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The Limits of Vococentrism: Chris Marker, Hans Richter and the Essay Film

David Oscar Harvey

The legacies of Left Bank Cinema and the essay film have become mutually intertwined. The former is a small but influential filmmaking movement in postwar France, primarily thought to consist of three friends, artists and filmmakers: Chris Marker, Alain Resnais and Agnès Varda, though Georges Franju is sometimes included in the coterie.¹ The group has significant overlap with the French New Wave in that both share the same historical moment and geographic space, as well as a common interest in exploring personal expression within cinematic signifying practices, and advancing the aesthetic possibilities of the film form. Ginette Vincendeau states that films directed by members of the French New Wave “lacked an interest in political or social issues, concentrating on personal angst among the (male) Parisian middle class (although another less media-prominent band of filmmakers known as the ‘Left Bank’ group...showed greater political awareness)” (110). Moreover, the New Wave filmmakers made almost exclusively fiction films, while the Left Bank group was also interested in documentary. The politically engaged, aesthetically bold documentary voiced with strong personal expression is how the essay film has come to be theorized.² Hence, many studies of the form consider the Left Bank group as most fully inaugurating the presently recognized dimensions of the essay film form.³

Alexandre Astruc’s 1948 manifesto, “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*,” is frequently invoked as an influential article thought to anticipate and/or incite both Left Bank Cinema and the essay film.⁴ Indeed, Resnais referred to his first film, *Ouvert pour cause d’inventaire* (1946), now lost, as “the sort of thing [that was] later called ‘caméra-stylo’” (cited in Joram ten Brink, 236). With his notion of the camera as pen, Astruc expressed his desire for a cinematic mode of signifying thought and personal expression. Engagements with the essay film have utilized the caméra-stylo as metaphor for a film form that articulates intelligence and an individual point of view, typically accomplished through voice-over. Timothy Corrigan argues that many engagements with the essay film

foreground the role of subjective voice and perspective: "An expressive subjectivity, commonly seen in the voice or actual presence of the filmmaker or surrogate, has become one of the most recognizable signs of the essay film" (*The Essay Film*, 30). This point is useful when accounting for varied formal strategies in documentary films, since it allows us to rethink the documentary form as limited to "objective" and more conventionally journalistic points of view.

Following, Michel Chion, I propose that essay films be thought of as vococentric (5-6). Vococentrism is Chion's term for the cinematic sound track's prioritization of the human voice over sound effects and music. Hence, essay films, as presently elaborated and theorized, are vococentric. Furthermore, they are so in emphatic or special manners. First, they are vococentric in the sense intended by Chion: that is, their soundtracks are dominated and arranged around the human voice. Second, the very rhetoric of film, its framework, is constructed by the logic and nature of the voiceover. The same can be said for expository, classical "voice-of-God" documentaries. Yet, essayistic voice-overs disavow the epistemological mastery put forward by classical documentaries, originating with the work of social reformer and filmmaker John Grierson.⁵ Propagating a practice of "objective" documentaries that endeavor to avoid offense while soliciting a wide audience, the Griersonian model minimized the presence of subjectivity, and with it, the traces of authorial presence. On the contrary, the essay articulates a perspective largely determined by the nature, orientation and temperament of a particular subject position.⁶ Put differently, essay film voice-overs do not proffer what Jacques Derrida has termed auto-affection, or the illusory idea that the human voice confers self-transparency of expression, presence and a bedrock against the supplementarity and immateriality of signification (*Of Grammatology*, 165).

Nevertheless, I mean to assert that the vococentric essay film is not what Astruc had in mind when imagining his *caméra-stylo*. Speaking of his own 1955 film *Les Mauvaises Rencontres*, Astruc admitted his embarrassment regarding "the premise of a silent film with commentary...because it is more of a novelistic than a cinematic construct" (cited in Rivette and Rohmer, 4). While with his *caméra-stylo* Astruc encouraged a style of filmmaking that expressed intellection, as in novels and essays, he, like François Truffaut in his critique of the "tradition of quality," called for a means for expression different from the literary, even if the desired ends were similar.⁷ In other words, Astruc's *caméra-stylo* is more in line with a mode of abstract intelligence available within specifically cinematic characteristics of the film medium: namely, its image and non-vococentric soundtrack, or elements uneasily likened to literary modes of signification.

