic status. According to Bellour, cinema bears a peculiar relationship to quotation and textuality, and thus also to the analytical project as a whole. On one hand, a film is quotable within the space of the written analytical text: it is always possible to present a film or a film segment as a series of fragmented and stilled images. On the other, however, something clearly resists this operation of transforming the filmic work into a text or a system of quotable fragments. The resistance stems not only from the fact that cinema’s ‘matters of expression’ (see Hjemslev 1968; Metz 1974) include sounds and noises – sensory matter that remains radically heterogeneous to the condition of quotability in written analysis. The problem for Bellour, in 1975, has to do primarily with the fact that the cinematic image is a *moving* image and that movement in cinema is not secondary but rather absolutely essential to the textual effect produced by a film. Movement is a film’s expressive substance, and it is this dimension that is irretrievably lost in the practice of quoting a film segment in the form of still images within written analysis. Yet it is precisely through this loss of

movement, the loss of cinematic substance, that analysis first constitutes for itself the filmic object and gives shape to its own desire that must somehow take up a position in relation to this loss.

There emerges a fundamental ambiguity, a split, which profoundly affects the status of analysis. The moving image of cinema, as Bellour puts it with great precision, is '*peculiarly unquotable*, since the written text cannot restore to it what only the projector can produce: a movement, the illusion of which guarantees the reality. That is why the reproduction even of many stills is only ever able to reveal a kind of radical inability to assume the textuality of the film' (2000: 25; emphasis added). The analytical gesture of quotation is possible only if it accepts its impossibility. A series of stills gives us a sense of what the film as a textual object might feel like.<sup>8</sup> Yet while this textuality might be felt, and while the citation of moving images as stills guarantees something of the film-as-text, the filmic text remains unattained. Far from vividly present, it remains affected by an ineliminable sense of irreality.

The split – it is possible to quote a film, it is impossible to quote a film – disappropriates film analysis from any sort of reciprocity with the filmic object. The film-analyst, who must assume the irreality of the object, becomes a bearer of an impossible desire. One moves in Bellour from the promise and ambition of analysis-as-knowledge (to take possession of a film as text, to establish reciprocity with the filmic object) toward a different analytical attitude, which certainly knows (it, in fact, knows quite a bit!), yet knows also that knowledge takes shape in relation to an object to which no relation is possible. The irony of the filmic text – the object analysis constitutes only through a loss of its substance – inflects Bellour's writing with an attitude that is at once meticulously patient and anguished:

The frozen frame and the still that reproduces it are simulacra; obviously they never prevent the film from escaping, but paradoxically they allow it to escape as a text. [...] [T]he analysis of the film thus receives its portion of an inevitability known to no other. [...] In fact, filmic analysis, if it is to take place at all, must take upon itself this rhythmical as well as figurative and actantial narrative component for which the stills are the simulacra, indispensable but already derisory in comparison to what they represent. Thus it constantly mimics, evokes, describes; in a kind of principled despair it can but try frantically to compete with the object it is attempting to understand. By dint of seeking to capture it and recapture it, it ends up occupying a point at which its object is perpetually out of reach. (2000: 26)

The movement of the image, the substance lost in the establishment of the analytical gesture, must then be taken up – it must be formally reflected – at the level of analytical writing itself. The analysis ‘constantly mimics, evokes, describes’; it rushes ‘frantically’ to measure itself up to an object that resists any commensurability. Which is to say: the analysis essays. There is an absolute necessity that the movement of analytical writing assume the essay form, which must learn to move with awareness that any substantiality of movement has been lost to it from the start. The film-analytical essay in the case of Bellour – and he is, undoubtedly, one of our greatest essayists – is the moving shape traced on a substanceless ground by a subject that wanders in perpetuity. Taking onto itself the elaboration of a filmic object that remains perpetually ‘out of reach’, analytical writing cannot be anything but an attempt, an essay. The writing of analysis takes on the possibility (that of a truly mobile text, of a true textual mobility) made impossible by the very condition that allows analysis to come into being in the first place (the practice of quotation, of stilling the image).

