
The Essay Film

FROM MONTAIGNE, AFTER MARKER

Timothy Corrigan

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Introduction: Of Film and the Essayistic

WHEN I BEGAN to work on this book in the 1990s, the phrase *essay film* was a fairly cryptic expression that normally required more than a little explanation. Since then, both the phrase and the films have become increasingly visible, and although for many the notion of an essay film remains less than self-explanatory, this particular mode of filmmaking has become more and more recognized as not only a distinctive kind of filmmaking but also, I would insist, as the most vibrant and significant kind of filmmaking in the world today.

Some versions of the essay film arguably extend back at least to D. W. Griffith's 1909 *A Corner in Wheat*, a sharp social commentary on the commodity wheat trade, or, more convincingly, to the 1920s and Sergei Eisenstein's various cinematic projects, such as his never-completed film adaptation of Marx's *Capital*. Especially since the 1940s, however, more and more filmmakers from Chris Marker to Peter Greenaway have described their own films as essay films, joining numerous film critics, theoreticians, and scholars who, since Hans Richter and Alexandre Astruc in the 1940s, have hailed the unique critical potentials and powers of this central form of modern filmmaking. Whereas Richter and Astruc can be considered two of the earliest filmmaker/critics to identify and argue the specific terms of the essay film, critical attention by critics and filmmakers alike has continually expanded and accelerated: from André Bazin's comments in the 1950s and Godard's in the 1960s through the work of contemporary scholars such as Nora Alter,

Christa Blümlinger, Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, Catherine Lupton, Laura Rascaroli, Michael Renov, and others.¹

In the last thirty years, essay films have followed this growth of attention and moved decisively from the margins to the center of film culture, capturing headlines (Michael Moore's 2007 *Sicko*) and Academy Awards (Errol Morris's 2003 *Fog of War*). Often with the look of a documentary filtered through a more or less personal perspective, these sometimes perplexing movies have always been difficult to classify, sometimes difficult to understand, and often difficult to relate to each other. Many of the challenges they pose and misunderstandings they provoke, however, can be mitigated or overcome, I argue, by locating these films specifically within the long and varied tradition of the essay.

Part of the reason for the lack of attention to these films—compared to both narrative fiction films and traditional documentary cinema—is the more general suspicion about the essay itself. More often than not, essays have been considered “eccentric,” “a degenerate, impossible genre, not very serious and even dangerous” (quoted in Bensmaïa 96–97); for many filmgoers, essay films have the confusing distinction of suggesting Jean-Luc Godard's goal of combining the “personal” with “actuality.” While other forms of writing and filmmaking elicit a certain respect associated with their privileged value as aesthetic or scientific practices, essays are usually (and not necessarily incorrectly) associated with mundane or quotidian activities such as school assignments and newspaper commentaries. Presumably, anyone can write an essay on any topic, and because of their broad and often indiscriminate reach, essays have sometimes been perceived as a merely “prosaic” activity. Indeed, precisely because of the tendency of the essay to respond to and depend on other cultural events that precede them—commenting on or criticizing a political event or a theatrical performance, for instance—essays have frequently been viewed as a parasitic practice, lacking those traditional forces of originality or creativity that, since the late eighteenth century, valorize works of art like paintings or poems.

Part of the power of the essay, however, lies precisely in its ability to question or redefine these and other representational assumptions (frequently enlisted with Romantic aesthetics) and to embrace its anti-aesthetic status. The difficulties in defining and explaining the essay are, in other words, the reasons that the essay is so productively inventive. Straddling fiction and nonfiction, news reports and confessional autobiography, documentaries and experimental film, they are, first, practices that undo and redo film form, visual perspectives, public geographies, temporal organizations, and notions of truth and judgment within the complexity of experience. With a perplexing and enriching lack of formal rigor, essays and essay films do not usually offer the kinds of pleasure associated with

traditional aesthetic forms toward intellectual reflection responses, well outside the b

Besides the centrality of es- ing motifs inform this study: other film practices and the i- itage in this particular film | the essay film must be disting- imental cinema and must be justice to its distinctive perc- experimental documentaries Bunuel's *Land without Bread* (the many attempts to fold es- to see film history as a contin- acknowledge the critical inte- cinema. Just as important, e- of more conventional or differ- television, and other measure- documentary tradition.

An abundance of recent lab- categories such as “meta-doc- or subjective documentaries.” quate (although Bill Nichols's intersects with some of the ce- standable emphasis on a docu- a large body of essay films that *Redupers: The All-Round Redu- sis of a Stolen Painting* (1979). essayists (from Marker to O- documentary tradition have- fictionalized films, including (1985) as a kind of essay, “a humans and animals” and *Bell- bility of contemporary archite- Gras* 52–53). While those other documentaries with the reflex- ernist cinema, they tend, I be- accomplishment of the essay- address and achievements.⁴

s, Catherine Lupton, Laura Ras-
 owed this growth of attention and
 er of film culture, capturing head-
 y Awards (Errol Morris's 2003 *Fog*
 iltered through a more or less per-
 movies have always been difficult
 and often difficult to relate to each
 misunderstandings they provoke,
 by locating these films specifically
 y.

to these films—compared to both
 itary cinema—is the more general
 n not, essays have been considered
 : very serious and even dangerous”
 rs, essay films have the confusing
 d of combining the “personal” with
 filmmaking elicit a certain respect
 ic or scientific practices, essays are
 iated with mundane or quotidian
 paper commentaries. Presumably,
 use of their broad and often indis-
 rceived as a merely “prosaic” activ-
 y of the essay to respond to and
 them—commenting on or criti-
 mance, for instance—essays have
 lacking those traditional forces of
 teenth century, valorize works of

precisely in its ability to question
 assumptions (frequently enlisted
 anti-aesthetic status. The difficul-
 other words, the reasons that the
 ction and nonfiction, news reports
 s and experimental film, they are,
 visual perspectives, public geogra-
 of truth and judgment within the
 nd enriching lack of formal rigor,
 kinds of pleasure associated with

traditional aesthetic forms like narrative or lyrical poetry; they instead lean toward intellectual reflections that often insist on more conceptual or pragmatic responses, well outside the borders of conventional pleasure principles.

Besides the centrality of essay films in contemporary film culture, two overarching motifs inform this study: the importance of differentiating the essay film from other film practices and the importance of recognizing an overlooked literary heritage in this particular film practice. First and most prominently, I contend that the essay film must be distinguished from broad models of documentary or experimental cinema and must be located in a more refined historical place that does justice to its distinctive perceptions and interactions. Documentaries, especially experimental documentaries, such as Jean Vigo's *A propos de Nice* (1930) or Luis Bunuel's *Land without Bread* (1933), are clearly important precursors.² Yet, despite the many attempts to fold essay films into those longer traditions, these attempts to see film history as a continuity with variations are limited in their ability to fully acknowledge the critical intervention that the essay film makes in the history of cinema. Just as important, essay films must be distinguished from the multitude of more conventional or differently innovative contemporary documentaries, reality television, and other measures of the recent fascination with and resurgence of a documentary tradition.

An abundance of recent labels attempt, for instance, to recover the essay film in categories such as “meta-documentaries,” “reflexive documentaries,” or “personal or subjective documentaries.” None of these, however, strikes me as entirely adequate (although Bill Nichols's notion of performative documentary suggestively intersects with some of the central features of my argument).³ With their understandable emphasis on a documentary tradition, these categories tend to exclude a large body of essay films that are well outside that tradition, such as Helke Sander's *Redupers: The All-Round Reduced Personality* (1978) or Raoul Ruiz's *The Hypothesis of a Stolen Painting* (1979). Along with the many self-proclaimed documentary essayists (from Marker to Orson Welles), many other filmmakers far from the documentary tradition have comfortably applied the term *essay* to their more fictionalized films, including Greenaway, who describes *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) as a kind of essay, “a theoretical observation on the relation between humans and animals” and *Belly of an Architect* (1987) “as an essay on the responsibility of contemporary architects to history and their relation with it” (Gras and Gras 52–53). While those other categories and terminologies properly align recent documentaries with the reflexive tendencies of so many different kinds of modernist cinema, they tend, I believe, to generalize and reduce the strategies and accomplishment of the essay film and to miss or underestimate its distinctive address and achievements.⁴

This study thus aims to explore more exactly the “essayistic” in and through film, where the essayistic indicates a kind of encounter between the self and the public domain, an encounter that measures the limits and possibilities of each as a conceptual activity. Appearing within many different artistic and material forms besides the essay film, the essayistic acts out a performative presentation of self as a kind of self-negation in which narrative or experimental structures are subsumed within the process of thinking through a public experience. In this larger sense, the essay film becomes most important in pinpointing a practice that renegotiates assumptions about documentary objectivity, narrative epistemology, and authorial expressivity within the determining context of the unstable heterogeneity of time and place.

With my second motif, linking the essay film with its literary heritage, I argue that the essay film focuses key issues in the historically varied and multidimensional relationship between film and literature. A prominent measure of cultural shifts in the aesthetics and industry of the cinema for over 100 years, the interchange between the literature and film has usually been mapped across the interaction of film and narrative fiction, dramatic theater, and sometimes poetry. Investigating the literary heritage of the essay that informs and is transformed by the essay film not only broadens the field of that interchange but also introduces distinctive questions, prerogatives, opportunities, and strategies in that relationship. Having virtually nothing to do with the usual fidelities and infidelities of textual adaptation, the literary heritage of the essay film illuminates, most importantly, a unique engagement between the verbal and the visual that has emerged from a long history of self-articulation in a public sphere.⁵ From Marker’s self-conscious rapport with Henri Michaux to Derek Jarman’s baroque linguistics, the literary tradition of the essay film thus becomes a crucial point of departure and often a visible figure in the shape and address of the essay film.

The richness, growth, and variety of essay films in recent decades have made it virtually impossible to attempt a comprehensive survey if one is to respect the diversity of the practice. As a companion piece to retrospectives on the essay film, the 2007 *Der Weg der Termiten: Beispiele eines Essayistischen Kinos 1909–2004* offers a useful historical and cultural panorama that extends from the 1909 *Corner in Wheat* and Dziga Vertov’s films of the 1920s to Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri’s *Tire dié* (1960), Thom Andersen’s *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), and Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2003), including along the way films by Leo Hurtz, Peter Nestler, Imamura Shohei, Chantal Akerman, Michael Rubbo, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Kidlat Tahimik, Patrick Keiller, and many other well- and less well-known filmmakers. While wide perspectives such as

this highlight the scope and historical boundaries of 194 individual films that draw out their individual distinctions: important essay films and film but for me the benefits of close survey of essay films. Besides particulars seems to me to be to canonize certain films and for the intricate varieties of thinking through those practices lesser-known films, from *Marcel Gleaners and I* (2000) to *Alain UnBelonging* (2006).

In addition, my focus here on media incarnations. As the film historical and theoretical pedagogy am primarily interested in the times appears through television more recently found some of through the Internet, other this study concentrates primarily video, or Internet essays—1 country around the world primarily Western, in large part because of the essay, a heritage that is and digital shifts in media practice

I have chosen a somewhat particular focus on both their many differences to the textual specifics of certain to particular modes within their different experiential encounters in public domain. As a base for conceptual shapes of the essay film from the sixteenth century, while changing the essay film from earlier documented to its full visibility in the twentieth century on the French tradition, which films, is the most prominent a

this highlight the scope and variety of this practice, here I argue for the stricter historical boundaries of 1945 to the present and provide particular readings of individual films that draw out not only the common ground of these films but also their individual distinctions. With this extended focus on single films, many important essay films and filmmakers will not get the attention they deserve here, but for me the benefits of close readings are preferable to the attempt at a broad survey of essay films. Besides, expanding and contracting my ideas around particulars seems to me to be truer to the spirit of the essayistic. My aim is not to canonize certain films and filmmakers within this tradition but to demonstrate the intricate varieties of the practice and to follow the movement of my own thinking through those practices. The result is a study that mixes well-known and lesser-known films, from Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1958) and Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) to Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (1989) and Lynne Sachs *States of UnBelonging* (2006).

In addition, my focus here is on the essay *film*, more so than its other visual and media incarnations. As the first two chapters make clear, the essay film has a long historical and theoretical pedigree. While it is crucial to provide this background, I am primarily interested in the modern and contemporary essay film (which sometimes appears through televised venues). Moreover, although the essay film has more recently found some of its most intriguing contemporary transformations through the Internet, other electronic media, and even museum installations,⁶ this study concentrates primarily on the cinematic essay—not photographic, video, or Internet essays—between 1945 and 2010. Although virtually every country around the world produces essay films, moreover, my focus is largely Western, in large part because of the historical and cultural origins and evolutions of the essay, a heritage that is clearly changing quickly as a consequence of global and digital shifts in media production.

I have chosen a somewhat generic organization of essay films as way to champion both their many differences and their inevitable overlappings. While attending to the textual specifics of certain films, my study organizes those analyses according to particular modes within the larger history of the essay, as they configure different experiential encounters or experiential concepts linking subjectivity and a public domain. As a base for my argument, chapter 1 distills the pragmatic and conceptual shapes of the essay as it has been practiced and discussed since the late sixteenth century, while chapter 2 investigates the historical emergence of the essay film from earlier documentary and avant-garde traditions, precursors leading to its full visibility in the the 1940s and 1950s. In this first section, my emphasis is on the French tradition, which, while not the exclusive foundation for these films, is the most prominent and influential in those early years. In fact, except for

Jean-Luc Godard, I emphasize the Left Bank school of modern French cinema where the literary underpinnings of essay films by Marker, Varda, and Alain Resnais is much more apparent than in the films of the *Cahiers du cinéma* group of Francois Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, and others. The second section of the book then investigates five different experiential modes informing essay films: In chapter 3, portrait essays describe representations of the self and self-expression; in chapter 4, travel essays map encounters with different spatial geographies; in chapter 5, diary essays depict different temporalities and velocities of modern life; in chapter 6, editorial essays reshape the news of world events; and in chapter 7, refractive essay films critically engage art objects, films, and other aesthetic experiences. Within each mode, essays represent a spectrum from didactic or sermonic positions to parodic and comic positions. Within this organization, as I indicated, it is unfortunate that my choices of films to signal—some canonically important, some historically important, some my personal favorites—can only implicitly acknowledge a vast number of significant essay films that deserve critical attention.

Categorizing essay films according to these modes is, admittedly, a slippery strategy since essay films invariably overlap and mix several of these modes or figures. I believe this overlapping is partly to do with the “unmethodical method” that, according to Adorno, is the fundamental form of the essay and helps explain one of the central paradoxes and challenges of the essay: It is a genre of experience that, as Reda Bensmaïa has pointed out, may be fundamentally antigeneric, undoing its own drive toward categorization.⁷ If “genre boundaries” are the staple of one wing of film studies, essay films require the acknowledgment of a defining overlapping whereby these films may participate in a variety of figural or modular crossings, as well as “boundary crossings” of more conventional distinctions, such as narrative versus nonnarrative forms.⁸ If Marker’s *Sunless* (1982) represents one of the widely acknowledged triumphs of the practice, it represents the triumph of an amalgamation and orchestration of modular layers, as a travelogue, a diary, a news report, and a critical evaluation of film representation. Besides providing a useful heuristic framework, however, isolating these five modes is important in drawing attention to the broader backgrounds that essay films so productively and explicitly engage as part of an archeology that includes sermons, philosophical dialogues, epistolary narratives, diaries, scientific reports, lectures, editorials, art criticism, and other forms of public discourse.

Writing about the essayistic and essay films requires, I found, more self-consciousness than is typical of scholarly and historical writing. My tactics have been to mobilize theoretical and scholarly positions as ways of turning ideas and films around each other, as strategic interventions rather than as blueprints for

certain interpretations. To c
size disjunctions and shifts b
each chapter and the analys
develop those ideas. Partly b
the shifting multiplicity of th
films make on an actively re
specific engagements in my e
Indeed, the choices of partic
certain scholarly and theoret
following the essayistic practic
by” certain films.

Many have contributed mig
University of Florida, Univer
College, Drake University, Un
Center for Cultural Analysis a
Media Studies conferences, th
2009 conference on “Short Circ
Bologna, and the 2009 Associat
Film Institute. One particular
University in Lünenberg, Germ
the topic with Hito Steyerl, S
Raymond Bellour, Christa Blü
owes much to the comments a
schler, Timothy Murray, Domin
ley Andrew, Jonathan Kahana,
Sachs, William Galperin, Tina
Kevin Harty, Eric Faden and Gr
appears so ubiquitously in this b
contributions, while my someti
matters cinematic, my inspirin
edge. I am grateful to the Univ
research support, including the
Akerman. My colleagues in the I
Peter Decherney, Meta Mazaj, a
for thinking about film as a publi
panions in so many other matter
lan energetically supported this
gracefully managed its publicati
appeared in the journal *Iris: A Jo*

certain interpretations. To dramatize this movement, I typographically emphasize disjunctions and shifts between the constellation of ideas and arguments in each chapter and the analysis of specific films as my readings respond to and develop those ideas. Partly because of the nature of the essay, partly because of the shifting multiplicity of the material, and partly because of the demands these films make on an actively reflective engagement, these chapters thus act out specific engagements in my experience of certain films and intellectual positions. Indeed, the choices of particular films to emphasize, as well as the choices of certain scholarly and theoretical positions to mobilize, might be described as following the essayistic practice that trusts the richness of “thoughts occasioned by” certain films.