While work on the essay film commonly engages what I am calling vococentric essay films, I wish to explore the non-vococentric voice. This non-vococentric voice finds a parallel in Bill Nichols's concept of the voice of documentary as "not restricted to any one code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary....[but] perhaps akin to that intangible pattern formed by the unique interaction of all of a film's codes" ("The Voice of Documentary," 260-61, 266). For Nichols, an explicit voice is the key feature that combats "the apparent simplicities of faithful observation or respectful representation" within realist documentaries (261). Timothy Corrigan accedes Nichols's generalized understanding of voice in noting that the expressive subjectivity of the essay film is not always rendered through voice-over: "When lacking a clearly visible subjective voice or personal organizing presence, this act of enunciation can also be signaled in various formal and technical ways, including editing and other representational manipulations of the image" (*The Essay Film*, 30). While the non-vococentric essay film does not establish itself through voice-over, it does exhibit a more general or literary voice as described by Nichols. Still, a non-vococentric essayistic subjectivity or manner of thinking has yet to be adequately theorized. More attention should be paid to wordless essay films that create a line of thought or contention through an engagement with the image—its grain, orientations, duration, and technologies—that become signifiers themselves and cause the image to open onto the social, political, and historical, or to construct, in Corrigan's words, "an experiential encounter in a public arena" (*The Essay Film*, 30).

While it is beyond my scope here to cogently theorize a non-vococentric essayistic film form and its concomitant subjectivity, I would like to address potential benefits of explicating a non-vococentric essay film. First, an understanding of the essay film in vococentric terms minimizes the system of signification specific to cinema, be it in film, video or the digital. While I certainly would not sunder the cinematic essay from its literary precursors, to insist upon a vococentric character for the essay film is to over-value its literary antecedents. This comes at the expense of failing to adequately account for the vagaries of voice and subjectivity allowed for within the cinematic image or non-vococentric elements of its soundtrack. As Vivian Sobchack has illustrated, the signifying practices of cinema rely heavily upon the perceptual apparatuses of both the camera and the spectator.⁸ Sobchack holds that films make sense through a similar manner of perceptual orientation that a subject relies upon to comprehend the world. Hence, in a subject's experience at the movies and in the world, perception doubles as expression, "the latter articulated as the visible gesture of the former" (Sobchack, 41). Put succinctly, a film expresses itself primarily through perception.

Writing about the poetics of narration in film and literature, Seymour Chatman observes that “when we speak of expression, we pass... to the province of voice” (154). Voice is a text’s manner of expression, the mechanics by which it makes sense. These mechanics are explicit when a film adopts voice-over narration. Yet, a film that does not adopt voice-over does not lack voice. Its voice is simply less explicit. Taking Chatman and Sobchack’s views together, I assert that since a film’s primary means of expression is perception, these perceptual elements comprise a large portion of a film’s “voice.” Such a voice is not always easy to identify, hence Nichols’ description of it as an “intangible pattern.” Indeed, the chiasmatic manner in which perception becomes expression is masked in the realist documentaries criticized by Nichols. Essay films, on the other hand, foreground their manner of expression and hence their voice. Following Sobchack’s emphasis on the perceptual nature of film’s expressivity, my engagement with the non-vococentric essay film draws attention to a cinematic voice cultivated outside the linguistic register. Instead, the voice of a non-vococentric essay film coheres around the perceptual potentialities of film, be it the compositions of the image, editing or non-vocal manipulations of the soundtrack.

Additionally, I would like to survey two arguments for the non-vococentric essay film. The first deals with the extent to which the non-vococentric essay film is able to challenge the authority of a transparent pro-filmic reality. My argument will be substantiated through a reading of three essay films by Chris Marker. The second concerns how a consideration of the non-vococentric essay film might open up and question common historical orientations of the essay film form that have it originating in postwar France. This portion of my argument will draw upon the writings of Hans Richter as well as his cinematic essay *Inflation* (1928), a work I will use to illustrate the possible dimensions of a non-vococentric essay film.

