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In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film

Phillip Lopate

MY INTENTION HERE is to define, describe, survey and celebrate a cinematic genre that barely exists. As a cinephile and personal essayist, I have an itch to see these two interests wed, via essays on celluloid. But, while there are cinematic equivalents to practically every literary genre, filmmakers tend to shy away from this form, and that in itself is intriguing. What it signals to me is that, in spite of Alexandre Astruc's tempting utopian term "camera-stylo," the camera is not a pencil, and it is rather difficult to think with it in the way an essayist might.

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

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

It is easier to list the essay's practitioners than to fix a definition of this protean form. My American Heritage Dictionary, maybe not the most prestigious but it can be held in the hand and was given me by an ex-girlfriend, says: "A short literary composition on a single subject, usually presenting the personal views of the author." While I defy anyone to boil down Montaigne's omnivorous late essays to a single subject, I do agree that the essay offers personal views. That's not to say it's always first-person or autobiographical, but it tracks a person's thoughts as he or she tries to work out some mental knot, however various its strands. An

essay is a search to find out what one thinks about something.

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

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

I WILL NOW try to define the qualities that to my mind make an essay-film. Bear in mind that I'm no film theorist.

Starting with my most questionable proposition first: 1) an essay-film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled or intertitled. Say all you like about visualization being at the core of thinking, I cannot accept an utterly pure, silent flow of images as constituting essayistic discourse. To be honest, I've never seen a silent-era movie that I could consider an essay-film. Something like Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* delivers a clear ideological point (as does, say, Franju's *Blood of the Beasts*), but conveying a message or politics through one's images does not alone make an essay—or else we would have to speak of political posters or Madison Avenue ads as essays.

2) The text must represent a single voice. It may be either that of the director or screenwriter, or, if collaborative, then stitched together in such a way as to sound like a single perspective. A mere collage of quoted texts is not an essay. I know that Walter Benjamin used to fantasize writing an essay composed wholly of quotes, but he never got around to doing it; and even if he had, it would not be what draws us to Benjamin—what draws us is his compelling, tender voice and thinking process. When I read in an Anthology Film Archive calendar of an "essay-like" Japanese Super-8 in which "Some words are taken from Dostoevsky, others from Susan Sontag, Rimbaud, Bob Dylan, creating a string of overlapping images that ultimately

build into an innate image," I don't even have to see it to know that it's not my idea of an essay-film.

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

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

4) The text must impart more than information; it must have a strong, personal point of view. The standard documentary voiceover which tells us, say, about the annual herring yield is fundamentally journalistic, not essayistic. Nor is Luis Buñuel's mischievous *Land Without Bread*—which parodies the faceless, objective documentary perspective while refraining from giving us Buñuel's own private thoughts about Las Huertes—an essay-film. (For the difference, see Buñuel's lovely, literate autobiography, *My Last Sigh*.)

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

Those who regard the cinema primarily as a visual medium may object that my five criteria say nothing about the treatment of images. This is not because I mean to depreciate the visual component of movies, which is what drew me to the medium in the first place, but only because I am unconvinced that the handling of the visuals *per se* dictates whether some particular work is or is not an essay-film. I will say more about the relationship between sound and image in this genre later. For now, permit me to look at a few examples.

I REMEMBER my first glimpse of the Centaur—the essay-film—in college: it was Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*. While watching it I became aware of an elegance in the screenwriter Jean Cayrol's language that was intriguingly at odds with the usual sledgehammer treatment of the Holocaust. "Sometimes a message flutters down, is picked up. Death makes his first pick, chooses again in the night and fog. Today, on the same track, the sun shines. Go slowly along it...looking for what? Traces of the bodies that fell to the ground?" The voice on the soundtrack was worldly, tired, weighted down with the need to make fresh those horrors that had so quickly turned stale. It was a self-interrogatory voice, dubious, ironical, probing, like a true essayist's, for the heart of its subject matter. Meanwhile Resnais's refined tracking shots formed a visual analogue

of this patient searching for historical meaning, in sites now emptied of their infamous activity.

