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In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film

Philip Lopate

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MY INTENTION HERE is to define, describe, survey and celebrate a cinematic genre that barely exists. As a cinéphile and personal essayist, I have discovered two interests wed, via essays on celluloid. But while there are cinematic equivalents to practically every literary genre, film directors have yet to develop a form, and that in itself is intriguing. What it signals to me is that, in spite of Alexandre Astruc’s tempting utopian thesis that “a sheet of paper is a pencil, and it is rather difficult to think in it with the way an essayist might.”

Ever since I began looking for models of film, the cinema maven I consulted were quick to suggest candidates that seemed pretty far-fetched. I was told, for instance, that Brakhage’s abstract filmmaker — and I was looking for a stylistic or personal essayist — had a 1960s series of short, visionary films, Tarkovsky’s transcendental dramas, even the supposedly genre-subversive remake of Little Shop of Horrors I’ve lately been hearing of as a one sort or another. These examples suggested a confusion between a reflective, self-conscious style and an essayistic one. While an essay must reflect or meditate, not all meditative sensibilities are essayistic. Take Brakhage: for all the mythic sweat of his writings, or the lyrical satisfaction of his visuals, I’m unable to follow a coherent argument or know what he actually thinks about, say, the play of light on an ashy tray for forty minutes. So let me propose that, rather than trying to fill the void, it might be an important starting-point to face squarely the scarcity of essay-films:

What exactly do I mean by an essay-film? To answer that, I have to step back first and convey my sense of the literary essay. To me, the essay is as much a tradi-

tional form as the sonnet or the odes: prefigured by Cicero, Plutarch and Seneca, it crystallized with Montaigne and Bacon, thrived with the English essayists, tinged with the French philosophes and Steele, Hazlitt, Lamb, Stevenson, Orwell, Virginia Woolf, propelled an American branch in Emerson, Thoreau, Mark, E.B. White, down to our con-
temporaries like Didion, Hoagland, Gass, and Hardwick. There is also a European strand of philosophical essay-writing that extends from Nietzsche to Simone Weil, Benjamin, Barthes, Sartre, Cioran, etc.

It is easier to list the essay’s prac-
tice than to fix a definition of this pro-

I will now try to define the qualities that to my mind make an essay-film. Bear in mind that I’m no film theorist, starting with my most questionable proposition first: 1) an essay-film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtilted or intertitles. Say all you like about visualization being at the core of the argument, I can’t see that this is utterly pure, silent flow of images as constituting essayistic discourse. To be honest, I’ve never seen a silent-era movie or heard of some contemporary film without a voiceover. That is not the only kind, however, of essay-film. What does Dziga Vertov’s Three Songs of Lenin deliver a clear ideological point (as does, say, Franju’s Blood of the Beasts), but conveying a message or politics through one’s images does not alone make an essay—or else we would have to speak of political posters or Madison Avenue advertising.

2) The text must represent a single voice. It may be either that of the direc-
tor or screenplay, or, if collaborative, then strasse’s way is to his compelling, tender voice and thinking process. When I read in an Anthology Film archive calendar of an “essay-like” Japanese Super-8 in which the voice is as compelling as the images, I welcome it. Stetsky, Dostoyevski, others from Susan Sontag, Rimbaut, Bob Dylan, creating a string of overlapping images that ultimately build into an innate image,” I don’t even have to see it to know that it’s not by any director of an essay-film.

3) The text must represent the speaker’s attempt to work out some rea-
sioned line of discourse on a problem. I am a little sketchy about how to distinguish such a criterion; but I know when it’s not there. For instance, Jonas Mekas’ haunting text in Lost Lost Lost functions like an unadorned poem, not an essay.

By now it should be clear that I am using the word “essay-film” as a de-
scription, not an honorific; there are genuinely cinematic works that do not qual-
ify as essay-films, and highly flawed ones that do.

4) The text must impart more than information; it must also operate a per-
sonal point of view. The standard docu-

my turn, shooting, and the camera zoomed in optically on a Soviet army man’s head. I again felt a sort of embarrassing complicity. Not that I had any idea who this Rus-

ian officer was, but I loved the sudden way the civilized elegy for Prague Spring was ruptured, and we were cata-

pulted into that more basic Eastern European mentality of tribal scores to settle, long memories and bitter humor. That attitude, for which the commentary, I later identified as an intrusion of the essayistic.

