

and stillness at once, or the smile of the compassionate Buddha for those who are only what they are, a smile that would encourage them to more. This is not the humor derived from things being put together that are unlike. It is the humor of seeing the array of things and realizing that it all might rise, as if against gravity—the humor of a spontaneous response to having seen this, as if being touched.

PHILLIP LOPATE

In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film

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

Ever since I began looking for essay-films, the cinema mavens I consulted were quick to suggest candidates that seemed pretty far-fetched, given my idea of what an essay is. I was told, for instance, that 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 am unable to follow a coherent argument or know what he actually thinks about, say, the play of

light on an ashtray for forty minutes. So let me propose that, rather than rushing in anxiously to fill the void, it might be important as a starting-point to face the brute absence—the scarcity—of essay-films.

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

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

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

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

Adorno, in "The Essay as Form," saw precisely the antisystematic, subjective, nonmethodic method of the essay as its radical promise, and he called for modern philosophy to adopt its form, at a time when authoritative systems of thought had become suspect. Nietzsche asserted famously that all philosophies were disguised psychopathologies. The essayist often begins with a confession of pathology, prejudice, or limitation, and then in the best cases rises to a level of general wisdom that might be generously called philosophy.

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

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

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

(1) An essay-film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled, or 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. Ditto for a movie composed of images with incidental background noises, like Robert Gardner's exquisite *Forest*

of *Bliss* or Johann van der Keuken's *The Eye above the Well*; whatever their other virtues, these are not, to my thinking, essay-films. To be honest, I've never seen a silent-era movie that I could consider an essay-film. I have been told that Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* transmits its ideational content solely through its visuals. I grant that it delivers a clear ideological point, as does, say, Franju's *Blood of the Beasts*, but conveying a message of politics through images does not alone make an essay—or else we would have to speak of advertisements or political posters as essays. Both the Franju and the Vertov films seem (to use Vertov's label) "songlike," rather than essayistic.

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

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

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

(4) The text must impart more than information; it must have a strong, personal point of view. The standard documentary voiceover that tells us, say, about the annual herring yield is fundamentally journalistic, not essayistic. Nor is Luis Buñuel's mischievous *Land Without Bread*,

which parodies the faceless, objective documentary perspective while refraining from giving us Buñuel's own private thoughts about Las Hurdes, an essay-film. The missing element becomes immediately apparent when we contrast the film with Buñuel's lovely, idiosyncratic autobiography, *My Last Sigh*.

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

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

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

Sometimes a message flutters down, is picked up. Death makes its first pick, chooses again in the night and fog. Today, on the same track, the sun shines. Go slowly along with it . . . looking for what? Traces of the bodies that fell to the ground? Or the footmarks of

those first arrivals gun-bullied to the camp, while the dogs barked and searchlights wheeled and the incinerator flamed, in the lurid decor so dear to the Nazis?

The voice on the soundtrack was worldly, tired, weighted down with the need to make fresh those horrors that had so quickly turned stale. It was a self-interrogatory voice, like a true essayist's, dubious, ironical, wheeling and searching for the heart of its subject matter. "How discover what remains of the reality of these camps when it was despised by those who made them and eluded those who suffered there?" Meanwhile Resnais's refined tracking shots formed a visual analogue of this patient searching for historical meaning in sites now emptied of their infamous activity.

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

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

There are essayistic elements that color certain films by Chris Marker, Alexander Kluge, Jon Jost, Ralph Arlyck, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Joris Ivens, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dušan Makaveyev, Jean-Marie Straub, Yvonne Rainer, Woody Allen, Wim Wenders, Hartmut Bitomsky, Orson Welles, Ross McElwee, Robb Moss; Alain Resnais's shorts, 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*, Louis Malle's *My Dinner with André*, Jónathan Demme's *Swimming to Cambodia*, and I'm sure many others that I've forgotten or overlooked. By no means will I be able to discuss all these in the limited space allotted. By zeroing in on a handful, I hope to convey a sense of the potentials and pitfalls of the form, as well as weed out the true essay-films from those that have merely a tincture of essayism.