## 6.

Against the background of the classical Bellourian film analysis, where the necessity of film-analytical essayism emerged out of an irreconcilable gap between the filmic substance (moving image) and its textual quotation (the still), the new video equipment that came into use in the 1970s and 1980s announced a momentous promise: the possibility of, finally, quoting a film in its fullness, without loss... within film itself. Quote the movement! Quote the sounds and noises! Quote fully the heterogeneous materiality of cinema and submit its substance to a sort of immanent textual transformation! In other words, what emerged was the utopian promise of an analysis that would finally be able to catch up with the filmic object and secure it within its reach (a truly mobile textuality, a true textual mobility).

With video it namely becomes possible to extract from films quotable fragments that remain mobile and to quote them as such within a new kind of analytical text, which now makes use of the same expressive materiality as the films from which it quotes. Video makes possible not only a quotation of moving images. Just as importantly, it also expands the repertoire of analytical gestures. The images can now be interrupted not only by stoppage or arrest, but also by being sped up or slowed down, their movement reversed, their size reduced or expanded, just as they can also be presented simultaneously on a split or multiplied screen, superimposed or layered, or nested within each other.<sup>9</sup> Video and the computer bear a utopian value for film analysis because they seem to have solved

the problem of quotability, which no longer has to contend with the gap and the loss that occur between the moving image and writing. Bellour sketched such a utopian possibility in the final paragraph of 'The Unattainable Text':

We might change our point of view completely ... and ask if the filmic text should really be approached in writing at all. I am thinking, *a contrario*, of the wonderful impression I had on two occasions, to cite only these two, when confronted with two quotations in which film was taken as the medium of its own criticism. This was in two broadcasts in the series 'Cinéastes de notre temps,' one on Max Ophüls and one on Samuel Fuller. [...] Here there is no longer any divergence, no need of narration. A true quotation, in all its obviousness. (2000: 27)

It is, however, immediately possible to register a creeping scepticism about the realisation of this analytical utopia. Is not the possibility of a quotation that would no longer be marked by the heterogeneity of its origin (a 'true quotation', as Bellour ironically puts it) simply another name for the destruction of quotation as such? And why would the case of the film-analytic utopia be any different from the fate of other utopias, all of which suffer from the inherently paradoxical nature of fulfillment: namely, that the realisation of utopia abolishes the very desire which it was possible to sustain in its absence, while the reality of utopia remained merely an imaginary projection? The technological solution to the problem of quotability – there is no longer any substantial divergence between the moving image and analytical writing, between images and words – threatens to abolish the very cause (the loss of substance, the non-coincidence of the filmic object with itself, the anguish of the analyst-essayist) that supported the essayistic desire of the film-analyst in the first place. The tools that allow the essayist-analyst to avoid stilling the moving images of a film now threaten to still and mortify something much more precarious: the essayistic-analytical desire itself.<sup>10</sup>

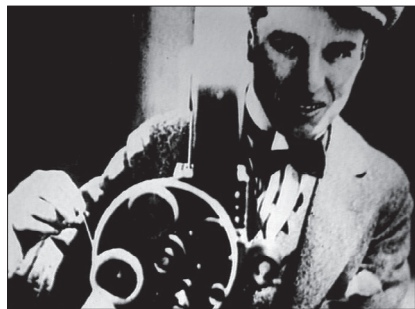
Bellour, in his later essays (from the mid-1980s onward), introduces the possibility that film analysis (and thus, one assumes, also a certain kind of essayism) might have reached the point of its conclusion. His stronger assertion, however, consists in expressing a fundamental doubt that we have indeed arrived at the film-analytical utopia. Despite the technological facility, it is, in fact, not at all clear that the new possibility of analysing film with filmic and videographic means has helped us attain the filmic text.

