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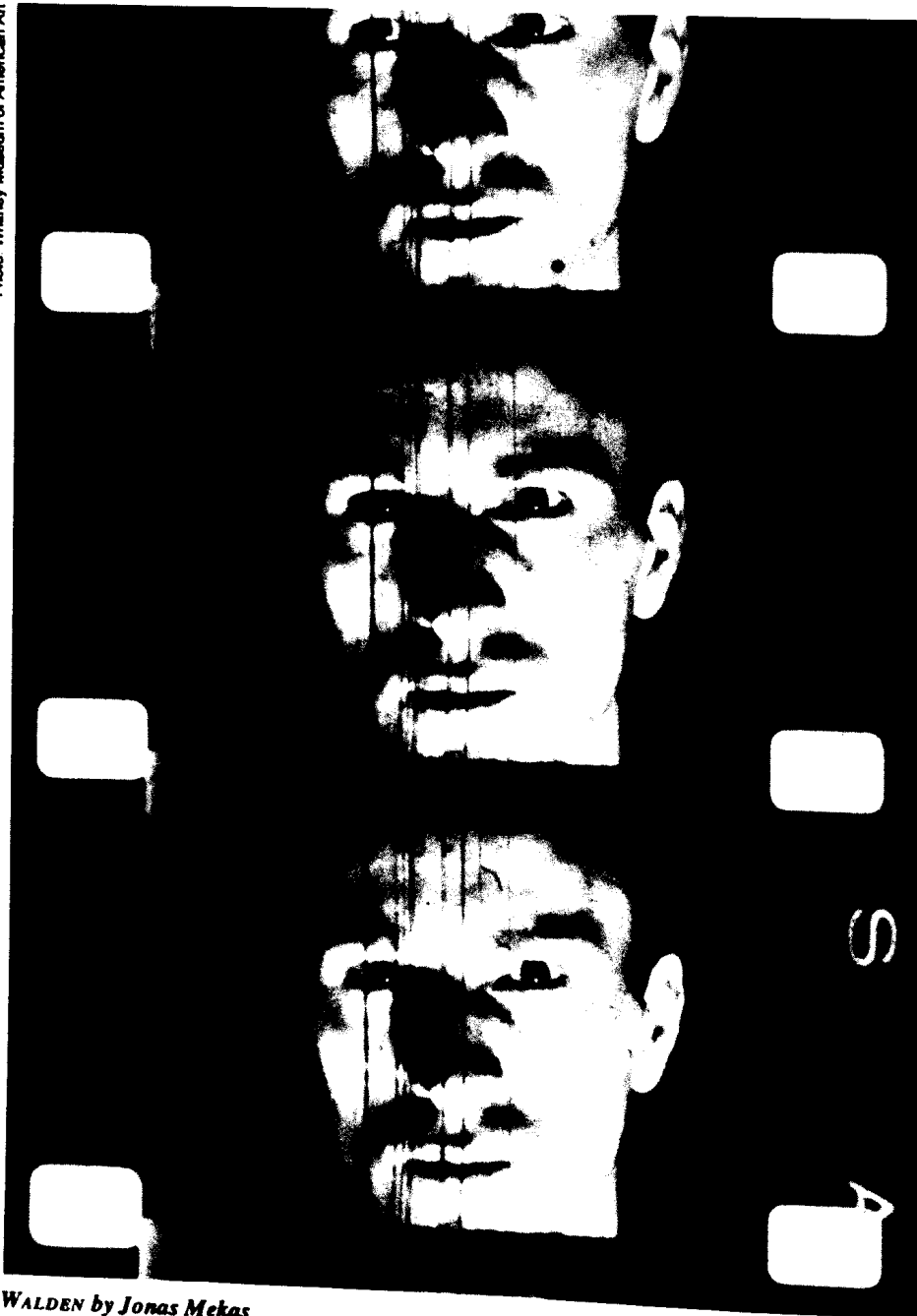
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History And/As Autobiography: The Essayistic in Film & Video

by Michael Renov

Photo: Whitney Museum of American Art



WALDEN by Jonas Mekas

"And so the opinion I give. . . is to declare the measure of my sight, not the measure of things."

Montaigne, *Essays* (1948, II:10, p. 298)

"... I am elsewhere than where I am when I write."

Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (1977, p. 169)

In formulating the category of the writerly as ideal text — triumphantly plural, characterized by a reversibility alien to narrative, a galaxy of signifiers rather than a structure of signifieds — Roland Barthes provided an introduction and commentary for the final and most remarkable phase of his career. The notion of the writerly was first broached in *S/Z*, published a decade before Barthes' death; the four books that followed — *The Pleasure of the Text*, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, *A Lover's Discourse*, and *Camera Lucida* — constitute a fragmentary but rhapsodic text, neither monumental nor finished, a montage of heterotopic elements that nonetheless resists a descent into cacophony (Bensmaïa, pp. 18-34).¹ According to Reda Bensmaïa in his *The Barthes Effect: The Essay As Reflective Text*, the essay, born practically and aesthetically with Montaigne in the late 16th century but never wholly integrated into the literary canon, was at last theorized in these latter works of Barthes. In a lineage that includes Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Adorno as well as Barthes, the essay form has confounded the laws of genre and taxonomy, challenging the very notion of text and of textual economy. In its heterogeneity and inexhaustibility ("with an 'amoeba-like' versatility often held together by little more than the author's voice" [Bensmaïa, p. ix]), the essayistic bears with it a logic that defies the verities of rhetorical composition and of system, indeed of mastery itself.

The Book of the Self

The trajectory of the essayistic which the present inquiry seeks to extend to the visual arts must be

distinguished from the alternative traditions of essay writing since Montaigne. In each century since the 16th and in virtually every European literary culture, the essay form has flourished: the British variant, formal (Locke) and informal (Lamb); the scientific as well as autobiographical essays of French letters (e.g., Laplace's *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités* and Sartre's *Situations*); or the philosophical Germanic tradition of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Adorno.² All versions display a defining didacticism, offering to knowledge something of the world and/or the self. Corresponding formats of film or video might thus be deemed "non-fiction," a cinematic domain traditionally limited in its expressive range. But if, as Bensmaïa has claimed, the essay is unique in the annals of literature for its resistance to generic integration, (p. 96) it should come as no surprise that the visual essay eludes ready classification with equal insistence.

In the present context, it is the Montaignian essay, indissolubly coupling personal and social-historical exploration ("the measure of sight" and "the measure of things"), that provides the ground upon which the figure of the film/video essay can be constructed. It is this lineage of the essayistic that most instantiates its etymological origins ("to try" or "put to the test"), exploring the conditions of enunciation as surely as its nominal "object matter." The self-reflexivity thus enjoined exceeds the playfully parodic gesture of (meta)fictional modes; in this textual gambit, the interrogation of the social cannot avoid the implication of the enunciative source. For if the subject/object split which underpins Western thought theorizes "self" and "other" as extrinsic positions, the sustained and simultaneous emphasis upon the historical real (the signified) and subjectivity (the signifying agency) which characterizes the essayistic dissolves radical disjunction. Within discourse, "self" and "other" become enmeshed and mutually defining: the social as representation, always mediated through subjectivity, becomes

instead its expression.

Another defining element of the essayistic constructed on the Montaignian model is its autobiographical character. The upsurge of recent critical attention to autobiography can be traced to its innately transgressive status "as a formal mutation, a hybrid genre . . . definable neither as fiction nor nonfiction — not even a mixture of the two." (Renza, p. 273). Constituted by the "divorce between the writing self and her textual rendition," producing "an 'I' never her own because it makes present what remains past to her" (Renza, p. 278), autobiographical writing has been characterized (much as the essay has been) as essentially heterotopic. Louis A. Renza ascribes to the autobiographical project a potential pull toward the writerly, due in part to the ineradicable split between the writing and written selves.

To write autobiographically, to limit the presentational effect of his narrative on himself, the writer will often "jam" his narrative's totalizing unity (with its promise of an unselfconscious transcription of his life) by overdetermining its parts. For this reason as much as any other, a given autobiographical work tends to be a composite, an eclecticism, of distinct verbal moments. It tends to accrue discrete pockets of verbal irrelevancies such as casual or ironic self-references; compressed or abbreviated narratives within — and redundantly digressing from — the major narrative line; journal and/or diary entries that in effect displace the narrative's present by evoking a past-present verbal act; and especially imaginative ramblings, digressions, "visions," reveries, unusual or drawn out depictions of other persons — all "spots of time," in other words, that seem complete or sufficient by themselves" (p. 286).

The newfound critical attention accorded autobiography seems bound up in its perceived resistance to organicist aesthetic norms. "Autobiography completes no picture," writes Janet Varner Gunn. "Instead, it rejects wholeness or harmony, ascribed by formalists to the well-made art object,

as a false unity which serves as no more than a defense against the self's deeper knowledge of its finitude" (p. 25). The abiding interest in the problematics of subjectivity discernible in American literary studies in the past twenty years (traceable to the importation of Continental thought) has placed autobiography on the critical agenda. The essayistic, which shares with that mode the textual involutions born of self-scrutiny, adds to that fixation upon subjectivity the documentarist's rapt gaze upon the representable world.