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

A similar *frisson* occurred when, some years later, I was watching an otherwise conventional documentary, Nemec's *Prague Oratorio*, about the events of Czechoslovakia in 1968. As the visuals displayed Russian tanks advancing on the crowd, the narrator said something like (I am paraphrasing from memory): "Usually we do not know where to pin the blame for massacres, we invoke large historical forces and so on. This time we do know who gave the order to fire. It was Captain *****" — and the camera zoomed in optically on a Soviet army man's head. Again I felt a sort of impudent tweak, "Stay awake!" Not that I had any idea who this Russian officer was, but I loved the sudden way the civilized elegy for Prague Spring was ruptured, and we were catapulted into that more basic Eastern European mentality of tribal scores to settle, long memories and bitter humor. That atypically malicious human voice on the commentary, I later identified as an intrusion of the essayistic.

There are essayistic elements or colorations in certain films by Chris Marker, Alexander Kluge, Jon Jost, Ralph Arlyck, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Joris Ivens, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dusan Makavejev, Jean-Marie Straub, Yvonne Rainer, Woody Allen, Wim Wenders, Hartmut Bitomsky, Orson Welles, Ross McElwee, Robb Moss; in Alain Resnais's shorts, Fellini's *Roma*, Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*, Isaac Julian's *Looking for Langston*, Tony Buba's *Lightning Over Braddock*, Morgan Fisher's *Academy Leader*, Cocteau's *Testament of Orpheus*, *My Dinner With Andre*, *Swimming to Cambodia*, and I'm sure many others that I've forgotten or overlooked. By no means will I be able to discuss all these in the limited space allotted; but my hope is that, by zeroing in on a handful, I can convey a sense of the potentials and pitfalls of the form, as well as begin to weed out the true essay-films from those that have merely a tincture of essayism.

The one great essayist in the film medium is Chris Marker. *Letter From Siberia*, *The Koumiko Mystery* and *Sans Soleil* are his most pure essay-films, though it seems to me that Marker has an inveterate essayistic tendency that peeps out even in his more interview-oriented documentaries, like *Le Joli Mai*, or his compilation films, like *Grin Without the Cat*. In Marker there is a tension between the politically committed, self-effacing, leftwing documentarist of the Thirties/Ivens tendency, and an irrepressibly Montaignesque personal tone. He has a reputation for being elusive and shy—not the best qualities, on the face

of it, for a personal essayist—and yet, perhaps because he has evolved so diverse and complicated a self (ex-Resistance fighter, novelist, poet, filmmaker), he can emit enough particles of this self to convey a strong sense of individuality and still keep his secrets. He also has the essayist's aphoristic gift, which enables him to assert a collective historical persona, a first-person plural, even when the first-person single is held in abeyance. Finally, he has the essayist's impulse to tell the truth: not always a comfortable attribute for an engagé artist.

In a characteristically witty passage in *Letter From Siberia* (1958), Marker interprets the same footage three different ways, based on three separate ideological positions, demystifying with a light touch the spurious objectivity of documentaries. The sequence also points to one of Marker's key approaches as a film-essayist, which is to meditate aloud on the footage he has shot. In Marker there is often a pronounced time-lag between the quick eye and the slow, digesting mind, which tracks months or even years later the meaning of what it has seen; and this delay accounts for a certain Markerian nostalgia for the escaping present, and a melancholy over the inherently receding reality of photographed images. It is like that famous passage from *Tristes Tropiques*, in which Levi-Strauss laments that the traveler/anthropologist always arrives "too early or too late." In Marker's case, his camera arrives on time to record events, but his mind and heart take too long to catch up and appreciate it sufficiently at the moment.

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

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

ing and celebrating, with mordant relish, his own death, projecting a more mythical figure of himself in the process.

