The Essay Film

FROM MONTAIGNE, AFTER MARKER

Timothy Corrigan
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.

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 l

Besides the centrality of essay motifs inform this study: other film practices and the image in this particular film the essay film must be distinguished in experimental documentaries Bunuel’s *Land without Bread* and the many attempts to fold essays into more conventional or different television, and other measurement.

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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 her-

tage 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. 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 ade-

quate (although Bill Nichols’s notion of performative documentary suggestively intersects with some of the central features of my argument). 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 to and to miss or underestimate its distinctive address and achievements.
Introduction

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. 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 1900–2004 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 historical boundaries of 394 individual films that draw on their individual distinctions, important essay films and films but for me the benefits of close survey of essay films. Besides particulars seems to me to be to canonize certain films and films, the intricate varieties of the thinking through those practices, lesser-known films, from Ma: Gleaners and I (2000) to Alar UnBelonging (2006).

In addition, my focus here media incarnations. As the historical and theoretical pedam primarily interested in themes appears through televisions more recently found some of through the Internet, other this study concentrates primarily video, or Internet essays—I country around the world p Western, in large part because of the essay, a heritage that is and digital shifts in media precipion both their many different to the textual specifics of certain to particular modes within different experiential encounter: public domain. As a base for conceptual shapes of the essay sixteenth century, while chaos: essay film from earlier document to its full visibility in the the 17 on the French tradition, whi films, is the most prominent a
Of Film and the Essayistic

While the "essayistic" in and through the encounters between the self and the senses limits and possibilities of each as different artistic and material forms, a performative presentation of self and experimental structures are subliminal public experience. In this larger than life pinning practice that reactivity, narrative epistemology, and context of the unstable heterogeneous text and its literary heritage, I argue historically varied and multidimensional. A prominent measure of cultural systems for over 100 years, the interactivity has been mapped across the ramatic theater, and sometimes the essay that informs and is transcendent of that interchange but also opportunities, and strategies in play with the usual fidelities and heritage of the essay film illuminate between the verbal and the visual articulation in a public sphere.\(^5\) John Michaux to Derek Jarman's essay film thus becomes a crucial in the shape and address of the...ms in recent decades have made it clear if one is to respect the...retrospectives on the essay film, *essayistinchen Kinos 1909–2004* offers...extends from the 1909 *Corner in the Argentine filmmaker Fernando...* (2003), and *Thai...ous Object at Noon* (2008), including...estler, Imamura Shohei, Chantal Jidlat Tahimik, Patrick Keiller, and re. While wide perspectives such as...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 its most intriguing contemporary transformations through the Internet, other electronic media, and even museum installations,\(^5\) 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 1940s and 1950s. In this first section, my emphasis is...
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 antigenic, undoing its own drive toward categorization. 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. 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 in each chapter and the analysis develop those ideas. Partly b the shifting multiplicity of the films make on an actively re specific engagements in my c. Indeed, the choices of particular scholarly and theoretical allowing the essayistic practice by certain films.

Many have contributed mi University of Florida, University College, Drake University, University Center for Cultural Analysis & Media Studies conferences, the 2009 conference on “Short Circuits Bologna, and the 2009 Association Film Institute. One particularl University in Lünenberg, Germany, the topic with Hito Steyerl, & Raymond Bellour, Christa Blü holds much to the comments of scherer, Timothy Murray, Dominley Andrew, Jonathan Kain, Sachs, William Galperin, Tina Harty, Eric Faden and Gr appears so ubiquitously in this b contributions, while my sometim matters cinematic, my inspiring edge. I am grateful to the Univ research support, including the Akerman. My colleagues in the Peter Decherney, Meta Mazaj, at 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
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certain interpretations. To dramatize this movement, I typographically emphasis 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 Lüneburg, 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 Eissenschitz. This book also owes much to the comments and encouragement of Ivone Marguès, Eric Rentschler, Timothy Murray, Dominique Bluher, Michael Renov, David Rodowick, Dudley Andrew, Jonathan Kahana, Yoram Allon, Dina Smith, Ann Friedman, Lynne Sachs, William Galperin, Tina Zwarg, Bob and Helen Buttel, Ruth Pritchett, Kevin Harty, 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:
Introduction


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

PART ONE

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Toward the Essay Film
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"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 1940s, has become one of its r

While no single definition malleable for its many variant literary foundation (and and formulates, I believe, the story of its shifting practices, abstracted and exaggerated from and an experiential world) thinking out loud. If Montaigne, tracing this history and André Bazin and others, to (and, subsequently, to Richard "1:1.33 Montaigne."