The one great essayist in the film medium is Chris Marker. *Letter From Siberia* (1958), *The Koumiko Mystery* (1965), and *Sans Soleil* (1982) are his purest essay-films, though it seems that he has an inveterate essayistic tendency that peeps out even in his more interview-oriented documentaries, such as *Le Joli Mai*, or his compilation films, such as *Grin without the Cat*. There is a tension in Marker's films between the politically committed, self-effacing, left-wing documentarist style of the thirties/Ivens tendency, and an irrepressibly Montaignesque personal tone. He has a reputation for being elusive and shy—not the best qualities, on the face of it, for a personal essayist—and yet, perhaps because he evolved so diverse and complicated a self (ex-Resistance fighter, novelist, poet, filmmaker), he can emit enough particles of this self to convey a strong sense of individuality and still keep his secrets. He also has the essayist's aphoristic gift, which enables him to assert a collective historical persona, a first-person plural, even when the first-person singular is held in abeyance. Finally, Marker has the essayist's impulse to tell the truth: not always a comfortable attribute for an engagé artist.

A film such as *Letter From Siberia*, which seems at first the sympathetic testimony of a Western fellow-traveler to the Soviet bloc, ends by coiling us in one contradiction after another. What keeps it on the Left is the good-humored, rather than sinister, tone in which Marker unveils the

problematic aspects of Siberian life. In a characteristically witty passage, Marker interprets the same footage three different ways, based on three separate ideological positions, thus demystifying the spurious objectivity of documentaries, albeit with a lighter touch than that with which this operation is usually performed. The sequence also points to one of Marker's key approaches as a film-essayist, which is to meditate on the soundtrack, after the fact, on the footage he has shot. In Marker there is often a pronounced time-lag between the quick eye and the slow, digesting mind, which tracks—months or even years later—the meaning of what it has seen, and this delay accounts for a certain nostalgia for the escaping present and a melancholy over the inherently receding reality of photographed images. It is like that passage in *Tristes Tropiques*, in which Claude Lévi-Strauss laments that the traveler/anthropologist always arrives too early or too late. In Marker's case, his camera arrives in time to record events, but his mind and heart take too long to catch up, not appreciating events sufficiently in the moment.

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

Sans Soleil is Marker's masterpiece, and perhaps the one masterpiece of the essay-film genre. How ironic, then, that Marker chooses the fictive strategy of a woman's voice (Alexandra Stewart's) reading passages from the letters of a friend, Sandor Krasna. This Krasna fellow is obviously a lightly fictionalized stand-in for the author, like Lamb's Elia. The film was assembled mostly during the seventies, a period when Marker was part of a political commune and preferred to downplay his auteurial signature (the line "Conception and editing: Chris Marker," buried in the long list of credits, is the only indication that it is his film), which may partly explain the diffident whimsy of hiding behind "Krasna." On the other hand,



Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (1982)

"To understand it properly one must move forward in time. In a year Luis Cabral, the President, will be in prison, and the man he has just decorated will have taken power."

putting his comments in the third person has the distancing effect of giving a respect and weight to them they might not have commanded otherwise. As Stewart reads passages from Krasna's letters, prefacing them with "he once wrote to me" or "he said," the effect is almost like a verbal funeral portrait. Marker appears to be anticipating and celebrating, with mordant relish, his own death, projecting a more mythical figure of himself in the process.

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

anonymity; a romantic who in San Francisco visits all the locations Hitchcock used in *Vertigo*; a collector of memories ("I have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering") who explicitly associates recollecting with rewriting.

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

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

Given Marker's sterling example, and the video access "revolution," and with more and more conceptual artists and defrocked academics taking to Portapak and cheap movie rigs, I half-expected to see a whole school of essay-films develop in the seventies and eighties. Not only did the technical potential exist, but a distribution circuit of underground venues, colleges, and museums was in place, promoting "personal cinema" as an alternative to the commercial product. But the essay-film never really arrived. What took its place, instead, was an explosion of films that incorporated essayistic throat-clearings as but one of many noises in an echo chamber of aesthetic cross-reference that ultimately "subverted," to use current jargon, the very notion of a single personal voice.

It was the bad luck of the essay-film that, just as its technical moment arrived, the intellectual trends of the hour—deconstruction, post-modernism, appropriation art, the new forms of feminism and Marxism retrofitted with semiotic media criticism—questioned the validity of the

single authorial voice, preferring instead to demonstrate over and over how much we are conditioned and brainwashed by the images around us. Not that these points are invalid, but they mute the essayistic voice: for if the self is nothing but a social construct, and individuality a bourgeois illusion intended to maintain the status quo, then the hip, "transgressive" thing to do is satiric quotation, appropriation, and collage.