The Essayistic

In classical poetics, the coherence and synthetic power of a work are the aesthetic manifestations of an epistemological presumption, namely the unity and stability of the subject. As formulated by Barthes, the essayistic comes to be metaphorized as a Japanese stew, a broken television screen, a layered pastry; Bensmaïa characterizes its formal procedure as a "tactics without strategy" (p. 51). The now familiar assault upon the category of the subject, bastion of western metaphysics, is textualized in the essayistic; for if compositional coherence is undermined, so too is the knowability of the source and subject of enunciation. Montaigne's "book of the self," the essay as autobiography, refuses any notion of simple origins.

In discussing Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, Jacques Derrida has suggested that autobiography mobilizes meaning along a dynamic borderline between the "work" and the "life," the system and the subject of the system (p. 5). This borderline, as in all of Derrida's meditations on boundary conditions, is posited as a site of contestation; it is the place where the proper name or signature is staged. Derrida's sense of the signature as ruse or masquerade echoes the Barthesian injunction: "In the field of the subject, there is no referent" (Barthes, 1977, p. 56). Speaking of Nietzsche's own autobiographical essay, Derrida suggests that the philosopher "advances behind a plurality of masks or names that, like any mask and even any theory of the

simulacrum, can propose and produce themselves only by returning a constant yield of protection, a surplus value in which one may still recognize the ruse of life" (p. 7). The subject today, says Barthes, "apprehends himself elsewhere" (1977, p. 51).

"The whole is the false"

Theodor Adorno's *Minima*

Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life, a volume of one hundred fifty-one aphorisms composed between 1945 and 1947, provides yet another essayistic prototype. In this work, Adorno takes issue with Hegel's conception of "a totality harmonious through all its antagonisms"; indeed, one passage concludes with the quintessential Hegelian inversion — "The whole is the false" (pp. 17, 50). The essays seek to confirm the efficacy of the category of the subject for philosophical investigation, pursuing aspects of the interrupted Adorno/Horkheimer collaboration "from the standpoint of subjective experience....the social force of liberation [having] temporarily withdrawn to the individual sphere" (p.18). While Adorno's description of the "disconnected and non-binding character of the form, the renunciation of explicit theoretical cohesion" (p. 18) is, in part the classicist's apologia, *Minima Moralia's* iconoclasm emerges as a mode of resistance to the "totalitarian unison" everywhere decried: "Yet a gaze averted from the beaten track...a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern is the last hope for thought....He who offers for sale something unique that no-one wants to buy, represents, even against his will, freedom from exchange" (pp. 67-68).

In the "Dedication" introducing the volume, Adorno outlines his working methods. In contrast to Barthes' sustained efforts towards a textual theory of heterology ("so many fragments, so many beginnings, so many pleasures" [1977, p. 94]), Adorno imagines a series of neatly concentric circles (historical, discursive) enveloping the writing subject. Notions of origin, discrete even interlocking systems of intellectual

inquiry remain intact and available to the writer.

The starting point is the narrowest private sphere, that of the intellectual in emigration. From this follow considerations of broader social and anthropological scope; they concern psychology, aesthetics, science in its relation to the subject. The concluding aphorisms of each part lead on thematically also to philosophy, without ever pretending to be complete or definitive: they are all intended to mark out points of attack or to furnish models for a future exertion of thought (p. 18).

Minima Moralia, so like Roland Barthes at first glance, favors condensation over Barthes' vertiginous displacement. Adorno's austerity ("It is part of the technique of writing to be able to discard ideas, even fertile ones, if the construction demands it" [p. 85]) produces written texts "like spider webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm" (p. 87). For his part, Barthes "caresses" his text, unwilling to choose his pleasures "parsimoniously": "It is as if, striving to epitomize himself, he could not get it over with, heaped summary on top of summary, unable to decide which is the best" (1977, p. 58). Disparities such as these (of provenance, method and effect) offer illustration of the variability potential to the essayistic enterprise, a richness and diversity apparent in the analysis of film or video works which share something of Barthes' or Adorno's problematic.

My own intentions are to outline the conditions under which a body of work — both film and video — might fruitfully be termed "essayistic," posed in relation to the literary mode of Montaigne and Barthes. These visual works, like the literary essay form, can be said to resist generic classification, straddling a series of all-too-confining antinomies: fiction/non-fiction, documentary/avant-garde, cinema/video. In ways that can be specified, these texts are notable for their negotiation of three terms or critical axes around and against

which the essay-effect can be said to form: history, subjectivity, language. It is the respective tactics employed, the means by which problems of historical representation and self-expression come to the fore in various texts, that will occupy our attention in the latter portion of this essay.