I have spoken often of the possibility of citing, at last, the 'unattainable text', of making us aware of this 'truth' of the film around which analysis could only

turn in vain. *Something there has remained unresolved. [...] Theory has not really been able to arrive at the image* – to speak, to hold, to live by the image; far less than it had been able to retain the image in its words. Perhaps this union of theory and image is an impossible marriage. *Yet I continue to believe in the surprises that could arise, at this level, from encounters between the word and the image.* (2012: 26; emphasis added)

The videographic ‘solution’ to the problem of quotability has thus served to make palpable and emerge in full force the more fundamental heterogeneity that exists between words and images – between, for instance, the theoretical discourse and the ‘discourse’ of images – the discontinuous encounter which can appear as a gap fully immanent to the operations of any single medium (in our case, video). Within the new condition, a gap between images and words persists and, as Bellour suggests, keeps open the possibility of an ever-renewed analytical and essayistic project. To bring up again Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, its

Figs. 1a–j: The form of the caption, often attached to images in academic texts, is a form of capture: a seizure of the image by the text. A caption, which tells us that the image is proper to the text, is also very useful for clarifying property relations. A caption transforms the image into mere illustration. It establishes the semblance of text as the cause of the image. But the idea of heterogeneity means precisely that neither text nor image can occupy the role of the determining cause for the other – their relation is strictly improper. Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (*History/ies of Cinema*, 1988–98)



paradigmatic status for contemporary videographic essayism depends precisely on the way in which Godard's long serial essay organises the disjunctive encounter of images and words (written and voiced) within the videographic medium; the way the video of *Histoire(s)* can be thought of as both cinema and a theory of cinema, video-cinema and video-theory, video-images and video-words, without the two dimensions ever simply coinciding or reciprocating each other. One of Godard's famous statements maintains that his early film criticism for the *Cahiers du cinéma* was already a way of making cinema, while his films are then the prolongation of the youthful critical project. The statement is often read as a profession of a certain unity of cinema or art and criticism. It seems more useful, however, to read the statement as describing the relation between the two as a relay between two practices, which it is impossible to take separately, yet they can





also never be thought of as simply occupying the same place. Cinema in this perspective signals the non-self-sufficiency of criticism, the idea that criticism is not fully itself, that in performing itself it also does something else. Criticism, on the other hand, points out the impossibility of conceiving cinema as a self-enclosed aesthetic work, a work that would not already in its constitution be carried away by an alien discourse which it does not control. Rather than settling the relay movement between art and criticism, Godard's videographic work brings its discontinuous dynamic into full fruition.

The videographic quotation of film means that the disjunctive relation of images and words can with increasing ease be addressed videographically. At stake here is not the task of reestablishing some kind of balance between images and words within the common measure of a single new medium, but instead a further adventure in the traversal and deconstruction of two types of fantasy, which have both been given another lease on life by the appearance of new technology: (i) the classical fantasy of the mutual representability of images and words (*ut pictura poesis*) and (ii) the 'romantic' aesthetic fantasy of presence that sees the two fused in either a pure imagism of words or in some purely verbose imagery. In the videographic analyses of film, the devastation of images by words can attain a new force, but it can do so only if the images themselves can find new strategies of resisting and displacing the dominance of words.

## 7.

At this point, there clearly exists a struggle within the new videographic tendency on the question raised by the encounter between images and words. One can, for instance, see the traces of the battle in the way a distinction is often made between poetic and didactic videographic essays, where the former maintain the disjunction between images and words, while the latter reconcile it (see Álvarez López and Martín 2014). The difference between the two options appears in essence less as a difference between two types of videographic essayism than simply a difference between the essay form and a form that, on the contrary, carries a rather minimal degree of essayistic desire and represents instead a new genre of the illustrated academic paper or lecture.

Indeed, it is possible to identify a basic tension in the new videographic tendency between the essay or the essayistic, whose condition lies in the gap between images and words, and a perceived need to ensure a didactic function and achieve for itself some form of scholarly recognisability, in which case it is possible to observe how the discontinuous encounter between words and images becomes

progressively overdetermined by the figure of knowledge. An example of such an overdetermining gesture can, for instance, be found in a text by Christian Keathley, which also begins by distinguishing between an ‘analytical and explanatory’ and a ‘poetical and expressive’ side of contemporary videographic work (2011: 179). While he acknowledges the disjunctive (‘poetical and expressive’) relation of images and words, Keathley nevertheless organises the dispute in a rather classical manner: ‘But if the goal is still the production of some knowledge, the challenge for the ‘digital film critic’ is to situate herself somewhere in the middle of these alternatives, borrowing the explanatory authority of one and the poetical power of the other’ (2011: 190). The essayistic is here replaced within a didactic model, academic and scholarly in its self-identification, which aims at pragmatically stabilising the contradiction. The differentiation drawn by Keathley between the two types of contemporary videography, since it is taken as what grounds the possibility of knowledge, is despite its balanced appearance hierarchical in nature. The choice of words is important here: the meaning of ‘authority’, associated by Keathley with the explanatory function, lies namely in its delimitation and orientation of the poetic and productive ‘power’ of the essay. What ‘authority’ (explanatory function) names is thus the place from which ‘power’ (production and expression) originates and to which it must in the final instance return.