"He wrote: 'I've been around the world several times, and now only banality interests me. On this trip I've tracked it like a bounty hunter.'" Place and homesickness are natural subjects for the essay-film: *Sans Soleil* is a meditation on place in a jet age, where spatial availability confuses one's sense of time and memory. Unlike Wim Wenders, who keeps whining (*Tokyo Ga*, etc.) that every place is getting to look like every other place—an airport—Marker has an appetite for geography and local difference; his lament is that, if anything, he feels at home in too many places. Particularly drawn to Japan, he visits his favorite Tokyo haunts, and the narrator reflects: "These simple joys he had never felt on returning to a house, a home, but twelve million anonymous inhabitants could supply him with them." Marker/Krasna is a man of the crowd, who revels in anonymity; a romantic who in San Francisco visits all the locations Hitchcock used in *Vertigo*: a collector of memories ("I have spent

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

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

Some of the bright, experimental young filmmakers, like Abigail Child, Laurie Dunphy, and Anita Thacher, produced "found footage" films, which



my life trying to understand the function of remembering") who explicitly associates recollecting with rewriting.

Sans Soleil touches upon time, emptiness, Japan, Africa, video games, comic strips, Sei Shonagon's lists, dog burials, relics, political demonstrations, suicide, the future, Tarkovsky, Hitchcock, and the Absolute. What unites it is the melancholy-whimsical, bachelorish sensibility of Marker looking at the fragments of the modern world moment by moment and trying to make at least poetic sense of them. "Poetry is born of insecurity," he says, "and the impermanence of things," at which point we see a samurai swordfight on television.

GIVEN Marker's sterling example, and the video access "revolution," and with more and more conceptual artists and defrocked academics taking to portapaks and cheap movie rigs, I half-expected to see a whole school of essay-films develop. Not only did the technical potential exist, but a distribution circuit of underground venues, colleges and museums was in place. But the essay-film never really arrived. What took its place, instead, was an explosion

mocked the patriarchy by deconstructionist editing; others, like Trin T. Min-ha, made "text films" (*Reassemblage, Surname Viet Given Name Nam*), which surrounded a subject like colonialism or oppression of women through a reshuffling of voices and doctored footage; Steve Fagin's videos on Lou Andreas Salome and Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pecuchet* used Syberberg-like puppet stagings, with results that were intriguing, campy and elusive. These films are frightfully intellectual; and they're effective, up to a point, in circling their chosen themes; and yet the last thing any of their creators would do is tell us directly, consistently what they actually think about their chosen subject.

A recent "collage film" by Yvonne Rainer, *Privilege*, is a case in point: it mixes dramatic scenes, found footage, faked interviews, written texts, documentary sequences, etc. in a stimulating, braided exploration of menopause and racism. Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, defending this film in the *Chicago Reader*, wrote: "Approached as a narrative, Yvonne Rainer's sixth feature takes forever to get started and an eternity to end... Yet approached as an essay,

Privilege unfolds like a single multifaceted argument, uniformly illuminated by white-hot rage and wit—a cacophony of voices and discourses to be sure, but a purposeful and meaningful cacophony in which all the voices are speaking to us as well as to one another...." Much as I sympathize with Rosenbaum's position, it almost sounds as though he is saying that all you have to do is recategorize some plotless stew as an "essay" and everything immediately belongs. Even essays have plots! Now it so happens that I admire and like Rainer's film; but I still cannot bring myself to accept a "cacophony of voices and discourses" as an essay. I also have to admit that when I left the theater I was still unsure what exactly Rainer's argument about menopause, and its relation to racism, was, other than that both involved being made to feel an outsider. She would probably say, "I'm not trying to tell you anything, I'm trying to get you to think." Fine; so does an essay; but an essay also tells us what its author thinks.

Jon Jost is another independent filmmaker who has experimented with essayistic elements. His *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes* (1972–74), which the filmmaker refers to as an "essay-film," I found insufferably irritating. In part my reaction was to Jost's solemn, humorless, self-hating, tediously lecturing persona. Granted, all essayists have the option to bring out the obnoxious aspects of their personality, but they usually balance it with *something* charming; in Jost's case I wanted to hide under the seat every time he came onscreen. Still, if only he had made a true essay-film I could have applauded. But instead he created one more hybrid collage, with Vietnam atrocity stories and nightly news broadcasts quoted simultaneously for ironic effect; with dictionary definitions suggesting something or other about linguistics; with fulminations against imperialism; cinema verité interviews of his friends and lover; and large smugly self-reflexive dollops informing us that this was a movie, as if we didn't know. Jost's autobiographical passages, when he addresses the camera, suggest the most potential for an essay-film; but he makes such vague, unprobing statements about his life or relationships—dismissing his parents in one sentence as a war criminal and a cipher—that the self-analysis comes off as evasive and shallow. Perhaps all this is intentional: a self-portrait of an unlikable fellow. It finally seems to me, though, that Jost hasn't really attempted to understand himself, but just subsumed his self-portrait in larger and more forgiving socio-historical categories.