A number of film and video works bear consideration within this framework, with the degree to which the appellation "essayistic" might usefully be applied varying in each case. For, unlike the latter Barthes, these visual works tend to *textualize* rather than *theorize* the double action of the essayistic in its regard for self and other, its portrayal of the historical real filtered through the flux of subjectivity (the essay as "open-ended, interminable writing machine"). The adjectival usage ("the essayistic") is thus preferred for its indication of *tendency* rather than totalizing effect as the nominal form ("the visual essay") might suggest. Among the video works that might be considered within this referential field are the two television series produced by Jean-Luc Godard and Ann-Marie Mieville (*SIX FOIS DEUX*, 1976 and *FRANCE/TOUR/DETOUR/DEUX/ENFANTS*, 1978), Godard's *SCENARIO DU FILM PASSION* (1984), Bill Viola's *I DO NOT KNOW WHAT IT IS I AM LIKE* (1986), Dan Reeves' *SMOTHERING DREAMS* (1981) and *GANAPATI: A SPIRIT IN THE BUSH* (1986), Juan Downey's *J.S. BACH* (1986), Cecilia Condit's *NOT A JEALOUS BONE* (1987), George Kuchar's *CULT OF THE CUBICLES* (1987) and Helen De Michiel's *CONSIDER ANYTHING, ONLY DON'T CRY* (1988). Cinematic instances of the essayistic include but are certainly not confined to Santiago Alvarez's *79 SPRINGTIMES OF HO CHI MINH* (1969), Hollis Frampton's *NOSTALGIA* (1971), Chantal Akerman's *NEWS FROM HOME* (1975), Kidlat Tahimik's *THE PERFUMED NIGHTMARE* (1976), Jon Jost's *SPEAKING DIRECTLY* (1974) and *PLAIN TALK AND COMMON SENSE (UNCOMMON SENSES)* (1987), Raoul Ruiz's *OF GREAT EVENTS AND ORDINARY PEOPLE* (1978), Jean-Pierre Gorin's *POTO AND CABENGO* (1981), Jonas Mekas' *LOST, LOST, LOST* (1976),

Trinh T. Minh-ha's REASSEMBLAGE (1982) and NAKED SPACES: LIVING IS ROUND (1985), James Benning's AMERICAN DREAMS (1981), Morgan Fisher's STANDARD GAUGE (1984), Yvonne Rainer's THE MAN WHO ENVIED WOMEN (1986) and Chris Marker's SANS SOLEIL (1982).

It would be quite proper to ask what critical gain might be achieved by the linking of such varied works. Why cast a taxonomic net over texts whose appeal results in part from their resistance to the familiar? I hope to show that the invocation of the figure of the essay, a writing practice now being interrogated for its contribution to contemporary literary theory, is capable of mobilizing a degree of explanatory power that enriches our understanding of these visual texts. Such a discussion points to a modality within contemporary film and video practices which activates, resists, even anticipates theoretical interventions, exploring questions of textuality in laboratory terms.

A further benefit results from contesting the sterility of the non-fictional domain and the critical writing it has engendered, particularly in the U.S., in which the methods of direct cinema have been supplanted by authoritarian narration, serial interviews or historical reconstruction as dominant formats. The expressive dimension remains sorely underdeveloped in current documentary practice, the play of the signifier held in dutiful harness to the signified. The place of figuration within non-fictional discourse has been equally scanted within the critical literature.

The resistance to rhetorical, compositional, even epistemological mastery, which is the hallmark of the essayistic, would seem, in light of prevailing models, antithetical to documentary discourse. Indeed Barthes (1982), in his inaugural address to the Collège de France as first holder of the Chair of Literary Semiology, confessed to the transgressive character of his project: "I must admit that I have produced only essays, an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing" (p. 457). In this context, the apparent paradox of certain corollary pronouncements

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emerges as Barthes' refusal to insulate the pleasures of culture from the bliss of the imaginary: "Science can be born of fantasy"; "Writing makes knowledge festive" (pp. 477, 464). As a prescription for an ailing documentary tradition, the unleashing of the expressive dimension (ever in the embrace of the imaginary) and the inscription of self in the discourse of the other hold much promise.

History/Subjectivity/Language

The triptych of terms deemed constitutive of the essayistic (history/subjectivity/language), far from anchoring the discussion, serves to name adjacent and overlapping sites of instability, in short, serves to inaugurate a problematic. This work towards a poetics of the essayistic in film and video must at all costs resist the lure of the categorical and unambiguous, the siren song of aesthetic determinism. Rather than assemble a model to which a series of works might be forced to conform, the intent is to ask how and under what conditions meaning is produced in certain texts; this agenda, in no small measure, includes asking questions about epistemological conditions.