Many have contributed mightily to my thinking through presentations at the University of Florida, University of Pittsburgh, Harvard University, Bryn Mawr College, Drake University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Vienna, the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers University, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conferences, the 2005 Werner Herzog conference in London, the 2009 conference on “Short Circuits in Contemporary Cinema” at the University of Bologna, and the 2009 Association of Adaptation Studies conference at the British Film Institute. One particularly notable meeting on “Der Essayfilm” at Leuphana University in Lünenberg, Germany, in 2007 provided a rich opportunity to discuss the topic with Hito Steyerl, Sven Kramer, Thomas Tode, Catherine Lupton, Raymond Bellour, Christa Blümlinger, and Bernard Eisenshitz. This book also owes much to the comments and encouragement of Ivone Margulies, Eric Rentschler, Timothy Murray, Dominique Bluher, Michael Renov, David Rodowick, Dudley Andrew, Jonathan Kahana, Yoram Allon, Dina Smith, Ann Friedberg, Lynne Sachs, William Galperin, Tina Zwarg, Bob and Helen Buttel, Ruth Pertlmutter, Kevin Hart, Eric Faden and Greg Flaxman. The work and support of Nora Alter appears so ubiquitously in this book that it would be impossible to detail her many contributions, while my sometimes co-author Patricia White has been, as in all matters cinematic, my inspiring interlocutor in more ways than I can acknowledge. I am grateful to the University of Pennsylvania for a research leave and research support, including the assistance of Maggie Borden and Sara Brenes-Akerman. My colleagues in the Penn Cinema Studies program, Karen Beckman, Peter Decherney, Meta Mazaj, and Nicola Gentili, have been the ideal community for thinking about film as a public endeavor; they have also been my faithful companions in so many other matters. At Oxford University Press, Shannon McLachlan energetically supported this project for several years, and Brendan O’Neill gracefully managed its publication. Earlier versions of parts of this book have appeared in the journal *Iris: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound, Still Moving:*

school of modern French cinema
films by Marker, Varda, and Alain
is of the *Cahiers du cinéma* group of
s. The second section of the book
des informing essay films: In chap-
of the self and self-expression; in
different spatial geographies; in
ilities and velocities of modern life;
of world events; and in chapter 7,
ts, films, and other aesthetic expe-
spectrum from didactic or sermonic
in this organization, as I indicated,
nal—some canonically important,
nal favorites—can only implicitly
essay films that deserve critical

modes is, admittedly, a slippery
and mix several of these modes or
o with the “unmethodical method”
form of the essay and helps explain
he essay: It is a genre of experience
fundamentally antigeneric, undo-
genre boundaries” are the staple of
he acknowledgment of a defining
e in a variety of figural or modular
ore conventional distinctions, such
ker’s *Sunless* (1982) represents one
actice, it represents the triumph of
r layers, as a travelogue, a diary, a
presentation. Besides providing a
; these five modes is important in
hat essay films so productively and
t includes sermons, philosophical
fic reports, lectures, editorials, art

ms requires, I found, more self-
historical writing. My tactics have
tions as ways of turning ideas and
ions rather than as blueprints for

Between Cinema and Photography (Duke University Press), *A Companion to Werner Herzog* (Blackwell), *The Geopolitics of Art Cinema* (Oxford University Press), and *Corto Circuito: Il Cinema Contemporaneo Nella Rete* (Archetip Libri, Bologna).

No acknowledgment here can measure the support and contributions of Marcia Ferguson, who knows about the complexity and richness of experience.

PART ONE
Toward the Essa

University Press), *A Companion to Werner Herzog* (Oxford University Press), and *Herzog: The Art of the Possible* (Archetip Libri, Bologna). Support and contributions of Marcia and richness of experience.

PART ONE

Toward the Essay Film

1

“On Thoughts Occasioned by . . .” Montaigne to Marker

FROM ITS LITERARY origins to its cinematic revisions, the essayistic describes the many-layered activities of a personal point of view as a public experience. Anticipated in earlier memoirs, sermons, and chronicles, the most recognizable origin of the essay is the work of Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), whose reflections on his daily life and thoughts appear, significantly, in the French vernacular of the streets rather than the Latinate discourse of the academy. With the term *essays* emphasizing their provisional and explorative nature as “attempts,” “tries,” or “tests,” Montaigne’s writings are views of, comments on, and judgments of his faltering memory, kidney stones, love, friendship, sex in marriage, lying, a “monstrous childe,” and a plethora of other common and uncommon questions picked almost haphazardly from a mind observing the world passing before and through it. Imagined, to some extent, as an active intellectual exchange with his deceased friend Étienne de La Boétie, these essays describe a bond between a personal life and the surrounding events of that life in sixteenth-century France, and, in revision after revision that characterize these essays (1580, 1588, 1595), they testify not only to the constant changes and adjustments of a mind as it defers to experience but also to the transformation of the essayistic self as part of that process.

Since Montaigne, the essay has appeared in numerous permutations, inhabiting virtually every discourse and material expression available. Most often, the essayistic is associated with the literary essays whose historical prominence extends from Montaigne to Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in the eighteenth century

to contemporary writers like James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, Jorge Louis Borges, and Umberto Eco. From its literary foundation, the essayistic also moves through the nineteenth century in less-obvious practices, such as drawings and sketches, and by the twentieth century, it appears even in musical forms, such as Samuel Barber's *Essay for Orchestra* (1938). Through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the essayistic has increasingly taken the shape of photo-essays, essay films, and the electronic essays that permeate the Internet as blogs and other exchanges within a public electronic circuitry.

Aldous Huxley describes the essay as moving among three poles:

The essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything. . . . Essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal. Most essayists are at home and at their best in the neighborhood of only one of the essay's three poles, or at the most only in the neighborhood of two of them. There are the predominantly personal essayists, who write fragments of reflective autobiography and who look at the world through the keyhole of anecdote and description. There are the predominantly objective essayists who do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme. . . . The most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist. (330)

To map and distinguish the essay in its evolution from Montaigne to the essay film, I employ a variation on Huxley's three poles as not separable kinds of essays but as, in the "most richly satisfying essays," interactive and intersecting registers. While one or the other of these three registers may be more discernible in any given essay, my three variations on Huxley's versions of the essayistic describe the intersecting activity of personal expression, public experience, and the process of thinking. Other definitions and models of the essay tend to emphasize one or the other of these features as, for instance, the role of a personal voice or the search for documentary authenticity. For me, however, the variable ratio and interactivity of these three dimensions creates a defining representational shape that emerges from the literary heritage of the essay and extends and reformulates itself in the second half of the twentieth century as the essay film. If part of the power of the essayistic has been its ability to absorb and mobilize other literary

and artistic practices, such as the essay film, has become one of its r

While no single definition is malleable for its many variations, its literary foundation (and its evolution and reformulates, I believe, the history of its shifting practices, its abstracted and exaggerated reality and an experiential world enhanced by thinking out loud. If Montaigne's practice, tracing this history and its evolution, and, subsequently, to Richard Dyer, "1:1.33 Montaigne."¹

Often cited as the modern or postmodern Barthes is, for me, the preeminent writer of the everyday, from the contemporary image and the temporaneous with the films of the 1960s to the representations of the 1990s, writing tests the limits and powers with public artifacts in My Era Lucida) and, more theoretically, locates the tensions of essayist between the verbal and the visual. I have produced only with writing" (457) and proclaimed the province of the essay "digression," and "excursion" (460) toward textual features—speak to the power and prevalence and disperse themselves through the text to make meaning. Appropriately, in the 1960s, the essayist, "The Third Meaning," made in Sergei Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible locates in photographs or the "visual" texts, describes an exceptional moment that, in their resisting,

, Susan Sontag, Jorge Louis Borges, m, the essayistic also moves through ices, such as drawings and sketches, n in musical forms, such as Samuel ne twentieth and twenty-first centu- : shape of photo-essays, essay films, ternet as blogs and other exchanges

g among three poles:

ost everything about almost any- whose extreme variability can be d frame of reference. There is the cal; there is the pole of the objec- d there is the pole of the abstract- at their best in the neighborhood t the most only in the neighbor- nantly personal essayists, who hy and who look at the world ription. There are the predomi- c directly of themselves, but turn c scientific or political theme. . . . which make the best not of one, ich it is possible for the essay to

ition from Montaigne to the essay oles as not separable kinds of essays tteractive and intersecting registers. ers may be more discernible in any ersions of the essayistic describe the ublic experience, and the process of essay tend to emphasize one or the le of a personal voice or the search er, the variable ratio and interactiv- ining representational shape that and extends and reformulates itself / as the essay film. If part of the absorb and mobilize other literary

and artistic practices, such as narrative or photographic practices, film, since the 1940s, has become one of its richest terrains.

While no single definition of the essayistic will probably ever be sufficiently malleable for its many variations, following this framework as it emerges from its literary foundation (and later adapted to the photographic essay) clarifies and formulates, I believe, the distinctive terms of the essay film. Across the history of its shifting practices, the essayistic stretches and balances itself between abstracted and exaggerated representation of the self (in language and image) and an experiential world encountered and acquired through the discourse of thinking out loud. If Montaigne introduces the literary beginnings of this practice, tracing this history and its emerging priorities leads almost climactically, for André Bazin and others, to Chris Marker's 1958 essay film *Letter from Siberia* and, subsequently, to Richard Roud's prescient characterization of Marker as "1:1.33 Montaigne."¹

*Often cited as the modern or even postmodern descendent of Montaigne, Roland Barthes is, for me, the preeminent literary essayist of the twentieth century, a protean writer of the everyday, fully and concomitantly dedicated to and resistant to the contemporary image and the power of the cinema. Arriving in the 1950s, contemporaneous with the films of Marker, Barthes's work stands out as both commentaries on and representations of the power and singularity of the essayistic: his writing tests the limits and possibilities of the essay (from his collection of encounters with public artifacts in *Mythologies* to his meditation on photography in *Camera Lucida*) and, more theoretically and explicitly than most, this work frequently locates the tensions of essayistic expression in that central twentieth-century play between the verbal and the visual.² In his "Inaugural Lecture, College of France," he claims, "I have produced only essays, an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing" (457) and proclaims for this kind of writing what I argue is more specifically the province of the essayistic, a discourse of "loosening," "fragmentation," "digression," and "excursion" (476).³ Throughout his essays, he identifies and gravitates toward textual features—of novels, photographs, or other social texts—that speak to the power and prevalence of a personal voice and experience that articulate and disperse themselves through a vast cultural landscape in an active struggle to make meaning. Appropriately, one of Barthes's most celebrated and important essays, "The Third Meaning," makes famous an "obtuse meaning" which he discovers in Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1947) and which, like the "punctum" he locates in photographs or the "suspended meaning" he finds in the best films and texts, describes an exceptionally personal engagement with a detail, texture, or moment that, in their resisting definitive meanings, dramatizes thought.*

mentaries on film, his essay "Leaving
nematic encounter whose dynamics
might reconfigure the filmic experi-
articular object becomes the primary
"cinema situation" as both a private
bodies at the same time." On the one
es, lost, into the engulfing mirror"
unds and counterpoints the "lure" or
ating "a perverse body, ready to fet-
s it" (348-349). The cinematic situa-
at allows the self to be there and
"urban dark" where "the body's free-
the theatre, the obscure mass of other
xit": the "inoccupation of the body"

self and public self, a narcissistic
as "the Cinema of society" (348)—
stic that begins with Montaigne and
verbal drift between the film image
the twilight), Barthes both inhabits
here" (347), and so complicates his
a verbal mapping of the "situation,"
thought (348). As Barthes spins the
ounter, essayistic encounters situate
ual and erotic twilight zone between
illusory place and the other, like a
(La chambre claire 181). Between
located, spaced out," the space that
land Barthes par Roland Barthes
e essayistic and in the evolution of
image halfway between the photo-
between the intense privacy of the
ie cinematic image.⁴

history of the essay offers a lengthy
performative voice and vision as the
ified by the "familiar essay" of nine-
Ralph Waldo Emerson, this connec-
on identifies, however, a much more

complicated, dynamic, and often subversive position than is often acknowledged in the assumption that essays cohere around a singular self.⁵ The history of the essay demonstrates, in fact, that the essayistic is most interesting not so much in how it privileges personal expression and subjectivity but rather in how it troubles and complicates that very notion of *expressivity* and its relation to *experience*, the second cornerstone of the essayistic. If both verbal and visual expression commonly suggest the articulation or projection of an interior self into an exterior world, essayistic expressivity describes, more exactly I think, a subjection of an instrumental or expressive self to a public domain as a form of experience that continually tests and undoes the limits and capacities of that self through that experience. At the intersection of these two planes, we find in the best essays the difficult, often highly complex—and sometimes seemingly impossible—figure of the self or subjectivity *thinking* in and through a public domain in all its historical, social, and cultural particulars. Essayistic expression (as writing, as film, or as any other representational mode) thus demands both loss of self and the rethinking and remaking of the self.

Montaigne's renowned combination of stoicism, skepticism, and Epicureanism consequently plays itself out across the movement from a self-expression undoing itself in the process of thinking through the dynamics of the world "as perennial movement" ("Of Repentance" 610). Aiming to be "an authority on myself" (822) and studying "myself more than any other subject" (821), Montaigne's motto "que-sais-je?" ("what do I know?") calls into question the security of his own authority. It is one of many succinct phrases in his work that describes a principal drive in the writings as an investigation into the terms of one's self and how an individual might discover a certain knowledge of the world through the individual's unsystematic experience of that world. Throughout this work, however, this drive continually rattles the terms of its own articulation, suggesting a self whose thinking through experience becomes a measure of the limits of its own capacities. While freely celebrating thinking about all details of his life, he acknowledges that "I speak freely of all things, even those which perhaps exceed my capacity" ("Of Books" 298).

In his monumental essay "Of Experience," Montaigne affirms "human ignorance" as "the most certain fact in the school of the world" (824) yet insists repeatedly on his goal to be "intellectually sensual, sensually intellectual" (433). Since "our life is nothing but movement," essayistic expression becomes that materialized place for a provisional self and its thoughts, free of method and authority: "For lack of a natural memory I make one of paper" (837), he quips, claiming that "all the fricassee that I am scribbling here . . . record the essays of my life. . . . It's instruction in reverse . . . not corrupted by art or theorizing" (826). Unlike systematic or formulaic approaches to knowledge, he learns "from experience, without

any system," so presents "my ideas in general way, and tentatively" (824). While Francis Bacon's more social, more advisory, and more structured essays (published in 1597, 1612, 1625) serve as a parallel beginning of the modern essay, Montaigne's shifting and layered assertions and denials of passing thoughts on the world become the acknowledged background and touchstone for many of the first essay films, as Roud would explicitly remind us in his description of Marker as "a kind of one man total cinema . . . a 1 to 1:33 Montaigne" (Roud "The Left Bank" 27).⁶

On the foundation of Montaigne, essay writing accelerates and broadens considerably in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when it begins to take a more distinctive shape as a public dialogue between a self and a visible world, often urban and sometimes natural. Eighteenth-century England is a prime example of where both the industrial and democratic backdrops of the essay come into high relief as a function of major shifts in the public sphere: Notably, through the vehicle of new periodicals ideally suited for essayistic interventions in coffee-house culture and propelled forward by the development of the iron press in 1798, the notion of individual becomes reconfigured in the significantly broader commercial terms of social observation, communication, and interactivity. One of many well-known examples, Addison and Steele's essays, published in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* as early as 1709, map the changing rhythms and geographies of industrialized urban spaces through the eyes of fictional personae Issac Bickerstaff and Sir Roger Coventry. These essays wander the streets of London as a distinctly self-effacing "looker-on" (Addison 3) whose perspective focuses and disperses across a club of social types (a country squire, a military man, and so on) and whose comments and observations, entwining spectacle and spontaneity, record the social variety and bustle of daily life.