Clearly, the chief influence on early Jost, and indeed on most independent filmmakers who have selectively used essayistic maneuvers only to abandon or undercut them, is Jean-Luc Godard. Now, Godard may be the greatest film artist of our era, but strictly considering the developments of the essay-film, his influence has been a mixed blessing. Godard is the master of hide and seek, the ultimate tease. Just when you think you've got him, he wriggles away. How can we be sure those soundtrack whisperings in *Two or Three Things...* are really his opinions? He is too much the modernist, fracturing, dissociating, collaging, to be caught dead straightforwardly expressing his views. (This raises

an interesting side-issue: to what degree is the modernist aesthetic itself inimical to the essay? Certainly the essay form allows for fragmentation and disjunction; and yet it keeps weaving itself whole again, resisting alienation, if only through the power of a synthesizing, personal voice with its old-fashioned humanist assumptions.)

To get back to Jean-Luc. Godard has often used the word “researches” in describing his filmic approach, particularly after 1968. “Researches” implies a scientific attitude, enabling Godard to present, say, deadpan ten-minute shots of an assembly line, ostensibly invoking, through “real time,” the tedium that will encourage us to empathize with the factory worker. The two times he approximated an essay-film, not a “research,” were *Ici et Ailleurs* and *Letter to Jane*.

Ici et Ailleurs (*Here and Elsewhere*) is both Godard’s (surprisingly) sincere effort to reflect on the frustration of making a movie about the Palestinian struggle, and a typically modernist attempt “to weave a text and to tear it to pieces, to build a fiction and to ruin its pretensions” (Andre Bleikasten). Two voices, a “He” and a “She,” chase each other on the soundtrack, saying things like: “Too simple and too easy to simply divide the world in two. Too easy or too simple to say simply that the wealthy are wrong and the poor are right. Too simple and too easy to simply say that the poor are right and the wealthy are wrong. Too easy. Too easy and too simple.” Godard’s Gertrude Stein linguistic cubist approach may be effective in making us contemplate whether a truth is no less valid for being simple; but I would hardly call the text, with its blurted slogans undercut by verbal arabesques, an attempt at reasoned essayistic discourse.

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

Godard’s ex-partner, Jean-Pierre Gorin, went on to develop a much more truly personal-essay film style in his own features, *Koto and Cabengo* and *Routine Pleasures*. In *Koto and Cabengo*, Gorin takes as his departure-point a seemingly sensationalistic true story about two sisters who invent their own way of speaking, and turns it into a meditation on language acquisition. Gorin’s narration interrogates his own doubts and confusions about what sort

of film he is trying to make. While it’s become a cliché of the New Documentary to present the difficulty of getting the necessary footage as the gist of the finished film, Gorin brings to this device a flexible, self-mocking voice (the expatriate filmmaker with the French accent, too smart and lazy for his own good) that is very engaging. In *Routine Pleasures*, he dispenses entirely with a news “hook,” cheekily alternating between two things he happened to take footage of, toy train hobbyists and painter-film critic Manny Farber, and trying to weave a connection between these non-related subjects (something about recreating the world ideally?)—if only to justify his having spent the European TV production money. The result is a perversely willed, unpredictable piece about the thin line between art and hobbyism (the film itself seems a demonstration of this), in which we learn still more about the inertial personality of Mr. Gorin. By drawing closer to himself as subject, however, he raises the ante of our expectations: for instance, having acknowledged Manny Farber as his mentor, Gorin’s discreet refusal to be more candid about Farber’s personality and the dynamics of mentorship leaves one disappointed. In both features, Gorin seems hot on the trail of the essay-film, but is still too coy about sharing the fullness of his thoughts.