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

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

A recent "collage film" by Yvonne Rainer, *Privilege* (1990), is a case in point: it mixes dramatic scenes, found footage, fake interviews, written texts, documentary sequences, and so forth, in a stimulating, braided exploration of menopause and racism. Jonathan Rosenbaum, defending this film in the *Chicago Reader*, wrote: "Approached as a narrative, Yvonne Rainer's sixth feature takes forever to get started and an eternity to end. In between its ill-defined borders, the plot itself is repeatedly interrupted, endlessly delayed or protracted, frequently relegated to the back burner and all but forgotten . . . Yet approached as an essay, *Privilege* unfolds like a single multi-faceted argument, uniformly illuminated by white-hot rage and wit—a cacophony of voices and discourses to be sure, but a purposeful and meaningful cacophony in which all the voices are speaking to us as well as one another." Much as I sympathize with Rosenbaum's position, he

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

Jon Jost is another independent filmmaker who has experimented on and off with essayistic elements. I recently checked out Jost's *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes* (1972–1974), which the filmmaker himself refers to as an "essay-film," and found it insufferably irritating. In part my reaction is to Jost's solemn, humorless, self-hating, tediously lecturing persona. Granted, all essayists have the option to bring out the obnoxious aspect of their personality, but they usually balance it with *something* charming; in Jost's case I wanted to hide under the seat every time he came on screen. Still, if he had made a true essay-film I could have applauded. But instead he created one more hybrid collage, with Vietnam atrocity stories and nightly-news broadcasts quoted simultaneously for ironic effect; with dictionary definitions suggesting something or other about linguistics; with fulminations against imperialism; ciné-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 apiece as a war criminal and a cipher, respectively—that the self-analysis comes off as evasive and shallow. Perhaps all this is intentional; a self-portrait of an unlikable fellow. It finally seems to me, though, that Jost has not really attempted to understand himself, but simply subsumed his self-portrait in larger and more forgiving sociohistorical categories. (I am told that Jost redeemed himself with a much better essay-film called *Plain Talk and Common Sense*. If so, I suppose I look forward to being proved wrong.)

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

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

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

language. It is effective in making us contemplate whether a truth is no less valid for being simple. But I would hardly call the text, with its blurted slogans undercut by verbal arabesques, an attempt at reasoned essayistic discourse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What is so refreshing about his talk is that he is speaking in an honest, maximally intelligent way about things he loves, Shakespeare and filmmaking. This Welles bears little resemblance to the arch poseur of late-night talk shows. Indeed, the audience is privileged to eavesdrop on a genius of the dramatic arts as he shares his thoughts and doubts about one



Orson Welles, *Filming "Othello"* (1978)

Over images from *Othello* Welles comments, "My film tried to depict a whole world in collapse."

of his most important productions. He is both musing to himself and seeming to dictate an essay aloud (though it was probably written out beforehand). On the other hand, he is also giving a performance, and we cannot help but judge him simultaneously as an actor, the way he whips his head from side to side or raises his eyebrows. Our awareness of the contrivance behind this seemingly artless conversation has been enhanced by Jonathan Rosenbaum's research on the making of *Filming "Othello"*: apparently it was shot over a number of years, with changing television crews operating under Welles's tight direction. (See Rosenbaum's "Orson Welles's Essay-Films and Documentary Fictions," *Cinematograph* 4, 1991.)

Welles tells us about the vicissitudes of filming *Othello*: how he was approached by an Italian producer who said "We must make *Othello*"; how he had originally planned to shoot in a studio with fluid long shots and long takes, but after the Italian producer went bankrupt he was forced into improvised location shooting all over the map and quick editing to cover the shifts; how he had to hammer sardine cans into armor; and other war

stories. He tells it exotically, "like a tale from Casanova," careening back and forth in his chronology, getting ahead of himself, digressing from meaty Shakespearian analysis to anecdote to critical response. "There is no way to avoid these—lapses into autobiography," he apologizes, as he begs our pardon later for rambling and failing to cite negative reviews. These apologies help to establish trust and rapport, in the classical manner of the personal essayist.

Vlada Petric notes ("*Filming 'Othello,'*" *Film Library Quarterly*, 1980) that, after reciting soliloquies of both Othello and Iago, as "a kind of compensation for the fact that the sound in the original print is poor," Welles "admits that his Othello 'does not do full justice to the play'; nevertheless he claims that the film is among his favorite works . . . 'I think that I was too young for this part, and I wish I could have done it over again.'" The present film is, in a sense, the "doing it over."

