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## **THE ESSAY FILM: "ON THOUGHTS OCCASIONED BY . . ." MONTAIGNE TO MARKER**

**Abstract.** This paper is part of a larger study on the essay film. It aims to explore more exactly the "essayistic" in and through film, where the essayistic indicates a kind of encounter between the self and the public domain, an encounter that measures the limits and possibilities of each as a conceptual activity. Appearing within many different artistic and material forms besides the essay film, the essayistic acts out a performative presentation of self as a kind of self-negation in which narrative or experimental structures are subsumed within the process of thinking through a public experience  
*Keywords:* essay film, Montaigne, Marker, personal expression, public experience

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

Since Montaigne, the essay has appeared in numerous permutations, inhabiting virtually every discourse and material expression available. Most often, the essayistic is associated with the literary essays whose historical prominence extends from Montaigne through Joseph Ad-

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

...the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything. (...) Essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal. Most essayists are at home and at their best in the neighborhood of only one of the essay's three poles, or at the most only in the neighborhood of two of them. There are the predominantly personal essayists, who write fragments of reflective autobiography and who look at the world through the keyhole of anecdote and description. There are the predominantly objective essayists who do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme. (...) The most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist.<sup>1</sup>

To map and distinguish the essay in its evolution from Montaigne to the essay film, I employ a variation on Huxley's three poles as not separable kinds of essays but as, in the "most richly satisfying essays," interactive and intersecting registers. While one or the other of these three registers may be more discernible in any given essay, my three variations on Huxley's versions of the essayistic describe the intersecting activity of personal expression, public experience, and the process of thinking. Other definitions and models of the essay tend to emphasize one or the other of these features as, for instance, the role of a personal voice or the search for documentary authenticity. For me, however, the variable ratio and interactivity of these three dimensions creates a defining representational shape that emerges out of the literary heritage of the essay and extends and reformulates itself in the second half of the twentieth century as the essay film. If part of the power of the essayistic has been its ability to absorb and mobilize other literary and artistic practices, such as narrative or photographic practices, film has become, since the 1940s, one of its richest terrains.

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<sup>1</sup> HUXLEY, A. "Preface to The Collected Essays of Aldous Huxley." – In: *Aldous Huxley Complete Essays*. Vol. 6, 1956–1963. Chicago: Dee, 2002, p. 330.

While no single definition of the essayistic will probably ever be sufficiently malleable for its many variations, following this framework as it emerges from its literary foundation (and later adapted to the photographic essay) clarifies and formulates, I believe, the distinctive terms of the essay film. Across the history of its shifting practices, the essayistic stretches and balances itself between abstracted and exaggerated representation of the self (in language and image) and an experiential world encountered and acquired through the discourse of thinking out loud. If Montaigne introduces the literary beginnings of this practice, tracing this history and its emerging priorities leads almost climactically, for André Bazin and others, to Chris Marker's 1958 essay film *Letter from Siberia* and, subsequently, to Richard Roud's prescient characterization of Marker as "1:1.33 Montaigne."<sup>2</sup>

From Montaigne to Barthes to Marker, the history of the essay offers a lengthy list of examples of a personal, subjective, or performative voice and vision as the definitive feature of the essayistic. Best exemplified by the "familiar essay" of nineteenth-century writers like Charles Lamb or Ralph Waldo Emerson, this connection between the essay and personal expression identifies, however, a much more complicated, dynamic, and often subversive position than is often acknowledged in the assumption that essays cohere around a singular self.<sup>3</sup> The history of the essay demonstrates, in fact, that the essayistic is most interesting not so much in how it privileges personal expression and subjectivity but rather in how it troubles and complicates that very notion of *expressivity* and its relation to *experience*, that second cornerstone of the essayistic. If both verbal and visual expression commonly suggests the articulation or projection of an interior self into an exterior world, essayistic expressivity describes, more exactly I think, a subjection of an instrumental or expressive self to a public domain as a form of experience that continually tests and undoes the limits and capacities of that self through that experience. At the intersection of these two planes, we find in the best of essays the difficult, often highly complex—and sometimes seemingly impossible—figure of the self or subjectivity *thinking* in and through a public domain, in all its historical, social, and cultural particulars.