Often cited as the modern or Barthes is, for me, the preeminent writer of the everyday, the contemporary image and the temporaneous with the films of taries on and representations writing tests the limits and posters with public artifacts in My era Lucida) and, more theorizes the tensions of essayist between the verbal and the visual claims, "I have produced only with writing" (457) and proclaims the province of the ess "digression," and "excursion" (4 tates toward textual features—speak to the power and prevail and disperse themselves through make meaning. Appropriately, essays, "The Third Meaning," in Sergei Eisenstein's Ivan the locates in photographs or the "texts, describes an exceptional moment that, in their resisting.
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 climatically, 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.”

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, contemporary 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. 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). 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.
Of his many passing and extended commentaries on film, his essay "Leaving the Movie Theater" reflects on a kind of cinematic encounter whose dynamics adumbrate how an essayist and an essay film might reconfigure the filmic experience. Just as the experience rather than any particular object becomes the primary concern of an essayist, Barthes writes here of a "cinema situation" as both a private and public encounter with his own self, "two bodies at the same time." On the one hand, there is "a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulphing mirror" (345, 349). On the other, the situation surrounds and counterpoints the "lure" or hypnotic capture of that imagistic mirror, creating "a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it" (348–349). The cinematic situation becomes then a "site of availability" that allows the self to be there and elsewhere. Subjectivity now drifts through an "urban dark" where "the body's freedom is generated" (3) in "the sound's grain, the theatre, the obscure mass of other bodies, the rays of light, the entrance, the exit": the "inoccupation of the body" becomes "that of the big city" (346).

This drift across two bodies—a private self and public self, a narcissistic image and an image of the surrounding world as "the Cinema of society" (348)—becomes a suggestive metaphor for the essayistic that begins with Montaigne and continues through essay films today. Creating a verbal drift between the film image and the image of its surroundings (the street, the twilight), Barthes both inhabits the cinematic image and "must also be elsewhere" (347), and so complicates his fascination with his "relation" to the image as a verbal mapping of the "situation," "taking off" from that image in the rhetoric of thought (348). As Barthes spins the visual-verbal tension of this private-public encounter, essayistic encounters situate themselves and find their place in an intellectual and erotic twilight zone between the cinematic image and the street, the one an illusionary place and the other, like a photograph, a "mad image, rubbed by the real" (La chambre claire 181). Between them, the subject drifts in a "double space, dislocated, spaced out," the space that locates the essayistic movement of thought (Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes 90). Little wonder that in the evolution of the essayistic and in the evolution of Barthes's body of work, the photograph, as the image halfway between the photograph and film, offers an almost utopian place between the intense privacy of the written word and overwhelming publicity of the cinematic image.

From Montaigne to Barthes to Marker, the history of the essay offers a lengthy list of examples of a personal, subjective, or performative voice and vision as the definitive feature of the essayistic. Best exemplified by the "familiar essay" of nineteenth-century writers like Charles Lamb or Ralph Waldo Emerson, this connection between the essay and personal expression identifies, however, a much more complicated, dynamic, and often in the assumption that essays essay demonstrates, in fact, that how it privileges personal expression and complicates that very notion second cornerstone of the Essay mony suggest the articulation world, essayistic expressivity is instrumental or expressive self continually tests and undoes experience. At the intersection of difficult, often highly complex self or subjectivity thinking social, and cultural particulars, other representational modes) and remaking of the self.

Montaigne's renowned commentary consequently plays itself out as itself in the process of thinking movement" ("Of Repentance" and studying "myself more that que-sais-je?" ("what do I know") authority. It is one of many such drive in the writings as an individual might discover a certain systematic experience of the continually rattles the terms freely celebrating thinking abo freely of all things, even those all...