Following this emphatic attention to the public sphere (and urban life), the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century essay tends to refine the moral and political voice of the essay. With nineteenth-century essayists from S. T. Coleridge to Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, essayistic practice spreads itself more dramatically among autobiography, social report, and art criticism. Coleridge's abundance of essayistic writing from the 1790s to the 1830s thus ranges from politics and theology to literary criticism and philosophy, often underpinned by the pronounced autobiographical current, culminating in his celebrated *Biographia Literaria* (1815). Somewhat typical of many nineteenth-century forays into public life, the *Biographia* ultimately settles for and celebrates the inevitable fragmentation and incompleteness of an essayistic self, materially dramatized in the unfinished conclusion of that famous work.

What I find most suggestive in these historical reformulations of the essayistic—particularly as they help ground and anticipate the essay film—is precisely *not* the usual understanding of them as the coherently personalized expression of an authorized subjectivity, typically associated with some version of the Romantic or

modern ego. While virtually said to dramatize encounter, the balance of that encounter is essayistic as a kind of fragmented representation. Whereas republican lyric poetry, generally speaking, finished frameworks of a coherent, and often aggressively, becomes subsumed in the work, more than a significant distinction, rhetorical changes (mapped in the choices and experiments with only in a writer's choice to such as poetry or novels, and

Essays are thus most indicative of the subjection of that self within the work. Charles Lamb, Virginia Woolf, and others are engaged in or transforming that self into a more visible form. In Woolf's essay "Street Lamps" (260), and instead of "only," the self becomes a redefined "streaked, variegated, all of a piece but a self that puts "on briefly" (265). Just as essayists from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century poetic urgency in a prose aim to move around them, Woolf's essay is an instrument of self-expression with "velocity and abundance" (263

As a pronounced anticipatory form, essayistic dramatize this desire to resist or troubles its verbal representation of a visual world that continually challenges language. From explicit cases like any of Jorge Luis Borges's essays to James Baldwin, this linguistic form is the vehicle for thinking a self into being that language to compensate

al way, and tentatively" (824). While and more structured essays (published ng of the modern essay, Montaigne's of passing thoughts on the world uchstone for many of the first essay is description of Marker as "a kind of e" (Roud "The Left Bank" 27).⁶

ting accelerates and broadens consid- enturies when it begins to take a more a self and a visible world, often urban England is a prime example of where of the essay come into high relief as a Notably, through the vehicle of new tions in coffee-house culture and pro- press in 1798, the notion of individual der commercial terms of social obser- of many well-known examples, Addi- er and *The Spectator* as early as 1709, industrialized urban spaces through and Sir Roger Coventry. These essays self-effacing "looker-on" (Addison 3) ss a club of social types (a country omments and observations, entwined variety and bustle of daily life.

olic sphere (and urban life), the eight- refine the moral and political voice of s from S. T. Coleridge to Matthew eads itself more dramatically among . Coleridge's abundance of essayistic from politics and theology to literary y the pronounced autobiographical *ia Literaria* (1815). Somewhat typical life, the *Biographia* ultimately settles and incompleteness of an essayistic nclusion of that famous work.

al reformulations of the essayistic— e the essay film—is precisely *not* the tly personalized expression of an th some version of the Romantic or

modern ego. While virtually every representational and artistic practice might be said to dramatize encounters between a self and the world, the dynamic and balance of that encounter seem to me to be significantly differentiated in the essayistic as a kind of fragmentation that dramatically troubles subjectivity and representation. Whereas representational practices such as those of the novel or lyric poetry, generally speaking, recuperate and organize public space through the finished frameworks of a coherent and determining subjectivity, essays tend willingly, and often aggressively, to undermine or disperse that very subjectivity as it becomes subsumed in the world it explores. This is less an oppositional distinction than a significant distinction in a representational ratio that in part reflects historical changes (mapped in the increasing importance and prevalence of the essay through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and in part reflects authorial choices and experiments with different representational relations (seen commonly in a writer's choice to move between traditionally authorized practices, such as poetry or novels, and the essayistic).⁷

Essays are thus most indicative of the form, I believe, when they act out of the subjection of that self within or before a natural space or, as with the essays of Charles Lamb, Virginia Woolf, and Roland Barthes, a public urban space, dispersing or transforming that self within that space and, often and more exactly, its visibility.⁸ In Woolf's essay "Street Haunting" (1927), for instance, London becomes a panoramic of sights, where the "eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances" (260), and instead of the coherency of seeing oneself as "one thing only," the self becomes a reflection of the visual plenitude of a modern city, "streaked, variegated, all of a mixture" (261), a self "tethered not to a single mind," but a self that puts "on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and mind of others" (265). Just as essayists from Thomas De Quincey to Walter Pater create a certain poetic urgency in a prose aimed at describing the fleeting images of the world around them, Woolf's essayistic self in "Street Haunting" finds her quest for an instrument of self-expression, specifically a pencil, ecstatically waylaid by the a "velocity and abundance" (263) of the London streets.⁹

As a pronounced anticipation of many essay films, many twentieth-century literary essays dramatize this destabilizing encounter between a visual world that resists or troubles its verbal assessment, producing a linguistic struggle with a visual world that continually undermines or subverts the subjective power of language. From explicit cases like William Gass's extended essay *On Being Blue* or any of Jorge Luis Borges's essays to the more naturalized tactics of writers like James Baldwin, this linguistic drama emphasizes the limitations of language as the vehicle for thinking a self in public images and the necessity of reinventing that language to compensate for its inadequacies before the world. In Baldwin's

"Stranger in the Village," for instance, the "sight" of an African American by the local villagers in a small Swiss town produces Baldwin's complex inquiry into American racial history and the struggle to "establish an identity" (*Collected Essays* 127). Throughout this essay and many others, including his long reflection on the Hollywood film industry, "The Devil Finds Work" (*Collected Essays* 477-576), Baldwin develops a rhetorical stance searching for new words that could sufficiently act as an interface between his personal experience and the images of the world that he sees and that sees him. Or, as he puts it in 1999 ("I'll Make Me a World"), "I will not take any one's words for my experience." In the most demanding essays and essay films, this interactive confrontation destabilizes not only the authorial subject but also the resulting text and the reader/viewer's apprehension of it.

If the essay film inherits many of the epistemological and structural distinctions of the literary essay, especially as it plays itself out as a dialogic tension between the verbal and the visual, a key transitional practice linking these two forms of representations is the photo-essay, in which the visual itself begins to acquire the expressivity and instability associated with the verbal realm of the literary voice and now often becomes not oppositional to but an alternative mode of expressivity. Part scientific investigation, part educational sermon, part ethnographic tour, Jacob Riis's 1890 *How the Other Half Lives* figures prominently as an early transitional essay between the verbal and the visual. Here, Riis investigates New York tenements in the 1880s as a public place defined as "the destroyer of individuality and character" (222), and the novelty and power of this work spring directly from its use of shocking photographs of the deplorable living conditions to counterpoint the melodramatic voice of the commentary.¹⁰ The 1930s later become the heyday of the photo-essay, and during this period a heightened dialogic tension between verbal texts and photographic images define a transitional period that would lead to the first discussions and practices of the essay film in the 1940s. This verbal-visual dialectic is most famously witnessed in James Agee and Walker Evans's 1939 essayistic collaboration *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in which the literary privileging of the verbal against the pressure of the visual is reversed as a fundamental doubt about the adequacy of a verbal text to express the fragmentary mobility of images: "If I could do it," Agee writes, "I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odor, plates of food and of excrement" (13).

As a supplement for the subjective voice in the photo-essay, a verbal or literary text often dramatizes and concretizes a shifting subjective perspective and its unstable relationship with the photographic images it counterpoints. In other cases, the structural formulation of the photo-essay, as the linkage of

separate photographs whose "unsutured" interstices between shifting and aleatory voice are provisionally, to articulate the experiences represented. In Riis's "The Camera as Usurper," he suggests, in his "The Camera as Usurper" essay as part of a historical reconstruction of images can itself be a commentator since the camera can comment on a picture the world as a sevensome-umnist would picture it. A photo-essayistic tension between a troubles the verbal thus creates and resistance between photographs (sometimes impossible) to 're-claim them' (289). Complimenting the photo-essay should strive to be unfilmatic logic when he remakes the photo-essay film in which, like his *B* ("Word and Film" 238).

Against this historical backdrop, the object of theoretical and philosophical inquiry, especially in the early twentieth century, reflected on the twentieth century attention: the strategy flourishes as a distribution in anticipation of Jean-François Lyotard's the quintessential form of postmodernism (81).

Anticipating key dimensions of postmodernism, especially impositions of knowledge, and its subversion of Lukacs's "On the Nature and Role of the Novel" and celebrated accounts of the essayistic experience as "an e-

sight" of an African American by the
 uces Baldwin's complex inquiry into
 establish an identity" (*Collected Essays*
 s, including his long reflection on the
 rk" (*Collected Essays* 477-576), Baldwin
 w words that could sufficiently act as
 e and the images of the world that he
 99 ("I'll Make Me a World"), "I will not
 he most demanding essays and essay
 ilizes not only the authorial subject
 iver's apprehension of it.

istemological and structural distinc-
 plays itself out as a dialogic tension
 ansitional practice linking these two
 ; in which the visual itself begins to
 iated with the verbal realm of the lit-
 sitional to but an alternative mode of
 art educational sermon, part ethno-
 -*Half Lives* figures prominently as an
 nd the visual. Here, Riis investigates
 ic place defined as "the destroyer of
 ovelty and power of this work spring
 s of the deplorable living conditions
 the commentary.¹⁰ The 1930s later

during this period a heightened dia-
 graphic images define a transitional
 and practices of the essay film in the
 ously witnessed in James Agee and
t Us Now Praise Famous Men, in which
 he pressure of the visual is reversed
 of a verbal text to express the frag-
 Agee writes, "I'd do no writing at all
 be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton,
 ood and iron, phials of odor, plates of

n the photo-essay, a verbal or liter-
 shifting subjective perspective and
 aphic images it counterpoints. In
 the photo-essay, as the linkage of

separate photographs whose implied relationship appears in the implicit gaps or
 "unsutured" interstices between those images, becomes itself analogous to the
 shifting and aleatory voice or perspective of the literary essay as it attempts,
 provisionally, to articulate or interpolate itself within the public spaces and
 experiences represented. In 1937, Henry Luce, founder of *Life* magazine, sug-
 gests, in his "The Camera as Essayist," just this ability of the image to mimic or
 usurp the verbal subjectivity of the literary essay when he describes the photo-
 essay as part of a historical evolution that links practices from the seventeenth
 century to Riis and the heyday of the photo-essay in the 1930s. Here, the con-
 struction of images can itself assimilate the role and language of the essayistic
 commentator since the camera "is not merely a reporter. It can also be a com-
 mentator. It can comment as it reports. It can interpret as it presents. It can
 picture the world as a seventeenth-century essayist or a twentieth-century col-
 umnist would picture it. A photographer has his style as an essayist has his"
 (quoted in Willumson 16). Whether with an explicit or implicit voice or text, the
 essayistic tension between a verbal register and a visual order that resists and
 troubles the verbal thus creates, in W. J. T. Mitchell's words, "dialectic of exchange
 and resistance between photography and language," making it "possible (and
 sometimes impossible) to 'read' the pictures, or to 'see' the text illustrated in
 them" (289). Complimenting German writer Christa Wolf's claims that "prose
 should strive to be unfilmable" (33), Alexander Kluge would later extend this
 logic when he remakes the tradition of the photo-essay as the contemporary
 essay film in which, like his *Blind Director* (1985), "Language in film may be blind"
 ("Word and Film" 238).

Against this historical background, the essayistic has become increasingly the
 object of theoretical and philosophical reflections and self-reflections, starting
 especially in the early twentieth century. Well before this point, many essayists
 themselves reflected on the practice as a particular kind of writing. Yet, during
 the twentieth century attention to the essay as a unique representational
 strategy flourishes as a distinctive aesthetic and philosophical question, perhaps
 in anticipation of Jean-Francois Lyotard's provocative claim that the essay is
 the quintessential form of postmodern thought in the latter half of the twentieth
 century (81).

Anticipating key dimensions and strategies of the essay film, several celebrated
 positions are especially important for theorizing its heritage, its status as a form
 of knowledge, and its subversion of aesthetic unity. Published in 1910, Georg
 Lukacs's "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" is one of the earliest and most
 celebrated accounts of the essay in terms of a dialogic idealism that envisions
 essayistic experience as "an event of the soul" (7). For Lukacs, successful essays

are "a conceptual reordering of life" (1), "intellectual poems" (18) that either address "life problems" (3) or re-create that vitality as a critical engagement that becomes itself a work of art. Even within this framework, Lukacs identifies, however, the essayistic experience as an active "questioning" that asserts the primacy of a subjective "standpoint" (15) and works to discover through that questioning the "idea" of a "life-sense" (15). In this mobile activity, the essayist becomes "conscious of his own self, must find himself and build something out of himself" (15) and so becomes extended through the conceptual revelations of this dialogue with real or aesthetic experience. Pinpointing what will be a central dialogic structure in essay films, Lukacs sees Plato as "the greatest essayist who ever lived" (13), and "Socrates is the typical life for the essay" since Socrates "always lived in the ultimate questions . . . to comprehend the nature of longing and to capture it in concepts" (13-14). All essays are "thoughts occasioned by" (15) and lead to his famously pronounced motto of a self suspended in the experience of thinking through the core of life: "The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with system) but the process of judging" (18).

Contrasting Lukacs's focus on the essay's Platonic heritage, midcentury discussions of the essay in Germany and Austria evolve around questions of the essay's unique epistemological resources. Significantly, the essay now begins to distinguish itself not as an aesthetic or idealistic experience but as an intellectual activity and form of knowledge that resists the lure of an idealism often perceived as an aesthetic experience. In Robert Musil's monumental 1930 essayistic novel *The Man Without Qualities*, the essay refigures thought as an experiential engagement with the world: It "explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it—for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down to a concept . . . an essay is . . . the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in a decisive thought. Nothing is more foreign to it than the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism" (I, 270, 273). In 1947, Max Bense refines the argument in postwar terms that would be especially important to the multilayered form of film by noting: "The essayist is a combiner, a tireless producer of configurations around a specific object. . . . Configuration is an epistemological arrangement which cannot be achieved through axiomatic deduction, but only through a literary *ars combinatoria*, in which imagination replaces strict knowledge" (422). Like the configuration of fragments in a kaleidoscope or cinematic montage, the essay offers, for Bense, a creative rearrangement and play "of idea and image" (423-424), comparable to Benjamin's "constellations" of knowledge in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in which "ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars" (34).

Especially as it describes the T. W. Adorno's "The Essay as Fragmentary and 'noncreative' concepts in the process of intellectual becoming a 'thinker' who 'makes' (13). Configured as "force field of identity" and the emancipatory exploring a subjective aspect of something that is not interested with what is blind in concepts to pry open the aspect that reveals, through tangled, that the net of their objectives polarize the opaque elements and appropriately, Adorno's *Letter from Siberia* and Bazin's

Few films modulate the play experience more eloquently (2004). Almost a parody of a historic tobacco fields that drive the romantic aura of a bucolic homeland defined by the essayistic, a highly personal sona, enters the public arena of ultimately requires abandonment of tobacco in North Carolina.

Following these shifting move to locate this strain between what seems like a random, in cousin, John McElwee, who shows McElwee a 1950 film Gary Cooper, Lauren Bacall, expect the film is a fictionalized social and industrial collapse wh

intellectual poems" (18) that either vitality as a critical engagement that is framework, Lukacs identifies, how-questioning" that asserts the primacy to discover through that questioning activity, the essayist becomes "con-build something out of himself" (15) conceptual revelations of this dialogue ting what will be a central dialogic "the greatest essayist who ever lived" essay" since Socrates "always lived in the nature of longing and to capture it is occasioned by" (15) and lead to his ended in the experience of thinking gment, but the essential, the value- (as is the case with system) but the

Platonic heritage, midcentury discus- solve around questions of the essay's tly, the essay now begins to distin- experience but as an intellectual activ- of an idealism often perceived as an mental 1930 essayistic novel *The Man* : as an experiential engagement with sides without wholly encompassing / loses its scope and melts down to a nalterable form assumed by a man's ore foreign to it than the irresponsi- as subjectivism" (I, 270, 273). In 1947, erms that would be especially impor- g: "The essayist is a combiner, a tire- cific object. . . . Configuration is an e achieved through axiomatic deduc- toria, in which imagination replaces on of fragments in a kaleidoscope or e, a creative rearrangement and play : to Benjamin's "constellations" of ma, in which "ideas are to objects as

Especially as it describes the conceptual and formal activities of the essayistic, T. W. Adorno's "The Essay as Form" offers one of the most resonant models of the essay as it looks forward to the essay film. Here, Adorno argues that the distin- guishing strength of the essay is its ability to subvert systemic thought, totalities of truth, and "the jargon of authenticity" (7) through "methodically unmethodi- cal" (13) strategies through which essay's "innermost formal law is heresy" (23). Fragmentary and "noncreative," the essay represents "reciprocal interaction of concepts in the process of intellectual experience" (13), and the essayistic subject becomes a "thinker" who "makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience" (13). Configured as "force fields" (13), essays celebrate "the consciousness of noni- dentity" and the emancipation from the compulsion of identity (17), simultane- ously exploring a subjective activity that realizes "nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it at the same time" (4). "The essay is concerned with what is blind in its objects," according to Adorno. It wants "to use concepts to pry open the aspects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entan- gled, that the net of their objectivity is merely subjective arrangement. It wants to polarize the opaque element and release the latent forces in it" (23). Coincidentally and appropriately, Adorno's essay appears the same year, 1958, as Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* and Bazin's landmark description of that film as an essay film.