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen (1986), in a recent reevaluation of the Freudian subject, writes convincingly of the "appeal of foundation," noting that Lacan's retention of the word "subject," despite its character as divided, split and decentered, signals a kind of surreptitious restoration of that metaphysical category if only as a pure position

"reduced to only the desire for that part of itself that language simultaneously arouses and forbids it from rejoining" (p. 112). The visual works I here term essayistic take up the problematic of subjectivity in a manner suggested by Borch-Jacobsen who notes that, far from embracing the notion of the Cartesian ego, the subject of the moderns is the "subject as representation. . . the representation as subject" (p. 113).

In *Discerning the Subject*, Paul Smith seeks to distinguish between versions of the subject in contemporary theory and the less frequently invoked notion of agency, by which Smith means the individual's power to act or resist. Inasmuch as Smith adopts the crucial features of the Lacanian/Althusserian notion of the subject as a conglomeration of positions (provisional but constitutive), he grants a kind of liberatory power to Barthes' presentation of self as "the untreatable, the imponderable that constitutes me" (p. 102). If, as Barthes claims, "the subject is only an effect of language" (p. 104), autobiography of the sort practiced in the latter works of that writer (and Smith devotes the chapter of his book entitled "Autobiography" solely to these texts) becomes a crucial ground of contestation: "Barthes's oppositional writing project . . . is to reveal instances of a new and paradoxical subjectivity where the symbolic's hold is not total" (p. 109). The notion of the essayistic activated in the present context can thus be said to engage in resistance at several levels: to the law of genre, to the principle of compositional mastery, and to an untested presumption of the category of the subject.

Under the sign of the essayistic, each of the defining terms (history/subjectivity/language) becomes a locus of interrogation. The visual essay can, nevertheless, be subjected to a functional definition: a representation of the "historical real" (digressive, fragmentary) through sound and image in a manner which embroils the subject of enunciation. Such a definition recalls Beneveniste's formulation of discourse: ". . . Every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker,

the intention of influencing the other in some way In short, all the genres in which someone addresses himself to someone, proclaims himself as the speaker, and organizes what he says in the category of person" (p. 209). This reference is a helpful beginning since it demarcates the work from the diverse range of presentational treatments common to fiction and non-fiction alike (the "recit" of classical narrative as well as direct cinema) in which the third person impersonal verbal inflection issues from "the one who is absent."

And yet the essayistic dismantles the couplet *histoire*/discourse through its polyphony of enunciative positions (Barthes' auditory metaphors abound in his elaboration of textuality: stereo-phony, counterpoint, a braid of voices). Slippage across the boundaries of person, gender, tense, and mood abound in Barthes as in many of the visual works in question: "The intrusion, into the discourse of the essay, of a third person who nonetheless refers to no fictive creature, marks the necessity of remodeling the genres: let the essay avow itself *almost* a novel: a novel without proper names" (Barthes, 1977, p. 120).

"We Taste Nothing Pure": Montaigne as Precursor

But beyond the over-broad realm of discourse, a more precise textual horizon can be invoked as the ground for further clarification of the essayistic; this point of tangency is the antecedent literary tradition of the Montaignian oeuvre. In his assessment of the very contemporary appeal of the three-volume *Essays*, an appeal evidenced by Bensmaïa's return to Montaigne in *The Barthes Effect*, Gerard Defaux points to the double play of the discourse of the *Essays*, its twofold project as, on the one hand, descriptive, turned outward to the world ("the measure of things") and on the other, reflexive, turned in upon itself ("the measure of sight") (pp. 88-89). Attention is drawn to the level of the signifier ("Let attention be paid not to the matter, but to the shape I give it" [Montaigne, II:10, p. 296]); a self is produced through a plurality of voices,

"mediated through writing, forever inscribed in the very tissue of the text" (p. 77). Countless citations from the *Essays* could be called upon as illustration ("... we go hand in hand and at the same pace, my book and I. In other cases, one may commend or blame the work apart from the workman; not so here; he who touches the one, touches the other" [Montaigne, III:2, pp. 611-612]), but, in isolation, such excerpts too easily evoke conventional autobiography rather than the unfinished, reflexive and open text which has intrigued four centuries of readers.