In his monumental essay "Ranc" as "the most certain explicitly on his goal to be "intelle our life is nothing but movernized place for a provisional sense "For lack of a natural memory "all the fricassee that I am scr instruction in reverse... not catic or formulaic approaches...
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in the assumption that essays cohere around a singular self. 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...” (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 of that encounter as essayistic as a kind of fragmentary representation. Whereas representations of lyric poetry, generally speaking, finished frameworks of a coherently, and often aggressively, becomes subsumed in the work than a significant distinction in the torical changes (mapped in through the nineteenth and choices and experiments with mony in a writer’s choice to such as poetry or novels, and

Essays are thus most indicative of that self within Charles Lamb, Virginia Woolf’s or transforming that self visibility. In Woolf’s essay “Self a panoramic of sights, where it enhances” (260), and instead, “the self becomes a ret “streaked, variegated, all of a but a self that puts ‘on brief’ (266). Just as essayists from the poetic urgency in a prose aim around them, Woolf’s essayistics instrument of self-expression “velocity and abundance” (263).

As a pronounced anticipatory essays dramatize this desire or troubles its verbal visual world that continually language. From explicit cases of Jorge Luis Borges’s essay, James Baldwin, this linguistic the vehicle for thinking a self that language to compensate...
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).

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. 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.

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
Toward the Essay Film

"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. 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 "unsturied" interstices betw shifting and aleatory voice c provisionally, to articulate c experiences represented. In gests, in his "The Camera as usurp the verbal subjectivity essay as part of a historical e century to Riis and the heyd struction of images can itself commentator since the came mentator. It can comment a picture the world as a sevent umnist would picture it. A (quoted in Willumson 16). W essayistic tension between a troubles the verbal thus creat and resistance between pho sometimes impossible) to 'rs them" (289). Complimenting should strive to be unfilm logic when he remakes the essay film in which, 'ike his B. ("Word and Film" 238).

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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 dialectic 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  

Especially as it describes T. W. Adorno's "The Essay as a preliminary essay as it looks forward to the distinguishing strength of the essay of truth, and "the jargon of academic" (13) strategies through Fragmentary and "noncreativity concepts in the process of intently becomes a "thinker" who "mal (13). Configured as "force field duality" and the emancipatorously exploring a subjective as of something that is not intended with what is blind i concepts to pry open the aspect that reveals, through ti gled, that the net of their objective polarize the opaque element a and appropriately, Adorno's e Letter from Siberia and Bazin's

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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 distinguishing strength of the essay is its ability to subvert systemic thought, totalities of truth, and “the jargon of authenticity” (7) through “methodically unmethodical” (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 nonidentity” and the emancipation from the compulsion of identity (17), simultaneously 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 entangled, 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 “prehistoric” tobacco fields that draw McElwee back to his childhood homestead, where the romantic aura of a bucolic North Carolina countryside quickly becomes a troubled homeland defined by the tobacco industry. As with many versions of the essayistic, a highly personal and potentially narcissistic subject, McElwee’s persona, 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 suspect the film is a fictionalized documentary about their grandfather and his financial 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 essyistic 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 Park](image-url)

Less obvious, tobacco associations throughout the film simultaneously imply a metaphor of the film, for instance, McB eating before their marriage as a physical manifestation of their physical destruction. In this to nature, family, and community always shadowed by death an between McElwee and his sor to work with him" to interview is "an unusual place for a fe becomes an especially disturbing public realities can jarringly ir the usually invisible place of where the privatized relation to the other world of tobacco: Oddly like Barthes’s relation with tobacco becomes about relationship with filmmaking and frames, he notes, "Someti
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FIGURE 1.1 Undone in McElwee Park (Bright Leaves)

Less obvious, tobacco also becomes a peculiar bond for communities and rel ationships 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
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 (and his interlocutors') often-urgent voice are redistributed 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 camera 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 family, McElwee and his film begin to brilliantly fall apart. "How can this be?" he says as an unexpected dog races across his shot. "I suddenly find myself adrift, dogged
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 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 a finally accepts, the movie Bright the single fictional image that "probably melded them into a voice, a "McDuk.""

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 a world that mirrors McElwee’s history. [fig. 1.5] For essayist social places where the final q words of the historical preserve here . . . what’s being p

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

**Figure 1.5** Releasing selves into ex
This small hound that came out of
ring efforts (to find a lost home and to
leaves might be considered a reflecting
documentary film, an almost theo-
dratic theorist Viada Petric will call
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relinquish his binary sense of identi-
tragic loss. In the end, the institutions
way to the vicissitudes of subjectivity,
If. 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 char-
acter . . . 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 pres-
served here . . . what's being passed down?" Like his son's release of that fish and

![Image of Bright Leaves](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 spectator's 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 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 insertions 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 with topics and subjects that are Errol Morris's estranged mad Jean-Luc Godard's housewife/p in 2 or 3 Things I Know about Her subject and a shifting enunciative its single scintillating blue scree (2003), in which points of iden its structure is then a second-personalization.