Keathley’s solution, which describes in this way the condition of knowledge, needs to be distinguished from the insistence on disjunction between images and words that orients and gives force to the essayistic. The essay can in this light be described as an affirmation of poetic power’s irreducibility to its overdetermination by an explanatory authority. The essay starts from the ‘poetic’ gap between images and words and does not need to posit any particular orientation of this gap – authoritative or, for that matter, rebellious, explanatory or experimental – as originary. In the discourse of knowledge, knowledge addresses itself to the cause of essayistic desire (the disjunctive encounter of images and words), yet it does so precisely to master it, keep it in some kind of balance, integrate it into its chain (‘the goal is still the production of some knowledge’). If there exists, on the contrary, such a thing as the discourse of the essay, then perhaps one of its crucial tasks lies not simply in removing the function of knowledge, but precisely in removing knowledge from the position of authoritative agency, subordinating it instead to a discursive position, from which it may stop explaining and begin registering the truth of an irreducibly disjunctive, conflictual and disputable desire.

The knowledgeable overdetermination of the disjunctive encounter between images and words appears in new videographic essays most clearly in the predominance of the explanatory voice-over, which reduces images to the status of illustrative appendages. According to Adrian Martin, in many of the new videographic essays

the voice 'leads'. It is the voice which has authority – more than the original images and sounds of the movie. There is something frustrating, even wrong about this. It is instructive to compare both DVD audio commentaries and video essays to what Jean-Luc Godard does in his massive *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. In fact, Godard has complained in an interview that he hates it when the voice – the law of the written/spoken text – dominates in a filmic 'essay': there is a lot of vocalising in Godard, but it is always displaced, decentred, at war with all the other elements of the work. It is not a voice which legislates or pontificates, which closes down meaning. (2010)

But the predominance of knowledgeable words is visible also in other manifestations. For instance, one can already note the appearance of an academic meta-discourse about the practice of videographic filmmaking, in which the videographic essay is introduced and described by its author, yet in a decidedly non-essayistic, didactic way, offering perhaps practical advice on how videographic essayism might be included in coursework and teaching, how it might become part of the larger project of the discipline of Film Studies, or perhaps simply providing an additional explanation of this or that videographic essay.

In *[in]Transition*, the online journal and meeting place of the new videographic tendency, the predominance of knowledgeable words assumes two further strategies. The first strategy consists of accompanying the videographic essays presented by the journal with a text furnished by a 'curator' – a practice of situating the essay within a discourse that formally resembles the practice of museum and gallery exhibition, where works of art are typically accompanied and made consumable by more or less useful descriptions that mediate their encounter with the audience. The second strategy, introduced more recently, consists in adding to the curatorial contextualisation a peer-review statement, that is, following the practice used in the process of evaluating more traditional forms of scholarship. The purpose is to provide disciplinary legitimacy to the videographic work which does not possess such legitimacy simply by itself. It is remarkable to observe how in these ways even a relatively tame essayistic desire triggers a degree of anxiety, which is then appeased by the impulse toward erecting traditional forms of institutional armature. Yet the contradiction between the essayistic insistence on the disjunctive image-word encounters and the overdetermination of these encounters by knowledge (predominance of explanatory words, meta-discourse, curatorship or peer-review) remains and will remain irreducible. In this light, it is perhaps more productive to simply affirm the videographic essay as a 'form that thinks' precisely to the extent that it affords us some respite from the constant need to valorise in the form of knowledge the productive and expressive capacities of thought.