It might be useful to consider critic André Tournon's discussion of Montaigne's textual methods in conjunction with a rather different set of terms, those provided by J. L. Austin's distinction between constative and performative utterances (Austin, 1962).³ For in his famous formulation, Austin wishes to distinguish between statements which describe or report and can be deemed "true" or "false" (the constative) and those whose utterance represents the doing of an action that may be contractual ("I bet") or declaratory ("I declare war"). This notion of the performative has been applied to the rhetorical analysis of filmic narrative by Daniel Dayan (1983), but I wish to suggest its pertinence for the understanding of this double register of judgment and enunciation, description and reflection attributed to Montaigne's *Essays* and by extension to the essayistic visual works under consideration. Tournon has written of the reflexive impulse in Montaigne as the willingness to speak oneself as the other discourse. The example used is the following: "Among other vices, I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and judgment, as the extreme of all vices." One might claim that such a statement combines an ethical proposition with a performative insofar as it offers judgment while implicating the speaker within the boundaries of its proscription. Such a usage is a particularly instructive instance of paradox in that it enacts the fundamental impulse of the *Essays* which is to offer up for investigation the received wisdom of the age, to reject all a priori

constructions, indeed to question the authority of any discourse, including its own. Montaigne simultaneously issues a moral proposition (cruelty is the most serious of vices) while declaring his inclusion within the set of perpetrators. Philip P. Hallie has called this willingness to show oneself in the act of thinking "intellectual disrobing" and has claimed that for Montaigne "essays are ... a set of actions" (p. xv). If Montaigne was the first to use the word "essay" in its modern sense, it was because he adapted the word to a purpose both self-expressive and epistemological, layering it with the senses of the test, the trial, the experiment — performatives in the service of understanding.

If we consider the implications of this writing practice for an essayistic enterprise for the visual arts, we are confronted with a kind of reflexivity that exceeds the cutely modernist gesture of self-reference. Perhaps the historical grounding of the essay, its concern to speak the world rather than weave *fabulae*, accounts for the greater seriousness of its reflexive activity. For the young Georg Lukacs, the essay was an "intellectual poem" whose first exemplar was not a literary trace but the life of Socrates. For unlike tragedy, whose end informs the whole of the drama, the life of Socrates and the essay form alike render the end an arbitrary and ironic moment. "The essay," declared Lukacs, "is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict . . . but the process of judging" (p. 18). Socrates as essayistic pheno-type comes to stand for a method which is active, fragmentary, self-absorbing — ever in pursuit of a question "extended so far in depth that it becomes the question of all questions" (p. 14).

Documentary and The Cinematic Register

IN OF GREAT EVENTS AND ORDINARY PEOPLE, Raoul Ruiz claims, in voice-over, that "the documentary has no beginning and no end." Such a statement evokes the psychoanalytic principle of "analysis interminable," for it reminds us that the purview of non-

fiction is the *re-presentation* and *interrogation* of the phenomenal world, itself a limitless text. The narrative arts seek instead to *dramatize* story elements that may have strong referential ties to lived experience. Both expressive categories delimit their material within an infinite field of possibility and are (like language itself) arbitrary in their process of selection. But while dramatic forms have been generically coded at least since Aristotle, the documentary can rely on fewer and, perhaps, less appropriate models for its shaping: biography, chronology, diary, the cyclical or "day in the life" structure, exegesis, or case study. In fact, documentary implies a modality akin to the interpretation of dream or symptom, a process of unravelling meaning capable of infinite regression through a cascade of linguistic qualifiers and visual alternatives — ever-shifting, filtering, and recasting experience. Part of the problematic of non-fiction is the determination of a framework for a pro-filmic lifted from the real, a structuration which can produce meaning for the recorded images and sounds by rendering them coherent — capable of being held in the mind and retained in memory — to the limits of our mnemonic and synoptic powers. The documentary imperative has typically been "production for use"; at least since Grierson, the documentary tradition has favored the wielding of cinema as the hammer of education and social change.

The documentary has tended toward a disavowal of its status as open text, with the practitioner pretending that what we see is simply a replication of the world requiring neither explanation as to its provenance nor acknowledgement of the procedures which produced it as discourse. Such a stance is at odds with essayistic practice, defined in its inexhaustibility and inconsistency, ever alert to process. André Tournon's account of the disruptive power of Montaigne's writing practice, its resistance to closure, elaborates on this theme, noting that, in the *Essays*, "thought can abandon its theme at any time to examine its own workings, question its acquired knowledge or

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exploit its incidental potentialities" (p. 61).

Tactics Without Strategy

"The world is but a perennial movement. All things in it are in constant motion I cannot keep my subject still I do not portray being, I portray passing If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions, but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial." Montaigne, *Essays* (III:2, pp. 610-611).

If a number of the films and videotapes termed essayistic can be located more firmly within an avant-garde canon than a documentary one (Godard, Akerman, Rainer, Frampton, Mekas, Benning), there are etymological reasons to be considered. The multivalence of essayistic practice can be traced to the polysemic character of the word itself. Derived from the Latin "exagium" meaning an "exact weighing" and, by extension, an "ordeal" or "examination," the word can designate a trial (experimental, moral, physical), an examination (of conscience or of resources) and an exercise (Bensmaïa, p. 96). The essayistic is always research, the discovery of self and object (of object through self) as an active, critical process. The testing of limits, the exploration of the edges of representability, a taste for the "experimental" — such notions have remained the province of vanguardists held on the margins of cinema. Contemporary discussions of documentary, itself already an outcast discourse, have evidenced

little interest in returning to the experimentalist roots of non-fiction (Vertov, Vigo, Cavalcanti, Bunuel, Jennings). In turning to a discussion of tactics within essayistic practice in film and video, the emphasis shifts from the residual effects of language and tradition to questions of function.