There are essayistic elements or color-

ations in certain films by Chris Marker, Alexander Kluge, Jon Jost, Ralph Arlyck, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Joris Ivens, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dusan Makavejev, Jean-Marie Straub, Yvonne Rainer, Woody Allen, Wim Wenders, Hartmut Bitromsky, Orson Welles, Ross McElwee, Rob Moss; in Alain Resnais’ shot-to-shot transition, in Jackie 
Moor’s Roger and Me, Isaac Julian’s Looking for Langston, Tony Buba’s Lightning Over Braddock, Morgan Fisher’s A Day in the Life of a Testament of Orpheus, My Dinner With Andre, Swimming to Cambodia, and I’m sure many others that I’ve for-

gotten or overlooked. By no means will I be able to discuss all these in the limited space allocated; but my hope is that, by zeroing in on a handful, I can convey a sense of the potentials and pit-


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of it, for a personal essayist—and yet, perhaps because he has evolved to diverse and complicated a self (ex-Resistance fighter, novelist, poet, filmmaker), he can emit enough particles of this self to con-

vey some of his shape and keep his secrets. He also has the essayist’s aphoristic gift, which enables him to assert a collective historical per-

spective and place events within the time around a single-personal event is held in abeyance. Finally, he has the essayist’s impulse to tell the truth: not always a comfortable agenda for a person who grows old.

In a characteristically witty passage in Letter from Siberia (1958), Marker interprets the same footage three differ-

tently. It is a sequence of colored, decorated images made and a macabre over the inherently receding reality of photographed images. It is like that famous passage from Tristes Tropiques, in which Leo-Grasset fancies that the traveler/anthropologist always arrives “too early or too late.” In Marker’s case, he manages to arrive on time to record events, his mind and heart take too long to catch up and appreciate it sufficiently at the moment. This time-delay also allows Marker to project onto his house an image of an otherwise bland or neutral footage. The most dramatic instance of this occurs in Samsul Soliel: the medal-bestowing cere-

monies in Cape Verde, Africa. “A year later,” Marker tells us on the soundtrack, “the President would be deposed by the man he had a medal on.” At another point, he thought he deserved a larger reward than this particular medal, we have the chilling sense that we are watching a battle being fought on behalf of a dead

my life trying to understand the func-

tion of remembering?” he explicitly associates recollecting with remembering.

Samsul Soliel touches upon time, empti-

ness, Japan, Africa, video games, comic strips, Sea Shogun’s lists, dog burial, relics, political demonstrations, suicide, the future, Tarovsky, Hitchcock, and the Absolute. What unites it is the melan-

colichimical, bacheloric sensibility of Marker looking at the fragments of the modern world moment by moment and trying to make at least poetic sense of them. “Poetry is born of insecurity,” he says, “and the inherent heartwrenching things,” at which point we see a samurai swordfight on television.

GIVEN Marker’s sterling example, and the video access “revolution,” and with more and more conceptual artists and detached academics taking it for granted, engaging movies like this half-expectantly to see a whole school of essay-films develop. Not only did the technical potential exist, but a distribu-

tion circuit linked these sequences, and in stimulating, braided exploration of menace and racism. Critic Jonathan Rosen-

baun, defending this film in the Chicago Reader, lauds Marker’s “Appreciation as a narra-

tive, Yvonne Rainer’s sixth feature takes forever to get started and an eternity to end... Yet approached as an essay, Privilege unfolds like a single multi-

faceted argument, uniformly illuminated by white-hot rage and wit—a cacophony of voices and discourses to be sure, but a purposeful and meaning-

ful movie! Now it so happens that I am speaking to us as well as to one another...” Much as I sympathize with Rosenbaum’s position, it almost sounds like a putdown. It seems a pity that you are going to have to do is recategorize some plotless strew as an “essay” and every-

thing immediately becomes. Even essays have plots! Now it so happens that I admire and like Rainer’s film; but I still cannot bring myself to accept a “cacoph-

ony of voices and discourses” as an essay. For Marker has been mentioned, and left the theater I was still unsure what exactly Rainer’s argument about meno-

pause, and its relation to racism, was, other than that it involved being made to feel a outsider. She would probably say, “I’m not trying to tell you any-

thing, I’m trying to get you to think.” Fine, to do an essay; but an essay also tells us what its author thinks.

Jon Jost is another independent film-

maker who has experimented with essayi-

ic elements most recently in Shooting Directly: Some American Notes (1972–74), which the filmmaker refers to as an “essay-

film,” I found insufferably irritating. In part my reaction is to his argument—humorless, self-hating, tediously lectur-

ing persona. Granted, all essayists have the option to bring out the obvious aspects of their personality, but they usually balance it with something charming; in Jost’s case I wanted to hide under the seat every time he came onscreen. Still, if only he had made a true essay-film I could have applauded. But instead he created one more hybrid collage, with Vietnam atrocity stories and nightly news broadcasts quoted simultaneously, a discursive film that in dictionary definitions suggests something or other about linguistics; with fulminations against imperialism; cinema; an essayistic self-portrait in larger and more forgiving socio-historical categories.