## Notes

- 1 To be precise, for Corrigan, the personal is in the essay film not only expressed but also displaced with regard to its public existence. As he defines it, the essay film is '(1) a testing of expressive subjectivity through (2) experiential encounters in a public arena, (3) the product of which becomes the figuration of thinking or thought' (2011: 30). Or as he puts it elsewhere in the book: 'The essayistic describes the many-layered activities of a personal point of view as a public experience' (2011: 13).
- 2 In his *Essays* Montaigne writes: 'This also happens to me: that I do not find myself in the place where I look; and I find myself more by chance encounter than by searching my judgment' (1958: 27). The essayistic view of the subject as constitutively displaced with respect to its enunciation, produced and at the same time thwarted by the operations of form (or the mediations of the symbolic), is that of modern subjectivity as such, stretching from Montaigne and Descartes, through Kant and Hegel, to Freud, Lacan and psychoanalytic film theory.
- 3 Rascaroli's claim is that a 'personal cinema' or a cinema of personality emerges when enunciation is taken possession of by a single (authorial, subjective) instance, and that this defines the condition of the essay film. I wish to argue, on the contrary, that one enters the domain of the essay precisely at the point at which enunciation abandons its assumption of such a unitary point (which, at any rate, is nothing more than an illusion). In the essay film, enunciation is split or even multiplied between different instances. One therefore has to speak of 'personalities' in plural and, above all, as masks. The subjectivity of the essay film emerges out of the impossibility of any single subjective instance – author or spectator – that would control the film's enunciation.
- 4 'The relation to experience – and from it the essay takes as much substance as does traditional theory from its categories – is a relation to all of history; merely individual experience, in which consciousness begins with what is nearest to it, is itself mediated by the all-encompassing experience of historical humanity; the claim that social-historical contents are nevertheless supposed to be only indirectly important compared with the immediate life of the individual is a simple self-delusion of an individualistic society and ideology' (Adorno 1984: 158).
- 5 Perhaps the history of the essay form should be rewritten not as a history of the great essayists or theorists of the essay but instead as a history of responses to developmental shifts in technological means and apparatuses. Could the essay be understood as a form that appears with particular intensity at those historical moments in which the emergence of a new technological environment puts into crisis the one that preceded it? The essay could in this sense be understood as a

form in which the impossibility of maintaining the old media technology and its forms is put in conjunction with an exploration of the new, as yet undeveloped, formal possibilities of new media. Although it was Sergei Eisenstein who used the term ‘essay’ to designate one of the possible new uses of cinematic montage – he had in mind his own film *October* (1928) – the idea of film essayism really takes hold and gains wider acceptance only after World War II, a development that must surely be related to the technological changes in that period and the appearance of more portable and flexible film- and sound-recording equipment, as well as the appearance of a new media rival in the form of television. (On the role of television in preparing the ground for the ‘*discontinuous essay form*’ in cinema, see Burch 2014: 59, 115–6, 162–4.)

- 6 The extract of which Grant speaks in this passage is taken from a slightly longer version of her video essay *Unsentimental Education* (2009).
- 7 It is worth mentioning in this context Antoine de Baecque’s discussion of the appearance of the characters’ look at the camera in post-war European cinema in his book *Camera Historica*. Baecque describes the characters’ look at the camera in the films of the post-war period as a ‘hallucinatory resurgence of the foreclosed images of mass death’ in the Nazi concentration camps (2011: 63). He thus takes the look at the camera as an inscription into the cinematic fiction of something that may very well be called the non-reciprocal as such: ‘How can the experience of the depravity of the human race in the death camps be given cinematographic form? Thus far we have isolated the look-to-camera, which reemerges in fiction films several years after the stares of the survivors of mass death are recorded in the documentary footage of 1945: the mad women and a cornered Ingrid Bergman staring into Roberto Rossellini’s camera in *Europa ’51*, the essential look that Jean-Luc Godard also pinpointed, in his film book *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, when he captions a still photo of Ingrid Bergman’s stare with the following words: “forgetting extermination is part of extermination.”’ (2011: 65)
- 8 ‘The cinema, through the moving image, is the only art of time which, when we go against the principle on which it is based, still turns out to give us something to see, and moreover something alone that allows us to feel its textuality fully’ (Bellour 2000: 26).
- 9 As an example of some of these possibilities one may look at the videographic essay titled *dissolution* (2014) by the Oktopus Film Collective, which edits together all the dissolve transitions from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). What would on a page of written analysis be reproduced as a series of static superimpositions, we are able to observe here in movement. The impossible object of the dissolve – neither two images, nor their sum, but a strange kind of transition-image – is not only quoted in its dynamic dimension, which preserves the maddening

simultaneity of appearing and disappearing, it is also slowed down and temporally extended. *dissolution* brings to the surface in a new way the troubling textual effectiveness of this specific (marginal and often overlooked) type of cinematic movement (see Hon 2014).