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas Marker is consistently associated with the beginnings of the essay film, other film historians and scholars identify other key films in the formation of the practice. Michael Renov, for instance, discusses, Jonas Mekas's *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1969/1976) as an early and key example of the essay film. Alter follows Jay Leyda and aligns the essay film with an earlier history, beginning with Richter's 1928 *Inflation*. Arguing that "the foundations of the essay film derive from three landmark documentaries," Paul Arthur places Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955) and Jean Rouch's *Les Maitres fous* (1955) alongside *Letter from Siberia*, see: ARTHUR, P. *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film Since 1965*. Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 65–66.

<sup>3</sup> Historically, this is an essentially Romantic formulation as a "personal essay."

Essayistic expression (as writing, as film, or in any of its other modes) thus demands both loss of self and the rethinking and remaking of the self.

Montaigne's renowned combination of stoicism, skepticism, and Epicureanism consequently plays itself out across the movement from a self-expression undoing itself in the process of thinking through the dynamics of the world "as perennial movement" ("Of Repentance")<sup>4</sup>. Aiming to be "an authority on myself" and studying "myself more than any other subject" Montaigne's motto "que-sais-je" ("what do I know?") calls into question the security of his own authority. It is one of many succinct phrases in his work that describes a principal drive in the writings as an investigation into the terms of one's self and how an individual might discover a certain knowledge of the world through its unsystematic experience of that world. Throughout this work, however, this drive continually rattles the terms of its own articulation, suggesting a self whose thinking through experience becomes a measure of the limits of its own capacities. While freely celebrating thinking about all details of his life, he acknowledges that "I speak freely of all things, even those which exceed my capacity" ("Of Books")<sup>5</sup>.

In his monumental essay "Of Experience," Montaigne affirms "human ignorance" as "the most certain fact in the school of the world" yet insists again and again on his goal to be "intellectually sensual, sensually intellectual"<sup>6</sup>. Since "our life is nothing but movement," essayistic expression becomes that materialized place for a provisional self and its thoughts, free of method and authority: "for lack of a natural memory I make one of paper", he quips, claiming that "all the fricassee that I am scribbling here [...] record the essays of my life [...] it's instruction in reverse [...] not corrupted by art or theorizing"<sup>7</sup>. Unlike systematic or formulaic approaches to knowledge, he learns "from experience, without any system," so presents "my ideas in general way, and tentatively"<sup>8</sup>. While Francis Bacon's more social, more advisory, and more structured essays (published in 1597, 1612, 1625) serve as a parallel beginning of the modern essay, Montaigne's shifting and layered assertions and denials of passing thoughts on the world become the acknowledged background and touchstone for many of the first essay films, as Richard Roud explicitly reminds us in his description of Marker as "a kind of one man total cinema [...] a 1 to 1:33 Montaigne"<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> MONTAIGNE, M. *The Complete Works of Montaigne*. Trans. Donald M. Frame. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1948, p. 313.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 826.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 824.

<sup>9</sup> ROUD, R. "The Left Bank." – In: *Sight and Sound* (Winter 1962–1963), p. 27. A highly recommended contemporary reading of Montaigne's work is KRITZMAN, L. D. *The Fabulous Imagination: On Montaigne's Essays*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2009.

On the foundation of Montaigne, essay writing accelerates and broadens considerably in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when it begins to take a more distinctive shape as a public dialogue between a self and a visible world, often urban and sometimes natural. Eighteenth-century England is a prime example where both the industrial and democratic backdrop of the essay comes in high relief as a function of major shifts in the public sphere: notably through the vehicle of new periodicals ideally suited for essayistic interventions in coffee-house culture and propelled forward by the development of the iron press in 1798, the notion of individual becomes reconfigured in the significantly broader commercial terms of the social observation, communication, and interactivity. One of many well-known examples, Addison and Steele's essays, published in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* as early as 1709, map the changing rhythms and geographies of industrialized urban spaces through the eyes of fictional personae, Issac Bickerstaff and Sir Roger Coventry. These essays wander the streets of London as a distinctly self-effacing "Looker-on" (*Spectator* 1) whose perspective focuses and disperses across a club of social types (a country squire, a military man, and so on) and whose comments and observations, entwining spectacle and spontaneity, record the social variety and bustle of daily life.