Clearly, the chief influence on early Jost, and independent filmmaker who has selectively used essayistic maneuvers only to abandon or undercut them, is Jean-Luc Godard. Now, Godard may be the greatest film artist of our era, but strictly conventional essay-films, dismissing his parents in one sentence as a war criminal and a cipher—the self-analysis comes off as erase and shallow. Perhaps all this is intentional: a self-portrait of an unlikable fellow. It finally seems to me, though, that Jost hasn’t really attempted to understand himself, but rather used his filmmaking as a self-portrait in larger and more forgiving soci-historical categories.

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an interesting side-issue: to what degree is the modernist aesthetic intrinsic to cinema and what is its persistent allowance for fragmentations and disjunctures; and yet it keeps weaving itself whole again, resisting alienation, if only through the self-consciousness and personal voice with its old-fashioned humanist assumptions.)

To get back to Jean-Luc Godard has offered some revealing "Riddles" 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 fact- tory workers. Godard has sustained an essay-piece, not a "research," were Ici et Ailleurs and Letter to Jane. Ici et Ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere) is both an essay and a visual effort to reflect on the frustration of making a movie about the Palestinian struggle, and a typically modernist at- tempt "to weave a text."

The scene to which we refer is an essay-piece, to build a fiction and to ruin its pretensions" (Andre Brekkan). Two voices, a "He" and a "She," chase each other through a series of things like: "Too simple and too easy to simply divide the world in two. Too easy or too simple to say simply that the wealthy are right and the peasants are wrong. Too simple and too easy to say that the poor are right and the wealthy are wrong. Too easy, too simple and too goddamn." Godard's essay-cab- inet approach may be effective in making us contemplate whether a truth is no less valid for being simple; but I would have preferred to see some of the aforementioned gains undercut by verbal arabesques, an attempt at reasoned essayistic discourse.

Letter to Jane, on the other hand, is a closely-reasoned if hastily provocative by two hands. The dead-eyed ingrates, Godard and Gorin, against the female movie star who so generously collaborated with them on their otherwise unutterable feature films, "No way out, no easy way, all that stuff is pretentious," being too preposterously unfair about the impersonal didactic language with which Godard-Gorin, like thought-police in terrorem or the self-empowering neo-colonialist" angle of Jane Fonda's head as she appears to listen sympathetically to a Vietnamese peasant. Letter to Jane is more a series of considerations for essay-films, though, by so audaciously resisting any pressure to dazzle the eye (the visuals consist mostly of the Fonda newspaper photo, with a few other stills thrown in), and allowing the voiceover commentary to dominate, for once, unapologetically. Also, Letter to Jane solves the problem of what to do with form-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 cold- heartedness, I mostly like it, if only because of its unspeakable confidence in the power of expository prose.

Godard's ex-partner, Jean-Pierre Gorin, went on to develop a much more truly personal essay-film style in his own features, Koto and Cabengo and Row- time, which was slightly more important. Gorin takes as his departure-point a seemingly sensationalistic true story about two sisters who invent their own way of life as a Dublin city pub. Gorin's meditation on language acquisition. Gorin's narration interrogates his own doubts and confusions about what sort of film he is trying to make. While it's become a cliché of the New Wave to present the difficulty of getting the necessary footage as the gist of the finished film, Gorin brings to this device a flexible, self-mocking voice (the ex- perimental, through his or her with a sudden 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 figure out the relationship between these non-related subjects (something about recreating the world ideally)—if only to justify his having spent the European summer in France. When his introduction modulates into a perversely willed, unpredictable piece of the thin line between art and hobbyism (the film itself seems a case study of music and films, everything he learns still more about the inertial per- sonality of Mr. Gorin. By drawing closer to himself as subject, however, he has aligned the antithesis of our expectations for instance, having acknowledged Manny Farber as his mentor, Gorin's discreet refusal to be more candid about Farber's personality and his emission doubt- less over leaves one disconnected. In both features, Gorin seems on the hot seat of the essay-film, but is still too coy about sharing the fullness of his thoughts.