Welles's other so called essay-film, *F for Fake* (1975), is much less successful as such, largely because Welles seems more intent on mystifying and showing off his magician-Prospero persona than in opening his mind to us. I am never convinced that Welles is working hard to say all he can on the subject of counterfeit art; he is so taken up with a glib defense of artifice that he forgets to convey his own sincerity, something an essayist must do. He would rather have our tepid agreement that all art is a kind of lie than move us. Academic film critics, who overrate cinematic self-reflexivity and attention to the narrative "frame," adore the cheap joke he pulls on us when he promises that everything in the next hour will be true, then makes up some cock-and-bull story 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 all the more the wonderfully civilized, humane Welles of *Filming "Othello."*

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

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

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

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

Just as the diary is rightly considered a literary form distinct from the essay, so diary films such as *Sherman's March* and *David Holzman's Diary* obey a different structure than essay-films by following a linear chronology and reacting to daily events, rather than following a mental argument. Still, there are many overlaps between the two, as McElwee's thoughtful, digressive narrator in the wonderful *Sherman's March* (1986) demonstrates. Here McElwee plays with self-irony, ostensibly bidding for

our sympathy while asking viewers to judge his bachelor persona as rationalizing and self-absorbed. Indeed, the last quarter of the film turns into a contemporary morality play in which the narrator relinquishes his power of judgment to his friend Charlene, who becomes the voice of wisdom and vitality, telling him what he is doing wrong with women. This pat turn-about does provide a conclusion, but it also reinforces the suspicion that McElwee wants us to read his "Ross" the way we would a fictional, self-deluding character.

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

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

It is as though the filmmaker hooked us by offering himself as bait in order to draw us into his anticorporate capitalist sermon. The factual distortions of *Roger and Me*, its cavalier manipulations of documentary verisimilitude in the service of political polemic, have been analyzed at great length. I still find the film winning, up to a point, and do not so much mind its "unfairness" to the truth (especially as the national news media regularly distort in the other direction), as I do its abandonment of what

had seemed a very promising essay-film. Yet perhaps the two are related: Moore's decision to fade out his subjective, personal, "Michael," seems to coincide with his desire to have his version of the Flint, Michigan, story accepted as objective truth.

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

Roger and Me also raises the question of to what extent an essay-film can welcome and ingest interviews while still being true to its essayistic nature. At what point will the multiplicity of voices threaten a unified presentation of "the personal views of the author"? Of course, a film can be composed entirely of interviews and still exhibit a personal vision—Erroll Morris's or Marcel Ophüls's documentaries, for example. But a personal vision is not necessarily a personal essay. Erroll Morris's works, eccentric and personal as they are, do not seem to me essay-films. We can only guess what he is thinking as he exhibits the weird human specimens in *Vernon, Florida* or *Gates of Heaven*, and our not knowing how we are supposed to interpret them is precisely the ambiguous point. Similarly, other nonfiction movies with essay flavorings, such as Marker's *Le Joli Mai* or Rouch and Morin's *Chronique d'un Été*, employ a degree of interview material that would seem, at least in my mind, to tip the scales away from the essay-film and toward the documentary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another strong essay-film (or rather, videotape) is Vanalyne Green's *A Spy in the House That Ruth Built* (1989)—exemplary in its personal exploration of a subject (baseball), in the singularity of its first-person text, and in its self-mocking humor and elegant language. Green weaves entertaining connections between the national pastime, erotic fantasies, and the family romance. Here she is plotting her wardrobe for a shoot at the ballpark: "I wanted to go as a tramp, to look as if my head just left the pillow, and the gentle touch of a fingertip on my shoulder would topple me back into bed, where I would lie, framed seductively by the finest cotton and pastel pink sheets, smelling simultaneously of adult sex and a newborn baby's powdered bottom . . . But how not to abandon that other part of myself—the adult woman with the twelve-page vita—while a child inside

me was willing to whore her soul for a minute of eye contact with big Dave Winfield?" The visuals show us a witty assemblage composed of baseball paraphernalia, brief interviews, and comically homemade, modest visual tropes. If the text seems wrenched at times into a too-programmatically feminist line, Green recognizes the danger and stops herself, saying: "The more rhetoric, the less I said about me." In the end, she manages to say a lot about herself, in a manner that is broadly generous, forgiving, and very appealing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I do not know whether these processes, chance, or the immaturity of the genre are to blame, but so far, almost none of the examples I would consider essay-films have boasted superlative visuals. Serviceable, yes, but nothing that could compare with the shimmering visual nobility of

a dramatic film by Mizoguchi, 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 Welles tries his hand at an essay-film, the visuals are nowhere near as interesting as those in his narrative features. *F for Fake* suffers from too much François Reichenbach, who shot most of its documentary material, and *Filming "Othello"* is a conventional-looking, talking-heads production made for German television. Marker employs a visual style that is notationally engaging and decentered (and occasionally even mournfully beautiful, as in *Le Joli Mai*, when he had the budget for better cameramen); but for the most part, his visuals lack the syntactical rigor and elegance of his language. Arlyck's texts have considerable complexity and charm, but his visuals remain only one cut above the usual neutral documentary or hand-held cinema-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, and less demanding.