- 10 As far as I can see, this paradox of fulfillment – and the possible closure of analytical and essayistic desire – remains unremarked upon within the new videographic tendency. It seems more common that the utopia is taken as simply realised; and the critic is understood as someone liberated from anxiety. This presents us with a rather curious figure of criticism, in which a fulfilled result has taken the place of a desire (or of utopian speculation), while an essential positivity of the endeavour seems to squeeze out all negativity. As Grant and Keathley write: ‘In our own “different moment”, we have the opportunity to find a new way to do criticism – one that uses images and sounds to “write”, and one that supplements interpretive analysis and explanation with a more imaginative, expressive, poetical discourse. In 1975, Raymond Bellour speculated on that time in the future when people would be able to own movies the way they owned books and records. “If film studies are still done then, they will undoubtedly be more numerous, more imaginative, more accurate, and above all more enjoyable than the ones we carry out in fear and trembling, threatened continually with the dispossession of the object.” Of course, the ability to play with, manipulate, and rework these film objects the way we can now was perhaps more than even a mind like Bellour’s could imagine. Nevertheless, what he wrote then is still relevant – especially the imaginative and enjoyable part – even if he wasn’t dreaming of videographic essays’ (Grant and Keathley 2014).

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# Afterword

## The Idea of Essay Film

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Laura Rascaroli

An idea now shaped by over seven decades of reflections – inaugurated by Hans Richter’s article ‘Der Filmessay. Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms’ (1992), first published in 1940 – the essay film continues to be an enigmatic object which, on account of its ‘heretical’ (Adorno 1984: 171) and shape-shifting qualities, tirelessly engages critics’ attention, theoretical as much as taxonomic. At each encounter with a specific text that speaks to us as essay, we are prompted not so much to think of it against existing paradigms of the form, but to rethink the form itself in light of the new text, which comes to place a classificatory strain on established systems. It is with the potentiality of all essay films to question and challenge their own form that I wish to engage here, for it seems to me that in it lies the core of their ethical dimension. And, if there is a reason for the essay film’s enduring and, indeed, growing appeal today for filmmakers, artists and spectators worldwide, it is, I contend, precisely its ethics, which consists in establishing each time the ground rules of its own coming into being, and of its relationship with both subjectivity and with the world – a world now dominated by the infinite reproducibility of images and artefacts, and where the possibility itself of artistic newness seems to have been exhausted once and for all. This constant reestablishing of its own conditions is a deeply moral gesture that presupposes the possibility of failure, and that inscribes into the text the conditions of its own undoing. Such an attitude is, needless to say, profoundly antithetical to cultural-hegemonic

modes; and it is precisely for this reason, I suggest, that at the end of the 1950s Theodor W. Adorno could already submit that '[t]he relevance of the essay is that of anachronism' (1984: 166). The essay's anachronism coincides with its ethics – never of its time (nor of the hegemonic modes of the times), the essay is philosophy of the future (see Walker 2011: 274).

This idea underlies Elizabeth Papazian and Caroline Eades's own discussion of the essay film's potential for formlessness in the Introduction of this timely volume:

Given the subversion of nearly all accepted aesthetic boundaries in the essay form, it seems that the essayistic in film – as process, as experience, as experiment – also opens the road to its own subversion, as a form of dialectical thought that gravitates towards crisis. Thus it fosters the development of new forms, ranging from avant-garde experiments to experimentation within narrative cinema, and actively supports the emergence of inquisitive gestures as an intrinsic component of cinema as an art.