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

What I find most suggestive in these historical reformulations of the essayistic—particularly as they help ground and anticipate the essay film—is precisely *not* the usual understanding of them as the coherently personalized expression of an authorized subjectivity, typically associated with some version of the romantic or modern ego. While virtually every representational and artistic practice might be said to dramatize encounters between a self and the world, the dynamic and balance of that encounter seems to me to be significantly differentiated in the essayistic as a kind of fragmentation that dramatically troubles subjectivity and representation. Whereas representational practices such as those of the novel or lyric poetry, generally speaking, recuperate and organize public space through the finished frameworks of a coherent and determining subjectivity, essays tend willingly, and often ag-

gressively, to undermine or disperse that very subjectivity as it becomes subsumed in the world it explores. This is less an oppositional distinction than a significant distinction in a representational ratio that in part reflects historical changes (mapped in the increasing importance and prevalence of the essay through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and in part reflects authorial choices and experiments with different representational relations (seen commonly in a writer's choice to move between traditionally authorized practices, such as poetry or novels, and the essayistic).<sup>10</sup>

Essays are thus most indicative of the form, I believe, when they act of out the subjection of that self within or before a natural space or, as with the essays of Charles Lamb, Virginia Woolf, and Roland Barthes, a public urban space, dispersing or transforming that self within that space and, quite often and more exactly, its visibility.<sup>11</sup> In Woolf's essay "Street Haunting" (1927), for instance, London becomes a panoramic of sights, where the "eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances", and, instead of the coherency of seeing oneself as "one thing only," the self becomes a reflection of the visual plenitude of a modern city, "streaked, variegated, all of a mixture", a self "tethered not to a single mind," but a self that puts "on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and mind of others".<sup>12</sup> Just as essayists from Thomas De Quincey to Walter Pater create a certain poetic urgency in a prose aimed at describing the fleeting images of the world around them, Woolf's essayistic self in "Street Haunting" finds her quest for an instrument of self-expression, specifically a pencil, ecstatically waylaid by the a "velocity and abundance" of the London streets.<sup>13</sup>

As a pronounced anticipation of many essay films, many twentieth-century literary essays dramatize this destabilizing encounter between

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Harrison's *Essayism: Conrad, Musil, & Pirandello* is a smart investigation of how certain twentieth-century writers merged the novel and the essay to create a hybrid essayistic novel – HARRISON, Th. *Essayism: Conrad, Musil, & Pirandello*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> An incisive examination of this relationship between subjectivity, the verbal, and the visible in the early nineteenth century is GALPERIN, W. *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> WOOLF, V. "Street Haunting: A London Adventure." – In: *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995, pp. 260–265.

<sup>13</sup> This tension and dialogue between the verbal and the visual becomes particularly pronounced in the nineteenth century in ways that adumbrate the rise of the essayistic and film representation more generally. J. Hillis Miller has identified some of the precedents for this practice in his *Illustration* where he examines precursive examples such as the photographic frontispieces that accompany Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904), see: MILLER, J. H. *Illustration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992.

a visual world that resists or troubles its verbal assessment, producing a linguistic struggle with a visual world that continually undermines or subverts the subjective power of language. From explicit cases like William Gass's extended essay *Blue* or any of Jorge Luis Borges's essays to the more naturalized tactics of writers like James Baldwin, this linguistic drama emphasizes the limitations of language as the vehicle for thinking a self in public images and the necessity of reinventing that language to compensate for its inadequacies before the world. In Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village," for instance, the "sight" of an African American by the local villagers in a small Swiss town produces Baldwin's complex inquiry into American racial history and the struggle to "establish an identity".<sup>14</sup> Throughout this essay and many others, including his long reflection on the Hollywood film industry, "The Devil Finds Work," Baldwin develops a rhetorical stance searching for new words that could sufficiently act as an interface between his personal experience and the images of the world that he sees and that see him. Or, as he puts it in 1999 "I will not take any one's words for my experience" ("I'll Make Me a World").<sup>15</sup> In the most demanding essays and essay films, this interactive confrontation destabilizes not only the authorial subject but also the resulting text and the reader/viewer's apprehension of it.