ONE OF THE natural subjects for personal essay-films is moviemaking itself, since it is often what the filmmaker knows most. There is already a whole sub-genre of essay-films about the Movie That Might Have Been, Or Was, Or Could Still Be. Pasolini’s *Notes Toward an African Orestes* is a sort of celluloid notebook into which the filmmaker put his preliminary ideas about casting, music or global politics for a project that never came to pass. Maybe by shooting these “notes,” he used up the enthusiasm that might have gone into filming the classic itself. Given the murkiness of his *Medea*, I would just as soon watch an essay-film of Pasolini thinking about how he would do an Orestes in Africa as actually view the finished product. The opening sequences are promising: he “casts” by shooting passersby in the street, telling us, “This young man could be Orestes.” He delivers ambiguous touristic impressions, such as “The terrible aspect of Africa is its solitude, the monstrous form that Nature can assume.” But then the film abandons these reflections for ten minutes of Gato Barbieri noodling around in rehearsal, and an awkward, staged discussion in which Pasolini asks a group of puzzled African male exchange students how they feel about the Oresteia.

What makes *Notes Toward an African Orestes* so tantalizing and frustrating is to have a narrator of the intellectual stature of Pasolini, who nevertheless lets only slivers of his mind show through. Were he to have written an essay on the same subject, he would surely have struggled harder to pull his thoughts into focus. (Pasolini could be a very compelling and persuasive essayist.)

A much more satisfying essay-film about the process of moviemaking and what might have been is Orson Welles’s *Filming Othello*. This brilliant, if rarely-seen, self-exegesis consists, for the most part, of Welles seated with his back to a TV monitor, talking to the camera in

order to have, as he puts it, a “conversation” about the making of *Othello*. Conversation is of course the heart of the personal essay tradition.

A famous raconteur and compulsively watchable actor, even when bad, Welles solves through his own charisma the sticky problem of what to do about visuals in an essay-film—simply by filling the screen with himself talking. Suddenly we are face to face with our essayist, rather than hearing a disembodied voice. Cutaways to sequences of *Othello* (re-edited), a relaxed luncheon discussion of the play between Welles and two actor-friends, and footage of Welles addressing a Boston audience, provide sufficient visual variety to his talking torso.

What is so refreshing about his talk is that he is speaking in an honest, maximally intelligent way about things he loves, Shakespeare and filmmaking. This Welles bears little resemblance to the arch poseur of late-night talk shows. We are privileged to eavesdrop on a theatrical genius as he shares his thoughts and doubts about one of his most important productions. On the one hand, he is musing to himself, seeming to dictate an essay aloud. On the other hand—as how could Welles not?—he is also giving a performance, and we can’t help judging him simultaneously as an actor, the way he whips his head from side to side or raises his eyebrows. Our awareness of the contrivance behind this seemingly artless conversation has been enhanced by Jonathan Rosenbaum’s research on the making of *Filming Othello*: apparently it was shot over a number of years, with changing TV crews operating under Welles’s tight direction.

Welles’s other so-called essay-film, *F For Fake*, is much less successful as such, largely because Welles seems more intent on mystifying and showing off his magician-Prospero persona than in opening his mind to us. I am never convinced that Welles is working hard to say all he can on the subject of counterfeit art; he is so taken up with a glib defense of artifice that he forgets to convey his own sincerity, something an essayist must do. He would rather have our tepid agreement that everyone’s a charlatan or all art a kind of lie, than move us. Academic film critics, who overrate cinematic self-reflexivity and attention to the narrative “frame,” adore the cheap joke he pulls on us, when he promises that everything in the next hour will be true, then makes up some cock-and-bull story towards the end, without having told us the sixty minutes were up. Still, I’m grateful for *F For Fake*, because its florid windbag Welles makes me appreciate the more the wonderfully civilized, humane Orson of *Filming Othello*.

Before he died, Welles was planning to make yet another cinematic self-analysis, *Filming ‘The Trial’*. The director, who claimed that he read Montaigne every day, had clearly become seriously devoted to the essay-film. As Welles said himself in a 1982 interview: “The essay does not date, because it represents the author’s contribution, however modest, to the moment at which it was made.”