Genre and Genius

Every cinematic genre might be said to have its genius, or a certain filmmaker reputed to be the master of a particular film form and so epitomize the possibilities of that structure. Within film studies and specifically the theory and history of genre, the two most oft-cited examples are likely John Ford in reference to the western and Douglas Sirk in reference to the melodrama.⁹ A similar situation has arisen in elaborations of the essay film. While directors including Harun Farocki, Trinh T Minh-Ha, Alexander Kluge, Jean-Luc Godard and Ross McElwee are regularly invoked in discussions of the essay film, Chris Marker seems to have been implicitly elected master of the form. Scholars of documentary cinema

like Marker's films, as do I. In them we find illustrations of a progressive, thoughtful mode of cinema that we are eager to advocate. Broadly speaking, Marker's films actively work against classical documentaries that represent their subject matter as if it is a transparent or innocent iteration of the world as such. Indeed, Marker came of age in the same French intellectual and artistic culture that gave rise to many of the theories that scholars invoke to critique audio-visual meditations of reality that presume objectivity and an evidentiary status. Kaja Silverman makes Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1982) a centerpiece in establishing a theory of the cinematic look.¹⁰ While never categorizing *Sans Soleil* as a certain type of film, other than to say it allowed for the productive mode of spectatorial address in which she was interested, Silverman declared, "there should be more films of this kind" (193).

My point here is not to contradict the approval and use of Marker's films by Silverman and others. It is, however, to rethink the extent to which Marker's filmmaking practices have come to typify the essay film. Soon after Silverman's book, a discursive flurry of academic work began to materialize around this newly engaged "films of this kind."¹¹ Documentary scholars were interested in locating and working with films deploying practices of semiosis that undermined epistemological mastery by relying instead on fantasy, memory and the opacities of the post-structural subject—in other words, finding "more films like *Sans Soleil*." This constitution of the essay film provided scholars with a platform to assemble and present films that contravened normative understandings of documentary cinema and its truth claims, while remaining and in a sense redefining documentary cinema. Yet, should the work of a particularly well-regarded director within a genre stand too synonymously with the genre itself, one would come away with a rather narrow and distorted estimation of that genre. In other words, in some conceptualizations of a particular genre, the most well-known and celebrated director within that genre may begin to dominate the entirety of the genre.¹² Such a scenario seems particularly likely given the fact that a genre's pre-eminent artists are cited in numerous discussions of that genre. Consequently, the ideal (genius) begins to color one's understanding of the very rudiments of the idea (genre), in effect contradicting the "general" idea of genre. It may well be that given the frequency with which Marker is invoked in concert with the essay film, the particular tones and stylistics of his own corpus are too closely equated with the general dimensions of the film form.

The Paradoxical Authority of Chris Marker

While it is not my goal here to explicate a definition of the exact parameters of the essay film, it is important to provide a sense of the ways in which various scholars have utilized Marker's films to elaborate an

understanding of the form. Phillip Lopate nominates Chris Marker as “the one great essayist in the film medium,” further stating that Marker possesses “an inveterate essayistic tendency” (249). Lopate identifies a number of the qualities he considers essential to the essay film squarely within Marker’s cinematic corpus. For Lopate, these characteristics include films that represent the voice of a single person, typically the director, while attempting to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem with a strong, personal point of view (245-47).

Work subsequent to Lopate has highlighted the open-endedness and multiplicity of exposition within Marker’s work, and within the essay film more generally. Such a proviso dissuades one from the notion that Marker’s authorial presence dictates an authoritative rhetoric that allows for an absence of interpretative agency on the part of the spectator. Laura Rascaroli writes that “to accuse Marker of using an imperialist voice is utterly unthinkable...[Marker’s] self-portrayal can often be a modest gesture, rather than a manifestation of arrogance and authority” (*The Personal Camera*, 67). Somewhat paradoxically, then, Marker’s work coheres around a strong personal voice, but the strength in this voice does not lie in its epistemological authority; rather, within the particularity of the film’s cumulative perspective, the film fashions a sort of cinematic or textual persona.

Moreover, Marker is ostensibly savvy to the manner in which vagaries of cinematic voice affect how the spectator will receive and interpret the text. An oft-cited example that foregrounds Marker’s awareness is the moment in his *Letter from Siberia* (1957) that repeats a scene in which workers repair a street. The scene is replayed many times, each with a different perspective—one that supports the communist state, one that is against it, and a final voice that aspires to objectivity. The sequence highlights the inability of each variation to tell the “whole” truth, constructing instead various versions of the truth, each with its assortment of predispositions. The scenes consummately serve to cast doubt on any “objective” or “veracious” documentary exposition within cinema.