One of the tactics that most characterizes the essayistic film or video work is the pluralization of voices. Unlike the relatively parsimonious voice-over narration of the readerly documentary which implies a god-like agency and omniscience, the proliferation of voices undermines certainty by challenging univocal authority. Trinh T. Minh-ha's *NAKED SPACES: LIVING IS ROUND* deploys three female voices, one the filmmaker's own, which occupy three very separate discursive positions. While one voice remains close to the folk wisdom of the indigenous peoples represented, another is more anecdotal; the third tends toward the aphoristic. All the voices are used with and against images so as to explore the musical potentialities of language; words as well as voices are exploited for their dynamic range, for their color and rhythmic punctuation. In a manner more akin to poetry than prose, the narration tends toward repetition and ellipsis. Duration (the film runs 2 hours 14 minutes) emerges as a central issue for a film which interrogates temporality as surely as it does notions of space. Closure is provisional at best. The narration concludes in this manner:

"Drumming has no end," the drummer said. "No one can know everything about drumming; everyone knows only to his extent. In our drumming way, no one blames another. If someone doesn't know, you don't say 'This man doesn't know.' If you say that, you have demeaned yourself. Maybe as you say you know, someone too knows better than you, and as you are bending down looking at someone's anus, someone is also bending down looking at yours."

The film thus closes with a spoken figure of infinite reduplication while the percussive flow of the drumbeat is

simply cut off. Repetition, dispersion, and digression maintain their hold throughout; there is a conclusion but no end.

Another instance of the plurivocal common to these texts results from the interplay of public and private domains as discursive levels, a trope expressive of the double gaze of the essayistic. Chantal Akerman's *NEWS FROM HOME* overlays the recitation of letters from the filmmaker's mother — dispatched from Belgium, spoken in Akerman's heavily accented English — with images of the lower eastside of New York. These images are a mixture of the quotidian (static shots of street corners, subway platforms, panoramas of the warehouse district) and of the obsessive (painterly long takes which devalue action or event). But if the visual track has been emptied of drama, the letters offer a scene of maternal excess. Desire for the daughter's return is expressed through a kind of ritual repetition of despair and ennui.

The succession of urban images and the narrated letters which accompany them seem immune to closure; one travelling shot north along Manhattan's 10th Avenue seems sure to outlast the geographic limits of the borough while the machine noises of the city intermittently drown out the epistolary recitation with no apparent loss of meaning. This gesture of the maternal has replaced communication with a loop or circuit of familial desire capable of sustaining itself indefinitely. Even the film's last shot, a silent recession from aboard a ferry that shrinks the Manhattan skyline to pocket size, cannot help but suggest the oceanic (perhaps the maternal) rather than finitude, the destination of the Oedipal itinerary. Akerman's film suggests the inevitable — that certain of the preoccupations of the essayistic coincide with the oppositional agenda of feminist practices and their own refusal of mastery.

The relationship between the visible and aural worlds of *NEWS FROM HOME* is a parallel one, meeting only in infinity. The name of that infinity is the subject, its locus the Imaginary. For it is through the agency of the filmmaker

“Slippage across the boundaries of person, gender, tense, and mood abound in Barthes as in many of the visual works in question. . .”

as subject of enunciation that the public sphere (the world of well-travelled city streets) comes to be conjoined with the private (the maternal embrace, by turns life-giving and suffocating). The garulousness of many essayistic texts (the literariness of Mekas, Marker, Jost and Ruiz comes to mind) is here reduced to a compulsive monologue which vies for our attention with a relatively unaccented, indeed minimalist, world of the visible metonymically linked to endless re-vision. All attempts to bridge the gap between the regimes of public and private, to resolve the disparate claims of history and subjectivity, having been weighed and tested, are reduced to silence.