If both verbal and visual expression projection of an interior self describes, as evident in Bright Late on a public domain, often Essayistic subjectivity—in contra essay film—refers then not simple individual consciousness before and consciousness that tests, undoes, or the experiences of memory, etc. Embedded within the textual act the product of changing expedi of expressions. Following Musiel's than the irresponsible and half-b (73), Walter Benjamin was hyperbola of the essay as an expression implying a form of subjective ex constantly as the expressions of es sion, as a commonly recognized e which subjectivity tries out different selves. Fittingly, God exactly this note with actres camera that in this film she will "Notre Musique (2004) an early co: "Now I'm someone else."
say Film

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

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agency and activity of this subjectivity in McElwee's self-dramatizations in to Kluge's intertitles in The Patriot rick Keiller's Robinson and his intern Moore's Roger and Me (1989) makes subject of the film, Waltz with Bashir jective expression through its distinct 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" (78), 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's 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. 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. 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 contradiction 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, 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 se connections and relations . ... ties of memory and hope, inclu & Babylon 12–13).

As testings of subjectivity wit experience in the essay film of “doubt,” moving within and through territories. That the watershed is that failure, crisis, and trauma. That many of the most cha of the colonial and postcolonial the often-dangerous and fragile ling of self that partly explains socially, and racially marginaliz as different as those of Trinh T. the films of Raoul Ruiz and Abb invariably practices, regardless a politics quite different from t fiction films or conventional de coherent subjectivity within the be an easily decipherable and cle core is ideological instability.

As a key dimension of the poli and protean self and social exp as the third distinguishing fea on identified as the testing of id the products of discourse, and r between these two discourses, t across their meeting with each thought. Thus, an essential part characterized it, “aims ... to pr The essay film, in Godard’s words to Phillip Lopate, the essay film “to find out what one thinks about.”

Larger, speculative, impression movies think or might think at numerous others, Hugo Münst
ization of subjectivity as topic, enumerated have been most innovative, complex, and difficultly understood and complicated subjectivity as the cornerstone of the essay. Those public topics, and events—are what commonly thick those public realities commonly did. Yet, essay films fundamentally disarm strategies as a form of expression. It is a self to events, actions, and subjective expressions and representations of everyday as an arena of public spatio-temporal experience notable for its serialization and personal formulation. As platitude, but this banality is also k to existence in its very spontaneity. Ulative formulation, perhaps all coherent subject becomes—instantly, retroactively, nondistinction to more conventional theorists, is made and remade within the description of what defines a “public” or “Important here: public life as multiple and is a place of contestation through experience start with Jürgen Habermas, who represented the century when literary essays thrive for discussions of the essayistic life as “the world” which, “like everyone the same time” (52). Later, film essayist precisely filtered through a remaking of this public sphere as contingent terms of Habermas’ model and re from a variegated “social horizon of ny, more from below than from above. ly, the interface between different indi- ny dimensions along that interface (the local, the global, and so on). Or, in “as and Counterpublics,” public experience is a rather than timeless belonging, and we belonging” (89). Built on the work of

Montaigne to Marker

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). 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, 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). 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. 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).

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 fictional 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 i 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 posit documentaries, between a known and a knowledge acquired through a learning process" (251).

Essayistic thinking is modeled as a kind of Socratic dialog many essay films, the dialogic as the way the essayistic assimilative, genres, lyrical voices, an rather than formal structure, an the world, and so on), the act of the science of reflection and declarative activities (pleasure, fantasy, alt essayistic perspective.