If the essay film inherits many of the epistemological and structural distinctions of the literary essay especially as it plays itself out as a dialogic tension between the verbal and the visual, a key transitional practice linking these two forms of representations is the photo essay, where visual itself begins to acquire the expressivity and instability associated with the verbal realm of the literary voice and where the visual now often becomes not oppositional to but an alternative mode of expressivity. Part scientific investigation, part educational sermon, part ethnographic tour, Jacob Riis's 1890 *How the Other Half Lives* figures prominently as an early transitional essay between the verbal and the visual. Here Riis investigates New York tenements in the 1880s as a public place defined as "the destroyer of individuality and character"<sup>16</sup>, and the novelty and power of this work spring directly from its use of shocking photographs of the deplorable living conditions to counterpoint the melodramatic voice of the commentary. The 1930s later became the heyday of the photo essay, and during this period a heightened dialogic tension between verbal texts and photographic images defined a transitional period that would lead to the first discussions and practices of the essay film in the 1940s. This verbal-visual dialectic becomes most famously witnessed in James Agee and Walker Evan's 1939 essayistic collaboration *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* where the literary privileging of the verbal against the

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<sup>14</sup> BALDWIN, J. *Collected Essays*. New York: Library of America, 1998, p. 127.

<sup>15</sup> BALDWIN, J. "I'll Make Me a World." – *PBS broadcast*, February 2, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> RIIS, J. *How the Other Half Lives*. Boston: Bedford, 1996, p. 222.

pressure of the visual is reversed as a fundamental doubt about the adequacy of a verbal text to express the fragmentary mobility of images: "If I could do it," Agee writes, "I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odor, plates of food and of excrement".<sup>17</sup>

As a supplement for the subjective voice in the photo essay, a verbal or literary text often dramatizes and concretizes a shifting subjective perspective and its unstable relationship with the photographic images it counterpoints. In other cases, the structural formulation of the photo essay, as the linkage of separate photographs whose implied relationship appears in the implicit gaps or "unsutured" interstices between those images, becomes itself analogous to the shifting and aleatory voice or perspective of the literary essay as it attempts, provisionally, to articulate or interpolate itself within the public spaces and experiences being represented. In 1937, Henry Luce, founder of *Life* magazine, suggests, in his "The Camera as Essayist," just this ability of the image to mimic or usurp the verbal subjectivity of the literary essay when he describes the photo essay as part of a historical evolution that links practices from the seventeenth century to Riis and the heyday of the photo essay in the 1930s. Here the construction of images can itself assimilate the role and language of the essayistic commentator since the camera "is not merely a reporter. It can also be a commentator. It can comment as it reports. It can interpret as it presents. It can picture the world as a seventeenth-century essayist or a twentieth-century columnist would picture it. A photographer has his style as an essayist has his".<sup>18</sup> Whether with an explicit or implicit voice or text, the essayistic tension between a verbal register and a visual order that resists and troubles the verbal thus creates, in W. J. T. Mitchell's words, "dialectic of exchange and resistance between photography and language," making it "possible (and sometimes impossible) to 'read' the pictures, or to 'see' the text illustrated in them".<sup>19</sup> Complimentary German writer Christa Wolf's claims that "Prose should strive to be unfilmable"<sup>20</sup>, Alexander Kluge would later extend this logic when he remakes the tradition of the photo essay as the contemporary essay film in which, like his *Blind Director* (1985), "Language in film may be blind"<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> AGEE, J. and W. EVANS. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1939, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> WILLUMSON, G. G. *W. Eugene Smith and the Photographic Essay*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> MITCHELL, W. J. T. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 289.

<sup>20</sup> WOLF, Ch. *The Author's Dimension: Selected Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> KLUGE, Al. "Word and Film." – In: *Film and Literature: An Introduction and*