Few films modulate the play between voice and visuals as a personal and public experience more eloquently and playfully than Ross McElwee's Bright Leaves (2004). Almost a parody of a Romantic essay, the film begins with a dream of "pre- historic" tobacco fields that draw McElwee back to his childhood homestead, where the romantic aura of a bucolic North Carolina countryside quickly becomes a trou- bled homeland defined by the tobacco industry. As with many versions of the essayistic, a highly personal and potentially narcissistic subject, McElwee's per- sona, enters the public arena of nature and culture as a journey of self-discovery that ultimately requires abandoning and remaking of that self within the history of tobacco in North Carolina.

Following these shifting identities, McElwee and his film then make a third move to locate this strain between the personal and public in a Hollywood film. In what seems like a random, incidental discovery, McElwee encounters a cinephile cousin, John McElwee, who collects films and related movie paraphernalia and who shows McElwee a 1950 Michael Curtiz movie called Bright Leaf, featuring Gary Cooper, Lauren Bacall, and Patricia Neal. Both McElwee and his cousin sus- pect the film is a fictionalized documentary about their grandfather and his finan- cial and industrial collapse when his Bull Durham tobacco formula was supposedly

stolen by the powerful Duke family and their industry. Searching for a lost grandfather, the film appears as an almost traditional essayistic meditation on self, fathers and sons, and families, which then becomes entangled in an odd reflection on the power and danger of tobacco. Through a series of deft and seemingly random maneuvers held together by McElwee's colloquial voice, the film ultimately becomes a wry theoretical commentary on how film itself binds and unbinds those different motifs and their representational histories.

The film explores identity across different North Carolina places and spaces, homes, and homelands where McElwee's personal history has persisted, faded, or disappeared. Specifically, he finds himself positioned between two patriarchs, his grandfather and the grandfather's rival, John Buchanan Duke, and McElwee struggles to discover his place between the heritage of those two figures. Homes and other architectural sites are the cultural and institutional frameworks for that heritage, within which McElwee, awkwardly and comically, attempts to place himself. He visits the massive Duke mansion, the parking lot where his great-grandfather once had a mansion, and then his own modest family home around the corner, which his friend Charleen describes as "Buck Duke's outhouse." A historical preservationist shows him former McElwee factories that had been suspiciously set afire at different times in the past and which now store old furniture. At one point, he sits alone in the tiny, empty, weedy McElwee Park wondering about the different history—and identity—that would have been his if his family had triumphed. [fig. 1.1] Through the places and histories of two patriarchs, McElwee becomes a self spatially undone by a rival's empire and a history defined by personal loss.

As the luxurious close-ups of that opening dream make clear, the sensuality and abundance of tobacco leaves are the emblem of a complex natural and cultural world that suffuses McElwee's life and history. Most prominently, the film weaves his personal quest for the roots of an identity into a public commentary on the politics and commerce of the tobacco industry, past and present. Here and there throughout the film, McElwee's observations about tobacco fluctuate between sociology, psychology, science, and politics, with a tone that moves from the satirical to the tragic. Following the trail of tobacco appears at times to be a documentary exposé of the dominating family of James Buchanan Duke, whose tobacco empire destroyed his great-grandfather's rival business but ironically created an "agricultural, pathological trust fund" for generations of McElwee doctors that followed. McElwee visits the Duke University hospital, interviews chain-smoking students at a beautician school (in a building that formerly functioned as a tobacco warehouse), and elicits opinions on tobacco from a small-town parade with an endless array of increasingly smaller beauty queens.

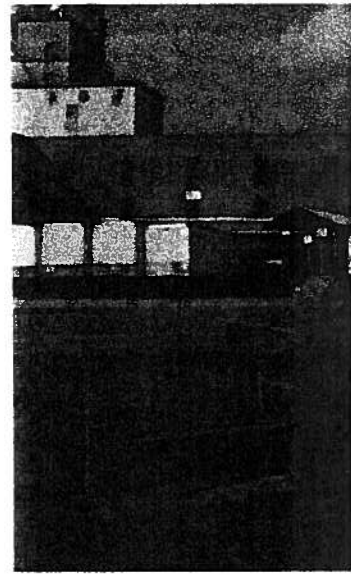


FIGURE 1.1 Undone in McElwee Pa

Less obvious, tobacco also relationships throughout the film simultaneously implies a meta of the film, for instance, McElwee smoking before their marriage, a ritual manifestation of their relationship physically destroy them. In both to nature, family, and community always shadowed by death and between McElwee and his son to work with him" to interview is "an unusual place for a film becomes an especially disturbing public realities can jarringly in the usually invisible place of where the privatized relationship to the other world of tobacco

Oddly like Barthes's relationship with tobacco becomes about relationship with filmmaking. and frames, he notes, "Someti

industry. Searching for a lost grand-
 tional essayistic meditation on self,
 comes entangled in an odd reflection
 a series of deft and seemingly random
 tial voice, the film ultimately becomes
 elf binds and unbinds those different

at North Carolina places and spaces,
 sonal history has persisted, faded, or
 sitioned between two patriarchs, his
 ohn Buchanan Duke, and McElwee
 eritage of those two figures. Homes
 il and institutional frameworks for
 wardly and comically, attempts to
 mansion, the parking lot where his
 then his own modest family home
 describes as "Buck Duke's outhouse."
 er McElwee factories that had been
 past and which now store old furni-
 mpty, weedy McElwee Park wonder-
 ty—that would have been his if his
 e places and histories of two patri-
 one by a rival's empire and a history

ng dream make clear, the sensuality
 em of a complex natural and cultural
 y. Most prominently, the film weaves
 ty into a public commentary on the
 y, past and present. Here and there
 about tobacco fluctuate between soci-
 tone that moves from the satirical to
 ears at times to be a documentary
 chanan Duke, whose tobacco empire
 ess but ironically created an "agricul-
 is of McElwee doctors that followed.
 , interviews chain-smoking students
 merly functioned as a tobacco ware-
 a small-town parade with an endless

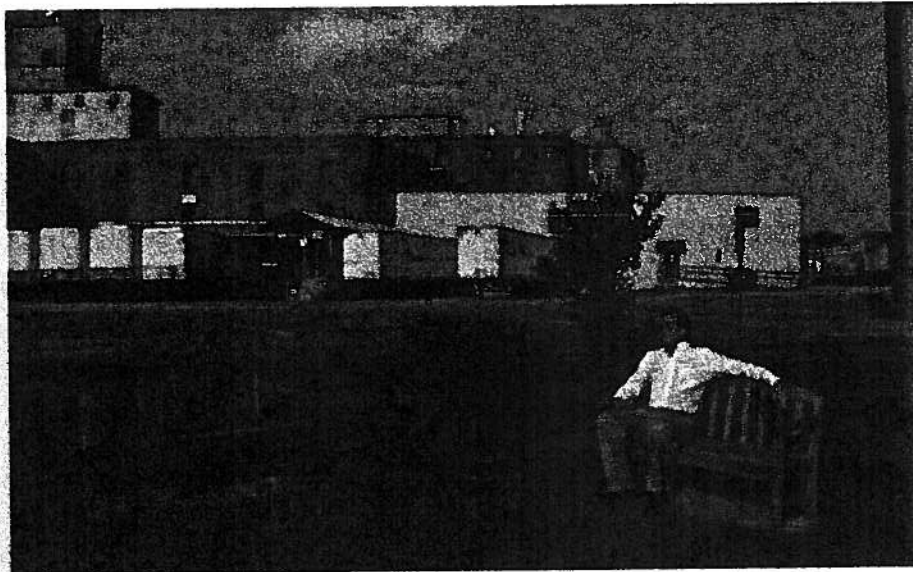


FIGURE 1.1 Undone in McElwee Park (*Bright Leaves*)

Less obvious, tobacco also becomes a peculiar bond for communities and relationships throughout the film in a way that suggests a complex need for others that simultaneously implies a metaphoric and real loss of self. Through the second half of the film, for instance, McElwee returns regularly to a couple struggling to stop smoking before their marriage and after their marriage, smoking acting as a continual manifestation of their relationship but one that will eventually, they know, physically destroy them. In *Bright Leaves*, addiction to cigarettes is an addiction to nature, family, and community, drawing the individual along a path that is always shadowed by death and dispersal. Even the central relationship in the film, between McElwee and his son, intersects with this reality when he takes "his son to work with him" to interview a woman being treated for cancer, which, he admits, is "an unusual place for a father/son outing." [fig. 1.2] Indeed, this last scene becomes an especially disturbing and dramatic visualization of how private and public realities can jarringly intersect across the essayistic as the film frame reveals the usually invisible place of the son operating a sound boom, a now visible place where the privatized relationship of father and son is, in Barthes's sense, "outed" to the other world of tobacco and death.¹¹

Oddly like Barthes's relationship with the movie theater, McElwee's encounter with tobacco becomes about the seduction and destruction that is also about his relationship with filmmaking. Toward the end of the film as he plays with his lenses and frames, he notes, "Sometimes I feel it's such a pleasure to film, especially down

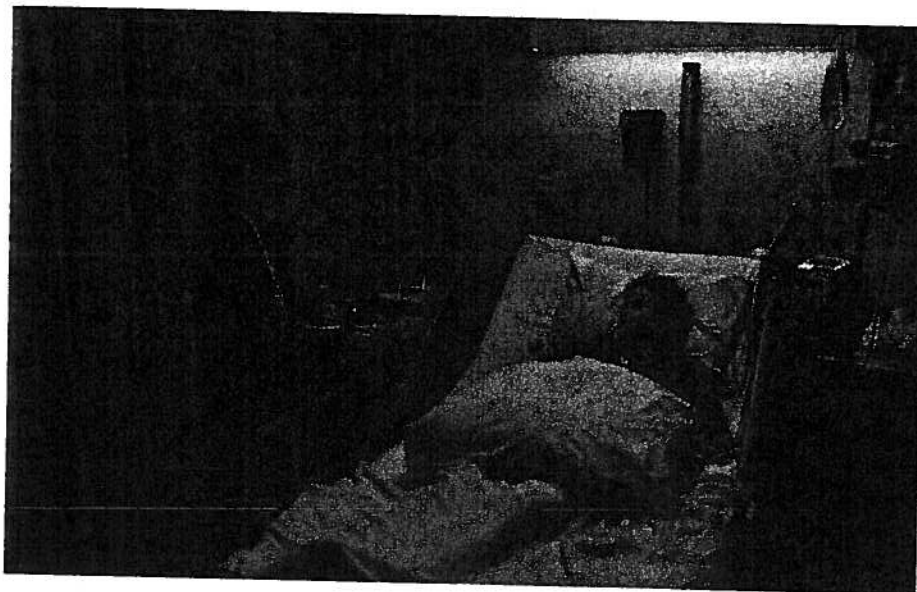


FIGURE 1.2 An unusual place for a father/son outing (*Bright Leaves*)

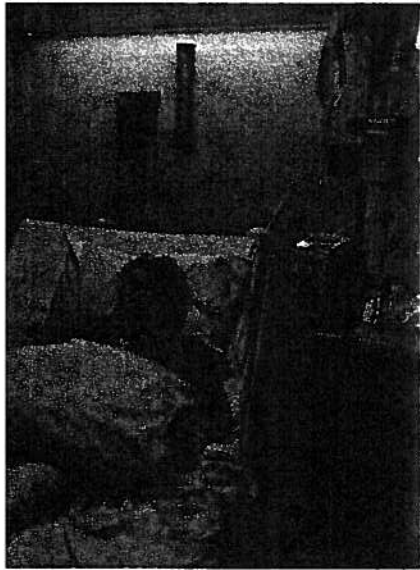
south, it doesn't matter what I'm filming. . . . Even just shooting around a motel can be an almost narcotic experience. . . . For me filming is not unlike smoking a cigarette." It consequently makes a kind of essayistic sense that McElwee's passionate addiction early in the film is to the Hollywood movie *Bright Leaf*. Just as his cousin who introduces him to the film pursues his cinephilia as the collector's passion to find movie people and documents that link films to a public history, McElwee pursues links that would make this feature film evidence of his own family's lost glory so that the Hollywood movie would become a "cinematic heirloom" and "surreal home movie" in which private life would reveal a public epic. Speaking over a sequence from the film in which Cooper falls down the staircase of his burning mansion, McElwee describes the film, with typically muted wit, as "a version of my great-grandfather's rise and subsequent fall." He convinces himself that the performances of the actors in *Bright Leaf* reveal "truthful aspects of their real lives"; in this pursuit, he identifies an on-screen gesture, Neal's left hand reaching up to Cooper during a kiss, that, for McElwee, speaks of their off-screen affair now surreptitiously captured on the screen as "a secret home movie nestled inside a Hollywood production."

Yet, while *Bright Leaves* seems to offer the possibility of a utopian salvation of that subjectivity through the public images of *Bright Leaf*, ultimately the film describes the dispersal and loss of the personal in the public images of a film. Most pointedly, the more profoundly philosophical aspirations of the film transform into

a comic essay as McElwee's (contributed through the contingent visual disruptions, turning his *As Charleen* explains her childhood for instance, she suddenly cries era flash pans around to find Charleen returns to her more drawn away from his focus on like comic versions of Barthes' kind of timelessness is moments with exposures, depths of fields created without the use of special that's about to slip by the back Patricia Neal about *Bright Leaf* garbage on a roof of a building project and quest falter: He re home movie content residing in the novelist who wrote the story theory, telling him that the story, McElwee and his film begin as an unexpected dog races across



FIGURE 1.3 Addiction to filming and



(Bright Leaves)

Even just shooting around a motel
 me filming is not unlike smoking a
 essayistic sense that McElwee's pas-
 ollywood movie Bright Leaf. Just as
 rsues his cinephilia as the collector's
 s that link films to a public history,
 feature film evidence of his own fam-
 would become a "cinematic heirloom"
 would reveal a public epic. Speaking
 per falls down the staircase of his
 , with typically muted wit, as "a ver-
 quent fall." He convinces himself that
 reveal "truthful aspects of their real
 en gesture, Neal's left hand reaching
 speaks of their off-screen affair now
 cret home movie nestled inside a Hol-

the possibility of a utopian salvation
 s of Bright Leaf, ultimately the film
 il in the public images of a film. Most
 aspirations of the film transform into

a comic essay as McElwee's (and his interlocutors') often-urgent voice are redis-
 tributed through the contingencies of the everyday that continually intrude as
 visual disruptions, turning his addictive fascinations into quotidian distractions.
 As Charleen explains her childhood memories while gazing at the Duke mansion,
 for instance, she suddenly cries out, "There's a black cat in the grass," and the cam-
 era flash pans around to find the cat and then quickly pans awkwardly back as
 Charleen returns to her more serious memories. Later, McElwee himself becomes
 drawn away from his focus on a shot he is filming by contingencies that appear
 like comic versions of Barthes's punctum: "When I look through a viewfinder . . . a
 kind of timelessness is momentarily achieved. . . . Just fooling around here playing
 with exposures, depths of field. . . . [discovering] how many special effects can be
 created without the use of special effects. . . . I mean I don't even notice the large rat
 that's about to slip by the background there." [fig. 1.3] Able to finally interview
 Patricia Neal about Bright Leaf, he and Neal are distractedly drawn to bags of
 garbage on a roof of a building neighboring her hotel. At this point, McElwee's
 project and quest falter: He realizes that Neal "can't just accept my theory about
 home movie content residing in a Hollywood production," and when the widow of
 the novelist who wrote the story, Foster Fitz-Simmons, completely debunks his
 theory, telling him that the story has, most definitively, nothing to do with his fam-
 ily, McElwee and his film begin to brilliantly fall apart. "How I can this be?" he says
 as an unexpected dog races across his shot, "I suddenly find myself adrift, dogged

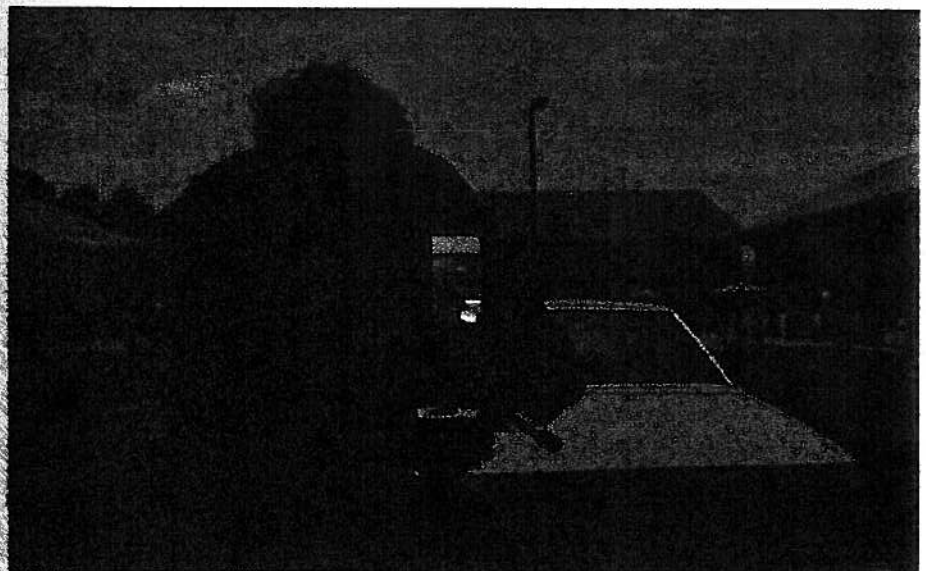


FIGURE 1.3 Addiction to filming and the contingencies of the everyday (Bright Leaves)

by doubts of my family's cinematic legacy. . . . This small hound that came out of nowhere has ruined the shot."