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

I am suddenly aware of many larger questions that my discussion may have failed to confront, and of my inability as a mere scribbler to answer any of them. Questions like: What is thinking? What is rationality? Is it possible to think exclusively in visual terms, or exclusively in language,

without images? Will there ever be a way to join word and image together on screen so that they accurately reflect their initial participation in the arrival of a thought, instead of merely seeming mechanically linked, with one predominating over or fetched to illustrate the other? Finally, is it possible that the literary essay and the essay-film are inherently different—the essay-film is bound to follow a different historical development, given the strengths and limitations of the cinematic medium? Have I been doing an injustice to the essay-film by even asking it to perform like a literary essay?

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

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

Postscript

Since writing this piece, I have seen a number of intriguing, thought-provoking nonfiction films that should be included in the discussion. There is Ross McElwee's skillful, moving, yet reticent continuation of his autobiographical musings, *Time Indefinite*; Alan Berliner's complex, funny documentary portrait of his grandfather, *Intimate Stranger*, about a man well loved by his colleagues but judged more harshly by his family; Patrick Keiller's *London*, an elegiac meditation on that city, using the distancing commentary of a third-person fictive figure, "Robinson," much like the device in *Sans Soleil*, though "Robinson" proves more unreliable; and Godard's amazing, layered, multipart montage, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, which broods about the medium in an evocatively "essayistic" manner, insistently subverted by Brechtian distancings. Each of these works flirts with and hesitates to commit to the essay-film, bearing out my thesis that it is an increasingly tempting yet problematic form of our era. Finally, Marker's latest essay-film, *The Last Bolshevik* (1993), about the Russian filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin and the vicissitudes of mixing radicalism and art, triumphantly and confidently manages the form, reaffirming Marker's right to hold onto his title as "the cinema's only true essayist."

Many people helped me in writing this essay, however much they may disagree with my conclusions. I want to thank Jonathan Rosenbaum for his generous sharing of materials and tapes, and his briefings on Welles; also Terrence Rafferty, for his insights into Marker; Amos Vogel, for his sage skepticism; the staff of Women Make Movies, for giving me access to their library; Charles Silver, for loaning me Ici et Ailleurs; Ralph Arlyck, for tapes of his films; Richard Pena, David Sterritt, Ralph McKay, and Carrie Rickey for their helpful advice; and last but not least, Vlada Petric for his invitation and steadfast support.

VLADA PETRIC

Vertov's Cinematic Transposition of Reality

The goal is to make things look on the screen like "life-facts" and at the same time to mean much more than that.

—Dziga Vertov

Works of art change on two levels: the aesthetic, which is affected by the ongoing evolution of artistic concepts, and the ideological, which is contingent upon socioeconomic circumstances. Only those nonfiction films that transcend mere documentation can continue to exist and be valued as important cinematic achievements.

These two levels of change are especially an issue with politically engaged cinema, such as Dziga Vertov's films dedicated to the October Revolution and communist society. His works *Forward March, Soldiers!* (1926), *One Sixth of the World* (1926), *The Eleventh Year* (1928), *Three Songs about Lenin* (1934) convey political messages through cinematic devices, turning recorded "life-facts" [*zhiznennye fakty*] into what he labeled *kinochestvo*. In his 1922 "We" manifesto, he defines this *kinochestvo* (which he coined): "Kinochestvo is the art of organizing the respective movements of objects in space, as a rhythmic and artistic whole, in harmony with the nature of the given material and the internal rhythm of the events."¹ It is not merely the content of the shot, but the organization of the rhythm of the images projected on the screen that constitute a genre.

1. Dziga Vertov, "We: A Variant Manifesto" (1922), in *Articles, Diaries, Projects* [Stat'i, dnevniki, zamysli], ed. Drobashenko (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), 47. Later cited as *Articles*; the translation of the quotations is mine. A more useful is *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (University of California Press, 1984).