Against this historical background, the essayistic has become increasingly the object of theoretical and philosophical reflections and self-reflections, starting especially in the early twentieth century. Well before this point, many essayists have themselves reflected on the practice as a particular kind of writing. Yet, during the twentieth century attention to the essay as a unique representational strategy flourishes as a distinctive aesthetic and philosophical question, perhaps in anticipation of Jean-Francois Lyotard's provocative claim that the essay becomes the quintessential form of post-modern thought in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Anticipating key dimensions and strategies of the essay film, several celebrated positions are especially important to theorizing its heritage, its status as a form of knowledge, and its subversion of aesthetic unity. Published in 1910, Georg Lukacs's "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" is one of the earliest and most celebrated accounts of the essay in terms of a dialogic idealism that envisions essayistic experience as "an event of the soul". For Lukacs, successful essays are "a conceptual reordering of life", "intellectual poems" that either address "life problems" or recreate that vitality as a critical engagement that becomes itself a work of art.<sup>23</sup> Even within this framework, Lukacs identifies, however, the essayistic experience as an active "questioning" that asserts the primacy of a subjective "standpoint" and works to discover through that questioning the "idea" of a "life-sense". In this mobile activity, the essayist becomes "conscious of his own self, must find himself and build something out of himself"<sup>24</sup> and so becomes extended through the conceptual revelations of this dialogue with real or aesthetic experience. Pinpointing what will become a central dialogic structure in essay films, Lukacs sees Plato as "the greatest essayist who ever lived" and "Socrates is the typical life for the essay" since Socrates "always lived in the ultimate questions [...] to comprehend the nature of longing and to capture it in concepts".<sup>25</sup> All essays are "thoughts occasioned by", and lead to his famously pronounced motto of a self suspended in the experience of thinking through the core of life: "The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with system) but the process of judging"<sup>26</sup>.

Contrasting Lukacs's focus on the essay's Platonic heritage, mid-century discussions of the essay in Germany and Austria evolve around questions of the essay's unique epistemological resources. Significantly, the essay now begins to distinguish itself not as an aesthetic or idealistic experience

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Reader. N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1999, p. 238.

<sup>22</sup> LYOTARD, J. F. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, Press, 1984, p. 81.

<sup>23</sup> LUKACS, G. "On the Nature and Form of the Essay." – In: *Soul and Form*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974, pp. 1–18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13–14.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

but as an intellectual activity and form of knowledge that resists the lure of idealism defined primarily as an aesthetic experience. In the Robert Musil's monumental 1930 essayistic novel *The Man Without Qualities*, the essay comes to refigure thought as an experiential engagement with the world: it "explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down to a concept. [...] an essay is [...] the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in a decisive thought. Nothing is more foreign to it than the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism".<sup>27</sup> In 1947, Max Bense refines the argument in postwar terms that would be especially important to film's multi-layered form by noting that "The essayist is a combiner, a tireless producer of configurations around a specific object. [...] Configuration is an epistemological arrangement which cannot be achieved through axiomatic deduction, but only through a literary *ars combinatoria*, in which imagination replaces strict knowledge".<sup>28</sup> Like the configuration of fragments in a kaleidoscope or cinematic montage, the essay offers, for Bense, a creative rearrangement and play "of idea and image".

Especially as it describes the conceptual and formal activities of the essayistic, T. W. Adorno's "The Essay as Form" offers one of the most resonant models of the essay as it looks forward to the essay film. Here Adorno argues that the distinguishing strength of the essay is its ability to subvert systemic thought, totalities of truth, and "the jargon of authenticity", through an "methodically unmethodical" whereby the essay's "innermost formal law is heresy"<sup>29</sup>. Fragmentary and "non-creative," the essay represents "reciprocal interaction of concepts in the process of intellectual experience", and the essayistic subject becomes a "thinker" who "makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience". Configured as "force fields", essays celebrate "the consciousness of nonidentity" and the emancipation from the compulsion of identity, while simultaneously exploring a subjective activity that realizes "Nothing can be interpreted out of something that is not interpreted into it at the same time"<sup>30</sup>. "The essay is concerned with what is blind in its objects," according to Adorno. It wants "to use concepts to pry open the aspects that cannot be accommodated by concepts, the aspect that reveals, through the contradictions in which concepts become entangled, that the net of their objectivity is merely subjective arrangement. It wants to polarize the opaque element and release the latent forces in it"<sup>31</sup>. Coincidentally and appropriately, Adorno's essay appears the same year, 1958, as Chris Marker's *Letter*

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<sup>27</sup> MUSIL, R. *The Man without Qualities, I*. New York: Knopf, 1995, p. 270, p. 273.

<sup>28</sup> BENSE, M. "Über den Essay und seine Prosa." – *Merkur* 1.3, 1947, p. 422.

<sup>29</sup> ADORNO, T. W. "The Essay as Form." – In: *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991, pp. 3–23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

from *Siberia* and Bazin's landmark description of that film as an essay film.

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

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