Encompassing McElwee's two overlapping efforts (to find a lost home and to recover that loss through the cinema), *Bright Leaves* might be considered a reflection on the critical blind spots of film, including documentary film, an almost theoretical musing on essayism itself. Hoping film theoretician Vlada Petric will call *Bright Leaf* a "minor classic," McElwee is placed in a wheelchair by Petric, who tells him that "only from unnecessary things in art can you expect something . . . special." [fig. 1.4] As Petric wheels him around in a medium close-up that mimics an intimate conversation with the filmmaker, he quickly deflates McElwee's grandiose expectations by pointing out that "Curtiz simply doesn't have a cinematic vision" or the ability to shoot "a fiction film becoming a documentary, a kind of home movie film" as historical epic. Here, Petric poses a version of an essential question behind the essay film when he asks, "How will you integrate a feature fiction film into a documentary?" Later, sitting in his tiny family park, McElwee stretches the question to identify the theoretical challenge of an essayistic encounter with thought: If documentary film is capable of "transcending the mere photographic recording of reality . . . then what do you do with it?"

In the end, McElwee and his film must relinquish his binary sense of identities and his coherent narrative of history as tragic loss. In the end, the institutions of the world—from family to film—must give way to the vicissitudes of subjectivity, history, and cinematic representation itself. His family fades across old home



FIGURE 1.4 Vlada Petric and the art of the unnecessary (*Bright Leaves*)

movies that form the backdrop of my mother, but in another father is becoming less and less actor . . . the reality of him slip life into that public epic film and finally accepts, the movie *Bright Leaves* the single fictional image that "probably melded them into a voice, a "McDuke."

Against old home movies where McElwee himself once preserve even his relationship separate identities: "As if the him from growing up so fast . . . doesn't slow anything down." . . . a small fish from the beach to world that mirrors McElwee's history. [fig. 1.5] For essayist social places where the final words of the historical preserved here . . . what's being p

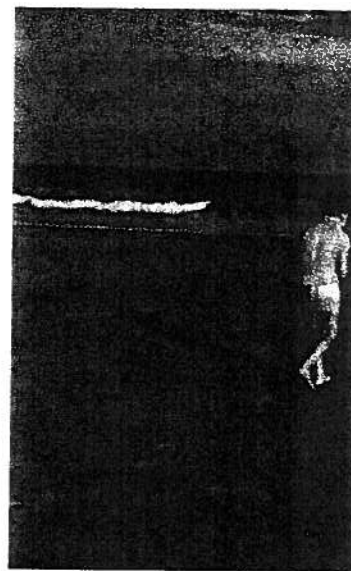
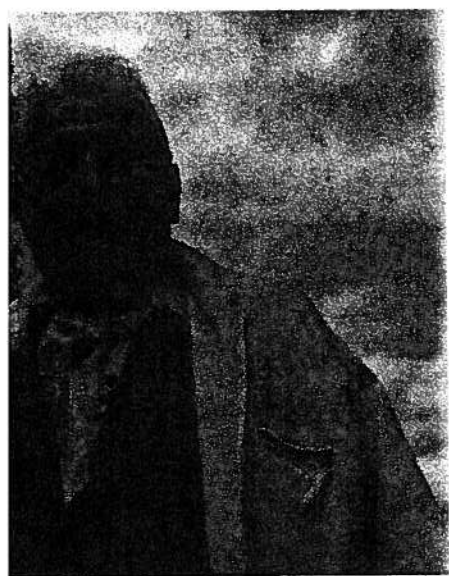


FIGURE 1.5 Releasing selves into exp

... This small hound that came out of
 ... ing efforts (to find a lost home and to
 ... it Leaves might be considered a reflec-
 ... ing documentary film, an almost theo-
 ... ilm theoretician Vlada Petric will call
 ... placed in a wheelchair by Petric, who
 ... s in art can you expect something . . .
 ... id in a medium close-up that mimics an
 ... e quickly deflates McElwee's grandiose
 ... imply doesn't have a cinematic vision"
 ... g a documentary, a kind of home movie
 ... version of an essential question behind
 ... integrate a feature fiction film into a
 ... nily park, McElwee stretches the ques-
 ... m essayistic encounter with thought: If
 ... ng the mere photographic recording of
 ... t relinquish his binary sense of identi-
 ... tragic loss. In the end, the institutions
 ... e way to the vicissitudes of subjectivity,
 ... elf. His family fades across old home

movies that form the backdrop of McElwee's realization: "I say I wish I had movies of my mother, but in another way I wonder what difference would it make. My father is becoming less and less real to me in these images. Almost a fictional character . . . the reality of him slipping away." Similarly, the integration of the personal life into that public epic film collapses into a blurred identity in which, as McElwee finally accepts, the movie *Bright Leaf* transforms the real subjects of history into the single fictional image that combines McElwee's grandfather and his Duke rival, "probably melded them into a single character" as, in McElwee's arch words and voice, a "McDuke."

Against old home movies of his son, Adrian, playing years earlier at the beach where McElwee himself once played as a child, he acknowledges that film cannot preserve even his relationship with his own son or even the singularity of their separate identities: "As if the weight of all these accumulated images could keep him from growing up so fast . . . [or] slow the process down. But, of course, filming doesn't slow anything down." A concluding sequence shows Adrian as a boy moving a small fish from the beach to the ocean, where he releases it, a release into the world that mirrors McElwee's release of self into the place and time of the future of history. [fig. 1.5] For essayists like McElwee, film is part of public histories and social places where the final question returns as a question to be thought: In the words of the historical preservationist in the film, "What exactly is being preserved here . . . what's being passed down?" Like his son's release of that fish and



essary (*Bright Leaves*)

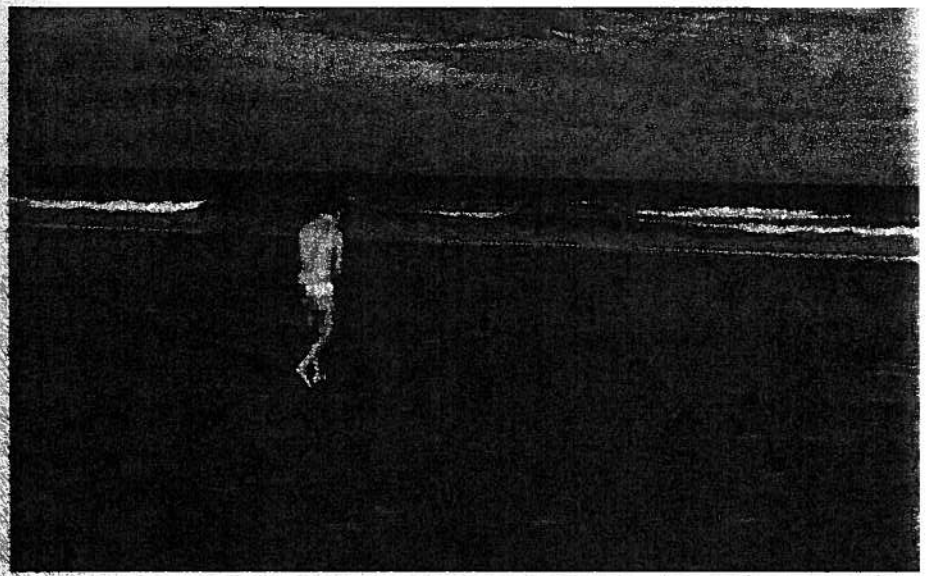


FIGURE 1.5 Releasing selves into expanding worlds (*Bright Leaves*)

Montaigne's imaginary dialogue with Étienne de La Boétie, the essayistic self invariably comes undone in an expanding world of continual and changing reflection: "When I'm on the road shooting I sometimes imagine my son, years from now, when I'm no longer around, looking at what I'm shooting. . . . I can almost feel him looking back at me from some distant point in the future . . . through the film I leave behind."

From the numerous literary and philosophical frameworks that precede it, a variety of definitions and descriptions of the essay film have circulated in recent years, including those in the important work of Nora Alter, Paul Arthur, Laura Rascaroli, and Michael Renov. Following the autobiographical and personal emphasis of McElwee's film, many of these positions foreground the role of the subjective voice or perspective in these films: some the mixing and matching of styles, genres, and aesthetic materials and still others a documentary heritage refashioned through a contemporary reflexivity on the epistemological assumptions of that heritage. Building on these and extending them in light of the history and theory of the literary essay, I return to my formulation of the essay film as (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 as a cinematic address and a spectatorial response. In the following paragraphs, I briefly unpack and describe the three parts of this definition.

An expressive subjectivity, commonly seen in the voice or actual presence of the filmmaker or a surrogate, has become one of the most recognizable signs of the essay film, sometimes quite visible in the film, sometimes not. Just as the first-person presence of the literary essay often springs from a personal voice and perspective, so essay films characteristically highlight a real or fictional persona whose quests and questionings shape and direct the film in lieu of a traditional narrative and frequently complicate the documentary look of the film with the presence of a pronounced subjectivity or enunciating position. When lacking a clearly visible subjective voice or personal organizing presence, this act of enunciation can also be signaled in various formal or technical ways, including editing and other representational manipulations of the image. The agency and activity of this subjectivity thus appears in many permutations: from McElwee's self-dramatizations in *Sherman's March* (1986) and *Bright Leaves*, to Kluge's intertitles in *The Patriot* (1979), to the restrained ironic banter of Patrick Keiller's Robinson and his interlocutor in *Robinson in Space* (1997). If Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) makes unmistakable the centrality of Moore as the subject of the film, *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) partially effaces and diffuses that subjective expression through its distinctive use of animation, while a film such as Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*

(1977) obliquely repositions that strict imagistic framings.

Often, moreover, essays and films deal with topics and subjects that are as complex as Errol Morris's estranged mad scientist or Jean-Luc Godard's housewife/poet in *2 or 3 Things I Know about Her*. The shifting subject and a shifting enunciating subject position of its reception, the shifting and unstable spectatorship of its single scintillating blue screen (2003), in which points of identification subtending the instability of the structure is then a second-personal, embodied and depersonalized.

If both verbal and visual expression are a projection of an interior self into a public domain, as evident in *Bright Leaves*, the essayistic self to a public domain, often referred to as Essayistic subjectivity—in contrast to the essay film—refers then not simply to individual consciousness before and after the consciousness that tests, undoes, or reconstitutes the experiences of memory, argument, and the embedded within the textual act of enunciation, the product of changing experiences of expressions. Following Musil's (1937) and (73), Walter Benjamin was hyperbolic of the essay as an expression of a self implying a form of subjective expression constantly as the expressions of a self in action, as a commonly recognized expression in which subjectivity tries out different selves. Fittingly, Godard's film exactly on this note with actress Jean Seberg's camera that in this film she will "Notre Musique (2004) an early collaboration with "Now 'I' is someone else."

me de La Boétie, the essayistic self
 world of continual and changing reflec-
 times imagine my son, years from now,
 "I'm shooting. . . . I can almost feel him
 in the future . . . through the film I

phical frameworks that precede it, a
 the essay film have circulated in recent
 work of Nora Alter, Paul Arthur, Laura
 the autobiographical and personal
 positions foreground the role of the
 as: some the mixing and matching of
 still others a documentary heritage
 ivity on the epistemological assump-
 extending them in light of the history
 my formulation of the essay film as
 ough (2) experiential encounters in a
 comes the figuration of thinking or
 torial response. In the following para-
 ee parts of this definition.

1 in the voice or actual presence of the
 e most recognizable signs of the essay
 metimes not. Just as the first-person
 rom a personal voice and perspective,
 eal or fictional persona whose quests
 in lieu of a traditional narrative and
 k of the film with the presence of a
 sition. When lacking a clearly visible
 ence, this act of enunciation can also
 ys, including editing and other repre-
 agency and activity of this subjectivity
 n McElwee's self-dramatizations in
 to Kluge's intertitles in *The Patriot*
 rick Keiller's *Robinson* and his inter-
 el Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) makes
 subject of the film, *Waltz with Bashir*
 jective expression through its distinc-
 Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*

(1977) obliquely repositions that enunciator through letters read by a mother and strict imagistic framings.

Often, moreover, essays and essay films anticipate these shifting enunciators with topics and subjects that are analogously fragmented and unstable, such as Errol Morris's estranged mad scientist Fred Leuchter in *Mr. Death* (1999) or Jean-Luc Godard's housewife/prostitute/actress Juliette Janson/Marina Vlady in *2 or 3 Things I Know about Her* (1967). Through this interaction of a fragmented subject and a shifting enunciation, these films work, in turn, to destabilize the subject position of its reception by creating or directly addressing an equally shifting and unstable spectator position, as in Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), with its single scintillating blue screen or in Lars Von Trier's *The Five Obstructions* (2003), in which points of identification are continually rejected or deferred. Subtending the instability of these essayistic enunciations, a central rhetorical structure is then a second-person address to a "you" that is (or becomes) disembodied and depersonalized.

If both verbal and visual expression can commonly suggest the articulation or projection of an interior self into an exterior world, essayistic expressivity describes, as evident in *Bright Leaves*, a subjection of that instrumental or expressive self to a public domain, often personified as a shifting and disembodied "you." Essayistic subjectivity—in contradistinction to many definitions of the essay and essay film—refers then not simply to the emplacement or positioning of an individual consciousness before and in experience but to an active and assertive consciousness that tests, undoes, or re-creates itself through experience, including the experiences of memory, argument, active desire, and reflective thinking. Embedded within the textual action of the film, the essayistic subject becomes the product of changing experiential expressions rather than simply the producer of expressions. Following Musil's claim "Nothing is more foreign to [essayism] than the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism" (73), Walter Benjamin was hyperbolic but correct in identifying the radical potential of the essay as an expression made entirely of quotes (Lopate 246), thus implying a form of subjective expression that inhabits and reformulates itself constantly as the expressions of another or an other. In this context, improvisation, as a commonly recognized essayistic figure, refers to a primary structure in which subjectivity tries out different positions within the world as ways of trying out different selves. Fittingly, Godard's essay *2 or 3 Things I Know about Her* begins exactly on this note with actress Marina Vlady/character Juliette telling the camera that in this film she will "speak as though quoting the truth," and in his *Notre Musique* (2004) an early commentator crystallizes the essayist subject as "Now 'I' is someone else."

More than simply foregrounding the organization of subjectivity as topic, enunciation, and reception, essayistic practices have been most innovative, complex, and defining, I believe, in how they have troubled and complicated subjectivity and its relation to public experience, that second cornerstone of the essay. Those public experiences—as encounters with places, people, and events—are what commonly align essay films with documentaries in which those public realities commonly take precedent as the referent to be revealed.¹² Yet, essay films fundamentally distinguish themselves from other documentary strategies as a form of expression and representation that necessarily relinquishes a self to events, actions, and objects outside the authority of her own subjective expressions and representations.¹³ Here, the key essayistic encounter with “the everyday” as an arena of public experience describes both a temporal and a spatial experience notable for its presumed ability to resist public institutionalization and personal formulation. As Maurice Blanchot puts it, “The everyday is platitude, . . . but this banality is also what is most important. It brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived. . . . It escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity” (13). The essayistic subject becomes—instantly, retroactively, or proleptically—a public figure who in contradistinction to more conventional “public figures,” such as journalists or politicians, is made and remade within the incoherent potential of the everyday.