Like the essayistic to which it is devoted, my own text appears intent on denying closure. Nevertheless, one final text remains to be discussed in passing. Raoul Ruiz's *OF GREAT EVENTS AND ORDINARY PEOPLE* offers illustration of several of the most definitive characteristics of this anti-genre. André Tourmon's pronouncement, intended as a description of the undecidable contours of Montaigne's *Essays*, might well be applied to this rather startling text: “The reader . . . is confronted with an uneven textual surface, broken in places and wound around itself like a Moebius strip — ‘Nous voyla embourbez’ . . . (‘There we are stuck in the mud’)” (p. 62). Like Chris Marker's *SANS SOLEIL* in which categories of gender, tense, person and mood begin to melt down through various textual sleights of hand, *OF GREAT EVENTS AND ORDINARY PEOPLE* writes itself in the conditional mood. As if to prove that documentary has neither beginning nor end, Ruiz continually intrudes in voice-over, in one

instance reminding us, a minute or so into a sequence, that “the shot could begin here.” Indeed, the film opens with what, in other quarters, would be a standard interview. But instead, the single question asked of the young woman (“If you were to make a film in this neighborhood, what sort of places and people would you show?”) signals the film's relentless interrogation of what “could be.” As the camera pans up and away from the interviewee, Ruiz informs us that “during the pan around the courtyard, we could have the credits.” In the midst of another lengthy camera movement, we are told “the narrator should say something in this pause.” The prescription itself becomes the “something” that fills the void. We are again in the domain of the performative in which the judgment uttered is also an action performed.

The scheme of the film is remarkable in that a shaping based on the-matics is supplanted by a structuration dependent upon the filmmaking activity itself. Only gradually is the viewer brought to realize that the Brechtian title cards which label the sequences from days one through ten with a notation of events filmed refers to the sequencing of the shooting schedule rather than the usual secondary revision of the “finished product.” When, towards the end of the film, inserts of newspapers are shown, the voice-over identifies them as “images for the beginning and end of the film. The film is being made as the spectators watch.” The film has, however, defined itself as a film *about* documentary: “One of the film's themes is the peculiar dispersal of documentary across a series of heterogeneous objects.” Inasmuch as this claim rings true for the spectator, there is little cause to question the apparent randomness of the unfolding previous to one's realization of its temporal logic. For if there is scant evidence of secondary revision at the level of the images, the voice-over enforces a belief in the filmmaker's control. We read the equivocations of the text, its pronouncement, for example, of no less than eight separate claims to the film's thematic core, as a sign of canniness or sophisti-

ation. We believe that coherence will win in the end, that indeed there will be a thematic core to award our attention. We hear that "the theme is the everyday life of a Paris neighborhood in an election period as seen by a foreigner." Minutes later we learn that "the subject of the film is dispersal, documentary's tendency to lose itself in details." We watch and listen as that dispersal eliminates the hoped-for recovery of meaning at the eleventh hour.

The spectator is well within her rights to ask what kind of film this is, after all. Somewhere near its end, the film admits its fatal attraction for a text without end. Potential linkages among shots and the play of elaboration along a vertical or metaphoric axis based upon associations in the mind of the filmmaker render the text as inexhaustible as language and memory: "Games with images. Series of images linked by secondary elements. A chance sentence changes the meaning of a speech. This procedure could transform a film, lengthen it indefinitely, produce a film of indefinite length."

At last, the film bites its tail. It begins again, recycling the images from days one through ten at a brisk tempo, condensing the film into a miniature version of itself, this time occasionally including "outtakes" which Ruiz prudently reminds us are perfectly acceptable inflections of the original. "Suddenly the images return in the same order. We see them again. It isn't the images which reappear but their sequence. The same sequence, the same film, but shorter, seen again. So what we are seeing is the same film finished, already finished, ever since the start."

Like Ruiz's film, like Tournon's Möbius strip, the work undertaken here ends only in deference to the limits of our attention. While I have only begun to suggest the tactics through which contemporary film and video-works have explored, in myriad ways, the terrain of the essayistic — a path marked in literature by the writings of Montaigne and Barthes — I have at least initiated work toward the understanding of what an essayistic practice might mean for these visual arts. It

seems to me that the double action which the essayistic implies — the gaze outward as well as in — offers the potential for future work capable of an informed interrogation of history, for historical representation cognizant of the meanings and limits of subjectivity.

FOOTNOTES

1. The originary reference for the fragmentary and digressive prose text remains Montaigne who treats the matter of his writing tactics throughout the Essays: "I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely. For I do not see the whole of anything; nor do those who promise to show it to us. . . . I would venture to treat some matter thoroughly, if I knew myself less well. Scattering a word here, there another, samples separated from their context, dispersed, without a plan and without a promise, I am not bound to make something of them or to adhere to them myself without varying when I please and giving myself up to doubt and uncertainty and my ruling quality, which is ignorance." (I:50, p. 219)

2. For a concise overview and etymology of the essay favoring the French tradition, see Bensmaïa's "Appendix: The Essay" in *The Barthes Effect*, pp. 95-102.

3. I wish to thank Sue Scheibler for drawing my attention to Austin's work and its potential applications to the visual media.

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