One of the natural subjects for personal essay-films is music, in itself, since it is often what the filmmaker knows most. There is already a whole sub-genre of essay-films about the Moors. This is certainly not for the faint of heart. We For Our City Still Be, Pasolini's Notes Toward an African Oratorio is a sort of celluloid notebook into which the filmmaker puts his preliminary ideas about casting, music or global politics; the project that never came to pass. Perhaps by shooting these "notes," he used up the enthusiasm that might have gone into finding a way to flesh out the classically morose mark of his Medusa, I would just as soon watch an essay-film of Pasolini thinking about how he would do an Oratorio of the Moors in Africa as a finished product. The opening sequences are promising: he "casts" by shooting passersby in the street, telling us, "This young man is going to play the part," which rouses big ambitious touristic impressions, such as "The terrible aspect of Africa is its solitude, the monstrous form of casting, music or global politics." The film abandons these reflections for ten minutes of Gato Barbieri noodling around in a rehearsal, and an awkward, staged discussion between the composer and the puzzled African male exchange students who feel about the Oresteia. What makes Notes Toward an African Oratorio so tantalizing and frustrating is to have a narrator of the intellectual stature of Pasolini, who nevertheless lets only silvers 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 novelist, or essayist, or the author of a novel or essay, but as he wrote his movie, he never so seriously devoted to the essay-film. As Welles said himself in a 1982 interview: "The essay does not date, because it is about the author's mind. It is, 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 an "I" begins to define his/her position in and view of the world, the potential for essayistic discourse comes into play. First-person narration is the most obvious disjuncture between the subjective voice on the soundtrack and the third-person, material objectivity which the camera tends to project. "I" is a glib, facile, lackluster, graphed, or not. This tension has been cunningly exploited by the filmmakers who are drawn to first-person, like Orson Welles, Michelangelo Antonioni, Woody Allen. First-person narra- tion in movies often brings with it abookish quality, particularly because it has so often been used in movies adapted from novels, but also because it superimposes a thoughtful perspective, looking back-wards on the supposed "now" of the film's fabricated present. Godard's essay-film "Zombie" begins to seem studied and literary here. We might remember that the first-person narrator is an artifice," an author's voice orienting us to events that began in the past.

Michael Moore's Roger and Me promises at first to be a model essay-film. The filmmaker sets up, in the first twenty minutes, a very strong, beguiling autobiographical narrator: we see his par- ents, the town where he grew up, his misadventures in San Francisco cappuccino. Moore's fairly objective documentation phases out the personal side of his narra- tor, making way for a cast of "color- ful" interviewees: the rabbit lady, the evasive insulation-thickening contractor the apologist for GM. True, he inserts a recurring motif of himself trying to confront Roger Smith, but this faux-narrator technique is immediately removed, fiera- lically farical, and in any case none of these subsequent appearances deepen our sense of Moore's character or mind. In its place, Moore offers us by offering himself as bait, only to draw us into this anti-corporate capital- ism sermon. The factual distortions of Roger and Me, its cavalier manipulations of documentary versimilitude, 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 abandon- ment of whatever seemed to be happening in essay-film. Perhaps the two are related: Moore's decision to fade out his subjective personage, "Michael," seems to go of what he has to know of the Vanity of the Flinst, Michael Moore is accepted by us as objective truth.

Unlike a true personal essayist, Moore resists the burden of self-examination, rejecting to ridicule the insanities of the rich while not being hard enough on himself. Don't get me wrong: the issue is not whether Roger and Me betrays the right-hemisphere of which it was made and that Michael Moore may have no conception of. The real question is, why do filmmakers find it so difficult to fol- low through with their personal voice and experience to guide us? In Moore's case, he seems to have had a more pressing political agenda. But there may also be a huge difference between writing about oneself and filmmaking oneself. Filmmakers usually choose that career expecting that they can control its meaning. But there may be an immense reticence or bashful- ness may set in, once a filmmaker who has taken center stage as the governing voice of a biographical autobiographical realizes how ex- pressed she/his—is an exposure, perhaps, far exceeding what a literary essayist

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I don’t know whether to blame these processes, chance or the immaturity of the genre, but so far, almost none of the examples I would consider essay-films have boasted superlative services. Serviceable, yes, but nothing to compare with the shimmering visual nobility of a drama. Even when a great Cinematographer like Max Ophuls. The one exception I know of is Night and Fog, a case in which the separation between visual stylist (Renais) and screenwriter (Cronen) may have helped both images and text to reach the same level of artistic ripeness. Even when a great Cinematographer like Max Ophuls. The one exception I know of is Night and Fog, a case in which the separation between visual stylist (Renais) and screenwriter (Cronen) may have helped both images and text to reach the same level of artistic ripeness. Then, there are the 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 commercial aspect hasn’t exactly stopped the legion of experimental filmmakers, whose work often takes a more esoteric, intellectually challenging form, more than an intelligently communicative essay-film.

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

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

It seems to me that three working procedures suggest themselves for the making of essay-films: 1) to write or borrow a text and make a film from it; 2) write and film a text which is a meditation on the assembled images. This is often Chris Marker’s approach. 3) The filmmaker can write a little, shoot a little, write a bit more, and so on—the one process interacting with the other throughout.