Amidst the vast amount of debate and description of what defines a “public” or a public sphere, two assumptions are important here: public life as multiple and changing domains of various registers and as a place of contestation through experience. Discussions of a public sphere often start with Jürgen Habermas, who locates its modern formation in the eighteenth century when literary essays reached a heyday,¹⁴ but even more suggestive for discussions of the essayistic is Hannah Arendt’s description of public life as “the world” which, “like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time” (52). Later, film essayist Kluge and Oscar Negt offer an alternative public sphere precisely filtered through the concept of experience. Negt and Kluge’s remaking of this public sphere as competing positions draws attention to the literary terms of Habermas’s model and proposes alternative perspectives born more from a variegated “social horizon of experience” than from a cultural hegemony, more from below than from above. Experience here suggests, to put it succinctly, the interface between different individuals and social groups, involving the many dimensions along that interface (the sensual, the emotional, the ideological, the local, the global, and so on). Or, in Michael Warner’s characterization in *Publics and Counterpublics*, public experience occurs as “scenes of self-activity of historical rather than timeless belonging, and of active participation rather than ascriptive belonging” (89). Built on the work of

Kluge and Negt, Miriam Hanse mediates individual perception processes, loss of self with self connections and relations . . . ; ties, of memory and hope, including *Babylon 12–13*).¹⁵

As testings of subjectivity with experience in the essay film of “doubt,” moving within and through territories. That the watershed is us that failure, crisis, and traumatic. That many of the most chaotic of the colonial and postcolonial the often-dangerous and fragile being of self that partly explains socially, and racially marginalization as different as those of Trinh T. the films of Raoul Ruiz and Abel invariably practices, regardless of a politics quite different from the fiction films or conventional documentary coherent subjectivity within the be an easily decipherable and clear core is ideological instability.

As a key dimension of the political and protean self and social experience as the third distinguishing feature on identified as the testing of identity the products of discourse, and relationship between these two discourses, through across their meeting with each other thought. Thus, an essential part characterized it, “aims . . . to probe. The essay film, in Godard’s words to Phillip Lopate, the essay film ‘to find out what one thinks about

Large, speculative, impressionistic movies think or might think are numerous others, Hugo Münster

ization of subjectivity as topic, enunciated and complicated subjectivity and a cornerstone of the essay. Those public people, and events—are what commonly which those public realities commonly d.¹² Yet, essay films fundamentally dis-ary strategies as a form of expression pushes a self to events, actions, and subjective expressions and representation with “the everyday” as an arena of public and a spatial experience notable for its realization and personal formulation. As platitude, . . . but this banality is also k to existence in its very spontaneity relative formulation, perhaps all coherent becomes—instantly, retroactively, contradiction to more conventional means, is made and remade within the

description of what defines a “public” or important here: public life as multiple and as a place of contestation through experience start with Jürgen Habermas, who nineteenth century when literary essays strive for discussions of the essayistic life as “the world” which, “like every the same time” (52). Later, film essayist public sphere precisely filtered through the remaking of this public sphere as contemporary terms of Habermas’s model and are from a variegated “social horizon of way, more from below than from above. Only, the interface between different individual dimensions along that interface (the local, the global, and so on). Or, in *Acts and Counterpublics*, public experience is local rather than timeless belonging, and we belong” (89). Built on the work of

Kluge and Negt, Miriam Hansen sums it up this way: “Experience is that which mediates individual perception with social meaning, conscious with unconscious processes, loss of self with self-reflexivity; experience as the capacity to see connections and relations . . . ; experience as the matrix of conflicting temporalities, of memory and hope, including the historical loss of these dimensions” (*Babel & Babylon* 12–13).¹⁵

As testings of subjectivity within a public domain, the representation of modern experience in the essay film often becomes culturally associated with “risk” and “doubt,” moving within and through a cultural “intermediary zone” of contested territories. That the watershed years of the essay film are 1940–1945 also reminds us that failure, crisis, and trauma often become the experiential base of the essayistic. That many of the most charged essay films regularly return to the experience of the colonial and postcolonial historically broadens and builds on those crises as the often-dangerous and fragile base of the essayistic, a questioning and rethinking of self that partly explains the attraction of the essay to politically, sexually, socially, and racially marginalized persons, demonstrated most explicitly by films as different as those of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Derek Jarman and perhaps less so in the films of Raoul Ruiz and Abbas Kiarostami. In this sense, the essayistic almost invariably practices, regardless of the subject matter, a distinctive form of politics, a politics quite different from the ideological and political strategies of narrative fiction films or conventional documentaries. In essay films, the subversion of a coherent subjectivity within the public experience of the everyday may not always be an easily decipherable and clear politics but is, perhaps always, a politics whose core is ideological instability.

As a key dimension of the politics of essay films, the encounter between an open and protean self and social experience produces the activity of essayistic thinking as the third distinguishing feature of these films, an activity that Montaigne early on identified as the testing of ideas. Both subjectivity and experience are of course the products of discourse, and rather than stabilize and harmonize the encounter between these two discourses, the essayistic creates clashes and gaps in each and across their meeting with each other as a place that elicits, if not demands, thought. Thus, an essential part of the essayistic encounter, as Graham Good has characterized it, “aims . . . to preserve something of the *process* of thinking” (20). The essay film, in Godard’s words, is “a form that thinks” (1998, 54–57), or according to Phillip Lopate, the essay film “tracks a person’s thoughts. . . . An essay is a search to find out what one thinks about something” (244).¹⁶

Large, speculative, impressionistic, and determined arguments about the way movies think or might think are as varied and old as film history itself. Among numerous others, Hugo Münsterberg, Rudolph Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, and

Walter Benjamin have all suggested different versions of a "visual thinking" specific to cinema. More recently, contemporary scholars and film theorists have continued these inquiries into different models of cinematic thinking.¹⁷ Most famously, Gilles Deleuze has become an icon for a thinking cinema, mainly through his extended reflections in *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*. While the formidable complexity and reach of Deleuze's positions have been widely analyzed and debated, what interests me here is the practical and specific insistence that film can be understood as a dynamic forum and framework that produces ideas and a process of thinking that extends subjectivity through an outside world. "Thinking belongs to the outside," according to Deleuze (*Foucault* 93), or as he suggests in other terms about film specifically, cinematic thinking becomes a way of restoring our belief in the world (*Cinema 2* 181–182): "The [modern] cinema must film, not the world, but belief in the world" (172). If modern cinema is widely and intricately implicated in the essayistic, Deleuze's motto would work especially for the essay film: "'Give me a brain' would be the other figure of modern cinema. This is an intellectual cinema, as distinct from a physical cinema" (204).¹⁸

That ways to think through cinema are so central to the essay film is one reason, I think, these films have become so prominent in current film practices and current debates in film theory in which notions of passive identification and cognition are regularly challenged. The essay film requires, however, a more specific model for cinematic thinking suited to its nonnarrative and nonfictional forms and adequate to its particular configuration of subjectivity and experience. In "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfiction Film Experience," Vivian Sobchack provides a sharp but flexible framework for such a model, bringing cinematic thinking much closer to the essayistic dynamic of experiential subjectivity. Building on the work of Jean-Pierre Meunier, Sobchack examines how different modes of identification operate across documentary films, subjectively modified by the cultural knowledge that a viewer brings to films ranging from home movies to narrative fiction films, with documentaries occupying an intermediate position between those two practices. For Sobchack, the film experience of a documentary offers various degrees of "constitutive actualization" (247), subjective modifications of images and sounds, by which we look "both at and through the screen" (246). If home movies more emphatically engage a "longitudinal consciousness" in which "the intentional object is not the specificity of the image itself, but the whole ensemble that the person or event it represents evokes," documentaries usually draw out a more "lateral consciousness" in which knowledge becomes "structured as a temporal progression that usually entails a causal logic as well as a teleological movement" (250). As part of the viewing process of a documentary, "the specific information in each image is retained and integrated with subsequent images to

form our cumulative knowledge existed 'elsewhere' in our life-world difference between the longitudinal consciousness of documentaries between the subjective and object of dialogic tension of seeing through subject struggles to learn a world essayistic, essay films initiate a process between the longitudinal position documentaries, between a known and a knowledge acquired through learning process" (251).¹⁹

Essayistic thinking is modeled as a kind of Socratic dialogue. In many essay films, the dialogic activity is the way the essayistic assimilates narrative, genres, lyrical voices, and rather than formal structure, an activity in the world, and so on), the active consciousness of reflection and decision activities (pleasure, fantasy), all from an essayistic perspective.

Essayistic thinking thus becomes a representational remaking of a version of the real as a public "elaboration" or "elaboration" of personal expression of varying kind, quality, and number, multiply one's selves. Eliciting a form of the activity of cognition, essay film is an intellectual and phenomenological activity of thinking through the world, and so on. The viewing subject inhabits a position in the film itself (as if, figuratively, in a position of participating in other activity).²⁰ Not only does that subjectivity of the resistant reality of the film times even coherent discourse of forms, its mix and subversion of narrative teleologies or lyrical v

rent versions of a "visual thinking" orary scholars and film theorists have odels of cinematic thinking.¹⁷ Most for a thinking cinema, mainly through *ma 2*. While the formidable complexity is widely analyzed and debated, what fic insistence that film can be under that produces ideas and a process of an outside world. "Thinking belongs to 93), or as he suggests in other terms ecomes a way of restoring our belief in | cinema must film, not the world, but is widely and intricately implicated in especially for the essay film: "Give me cinema. This is an intellectual cinema,

central to the essay film is one reason, ent in current film practices and cur- is of passive identification and cogni- m requires, however, a more specific nonnarrative and nonfictional forms m of subjectivity and experience. In *lm Experience*," Vivian Sobchack pro- a model, bringing cinematic thinking eriential subjectivity. Building on the nines how different modes of identifi- subjectively modified by the cultural ging from home movies to narrative g an intermediate position between e experience of a documentary offers n" (247), subjective modifications of a at and through the screen" (246). If longitudinal consciousness" in which y of the image itself, but the whole sents evokes," documentaries usually hich knowledge becomes "structured s a causal logic as well as a teleological ocess of a documentary, "the specific ntegrated with subsequent images to

form our cumulative knowledge of that general reality we know exists or has existed 'elsewhere' in our life-world" (250). Most important for my argument, the difference between the longitudinal consciousness of home movies and the lateral consciousness of documentaries is not oppositional but a matter of different ratios between the subjective and objective engagements within and with the film, a kind of dialogic tension of seeing through the eyes and mind of a specific subject as that subject struggles to learn a world elsewhere. Adapting Sobchack's argument to the essayistic, essay films initiate a process conceived broadly as straddling and wavering between the longitudinal positions of home movies and lateral activities of documentaries, between a knowledge accessed through a performed subjectivity and a knowledge acquired through a public experience as "an 'apprenticeship' learning process" (251).¹⁹

Essayistic thinking is modeled on the question-answer-question format initiated as a kind of Socratic dialogue. Seen in the second-person direct address of many essay films, the dialogic activity of essayistic thinking can also be seen in the way the essayistic assimilates and thinks through other forms, including narrative, genres, lyrical voices, and so on. If activity infers unsettled movement, rather than formal structure, and implies various kinds of effect (on oneself, on the world, and so on), the activity of essayistic thinking here describes a consciousness of reflection and decipherment that distinguishes it from other mental activities (pleasure, fantasy), although these are often the very subjects of that essayistic perspective.

Essayistic thinking thus 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." Essayistic thought becomes the exteriorization of personal expression, determined and circumscribed by an always-varying kind, quality, and number of material contexts in which to think is to multiply one's selves. Eliciting a particular hybrid of the bond of identification or the activity of cognition, essay 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. The viewing subject inhabits partially the unstable subject position foregrounded in the film itself (as if, figuratively, a home movie) and partially the expanding position of participating in other ideas and worlds (as if, figuratively, a documentary).²⁰ Not only does that subject become made and remade through the pressure of the resistant reality of the film but also the lack of a single, dominant, or sometimes even coherent discourse disperses that viewing subject through its pastiche of forms, its mix and subversion of generic structures, and its cannibalization of narrative teleologies or lyrical voices. Essayistic thinking becomes the necessary

recasting of subjective experience in the shifting interstices that define worldly experience itself.

*For many viewers and scholars, Chris Marker's films define and exemplify the essay film. Not only do they describe a central historical thread in the emergence of this practice from the 1940s to the end of the 1950s, but also, placed in the context of Marker's wide and varied efforts across different fields and disciplines, his work becomes a rich demonstration of how this cinematic practice inherits and remakes the earlier essayistic traditions of the literary essay and photo-essay, as well as anticipating new traditions. Marker is one of the most relentless and innovative essayists working in film and new media, with his 1982 *Sunless* rightly considered one of the landmarks of modern cinema. It is, however, at the early crossroads of the photo-essay and the essay film, between his 1959 photo-essay entitled *Koreans* and his 1958 essay film *Letter from Siberia*, in which one finds most visibly his complex engagement with the possibilities of creating a space and time between the images, experiential interstices in which to locate thoughts of the world. As Marker demonstrates in his work just after the war, the photo-essay would provide a transitional paradigm that allows film to discover its capacity to explore those critical conceptual and intellectual spaces between images.*

*Best known for his 1962 film *The Jetty*, his futuristic "photo-roman" of still images, and the 1982 *Sunless*, his extraordinary essay film about a cameraman traveling the globe between "the two extreme poles of survival," Marker has created a multi-media body of work that ranges through novels, literary criticism, museum installations, and the CD-ROM *Immemory* (1998). As different as his subjects and media practices are, however, his concerns have remained remarkably consistent: memory, loss, history, human community, and how our fragile subjectivity can acknowledge, represent, surrender, and survive these experiences. Across the continual undoing and redoing of expression in different forms and places, Marker's work becomes a concomitantly rigorous, witty, and poignant effort to document the human experience as a struggle to understand itself in an increasingly smaller, fragmented, and accelerated global space. If the literary appears as a consistent mode within his early experiments with expression (including a 1949 novel, *The Forthright Spirit*), in 1952 Marker recognizes a new cultural dominant in the public domain. Concluding a book-length literary essay on Jean Girardoux, he acknowledges that now it is the technological image and specifically the cinema that will recapture the "miracle of a world in which everything is at once absolutely familiar and completely strange" (43).*

At this personal crossroads of the literary and the cinematic, for Marker the photo-essay becomes a critical articulation. Just after the completion of his second

*short film, the 1953 *Les Statues* he edits a series of photo-essays, an experience that lays the gro Chris Marker: Memories of th venture into the photo-essay in a permeate all of Marker's work:*

A potent sense of the prospect er's announcement of the Peti du Seuil house magazine 27 R post-war world has come with experience this prospect of inc the world escape us at the sam To combat this disorientation, one of Marker's metaphors, a planet. He proposes that each propaganda brochure, not i like a conversation with an informed about the country in

*Marker would bring his own di photo-essay entitled *Koreans*, c Edition de Seuil's Court métrag*

Koreans is a meditative mostly about lists and invent organizations. Shadowing the North and South Korea,²² yet categorical abundance found in the multiplicity of things that heart. "I will not deal with Bi address to his cat. Rather, it is tions, relics of history, a "list of and fragments of a developir observed from numerous angle. zation of Koreans is a set of Orphans," "The Seven Wonders Muses," and "The Four Corners, ticular historical, imaginative "The Seven Wonders" mention free association, "the seventh

ifting interstices that define worldly

ker's films define and exemplify the
 il historical thread in the emergence of
 : 1950s, but also, placed in the context
 fferent fields and disciplines, his work
 ematic practice inherits and remakes
 ry essay and photo-essay, as well as
 of the most relentless and innovative
 th his 1982 *Sunless* rightly considered
 is, however, at the early crossroads of
 his 1959 photo-essay entitled *Koreans*
 a, in which one finds most visibly his
 of creating a space and time between
 h to locate thoughts of the world. As
 he war, the photo-essay would provide
 discover its capacity to explore those
 tween images.