Of the kind of rhetorical and authorial position presented in Marker’s essay films, Nora Alter writes “these thoughts are occasionally contradictory and not always rational. The filmmaker is thus no longer bound to the rules and parameters of traditional documentary practice and is given free-reign to use the imagination with all its artistic potentiality” (*Chris Marker*, 20). Elaborations of the essay film are often associated with Marker’s formal logic that follows no lucid line of reasoning, and instead drifts along variegated strings of intellection.

Like Marker, who values privacy and shies away from photographs and interviews, his authorial persona is often presented in evasive or fragmented form. Indeed, Marker’s films often adopt a variety of tones,

ranging from the ironic or flip to the earnest and even, at times, sentimental. They also adopt a variety of guises. For example, the narrator of *Sans Soleil* is a female who reads letters from the fictitious cameraman, Sandor Krasna—a thinly veiled alter-ego for Marker. The themes touched upon in Krasna's correspondence—memory, interest in the peculiar everyday minutiae of varied cultures, and the dynamic interplay between the past and present within the cinematic image—recur throughout Marker's oeuvre.

Though *Sans Soleil* makes leaps in time and space (with locations ranging from Iceland to San Francisco, Hong Kong, Japan and the Ile-de-France), Marker's engagement with the resulting images is not nearly as diffuse or indeterminate as the oblique logic that arranges the film's globe-trotting trajectory. Throughout the film, Krasna/Marker makes a valiant attempt to become other, illustrating in the process the vertiginous orientation of selfhood for a globalized subject. Moreover, Marker/Krasna seems to inhabit the memories of people he briefly encounters; he recalls the grief of a cat owner who had traveled to a cat temple to honor her departed friend, the rancor of anti-colonial fighters in Guinea-Bissau, the final words of a kamikaze pilot, and, in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Johnny's melancholic fondness for his dead lover Madeleine. At one point Krasna speculates that his dreams have tapped into a collective unconscious, stating "more and more my dreams find their setting in a department store in Tokyo...I begin to wonder if these dreams are mine, or if they're part of a totality, a giant collective dream of which the entire city may be a projection." In *Sans Soleil*, Marker is conveying a subject in transition, one that undergoes breakdown and splintering. Yet even as Marker/Krasna finds himself speaking in different voices and through different bodies, these hybrid subjects are haunted by the influence of Marker, via Krasna and his insight. *Sans Soleil* bespeaks a subject always on the move, changing as it encounters different cultures and locations. Yet, just as Krasna is modified by his travels, so too the objects of his regard are affected and determined by the active intelligence of his essayism.

Inasmuch as his films are never about himself, but narrate the curious avenues and objects along his travels, Marker is a truly generous filmmaker. There is, of course, an ample degree of self-effacement in such generosity. To maintain that Marker puts his own subject position in a state of flux or even duress in his films, while simultaneously asserting the overt presence of his authorial trace, as voice, may seem paradoxical. Nevertheless, this is exactly what I'm claiming. Marker's authorial presentation in his essay films is equal parts self-abnegation and forceful torrents of commentary that inscribe the logic of the self within the logic of the image. In other words, the voice(-over) is determinative, directional and strong, even if what the voice(-over) articulates is the process by which

it is simultaneously constituted and displaced by the object—no matter what variant of the historical world / pro-filmic real is being spoken about.

Marker once stated that “contrary to what people say, using the first person in (documentary) film tends to be a sign of humility. All I have to offer is myself” (cited in Walfisch, 165). Paradoxically, the humility involved is not a removal or self or an erasure of authorial inscription, but rather an underscoring of that inscription. By contrast, Griersonian documentary aspires to objectivity conducted by a voice supposedly neutralized of particularity and so, in a sense, epistemologically “pure,” and as such, universal. Such claims to universality, no matter the degree of self-erasure, overestimate the capabilities of the documentary director and those who assist him or her with the film. One might even say that Grierson’s project, which involves authorial erasure and classical voice-of-God exposition, is vainer than a first person-approach. As Sylvère Lotringer opines, “the man of pure knowledge boastfully practices self-effacement.” (173-74).