Essayistic thinking thus becomes representational remaking of a version of the real as a public "ontology of personal expression varying kind, quality, and number." Multiplying one's selves. Eliciting the activity of cognition, essay film, intellectual and phenomenological thinking through the world, the viewing subject inhabits the in the film itself (as if, figuratively position of participating in the tory). Not only does that subject of the resistant reality of the film times even coherent discourse do of forms, its mix and subversive narrative teleologies or lyrical
recent versions of a “visual thinking” variety scholars and film theorists have
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cess of a documentary, “the specific
integrated 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 con-
sciousness 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 exteri-
orization 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 documen-
tary).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 some-
times 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 Giradoux, 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

A potent sense of the prospecter's announcement of the Petit du Seuil house magazine 27 R post-war world has come with experience this prospect of inc the world escape us at the same To combat this disorientation, one of Marker's metaphors, a planet. He proposes that each propaganda brochure, not like a conversation with an informed about the country in Marker would bring his own di photo-essay entitled Koreans, c Édition de Seuil's Court méttrac Ko

Koreans is a meditative mostly about lists and invent organizations. Shadowing the North and South Korea, yet categorical abundance found in the multiplicity of things that heart. I will not deal with By's address to his cat. Rather, it is

tions, relics of history, a 'list of' and fragments of a develop observed from numerous anglezation 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
Montaigne to Marker

short film, the 1953 Les Statues meurent aussi (codirected with Alain Remais), 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, 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
Toward the Essay Film

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, theporter 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 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 [Rollei]flex camera. It was on the Rolleis’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.
images, and his stories—that “was hers.” [figs. 1.9 and 1.10]

In a later sequence, the camera reappears as a typewriter—a typewriter that is placed on a table inside a room. The camera then zooms in on the typewriter, and the hands of the typist become visible. The text on the typewriter is not visible, but the person using the typewriter is shown typing.

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

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

These doubled fissures—bet and between that "forgotten imag version of what Mitchell calls a "i through its leanings toward nonfici sonal point of view, and its "generi essay typically discloses a certain t interpret images; like the photogra thing that was there to be taken a selves or 'look back' at the viewer" and eyes looking directly at the car poetically in one exchange featuri and staring back at the camera, w
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
Toward the Essay Film

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 discriminatively 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. 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 photographic images. No doubt, The Jetty represents 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. 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 appropriate 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 comment 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. 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, which represents 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 reality of Siberia past and present in the form of a filmed report. Or, perhaps, to borrow 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,’ understood 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, oppositions 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 Letters 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

openings mapped in The Korean open the temporal “presence” of and temporal) containing multi future fantasies. As the commen image of a temporal vertigo: “It's tary, between the earth and the that it's straight ahead.”

Two sequences stand out in with different temporal zones. Ti bus passing an expensive as four different types of comments panegyric, the third an anticom in the voice-over of the comment only creates a very different inte perspective toward different de luxury car dominates the scene injured eye. For the commentates immediately questions the impo “with huge gaps and the will to 1 ity” is that it “may not distort enough to be appraised.” Instead, interpretive planes or zones th in a way that maps the temporo counts is the variety and the dri

![Figure 1.11](image1.png) The fault lines of knowledge: an animated encounter with the woolly mammoths of Siberian history (Letter from Siberia)

![Figure 1.12](image2.png) Workers repair the san from Siberia)
ut tribal rituals and drawings of the sria to the construction of new high-resentational heterogeneity of Letter s photo-essay as the film mixes black-and-white archival footage, and animation to experience and representation is the sledge of it. Unlike the efforts of the these images, however, this essay film is particularly cinematic dimension of them images, and so depicts and examines the conflict, from the vertical ascents of flying through a visual syntax of continual rhythms with a similar array of directionally different materials create a fabricated image of the past, a visual rhetoric of a desired future: Animation to documentary shots of the commerce, and shortly after, the film set value of reindeer as pets, transport-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 for different types of commentary. [fig. 1.12] The first is silent, the next a Soviet panegyric, the third an anticommunist 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."

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. Of a different order, however, is
once follows these four shots to suggest vent is inadequate. "A walk through the understand Siberia," the commentator inary newreel shot all over Siberia" in of those Siberian expressions that are and measuring its own voice in "those of, 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 Ye Yakut, the spring festivals, and so on. over in Letter from Siberia is that of a at will always elude him and us tempo-ye relationship in Koreans identifies a a more temporally mobile relationship m image. The changing voices, incorp 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 voint, the commentator anticipates the s image of a large truck passing a horse-

"[This is] the shot you've been waiting for 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-
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"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 connections better than Chris Marker, a writer and photo-essayist who can deservedly be characterized as one of the most consistent, earliest, and most articulate practitioners 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. Without 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 photographic 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).