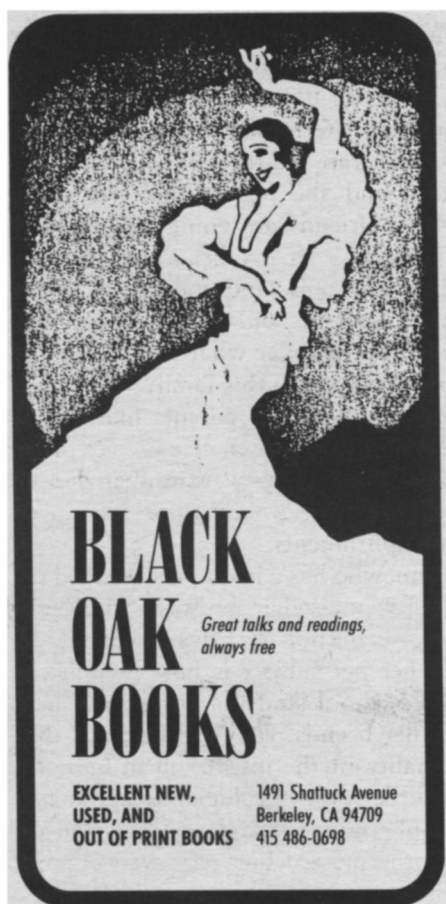
IT COULD be said that all first-person narration tends toward the essay, in the sense that, as soon as an “I” begins to define his/her position in and view

of the world, the potential for essayistic discourse comes into play. First-person narration in film is complicated by the disjunction between the subjective voice on the soundtrack and the third-person, material objectivity which the camera tends to bestow on whatever is photographed, like it or not. This tension has been cunningly exploited by the filmmakers who are drawn to first-person, like Robert Bresson, Joseph Mankiewicz, Woody Allen. First-person narration in movies often brings with it a bookish quality, partly because it has so often been used in movies adapted from novels, but also because it superimposes a thoughtful perspective, looking backwards on the supposed “now” of the film-time. Even an *I Walked With a Zombie* begins to seem studied and literary the moment we hear Frances Dee’s narrative voice orienting us to events that began in the past.

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

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

Unlike a true personal essayist, Moore resists the burden of self-understanding, electing to ridicule the inanities of the rich while not being hard enough on himself. Don’t get me wrong: the issue is not whether *Roger and Me* betrays the essay-film, a form that barely exists and that Michael Moore may have no conception of. The real question is, why do filmmakers find it so difficult to follow a train of thought, using their own personal voice and experience to guide them? In Moore’s case, he seems to have had a more pressing political agenda. But there may also be a huge difference between writing about oneself and filming oneself. Filmmakers usually choose that career expecting that they can stay behind the camera. I suspect that an immense reticence or bashfulness may set in, once a filmmaker who has taken center screen as the governing consciousness and main performer of an autobiographical film realizes how exposed he/she is—an exposure, perhaps, far exceeding what a literary essayist



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feels. Hence the dance of coyness and retreat, mentioned earlier in regard to Gorin.

Roger and Me also raises the question: to what extent can an essay-film welcome and ingest interviews while still being true to its essayistic nature? At what point will the multiplicity of voices threaten a unified presentation of "the personal views of the author?" Of course a film can be composed entirely of interviews and still exhibit a personal vision—see Errol Morris' or Marcel Ophuls' documentaries—but a personal vision is not necessarily a personal essay. Both Morris and Ophuls employ a degree of interview material that would seem, at least in my mind, to tip the scales away from the essay-film toward the documentary.

The relationship between documentary and essay-film is uneasy at best. They are often mistaken for each other; frequently, a work starts off as an essay-film and then runs for cover to the protective camouflage of the documentary. Roughly speaking, the essay-film is a sub-genre of the documentary (it must be, since it is shelved that way in video rental stores). At times, however, they behave like two different beasts.

When Michael Moore made a splash with *Roger and Me*, he was at pains to tell reporters, somewhat churlishly, that he hated most documentaries and did not consider his to be one. In so doing he was distancing himself both from the "box office poison" of documentaries and the standards of ethical documentary procedure. He also left the impression that he had invented a whole new type of movie, instead of acknowledging that there were other autobiographical filmmakers like Ross McElwee, Tony Buba, and Ralph Arlyck who had gotten there first.