This is indeed what Marker seems to be getting at with his invocation of humility. It is hard to imagine a single filmmaker—or group of them—able to resolutely capture the truth of whatever subject their film endeavors to chronicle. Hence I want to affirm the seemingly contradictory position that taking a singular perspective within the exposition of a documentary film is a humble perch from which to make one’s cinematic utterance. A voice that doesn’t hesitate from implying both the particularity and peculiarity of her situation implicitly underscores the inevitability of alternative perspectives. As such, the voice of the filmmaker underscores her authorial position, offering authorship as a sort of ethic: “All I have is to offer myself,” and so we must understand the import of Marker presenting his films as sprung from the stuff of his distinctive creation.

Yet, as a professor of mine once said in reference to Marker and his prolix voice-over as we screened his *Sunday in Peking* (1957), “It’s hard to argue with him.” Indeed, contra Alter, I am inclined to agree with Jacques Rancière’s understanding of epistemological authority in Marker’s films:

[Marker] falls prey...to an obvious paradox: he feels compelled to punctuate all these images that speak for themselves...with an imperious voice-over commentary that tells us what it is they say....This is what [Marker’s] voice is constantly spelling out for the audience: don’t forget this image, be sure to connect it to this image, look at this image a little closer, reread what there is to read in this image. (167-68)

Marker is a master at eliciting a counter-intuitive reading of images, their alternatives, eccentricities and counter-histories. For example, in *Sunday in Peking*, a film that sees that city through the perspective of a Frenchman and outsider, Marker reconsiders a bicyclist wearing a dust mask as an “absent-minded surgeon” and imagines a group of Chinese

school children as “half apple, half squirrel.” In this way, Marker reorients any self-evident logic or significance about the image, bending it to meet his whimsy, experience and fantasies. In the end, we see the image as Marker instructs us, and the same holds generally true for the vococentric essay film.

On the other hand, non-vococentric essay films combat impressions of representational objectivity by creating an individuated or expressionistic document of the world and the subject, or the subject in the world. An excess of the pro-filmic real—impressions represented from a particular vantage point—might cohere within the image track itself, or through elements of the soundtrack not related to speech. Such vehicles of expressivity—an addendum or supplement to the pro-filmic in a pure sense—are moored not to language, the mind, or conventional processes of human ideation, but rather to modes of perception and affect. Examples of the non-vococentric essay film include *Aliki* (Richard Wiebe, 2009), *I Met the Walrus* (Josh Raskin, 2008) and *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982). Finally, the non-vococentric essayistic mode poses a more thorough re-estimation of the documentary image as index than do accounts that rely upon the addition of speech.

Deeply inspired by post-structuralism and Althusserian Marxist critiques of ideology, scholars such as Bill Nichols and Brian Winston problematized the notion of reality produced outside cultural signs.¹³ Conventional documentary has proved an eerily fitting example of this, with its techniques of nonintervention, its progressively more mobile cameras, and sound recording devices designed to capture, allegedly, reality in the rough. The vococentric essay film avoids a mere description of the image-track, complicating the image through rigorous inquiry, commentary or even radical strategies of *détournement*. Yet, an understanding in which naïve estimations of documentary realism are challenged through an image’s juxtaposition with voice-over implies a realist reading of the image in-itself. An example of this can be found in André Bazin’s celebration of Marker’s *Letter from Siberia*, which credits the film with a new type of cinematic thinking that Bazin equates with the essayistic:

The film is above all else a film of ideas...articulated on the basis of documentary images. If the text of the film proves nothing without the images, it is no longer simply commentary. Instead it maintains a dialectical and lateral rapport with them, leading to an absolutely new notion of editing; no longer from one image to another and along the length of the filmstrip, but, so to speak laterally, as a consequence and reflection of the idea’s impact of the image (“Deux Documentaries ‘hors series,’” 461).¹⁴

One may understand Bazin, via Marker, as challenging the indexical nature of the image. Yet, such a contestation relies on recourse to the voice-over track. Hence, the indexicality of the image is reworked only

by the juxtaposition of an additional, lateral mode of signification—the voice-over. The image is still accorded an affiliation with reality, which is exceeded by the overlay of a voice-track that encourages a rethinking of the pro-filmic real. As Bazin notes about *Letter from Siberia* and the role of Marker's voice-over therein, "its immediate means of expression is language and [...] the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal expression" (Bazin on Marker, 44).