What this passage captures is a formal openness that becomes apparent in terms of experimentalism (the intellectual 'trial' that is etymologically central to the essay is also the reason of its aesthetic bordering with experimental, avant-garde and art cinema), of experience (its explicit engagement with questions of subjectivity places an experiential encounter with the world at the core of its interrogatory practice) and of processes (the essay is not a perfected, closed argument, but the search for an object with which it performatively comes to coincide). Because it is experimental, experiential and performative, formally the essay film is deeply unstable; but what is most compelling is its intellectual instability as a form of thought that 'gravitates towards crisis'. These two aspects are, of course, intimately related.

The idea of a form that contains its own potential for undoing as a point of necessary crisis was already explicit in Adorno, who claimed the essay 'must be constructed in such a way that it could always, and at any point, break off' (1984: 164). It also underlies his description of the essay as 'a compelling construction that does not want to copy the object, but to reconstruct it out of its conceptual *membra disjecta* [disjointed limbs]' (1984: 169). Noël Burch expressed a similar concept in 1969 in his *Theory of Film Practice*, when he discussed essay films as a new type of documentary that 'set forth thesis and antithesis through the very texture of the film' (1981: 159), thus achieving a complex disjunction of form.

The idea of essay film as a cinema centred on disjunction may, then, be theorised. But it is not generalisable, for each and every essayistic text must create

the conditions of its own form – and thus of its form’s point of potential crisis. It follows that only an engagement with specific films can bring to light the means of each text’s articulation of this potentiality. In search of a case study through which to explore this idea of essay, I (re)encountered Rebecca Baron’s 16mm short *The Idea of North* (1995), which, with its vivid experimental, experiential and performative qualities, is an emblematic though profoundly idiosyncratic paradigm of essayistic crisis of form and thought, and a compelling powerful example of anachronistic, counterhegemonic philosophy.

The film, which is titled after Glenn Gould’s 1967 radio documentary of the same name, sets off from the filmmaker’s encounter with some photographs taken during a 1897 Swedish expedition to the North Pole via hydrogen balloon. Led by Salomon August Andrée, the expedition was ill-fated: the balloon crash-landed after three days of flight, and the three men of the crew died in the attempt to reach safety, after surviving some thirteen weeks on the ice. The photographs were eventually found in the still loaded camera, which had been buried for thirty-three years in the snow, and first printed in 1930. In *The Idea of North*, Baron starts from the eerie, faded images, their retouched and enhanced versions, and from the original diaries of the members of the expedition, also preserved but significantly damaged, and so reconstructs the events, adopting a dual, disjunctive reflective and lyrical register. Combining the original photos and what is clearly reconstructed and performed footage, the film offers an incisive essayistic

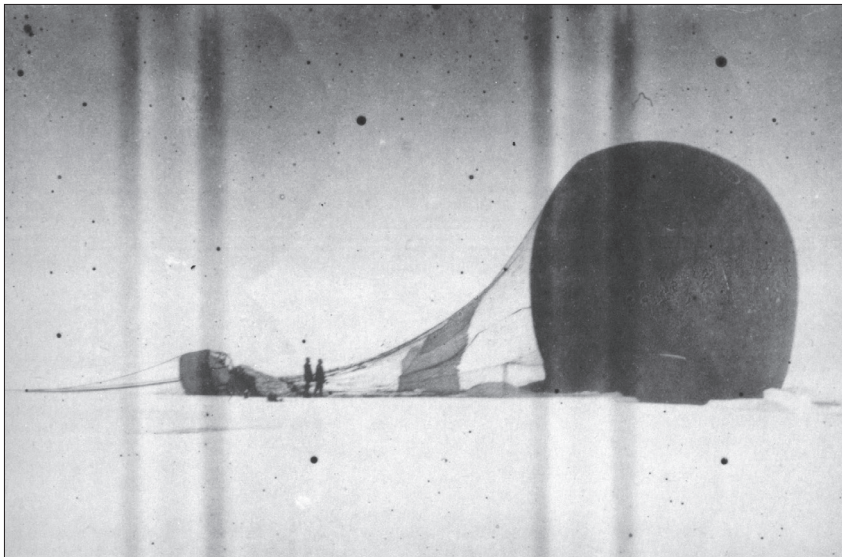


Fig. 1: One of Nils Strindberg’s original photographs of the failed expedition: *The Idea of North* (Rebecca Baron, 1995). Courtesy of Rebecca Baron.

treatment of such topics as the gulf between man's trust in technology and its ultimate inadequacy (Andrée's misplaced faith in the balloon and in the expedition's scientific tools; the photographic camera's imperfect preservation of documentary traces; and photography and film's limitations as tools to embalm and mediate human experience); and questions of time and memory, with the creation of a compelling, 'paradoxical interplay of film time, historical time, real time and the fixed moment of the photograph' (Baron 1997), as described in the program notes of the 1997 New York Film Festival.