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

An Acquired Taste (1981) is, in fact, an hilarious half-hour personal essay about the filmmaker's lack of commercial success, his jealousy and career envy, as seen against the American dream of rising to the top. Arlyck pokes fun at his pathetic go-getter attempts: there is one excruciating scene in which we watch the filmmaker typing out a grant application. "Increasingly I feel like the Ferdinand the Bull of filmmaking," he concludes. He prefers to stay home, play with the kids and make mild little films, while his wife flies off to France to defend her doctoral thesis. The Arlyck character comes across as a likable schlemiel, cousin to Woody Allen—not necessarily because he is influenced by Allen but because both are drawing from the same well of urban Jewish self-deprecating humor. (Indeed, listening to Woody Allen's digressive, epigrammatic narrators in films like *Annie Hall*, *Hannah and Her Sisters* or *New York Stories*, I've often thought that with a little push Woody could have ended up a natural essay-

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

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

First, there is the somewhat intractable nature of the camera as a device for recording thoughts: its tendency to provide its own thoughts, in the form of extraneous filmed background information, etc. rather than always clearly expressing what is passing through the filmmaker's mind.

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

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

Finally, I suspect there is a self-selection process attracting certain types of people into filmmaking as an art form: they revere images, want to make magic, and are uncomfortable with the pinning down of one's thoughts that an essay demands. You would probably stand a better chance of getting a crop of good essay-films if you gave out cameras and budgets to literary essayists, and told them to write their next essay for the screen, than if you rounded up the usual independent filmmakers and requested them to make essay-films. (I realize this will sound like a very self-serving suggestion on my part!)

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

It seems to me that three working procedures suggest themselves for the making of essay-films: 1) to write or borrow a text and go out and find images for it. I don't necessarily mean "illustrations," which casts the visual component in a subordinate position. The images and spoken text can have a contrapuntal or even contradictory relation to each other. 2) The filmmaker can shoot or compile previously shot footage and then write a text which is a meditation on the assembled images. This is often Chris Marker's approach. 3) The filmmaker can write a little, shoot a little, write a bit more, and so on—the one process interacting with the other throughout.

I don't know whether to blame these processes, chance or the immaturity of the genre, but so far, almost none of the examples I would consider essay-films have boasted superlative visuals. Serviceable, yes, but nothing to compare with the shimmering visual nobility of a dramatic film by Mizoguchi or Antonioni or Max Ophuls. The one exception I know of is *Night and Fog*, a case in which the separation between visual stylist (Resnais) and screenwriter (Cayrol) may have helped both images and text to reach the same level of artistic ripeness. Even when a great cinematic stylist like Orson Welles tries his hand at an essay-film, the visuals are nowhere near as interesting as those in his narrative features. *F For Fake* suffers from too much Francois Reichenbach, who shot most of its documentary material, and *Filming Othello* is a conventional-looking, talking-heads production made for German television. Chris Marker employs a visual style which is notationally engaging and decentered (and occasionally even mournfully beautiful, as in *Le Joli Mai*, when he had the budget for better cameramen); but for the most part, his visuals lack the syntactical rigor and elegance of his language. Ralph Arlyck's texts have considerable complexity and charm, but his visuals remain only one cut above the usual neutral documentary or hand-held *cinema verité*. It is almost as though, when the part of the brain that commands a sophisticated rational discourse springs into action, the visual imagination becomes sluggish, passive, less demanding.

Here it might be argued by some that the power of cinematic images springs from the unconscious mind, not from rational thought processes—that you need access to the irrational, the dreamscape to make visually resonant films. I wonder. So much of film theory is prejudiced in favor of the oneiric. Yet many of the film images that move me most reflect a detachment, serenity or philosophical resignation toward the wakened world that I can only think of as—rational. I don't want to sound too dualistic about this by implying that essays are only written with the rational mind; certainly an essayist taps into unconscious currents for imagery or passion. But I still say that the essay is a form *par excellence* for the display of rational thinking processes. So too should be the essay-film.

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