Drawing again on Alexandre Astruc, my idea of an image track opening onto a mode of signification beyond the indexical is affirmed in his desire to be freed from "the dictatorship of photography" so that cinema might cross over into an abstract representation of reality that contravenes brute documentation ("*L'Avenir du Cinéma*," 49). Astruc's notion of the dictatorship of photography need not be overcome by adding a supplementary element to the image track; voice-over is certainly not required to democratize the rule of the image. Rather, such democratization might spring from the formal properties of the image itself. Astruc's push for a "cinematic thinking and authorship" calls not for introducing voice-overs but for cultivating mental images within the spectator that exceed the cinematic image itself.

The Non-Vococentric Voice of Hans Richter

Astruc leads to my second motivation for theorizing the non-vococentric essay film—its ability to open the historic field in which it is situated. As noted above, Astruc's "*Birth of a New Avant Garde*" presides over the cultural delivery of the essay film, taken up by French film essayists like Resnais, Marker, Franju and Jean-Luc Godard. This development, with its many elaborations, takes place in the specific historical moment of postwar French film culture. Yet, if we attend to the non-vococentric essay film, the discussion and realization of essayistic aspirations in cinema can be glimpsed much earlier.

Astruc situates his new avant garde as formally between "the pure cinema of the 1920s and filmed theatre," or between a purely abstracted cinematic language and one dull and devoid of any specifically cinematic character ("*La Caméra-Stylo*," 21). For Astruc, his contemporary avant-garde was capable of thinking and expressing ideas via cinema; recent studies by Bill Nichols, Paula Amad, Malcolm Turvey, Michael Renov and Malte Hagener of European documentary and experimental films of the 1920s and 1930s confirm this.¹⁵ Indeed, much of classical or modernist film theory has—like Astruc, though before him—chastised films for self-professed abstraction. These earlier theorists call for a middle ground between raw documentation and promiscuous expressivity unmoored from the historical world. Béla Balázs criticized a style of pure or absolute cinema that was "obviously the result of an extreme subjectivism which

is undoubtedly a form of ideological escapism characteristic of decadent artistic cultures" (176).

I'd like to turn to the film theory of Hans Richter, as well as to his film *Inflation*. Richter, a significant figure in the European modernist avant-garde, was primarily an artist, though he later wrote film criticism and taught film history after emigrating to the United States in the 1940s. His 1939 book *The Struggle for the Film: Towards a Socially Responsible Cinema* advocated a progressive cinema that would lucidly represent everyday life, thereby fostering increased awareness of socio-political issues. The following year he wrote "Der Filmessay: Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms" now recognized as the first sustained engagement with the essay film form. While he complimented films of the early 1920s avant-garde that "broke free in [their] own way...[from] the inhibitions imposed on the cinema by its subordination to giant organizations, material interests, distributors' tastes and political restrictions," he also described these film as having a "lyrico-anarchistic content apparently without any socially definable content at all" (*Struggle*, 119). Richter underscored the "lyrico-anarchistic" films' limitations in their representation of social realities. Instead he advocated a cinema that addresses pressing political concerns. A variant of this type of cinema is explicated and extolled in his short article on the essay film. Paralleling Astruc's call for a cinema capable of thinking expressively within specifically cinematic terms, Richter hailed film for its ability to "shape mental content into a more relevant and modified form.... In other words, one can no longer rely upon the simple documentary film that merely shoots an object to be represented. Rather, one must try to render, with whatever means available, the idea" ("Der Filmessay," 196, 196-97).¹⁶ Hence, for Richter, a socially responsible cinema and a theoretical or ideational cinema are irrevocably linked. While Richter aligns the cinema he admires with documentary, and Astruc's aligns his with the avant garde, they praise many of the same attributes, including the ability to think cinematically. Additionally, whereas Astruc in 1948 imagines his cinema as one yet to come, Richter cites a number of films in 1940 that have already actualized his aspirations ("Der Filmessay," 197).

One of the examples Richter cites is his own three-minute film, *Inflation* (1928). A brief look at it will suggest the dimensions that a non-vococentric essay film might take, as well as demonstrating their presence well before Astruc's new avant-garde. *Inflation* is a silent film on the Great German Inflation of the early 1920s. Without a voice-over to serve as exposition, the film relies on the images to craft its rhetoric. Yet, the images neither construct a cohesive pro-filmic real, nor do they even forge a lucid argument. Rather, it is the frenzied play of the image that weaves the film's logic of whimsy and disarray—one that complements

the scenario it depicts (the inflation) as well as the essay film's penchant for illogic and contradiction.