Images and sounds of different quality and status (at the image-track level: still and moving images, original, enhanced and reenacted images, black screens, scratched screens, superimposed captions; at the soundtrack level: music, noises, recorded voices and the filmmaker's voiceover) constitute the superimposed strata of essayistic signification. While radically disjointed by what Gilles Deleuze would describe as irrational cuts, which sever image from image, image from sound, sound from sound (1989: 180), these elements incessantly come together to form constellations, lumps, layers of meaning – only to break apart again. In mixing extremely hybrid materials, the film experimentally shatters the distinction between fiction and documentary, between essay and art object. By immediately underscoring the 'I', along with the film's personal motivation and origination (as the voiceover recites: 'I begin in the middle; I begin with a set of five photographs printed in a book of Scandinavian photography'), the text places subjective experience at its centre, thus embracing contingency and partiality, but also declaring its intellectual and affective interest in a specific experiential relationship with the world. Such a focus produces a performative ethos: the faded photographs and diary words are incomplete, pale, almost illegible traces of an embalmed subjectivity and a distant human experience that remain largely unknowable; the film attempts not a full, perfected reconstruction, but the allusive unfolding of an experiential engagement via performative elements that offer glimpses of knowledge and of empathetic understanding, while discouraging the illusion of full apprehension.

What distinguishes *The Idea of North* from experimental cinema, and what makes it an essay, is its focus on an intellectual enquiry, its lucid and concentrated exploration of an idea: an idea of North, as the ultimate limit of our imagination of the world, and of our experience of it; and an idea of the precariousness of our technologies of record and memory. As the film's form gravitates towards formlessness (static noise, undistinguishable voices, scratches, black screens and indiscernible images), thought in the film gravitates towards its crisis. *The Idea of North* as essay embraces sceptical thinking – its mistrust of technology, and denunciation of technology's fallibility, produce a skeptical detachment that

sanctions the irremediable temporal, cultural and geographical distance of the events, and their ultimate unreadability. Yet the film is not fully resolved by its intellectual stance. In its striving to understand and reproduce its object, *The Idea of North* raises the possibility of an affective spectatorial response based on the evocative, lyrical and aesthetic impression made by images and sounds, which, in spite of their evident fabrication, for a few instants become capable of bearing the distant echo of a human experience. In this, *The Idea of North* could be described as an essay poem – a genre already practiced at different historical moments by writers such as Alexander Pope and Jorge Luis Borges. Its lyricism is, however, not linguistic; as Baron herself has commented in an interview, indeed, here she was interested ‘in what film could offer history in excess of language’ (Baron and Sarbanes 2008: 121).

The affective possibilities of non-verbal lyricism are a point of crisis in the film’s sceptical thinking. In order to be an essay on the failures of the photographic image, the film must work against itself, and put its own images into crisis, deeply querying their ability to be an effective record of human experience; and yet, by radically disjoining its own conceptual limbs, the film allows glimpses of experiential empathy to form in the interstices between images and sounds, between temporal strata, and between source media – somewhat undermining its own intellectual argument. The unreadability of the past and impossibility of apprehending it through our technologies of memory, on the one hand, and the affective evocation of human experience through an aesthetic and expressive use of such technologies, on the other, short-circuit, interminably contradicting but also reinforcing each other.

*The Idea of North* cannot be seen to be representative of *all* essay films – each of which must invent its object and the conditions of an engagement with it. But it is strongly emblematic of the essay film’s counterhegemonic ethos of openness to failure. The idea of the essay that Baron’s film sustains is as future philosophy, as a form of thinking that is not of its time; one that anticipates its own potential undoing, and that ‘gravitates towards crisis’. It is this self-refuting method that at once makes the essay film into a minor form and accounts for its ever-growing worldwide appeal and attraction.

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