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## Introduction: Between The Essay Film and Social Cinema

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## Introduction

# Between The Essay Film and Social Cinema

Call it meaningful coincidence. The dossier in this issue of *SubStance* was well along in production when I realized that its appearance would mark the fiftieth anniversary of the article in which Richard Roud first referred to Chris Marker, Agnès Varda and Alain Resnais as Left Bank filmmakers.<sup>1</sup> As Roud noted in the first line of his 1962 article, classification is a kind of analogy that proves nothing unless it tells us more about what is being classified. The “something more” Roud sought to provide was a viable means of situating the work of these three filmmakers apart from that of Right Bank filmmakers François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and others associated more closely with the *Cahiers du cinéma*. Summarizing his geography-based analogy, Roud asserted that the Left Bank was not so much an area as a state of mind.

The current dossier neither tests the validity of Roud’s designation nor that of others such as Claire Clouzot’s broader take in *Le Cinéma français depuis la Nouvelle Vague* (Paris: Nathan, 1972, 46-81). Instead, its goal is to look again at films by Marker, Varda and Resnais in order to consider (reconsider) their implications for film theory over a longer duration, from the late silent era to the present. For three of the five articles, looking again at Left Bank films and filmmakers is inseparable from listening to them and thus rethinking the role of sound in conjunction with critical approaches to the essay film. David Oscar Harvey draws on Michel Chion’s notion of vococentrism, which prioritizes the human voice over sound effects and music, before exploring elements of non-vococentric voice for which essay films by Chris Marker and Hans Richter are test cases. Nora M. Alter likewise looks to sound as she considers others ways of thinking non-fiction cinema with an ear to the ephemeral domain of the acoustic, mainly in music, in Alain Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard* and Jean-Luc Godard’s *One Plus One*. Working outward from Hanns Eisler’s composition for Resnais’s film, Alter cites V.I. Pudovkin’s 1929 statement that music in sound film must retain its own line and *never be the accompaniment*. Finally, Claudia Gorbman examines two early non-fiction

travelogues by Agnès Varda, *Ô saisons ô châteaux* and *Du Côté de la Côte*, with an eye—and an ear—to the maturation of a cinematic voice grounded in Varda's self-styled imperative to speak with images (DIRE avec des images). Each of the three articles reconsiders Left Bank and related films produced in France between 1954 and 1968 in conjunction with elements of sound and critical perspectives on the essay film.

The fourth and fifth articles in the dossier are cast as case studies of individual films. My reading of Alain Resnais's 1956 documentary short subject on the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, *Toute la mémoire du monde*, situates it among the eight non-fiction, short-subject documentaries he directed between 1948 and 1958. My approach to the library film tests my claim that it is best understood as a supplement to the audiovisual and thematic treatment of the World War II concentration camp universe in Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard*, which he completed a year earlier. At the same time, I consider the degree to which formal elements of *Toute la mémoire du monde* engage the notion of social cinema set forth in a 1930 text Jean Vigo wrote to introduce a screening of his short-subject silent documentary, *A propos de Nice*, at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier in Paris. Vigo's name reappears in Andrew Ritchey's study of the critical reception of Jean-Daniel Pollet's 1963 experimental short subject, *Méditerranée*, during the decade following its release. As an instance of what critics associated with the journal *Tel Quel* later termed theoretical cinema, *Méditerranée* serves Ritchey as a measure of evolving theories of film related to New Wave and Left Bank cinemas as well as to debates surrounding the articulation of image and sound, *auteurism* and the emergence of the postwar essay film form.

Whether or not their authors subscribe to Roud's Left Bank designation, the articles in the current issue provide another look at the early work of Varda, Marker and Resnais by assessing their relevance for critical considerations of the postwar documentary and the global phenomena of social cinema and the essay film.

As I draft this brief introduction, all three figures designated by Roud fifty years ago are alive and active. Now 90 years old, Chris Marker moved long ago from photography, film, and video to digital media. His work as far back as *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1953, with Alain Resnais), *Dimanche à Pékin* (1956), and *Lettre de Sibérie* (1958) still inspires proponents of experimental and militant cinema around the world. Agnès Varda, at age 84, may have stated that *Les Plages d'Agnès* (2008) was her last film. But her turn to multi-platform gallery and museum installations suggests that she is far from any kind of retirement. The latest film by Alain Resnais, who turned 90 just days ago, premiered at this year's Cannes Film Festival. Its

title, *Vous n'avez rien encore vu*, echoes Al Jolson's line—"You ain't heard nothin' yet," in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first feature-length film with sequences of synchronized dialogue. As a summary expression, the title conveys the enduring vitality of Left Bank films and filmmakers worthy of another look . . . and another listen.

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June 2012

#### Note

1. See "The Left Bank," *Sight & Sound* 32:1 [winter 1962/1963], 24-26 and "The Left Bank Revisited," *Sight & Sound* 46:3 [Summer 1977], 143-145.