Stills from *Inflation* (Hans Richter, 1928) that express the chaos of the great German inflation

Unlike the elegant movement and juxtapositions of geometrical shapes in Richter's earlier *Rhythmus* films (with Viktor Eggling, 1921 and 1923), *Inflation* juxtaposes piles of Deutschmark bills drifting through a vacuous, darkly lit space against rapidly escalating stacks of gold coins and gesticulating stockbrokers.¹⁷ The volume of the currency and coinage, the frenetic use of montage and the arresting, discordant compositions of the images all congeal to represent the instability of the German economic system. Though clearly indebted to modernist artistic techniques such as montage and a fragmentary sense of narrative, the film's critical depiction of an historical event secures its documentary value. *Inflation's* non-vococentric voice can be understood doubly, in both Richter's play with rhythm, and in the film's bold aesthetization of reality.

Richter calls rhythm one of films "primary possibilities," and he uses it to dramatic effect in *Inflation* (Hans Richter, 143). The increasingly frantic editing and the ghostly juxtaposition of images (for example, an anxious crowd of bourgeois everymen superimposed over piles of bills) endow the film with both a spatial and temporal sense of rhythm.¹⁸ There is no mistaking Richter's account of the inflation for a sober journalistic account of events. Richter uses bold, rhythmic play to elevate cinema beyond mere reproduction: "The silent rhythm of shot sequences... [in] the organization of movements in an overall rhythm,... raised the cinematic fact to the level of free artistic elaboration" (*Struggle*, 53). *Inflation* is clearly influenced by this approach.

Richter's remarks on rhythm also speak to his more general interest in expanding film aesthetics beyond straight-forward representation:

The main esthetic problem in the movies, which were invented for reproduction of movement, is paradoxically the overcoming of reproduction. In other words, the question is: to what degree is the camera developed and used to reproduce any object which comes before the lens, or to produce sensations not possible in any other medium. (Hans Richter, 154)

Richter understands early filmgoers as dulled by films or newsreels that blandly reproduced cinematic facts—a variety of filmmaking he deigns "primal cinema," stating "for a start, the audience, too, was quite satisfied with straight reproduction so long as it fulfilled the ideal of the most exact representation possible" (*Struggle*, 41, 43). Positing early film audiences as captivated by the novelty of indexical realism, especially in the realm of non-fiction, Richter theorizes that the next step in film's evolution is the addition of expressive techniques to complement the cinematic fact. Richter's chronicle of developments within film history and culture recalls John Grierson's description of the documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" ("Flaherty's *Moana*," 26). Yet, while

Grierson later downplayed the aesthetic element of documentary, calling it “from the beginning an anti-aesthetic movement,” Richter insists upon the centrality of expressivity to the artistic evolution of non-fiction film (“The Documentary Idea,” 105). The development of film form is the turn towards the beautiful which, for Richter, “marked the cinema’s first direct overtures to the artistic climate of the period” (*Struggle*, 44).

Yet, “the beautiful” that Richter explicates does not reside solely within the image, as in pure cinema; rather, it exists in concert with the reproduction of reality. This elaboration of the real is understood by Richter as an addition artfully crafted by the filmmaker, “[We discovered] as well as the possibility of shaping facts, the temptation of giving the image an extra aesthetic attractiveness” (*Struggle*, 44). Hence, an element that distinguishes films like *Inflation* from primal cinema is the presence of voice. Given the film’s elliptical logic, its editing, and the sensational nature of the images, the voice of the film is keenly marked. Yet, rather than taking the form of a voice-over remarking upon images, the voice emerges from the play and arrangement of the images. *Inflation* is as much a film of affect as it is one of intellection. It confirms the fact that a film’s assumptions, positions and canons of validation—that it is to say, its voice—are readily available without recourse to vococentrism.