; his futuristic "photo-roman" of still
 inary essay film about a cameraman
 ie poles of survival," Marker has cre-
 es through novels, literary criticism,
 memory (1998). As different as his
 s concerns have remained remarkably
 munity, and how our fragile subjek-
 and survive these experiences. Across
 ssion in different forms and places,
 orous, witty, and poignant effort to
 le to understand itself in an increas-
 bal space. If the literary appears as a
 ts with expression (including a 1949
 r recognizes a new cultural dominant
 h literary essay on Jean Giradoux, he
 al image and specifically the cinema
 which everything is at once absolutely

ry and the cinematic, for Marker the
 ust after the completion of his second

short film, the 1953 *Les Statues meurent aussi* (codirected with Alain Resnais), he edits a series of photo-essays for *Edition du Seuil*, produced from 1954 to 1958, an experience that lays the groundwork for his own photo-essays. In her book *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*, Catherine Lupton describes this first venture into the photo-essay in a way that suggests the larger concerns that would permeate all of Marker's work:

A potent sense of the prospective disorientation of world travel informs Marker's announcement of the Petite Planete series, which appeared in the Editions du Seuil house magazine 27 Rue Jacob. He pinpoints a growing sense that the post-war world has come within reach as never before, but that as a subjective experience this prospect of increased access seems confusing and elusive: "we see the world escape us at the same time as we become aware of our links with it." To combat this disorientation, Seuil is launching a series of books that, to adapt one of Marker's metaphors, are intended to be user manuals for life on a small planet. He proposes that each volume is "not a guidebook, not a history, not a propaganda brochure, not a traveller's impressions," but is intended to be like a conversation with an intelligent and cultivated person who is well-informed about the country in question. (44)

Marker would bring his own distinctive voice to that conversation with his 1959 photo-essay entitled *Koreans*, an essay fittingly published as the only volume in *Edition de Seuil's Court métrage* ("short film") series.²¹

Koreans is a meditative travel essay about extremes and oppositions but mostly about lists and inventories—and the spaces made visible by all these organizations. Shadowing the images and text are the cold war politics dividing North and South Korea,²² yet oppositions such as this are less central than the categorical abundance found in the experience and fabric of everyday Korean life, the multiplicity of things that, to borrow a phrase from *Sunless*, quicken the heart. "I will not deal with Big Issues" (135), the commentator concludes in an address to his cat. Rather, it is the daily routines, legends and myths, conversations, relics of history, a "list of the spirits and stars that govern human life" (85) and fragments of a developing industrial future that are photographed and observed from numerous angles at passing moments. Even the seven-part organization of *Koreans* is a set of numerical categories, "The Six Days," "The Two Orphans," "The Seven Wonders," "The Five Senses," "The Three Sisters," "The Nine Muses," and "The Four Corners," that weave together lists and inventories of particular historical, imaginative, relational, emotional, and sensual experiences. "The Seven Wonders" mentions explicitly only the "wonder of ginseng" and, as a free association, "the seventh wonder . . . the work of builders" who took "fifty

years to complete a ginseng plant" (51–53). The other wonders appear in the markets and street scenes that come in and out of view as a series of ten photos:

A great deal of Korea strolls by on Koreans' heads. . . . Baskets, earthenware jars, bundles of wood, basins, all escape the earth's gravity to become satellites of these calm planets, obeying exacting orbits. For the Korean street has its cycles, its waves, its rails. In this double décor, where hastened ruins and buildings still balancing themselves in a second of incompleteness, the soldier who buys a civilian's sun hat, the worker leaving the construction site, the bureaucrat with his briefcase, the woman in traditional dress and the woman in modern dress, the porter carrying a brand new allegory to the museum of the Revolution with a woman in black following step by step to decipher it—all have their route and precise place, like constellations. (Koreans 44)

In Adorno's words about the essayistic, here the "elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion" becoming a constellation or "force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily a force field under the essay's gaze" (13).

These lists, inventories, and oppositions are primarily fading scaffolding that constantly draws attention to the conjunctive intervals that hold them together: the "and" that momentarily connects without a teleological logic. They create continual movement, a recollection and anticipation as a serial activity whose accumulations are endlessly generative and open-ended. If the fundamental structure of all photo-essays tends to approach that of a spatial categorizing of images, for Marker this inventory of images always approximates a photogrammatic series of film frames. In *Koreans*, he notes that "A market place is the Republic of things. . . . It all went by as quickly as a forgotten image between two shots" (39), a barely visible conjunctive place where the "and" opens potentially as the space of intelligence. As Deleuze notes about the cinema (and Godard's films specifically), through this conjunctive "and," categories are "redistributed, reshaped and reinvented" and so become "problems which introduce reflection on the image itself" (Cinema 2 185–186). "The whole undergoes a mutation . . . in order to become the constitutive 'and' of things, the constitutive between-two of images" (180). No episode in *Koreans* dramatizes the poignancy and power of this conjunctive place better than an encounter at the theater where the experience of a celebrated play based on the well-known legend of Sim Chon suggests both a mythic categorization and the emotional and intellectual energy within anticipatory conjunctives: Marker encounters a female friend crying during an interval over the plight of the heroine, despite her having seen the play 200 times, and when he tries to assure her that all will be well in the end, she replies in bewilderment, "How could I be so sure of the future?"

Several key sections of *K* waver between the photo and the film. In these instances especially, the experiential expressions around the face melts away, a face that comes into focus depicts a woman looking out of the text fills in, "she told us that" (24). [figs. 1.6, 1.7, 1.8] Immediate in the book presents just a woman's smiling face answers her prospects for marriage), but captures the ruptured transition: parents were killed during the war, she remarks:

I was sunk in my [Rolleiflex] camera, the metamorphosis, the smile and now the young woman looking at her head, and the hands that



FIGURES 1.6, 1.7, 1.8 Three of nine

ay Film

he other wonders appear in the mar-
f view as a series of ten photos:

rs' heads. . . . Baskets, earthenware
e earth's gravity to become satellites
rbits. For the Korean street has its
'cor, where hastened ruins and build-
of incompleteness, the soldier who buys
onstruction site, the bureaucrat with
ess and the woman in modern dress,
o the museum of the Revolution with
decipher it—all have their route and
44)

he "elements crystallize as a configu-
stellation or "force field, just as every
ld under the essay's gaze" (13).

are primarily fading scaffolding that
e intervals that hold them together:
: a teleological logic. They create con-
tion as a serial activity whose accu-
ended. If the fundamental structure
a spatial categorizing of images, for
proximates a photogrammatic series of
ket place is the Republic of things. . . .
e between two shots" (39), a barely
ns potentially as the space of intelli-
l Godard's films specifically), through
buted, reshaped and reinvented" and
ion on the image itself" (Cinema 2
. . . in order to become the constitutive
of images" (180). No episode in Kore-
his conjunctive place better than an
ce of a celebrated play based on the
th a mythic categorization and the
anticipatory conjunctives: Marker
interval over the plight of the heroine,
id when he tries to assure her that all
ment, "How could I be so sure of the

Several key sections of *Koreans* are especially dramatic illustrations of that wavering line between the photo-essay and essay film, places in the book where the photos become virtual photograms that draw attention to the space between the images as an interpretive "void" for the photographer/viewer/commentator. In these instances especially, the writer's voice as "expressive subject" documents the experiential expressions around him as faces "literally embodied [as] a smile that melts away, a face that comes undone" (25). At one point, a series of nine photos depicts a woman looking out of the frame telling "her life story." Or "more exactly," the text fills in, "she told us that there was nothing to be told, really nothing" (21–24). [figs. 1.6, 1.7, 1.8] Immediately following, one of the most dramatic conjunctions in the book presents just two shots of two expressions. First, there is a woman's smiling face answering questions about her personal life (her boyfriend, her prospects for marriage), but when asked about her parents, the second photo captures the ruptured transition between the two images as she explains that her parents were killed during the Korean War: "At that moment," the commentator remarks:

I was sunk in my [Rolleiflex] camera. It was on the Rollei's ground glass that I saw the metamorphosis, the smile vanishing into pain like water drunk by sand . . . and now the young woman's face was covered in tears, but she did not lower her head, and the hands that had hidden her laughter lay immobile on the table.



FIGURES 1.6, 1.7, 1.8 Three of nine photos in which there is "nothing to be told" (*Koreans*)



FIGURES 1.6, 1.7, 1.8 (continued)

The instant was hers. . . . The extraordinary hymn of hate and will power that followed would need more than a story and an image to do it justice. (25–26)

Here, the camera lens itself becomes both a physical and metaphoric interface on which the commentator engages a radical shift in the expressions of the self and its relation to a world and a history. In the “vanishing” that marks the space between his experience of her experience is precisely where he relinquishes himself, his

images, and his stories—that “was hers.” [figs. 1.9 and 1.10]

*In a later sequence, the ce
the world reappears as a typi
photographs of construction c
tively empty lot and then the
aurora borealis of welding to
and the headlights on the grea
tator observes about the two
the interval they document, i
temporal passage it records, b
seen, from which subjectivity*



FIGURES 1.9 AND 1.10 The vanish.



ry hymn of hate and will power that
 d an image to do it justice. (25–26)

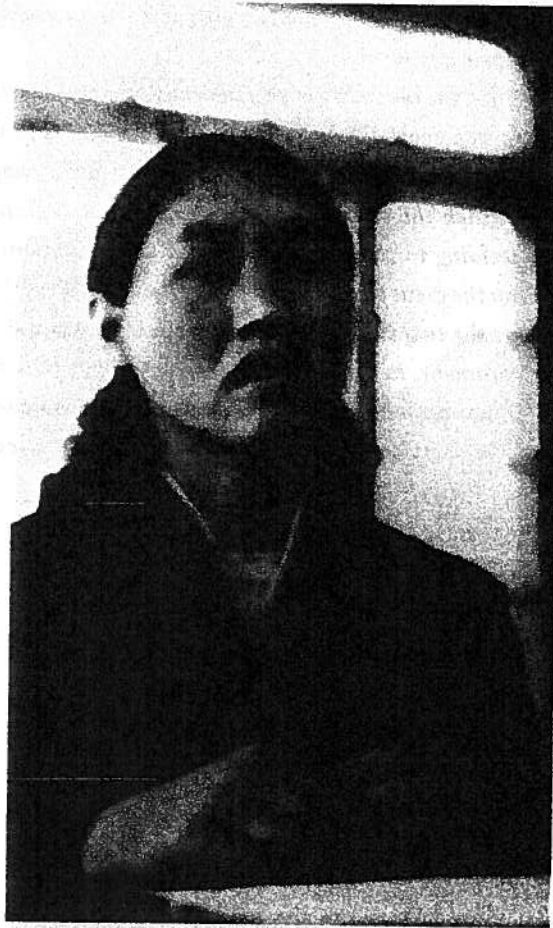
physical and metaphoric interface on
 ft in the expressions of the self and its
 ishing” that marks the space between
 y where he relinquishes himself, his

images, and his stories—that is, his thoughts—to the unrecoverable reality that
 “was hers.” [figs. 1.9 and 1.10]

In a later sequence, the centrality of this subjective space in its encounter with
 the world reappears as a typically askew or inverted exchange. In this case, two
 photographs of construction cranes operating over an urban site show first a rela-
 tively empty lot and then the shapes of emerging buildings: “All night long, the
 aurora borealis of welding torches, spotlights on cranes, reflections of the moon
 and the headlights on the great glassy facades of new buildings”(53),” the commen-
 tator observes about the two photos. Yet, comparative images such as these and
 the interval they document, he quickly notes, are not about that scene and the
 temporal passage it records, but about the experiential space from which they are
 seen, from which subjectivity and thought have ventured forth to test themselves:



FIGURES 1.9 AND 1.10 The vanishing in the space between two shots (Koreans)



FIGURES 1.9 AND 1.10 (continued)

"I don't care much for propaganda photos in the style: 'Yesterday. . . Today.' But I still took these pictures of what I saw out my window, at fifteen days distance. In order not to mistake the room" (53–55).

*Koreans follows a temporal and spatial journey through these conjunctive spaces between numerous faces, things, activities, and images, searching those "forgotten image[s] between two shots." As he notes early in the text, "There are many ways of traveling" (16), and one way to view the photographic and photogrammatic travels might be as a mimetic attempt to represent the dynamic continuity of these active and changing people and places. The journey of Koreans, however, is better characterized according to the ambitious model offered by Henri Michaux's surrealist travel memoir *Plume*, in which, according to Marker's essay, the traveler embraces the transitions in time and place as disorderly "rhythms,*

waves, shocks, all the buffers of opening photo on this trip is the plane, described as the "first Korea of transitions" (10).

The textual commentary the vibrant and changing world become into these rhythms, waves, and some traditional photo-essays, the historically and geographically lay maps, quotations from historical Korean tales and legends, and precedes the photos; sometimes, it a series. It recounts parables, history and reminiscences of other places, dotes about ginseng, profoundly and self-debunking and whimsical. Sometimes, it describes the photo becomes a way of speaking/seeing a world that resists denotation. A Le Depays (Abroad): "The text does images illustrate the text. They are each other, but which it would be Lupton 62). Like the images to w reflective subjectivity of this travel between the different representational moments of reflection and think images.

These doubled fissures—between and between that "forgotten image version of what Mitchell calls a "s through its leanings toward nonfictional point of view, and its "generic essay typically discloses a certain interpret images; like the photograph thing that was there to be taken a selves or 'look back' at the viewer" and eyes looking directly at the camera poetically in one exchange featuring and staring back at the camera, u

waves, shocks, all the buffers of memory, its meteors and dragnets" (16). The opening photo on this trip is thus appropriately a woman descending from a plane, described as the "first Korean girl descended from heaven with the 'gift of transitions'" (10).

The textual commentary that documents these personal experiences of a vibrant and changing world becomes then a string of insertions or interpolations into these rhythms, waves, and shocks. In Koreans, unlike the consistent voice of some traditional photo-essays, the text is multivocal, mobile, scattered, and both historically and geographically layered. Weaving together poetry, photos, ancient maps, quotations from historical reports, literature, reproductions of paintings, Korean tales and legends, and comic book images, the commentary sometimes precedes the photos; sometimes, it follows or is interspersed in the spaces between a series. It recounts parables, historical events, personal reflections, observations, and reminiscences of other places, melding myths with daily observations, anecdotes about ginseng, profoundly serious commentaries on the atrocities of war, and self-debunking and whimsical humor about the commentator's own efforts. Sometimes, it describes the photos; sometimes, it gives voice to the images. Each becomes a way of speaking/seeing as a different representational encounter with a world that resists denotation. As Marker would later insist in his photo-essay *Le Depays* (Abroad): "The text doesn't comment on the images any more than the images illustrate the text. They are two sequences that clearly cross and signal to each other, but which it would be pointlessly exhausting to collate" (quoted in Lupton 62). Like the images to which it responds, 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.

These doubled fissures—between the textual commentary and the images and between that "forgotten image between two shots"—become in one sense a version of what Mitchell calls a "site of resistance," produced in the photo-essay through its leanings toward nonfictional subjects, its subjective anchoring in a personal point of view, and its "generic incompleteness" (287): "The text of the photo-essay typically discloses a certain reserve or modesty in its claims to 'speak for' or interpret images; like the photograph, it admits its inability to appropriate everything that was there to be taken and tries to let the photographs speak for themselves or 'look back' at the viewer" (289). Signaled throughout Koreans with faces and eyes looking directly at the camera, this spatial resistance is dramatized most poetically in one exchange featuring five sequential photos of six children playing and staring back at the camera, watching the author "watching them. A mirror

the style: 'Yesterday. . . . Today.' But I window, at fifteen days distance. In

I journey through these conjunctive vities, and images, searching those e notes early in the text, "There are o view the photographic and photo- mpt to represent the dynamic conti- nd places. The journey of Koreans, he ambitious model offered by Henri hich, according to Marker's essay, e and place as disorderly "rhythms,

game that goes on and on where the loser is the one who looks down, who lets the other's gaze pass through, like a ball" (43). As he quickly acknowledges, "My third eye was a bit like cheating" (43). In this exchange and in the photo-essay in general, according to Sobchack, temporality itself becomes necessarily remade according to a spatial dynamics in which a "temporal hole" appears as a "gap" or "arena" opening up and staging the possibility of meaning:

The lack of depth and dimension in the still photograph seems less a function of the phenomenal thickness of the subjects and objects that it displays than of the temporal hole it opens within the world in which we gaze at it. Indeed, the most "dynamic" photojournalism derives its uncanny power from this temporal hole, the transcendence of both existence and finitude within existence and finitude. . . . The photograph, then, offers us only the possibility of meaning. It provides a significant gap that can be filled with every meaning, any meaning, and is itself meaningless in that it does not act within itself to choose its meaning, to diacritically mark it off. Like transcendental consciousness, the photograph as a transcendental structure posits the abstraction of a moment but has not momentum—and only provides the grounds or arena for its possibility. (Address of the Eye 60)

For Marker, however, the resistances and holes created in his photo-essays, in which language and subjectivity lose themselves in images of the world, might be best understood with the cinematic framework used by Deleuze. Here, thinking and "intelligence" occur when comprehension and understanding encounter the world on its own terms—in what Deleuze labels "a void" or an "interstice" in the time and spaces of representations: "What counts is . . . the interstice between images, between two images: a spacing which means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it" (Cinema 2 179). This creates neither spectatorial "identification," a position of a familiar emplacement in the world, nor a version of Brechtian "alienation," a position of unfamiliar exclusion from that world represented. Rather, this is a suspended position of intellectual opportunity and potential, a position within a spatial gap where the interval offers the "insight of blindness," where thought becomes the exteriorization of expression.

