

Books

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The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker

By Timothy Corrigan

London: Oxford University Press, 2012

237 pp. \$99 cloth, \$27.95 paperback

Reviewed by Zoran Samardzija

Timothy Corrigan's *The Essay Film* is an overdue introduction to a mode of filmmaking that has become increasingly common. The aesthetic practices of filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov, Chris Marker, or Jean-Luc Godard are no longer confined to the fringes of documentary or the avant-garde. In the most recent *Sight and Sound* critic's poll of The Top 50 Greatest Films of All Time, one of the first essay films, Vertov's masterful *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), placed number eight on the list. Moreover, popular websites such as *Indiewire* regularly post in-depth criticism in the form of video essays that analyze, for example, action movie editing, cinematography, or the style of a particular director.

The essay has, in other words, become an accepted mode of visual expression and criticism, and it is important to understand how this has happened. *The Essay Film* – as its subtitle *From Montaigne, After Marker* indicates – aims to do precisely that. It reexamines Western culture to trace the ways in which the essay, originating in the literary traditions of the Renaissance, became part of film history and the aesthetics of cinema.

According to Corrigan, the history of the essay film begins with Montaigne, who is universally credited with first developing the essay as a literary form. More importantly, Montaigne also establishes the central traits of “essayistic” thinking, which Corrigan defines as an unsettled exploration of the relationship between the self, expression, and experience – adding that “we find in the best 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” (17). Montaigne’s famous question “What do I know?” and key essays such as “Of Experience” are early examples of this attempt to foreground the self in order to think through the world. After Montaigne, Corrigan sees the literary essay evolving into the essay film according to three distinct but “intersecting registers” that encompass “personal experience, public experience, and the process of thinking.” (14) Most essays attempt to engage with some, if not all, of these.

Because *The Essay Film* is relatively brief at 237 pages, Corrigan cannot afford to be entirely historically comprehensive about how the literary essay or the essay film developed. The first part of the book, “Toward The Essay Film,” where Corrigan specifically traces the history of the essay, covers only one third of the text. The remainder of the book, “Essayistic Modes,” is structured around detailed, impressionistic readings about select works that represent the aforementioned “intersecting registers” and diverse practices of essayistic filmmaking. Corrigan argues that this essayistic approach is more appropriate to the subject matter.

The decision to privilege “extended focus on single films” (7) rather than offer a more detailed history is both a flaw and virtue of *The Essay Film*. Corrigan attempts to acknowledge the limitations of this approach when he writes that “many important essay films and filmmakers will not get the attention they deserve here” (7). However, it is not the absence of any one individual director or film that is problematic. Rather, it is the fact that Corrigan does not adequately justify his “largely Western” (7) selection of films, leaving the reader to wonder why the great essay films of, for example, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, or Latin America do not deserve either close analysis or brief discussion.

He argues, “My focus is largely Western, in large part because of the historical and cultural origins and evolutions of the essay, a heritage that is clearly changing quickly as a consequence of global and digital shifts in media production” (7). Corrigan’s point is murky. He correctly emphasizes that the essay originates in the West, but the latter portion of the sentence invites a simple question: If global “shifts in media production” are redefining the essay-film, then why not analyze those shifts?

Even more questionable is why Corrigan avoids extensive

engagement with Soviet Cinema from the 1920s and the various theories of montage that emerged during the decade that are essential for understanding how film began to develop in essayistic forms. He unnecessarily limits himself to 1945 through 2010. To be fair, Corrigan does briefly discuss the aforementioned *Man With A Movie Camera* and acknowledges that, “by the 1920s the work of Sergei Eisenstein and other filmmakers in the Soviet Cinema most clearly articulate the possibilities of an essayistic cinema” (56). However, this is not an argument he develops, and his short analysis of the Vertov film is framed as a comparison with Jean-Luc Godard’s *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967). While the post-WWII “French tradition” that Corrigan emphasizes is indeed rich with innovations for the essay film, his book would have been strengthened immensely by a more substantial engagement with early Soviet Cinema.

Despite the truncated history of the essay film that Corrigan offers, in Part Two, “Essayistic Modes,” he succeeds at showing the range of expression for essayistic thinking on film. His impressionistic readings of select films clearly explicate the definitions of the essayistic given at the beginning of the book, and they leave readers with an understanding of how filmmakers are able to stage encounters among subjectivity, selfhood, and the world. More importantly, his close readings also rethink the boundaries among documentary, the avant-garde, and narrative film.

In his analysis, for example, of Chantal Akerman’s *News From Home* (1976), he astutely notes that the film “is not, I believe, best understood within the confines of the avant-garde tradition of structural cinema but rather as an essay about the concomitant assertion and dispersal of a subjectivity through the public spaces of travel, places subjectively encountered as dramatically elsewhere” (106). In making this argument, Corrigan does more than merely reclassify Akerman. With this and other film examples, he shows how the essay film represents a unique form of aesthetic synthesis that draws from multiple cinematic traditions.

The Essay Film may not be historically comprehensive, but it is a convincing study that invites a new look at film history. It also certainly lays the groundwork for further analysis of the essay film and its various current practitioners, such as Lars Von Trier and Abbas Kiarostami. Discussing Kiarostami’s masterpiece of essayistic cinema, *Close-Up* (1990), Corrigan observes how it “humanizes the

close-up not as a coherent cinematic figure of personal subjectivity but as part of a complex social and technological system of beliefs and desires” (199). This serves as a great final word about the importance of the essay film as it indicates how cinematic forms can always be reinvented and reimagined to understand the world at large. In other words, *The Essay Film* is as much about the future of cinema as it is its past.

Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women's Cinema

By Florence Martin

Indiana University Press, 2011. 271 pages. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by Laura Reeck

Cinema from the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) has come into critical favor in an accelerated way in the recent past, and in the wake of the Arab Spring it will likely continue to garner the critical attention it deserves. A look back at English-language book-length studies of Maghrebi cinema over the past five years reveals a predilection for Moroccan film: *What Moroccan Cinema? A Historical and Critical Study, 1956-2006* (Sandra Gayle Carter, 2009), *Screening Morocco: Contemporary Depictions in Film of a Changing Society* (Valerie Orlando, 2011), and, most recently *Algerian National Cinema* Guy Austin, (2012). Maghrebi cinema has also sometimes been folded into the broader region of the Middle East and North Africa, which is to say in studies treating Arab or Middle Eastern cinema, as is the case with Viola Shafik's *Arab Cinema; History and Cultural Identity* (2007) and *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence* (ed. Joseph Gugler, 2011).

This critical interest in Maghrebi cinema parallels burgeoning film festivals across the Middle East and North Africa, where Maghrebi cinema is often featured, including those in Doha, Dubai, Marrakech, and Tunis (Doc à Tunis; Carthage). Morocco alone now has a spate of film festivals ranging from the Marrakech International Film Festival to the Tetouan Mediterranean Film Festival and Tangier's National Film Festival and Mediterranean Short Film Festival; it is also of note that The Marrakech School of Visual Arts opened its doors to its first cohort of film students in 2006. Interest in Maghrebi cinema has swelled in the United States as well, as evidenced by the High Atlas

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