If Marker's photo-essay opens a space, a changing geography, in which thinking may pitch its tent, the essay film must aim to retrieve the possibility of that active intelligence within the continuous landscape of film.²³ Bridging these different forms of the essayistic, the photogram describes a conceptual borderline between the photography and film, a kind of "stop action," since it pinpoints the transformation of film's moving image into the suspension of "real movement and

time" as a series of overlapping, presents this reflexive merging of the (also constructed only of still images) photograms become a brief cinematic framework of a science fiction text that creates a significantly different identification, memory, and a belief.²⁴ Also constructed of a series of stills (Jetty, Marker's 1966 *If I Had Five Things to Come*) more clearly create cinematically the full essay interstitial zones as "a photogram on a series of images taken and 1966."

Despite the canonical prominence, these are best understood within the context of their historical proximity to Koreans and the essay film and partly because of the renowned Jetty, I concentrate here on the film as an early paradigm for the general. Writing about Letter from Siberia, the most prescient word: Letter from Siberia have ever seen before in films with the history of Siberia past and present; it follows Jean Vigo's formulation of the film. I would say an essay document is best understood in the same sense that it is a political, written by a poet as well as a filmmaker.

Even more explicitly than in the film, the epistolary travelogue whose voice is that of an exemplary traveler in Koreans, the film is I am writing you from the end of the world. Positions linger in the background as disembodied voice rather than as objects in inventories and oppositional categories that alternate with descriptions of the filmmaker as commentator reflecting on the film by burrowing to the center of the film and throwing themselves into outer space. D

s the one who looks down, who lets the
As he quickly acknowledges, "My third
range and in the photo-essay in general,
comes necessarily remade according to
le" appears as a "gap" or "arena" open-
ing:

till photograph seems less a function of
and objects that it displays than of the
n which we gaze at it. Indeed, the most
canny power from this temporal hole,
nitide within existence and finitude. . . .
e possibility of meaning. It provides a
ry meaning, any meaning, and is itself
in itself to choose its meaning, to dia-
al consciousness, the photograph as a
straction of a moment but has not
nds or arena for its possibility. (Address

and holes created in his photo-essays,
mselves in images of the world, might
network used by Deleuze. Here, think-
ension and understanding encounter
ize labels "a void" or an "interstice" in
"What counts is . . . the interstice
acing which means that each image is
" (Cinema 2 179). This creates neither
a familiar emplacement in the world,
osition of unfamiliar exclusion from
a suspended position of intellectual
hin a spatial gap where the interval
ought becomes the exteriorization of

a changing geography, in which think-
aim to retrieve the possibility of that
dscape of film.²³ Bridging these differ-
m describes a conceptual borderline
of "stop action," since it pinpoints the
the suspension of "real movement and

time" as a series of overlapping photographic images. No doubt, *The Jetty* repre-
sents this reflexive merging of the photographic series and film form most famously
(also constructed only of still images except for a few seconds when those series of
photograms become a brief continuous movement), but enlisting the narrative
framework of a science fiction tale rather than an essayistic framework, *The Jetty*
creates a significantly different viewing position from the essay film, one based in
identification, memory, and desire, rather than observation, reflection, and
belief.²⁴ Also constructed of a series of still images but less well known than *The*
Jetty, Marker's 1966 *If I Had Four Camels* (and later the 2001 *Remembrance of*
Things to Come) more clearly and fully resists that pull of narrative to appropri-
ate cinematically the full essayistic activity of the photo-essay to explore those
interstitial zones as "a photographer and two of his friends look through and com-
ment on a series of images taken just about everywhere in the world between 1956
and 1966."

Despite the canonical prominence of *The Jetty*, the majority of Marker's films
are best understood within the framework of the essayistic.²⁵ Partly because of its
historical proximity to Koreans and its place at this historically formative stage of
the essay film and partly because it eschews the narrative logic of the more
renowned *Jetty*, I concentrate here on the 1958 *Letter from Siberia*,²⁶ which rep-
resents an early paradigm for the essay film for Marker and for the practice in
general. Writing about *Letter from Siberia* in 1958, André Bazin has the first and
most prescient word: *Letter from Siberia* "resembles absolutely nothing that we
have ever seen before in films with a documentary bias." It "is an essay on the real-
ity of Siberia past and present in the form of a filmed report. Or, perhaps, to bor-
row Jean Vigo's formulation of *A propos de Nice* ('a documentary point of view'),
I would say an essay documented by film. The important word is 'essay,' under-
stood in the same sense that it has in literature—an essay at once historical and
political, written by a poet as well" ("Bazin on Marker" 44).

Even more explicitly than Koreans, *Letter from Siberia* presents itself as an
epistolary travelogue whose voice-over begins with lines appropriated from that
exemplary traveler in Koreans, Michaux: "I am writing to you from a far country. . . .
I am writing you from the end of the world." Here, too, cold-war, East/West, oppo-
sitions linger in the background, and here, too, a traveler commentator, now a
disembodied voice rather than a printed text, negotiates and reflects on serial
inventories and oppositional categories: Lists of Siberian plants and animal life
alternate with descriptions of daily activities, and the film concludes with the
commentator reflecting on the polarized journeys of underground scientists
burrowing to the center of the earth while their colleague-cosmonauts launch
themselves into outer space. Digressions into an archeological past jump quickly

forward to the industrial future: from Yakut tribal rituals and drawings of the woolly mammoths that once populated Siberia to the construction of new highways and telephone lines. [fig. 1.11] The representational heterogeneity of *Letter from Siberia* also parallels that of Marker's photo-essay as the film mixes black-and-white and color film, still photographs, archival footage, and animation to underline, here also, how the bond between experience and representation is the fault line between the world and our knowledge of it. Unlike the efforts of the photo-essay to inhabit the spaces between these images, however, this essay film opens a second dimension to its travels, that particularly cinematic dimension of the temporality of the moving image. Together with the rhetorical and spatial gaps found in the photo-essay, the film thus also depicts and examines the continual dynamics of movement captured on film, from the vertical ascents of flying airplanes to horizontally racing reindeer, through a visual syntax of continual tracks and pans capturing those temporal rhythms with a similar array of directional movements. Early in the film, dramatically different materials create dramatically different forms of temporality as a fabricated image of the past, a realistic transparency of the present, and a visual rhetoric of a desired future: Animated drawings of mammoths precede a transition to documentary shots of the Lena River bustling with its industry and commerce, and shortly after, the film offers a "spot commercial" spoofing the market value of reindeer as pets, transportation, clothing, and food. Bazin goes so far as to identify these constructions as a "new notion of montage" that he calls "horizontal" or "lateral," in which, unlike the traditional "sense of duration through the relation of shot to shot," "a given image doesn't refer to the one that preceded it" (44). Comparable to the spatial

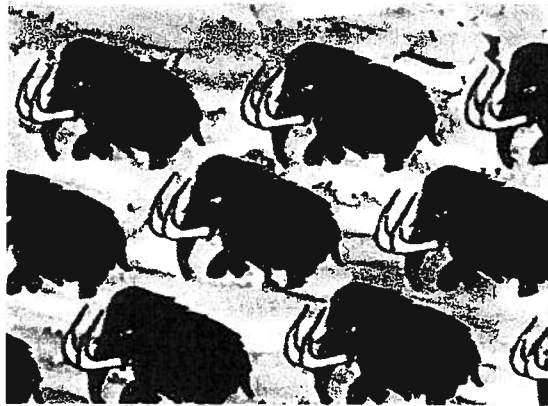


FIGURE 1.11 The fault lines of knowledge: an animated encounter with the woolly mammoths of Siberian history (*Letter from Siberia*)

openings mapped in *The Korean* open the temporal "presence" of and temporal) containing multi future fantasies. As the comment image of a temporal vertigo: "Beauty, between the earth and the that it's straight ahead."

Two sequences stand out in with different temporal zones. Tibus passing an expensive car as four different types of comment panegyric, the third an anticomn in the voice-over of the commen only creates a very different inte perspective toward different de luxury car dominates the scen injured eye. For the commentat immediately questions the impo "with huge gaps and the will to 1 ity" is that it "may not distort enough to be appraised." Instea interpretive planes or zones tha in a way that maps the tempor counts is the variety and the dri



FIGURE 1.12 Workers repair the sar from Siberia)

ut tribal rituals and drawings of the
 eria to the construction of new high-
 resentational heterogeneity of Letter
 s photo-essay as the film mixes black-
 s, archival footage, and animation to
 experience and representation is the
 vledge of it. Unlike the efforts of the
 these images, however, this essay film
 t particularly cinematic dimension of
 ether with the rhetorical and spatial
 s also depicts and examines the con-
 ilm, from the vertical ascents of flying
 through a visual syntax of continual
 hhythms with a similar array of direc-
 tically different materials create dra-
 s a fabricated image of the past, a
 visual rhetoric of a desired future: Ani-
 ansition to documentary shots of the
 commerce, and shortly after, the film
 et value of reindeer as pets, transpor-
 as to identify these constructions as a
 izontal" or "lateral," in which, unlike
 the relation of shot to shot," "a given
 d it" (44). Comparable to the spatial

openings mapped in *The Koreans*, in these instances Letter from Siberia pries open the temporal "presence" of the moving images as an interstice (both spatial and temporal) containing multiple time zones ranging from past memories to future fantasies. As the commentator remarks in his conclusion, this Siberia is the image of a temporal vertigo: "Between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century, between the earth and the moon, between humiliation and happiness. After that it's straight ahead."

Two sequences stand out in this effort to open the cinematic image as planes with different temporal zones. The most famous is a single shot of a Yakutsk town bus passing an expensive car as workers repair the road, shown four times with four different types of commentary. [fig. 1.12] The first is silent, the next a Soviet panegyric, the third an anticommunistic denunciation, and the last the description in the voice-over of the commentator's own impressions. Each commentary not only creates a very different interpretation of the street scene but also directs the perspective toward different details and activities in the shot: For one, the Zim luxury car dominates the scene; in another, the voice-over points out a man's injured eye. For the commentator, this series of judgments without verdicts most immediately questions the impossible notion of objectivity regarding a landscape "with huge gaps and the will to fill them." Indeed, a major problem with "objectivity" is that it "may not distort Siberian realities but it does isolate them long enough to be appraised." Instead, the four different commentaries here offer four interpretive planes or zones that describe the street scene and direct our attention in a way that maps the temporal fullness of a short interval during which "what counts is the variety and the driving momentum."



ated encounter with the woolly mammoths of



FIGURE 1.12 Workers repair the same Yakutsk road through four contrasting sequences (*Letter from Siberia*)

The second, considerably longer, sequence follows these four shots to suggest that even this layering of a cinematic present is inadequate. "A walk through the streets of Yakutsk isn't going to make you understand Siberia," the commentator admits. "What you might need is an imaginary newsreel shot all over Siberia" in which "the commentary would be made up of those Siberian expressions that are already pictures in themselves." Locating and measuring its own voice in "those Siberian expressions" it aims to document, the commentator literally evokes images of those expressions by opening a second frame within the center of the image of the street scene, which then expands to fill the entire frame and become a collage of winter images. As the collage proceeds, this "imaginary newsreel" assumes a future conditional voice developing through a series of conjunctive "ands": "And then I'd show you" the snow, the Yakut, the spring festivals, and so on.

As these sequences suggest, the voice-over in *Letter from Siberia* is that of a time traveler and guide through a world that will always elude him and us temporally and spatially. Whereas the text/image relationship in *Koreans* identifies a fissure or gap, the audio commentary offers a more temporally mobile relationship with the fragmented chronologies of the film image. The changing voices, incorporated quotations, and music and sound recordings—from the lyrical, to the bemused, to the pedagogical—describe a series of shifting subject positions surrounding and intervening in the visuals. This address of the voice-over can even be dramatically insistent as an ironic and overdetermined attempt to direct the viewer according to a specific chronology: at one point, the commentator anticipates the contrast between the past and present in the image of a large truck passing a horse-drawn cart and quickly reminds the viewer, "[This is] the shot you've been waiting for." The unusual mobility of this voice exploring time between images creates, in Bazin's words, a "montage . . . forged from ear to eye" ("Bazin on Marker" 44). Through it, *Letter from Siberia* insists "that the primary material is intelligence, that its immediate means of expression is language, and that the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence" (44).

It seems to me a curious paradox that Deleuze says nothing about Marker's films in his monumental *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*, for few writers have theorized the cinema in terms so sympathetic to Marker's essayistic films and their aim to elicit a "cinematic thinking." Although Deleuze's perspective on "thought and cinema" casts a much wider net than the essayistic, it accommodates Marker's work and essayistic cinema in general in a manner that few theoretical models can—which is the justification for my selective appropriation of Deleuze. For Deleuze, thought is "the essence of cinema" (*Cinema 2* 168), and it can be discovered in various orders throughout film history, beginning with the "movement images" of Eisenstein, Abel Gance, and Alfred Hitchcock.²⁷ Of a different order, however, is

"the modern cinema," the cinematic. In these films, of which there is in the cinema "is brought face to face with suspension of the world" "gives the act that is constantly arising an essayistic subjects personal expression finds itself taken over by the external mode of knowledge" (175). For Deleuze and time zones between film images always eliciting and refusing thought.

Although the genealogical (and literary essay) and the essay film photographers, or filmmakers definitions better than Chris Marker, a character characterized as one of the most important of the essay film. Essay film forms of filmmaking since the 1960s from filmmakers around the globe structure, and subject matter, the Marker, a tradition that draws on the photo-essay within the participatory out assuming that one practice a career, it seems certain that, in his photographic images, Marker discovers images where the fading spaces are a thinker. After all, as Marker notes, it has been nothing but an immense, int

ence follows these four shots to suggest
 ment is inadequate. "A walk through the
 understand Siberia," the commentator
 inary newsreel shot all over Siberia" in
 of those Siberian expressions that are
 and measuring its own voice in "those
 nt, the commentator literally evokes
 second frame within the center of the
 ids to fill the entire frame and become a
 proceeds, this "imaginary newsreel"
 oping through a series of conjunctive
 ie Yakut, the spring festivals, and so on.
 over in Letter from Siberia is that of a
 at will always elude him and us tempo-
 ge relationship in Koreans identifies a
 a more temporally mobile relationship
 m image. The changing voices, incorpo-
 recordings—from the lyrical, to the
 series of shifting subject positions sur-
 is address of the voice-over can even be
 determined attempt to direct the viewer
 joint, the commentator anticipates the
 e image of a large truck passing a horse-
 "[This is] the shot you've been waiting
 loring time between images creates, in
 ear to eye" ("Bazin on Marker" 44).
 at the primary material is intelligence,
 nguage, and that the image only inter-
 is verbal intelligence" (44).

Deleuze says nothing about Marker's
 nema 2, for few writers have theorized
 rker's essayistic films and their aim to
 uze's perspective on "thought and cin-
 vistic, it accommodates Marker's work
 er that few theoretical models can—
 appropriation of Deleuze. For Deleuze,
 2 168), and it can be discovered in vari-
 ning with the "movement images" of
 ck.²⁷ Of a different order, however, is

"the modern cinema," the cinema of the "time-image" (169) and, for me, the essay-
 istic. In these films, of which there are no better examples than Marker's, thought
 in the cinema "is brought face to face with its own impossibility" (168), where "the
 suspension of the world" "gives the visible to thought, not as an object, but as an
 act that is constantly arising and being revealed in thought" (169). Just as the
 essayistic subjects personal expression to the public domain of experience, "thought
 finds itself taken over by the exteriority of a 'belief,' outside any interiority of a
 mode of knowledge" (175). For Deleuze and Marker, encountering the interstices
 and time zones between film images is thus the pathway to "belief" in a world
 always eliciting and refusing thought.

Although the genealogical relationship between the photo-essay (and the
 literary essay) and the essay film is not a difficult argument to make, few writers,
 photographers, or filmmakers demonstrate their intricate and compelling connec-
 tions better than Chris Marker, a writer and photo-essayist who can deservedly be
 characterized as one of the most consistent, earliest, and most articulate practi-
 tioners of the essay film. Essay films are arguably the most innovative and popular
 forms of filmmaking since the 1990s, producing a celebrated variety of examples
 from filmmakers around the globe. However extremely they may vary in style,
 structure, and subject matter, the best of these, I believe, work in the tradition of
 Marker, a tradition that draws on, merges, and re-creates the literary essay and
 the photo-essay within the particular spatial and temporal dynamics of film. With-
 out assuming that one practice anticipates or prepares for the other in Marker's
 career, it seems certain that, in his early essayistic encounters with words and pho-
 tographic images, Marker discovers an essentially modern territory between
 images where the fading spaces and black time lines ask the film viewer to become
 a thinker. After all, as Marker notes in Koreans, the twentieth century "may have
 been nothing but an immense, interminable fade" (23).