Antonin Artaud is another prominent artist whose writings on the cinema lend themselves to theorizations of the essay film. Articulating a stance quite similar to Richter’s, though in the 1920s, Artaud held that “pure cinema is wrong, as are all efforts to reach the principle of any art at the expense of one’s means of objective representation” (“Cinema of Abstraction,” 61). Although Artaud was less optimistic than Astruc and Richter about cinema’s future, he did approvingly imagine a cinema capable of retaining the original thought process from which it emerged. Moreover, Artaud understood the creative energy behind art as grounded in the body of the artist. In the same vein, Artaud likened works of art lacking such energy to excrement or human waste.¹⁹ In the case of cinema, he celebrated art that is able to suggest a discernable voice beyond the raw material of its pro-filmic reality. Artaud understands cinema as potentially articulating the aporia of human subjectivity caught in a violent, creatively productive dynamic that vacillates between subject and object. Gilles Deleuze notes, “Artaud considers that cinema is essentially suited to reveal the powerlessness to think at the heart of thought” (166). The frustration of human reflectivity and modes of intellection and expression are at the heart of a great many essay films. Yet, these adventures of subjective expressive needn’t solely be addressed linguistically. As Astruc, Richter and Deleuze all suggest, one can essay via images or, I would add, within non-vococentric elements of the soundtrack.

Conclusion

Discourses surrounding the essay film provide a manner of theorization which, in addition to elucidating potentialities of cinema, speak about the nature of subjectivity itself. Essay films illustrate how, amidst the process of making a film, both the text and the subject-position behind its construction are challenged, taxed, and invigorated by the non-coincidence of self and world, or between thought as expression and its resultant images. Indeed, the tensions allowed for by this juxtaposition may be the very elusive stuff of the essayistic voice. In exploring the significance of a non-vococentric voice within the essay film, I am not seeking to deprecate the vococentric or the work of Chris Marker. Rather, I am arguing that we should attend to essayistic subjectivities and essayistic texts that express themselves in terms not primarily tethered to the literary or the linguistic. Such a broadened attention also points us toward the historical moments and geographies in which the essay film may be found.

In an anthology entitled *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, editor John D'Agata looks deeper into history than Montaigne, long acknowledged as the creator of the essay. D'Agata begins his anthology with "The List of Ziusudra," written some 5,000 years ago by the legendary Sumerian king who survived the great flood. In it, Ziusudra advises his readers that "lessons from the past can still be useful for today, for any path that we can take in life is one that is treading the earth (7)." D'Agata comments, "I think his list is the beginning of an alternative to nonfiction, the beginning of a form that's not propelled by information, but one compelled instead by individual expression—by inquiry, by opinion, by wonder, by doubt.... It is trying to make a new shape where there previously was none" (4). D'Agata's description of the essay form is not medium-specific, but its presence in a literary anthology would seem to privilege language. To conclude our consideration of the non-vococentric essay film, how might a film inquire, opine, wonder and doubt, but without words?

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Notes

1. See Richard Roud, "The Left Bank."
2. See Nora Alter, "Translating the Essay into Film and Installation," Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions: From Alain Renais to Michael Moore," Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne to Marker*, Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Michael Renov, "Lost, Lost, Lost: Mekas as Essayist."
3. See Timothy Corrigan: "The Forgotten Images between Two Shots: Photos, Photograms and the Essayistic."
4. See Jane Tormey, "The Cinematic Essay."
5. For an overview and an analysis on the work of John Grierson and its influence, see Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real*.

6. See Laura Rascoroli, "Sonic Interstices."
7. See François Truffaut, "A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema."
8. See Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*.
9. For an account that places John Ford at the center of an elaboration of the Western genre see Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System*. For elaborations of the melodrama dependent on the films of Douglas Sirk see Paul Willeman, "Towards an Analysis of the Sirkian System."
10. See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of a Visible World*, "The Look," 164-193.
11. See note 2.
12. For a work that ably demonstrates how Douglas Sirk's empathetic affiliation with the melodrama genre determines the manner whereby the melodrama as a genre is understood see Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. For a similar critique of genre theory regarding John Ford and the Western see Tag Gallagher: "A Shoot Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the Evolution of the Western."
13. See Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary" and Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real*.
14. The quotation is translated and discussed in Steven Ungar, "Radical Ambitions in Post-War France Documentary."
15. Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive Film, the Everyday and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture*, Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, Bill Nichols, "Documentary and the Modernist Avant-Garde."
16. Translation is my own.
17. For an in-depth engagement with the *Rhythmus* films see R. Bruce Elder, "Hans Richter and Viking Egging: The Dream of Universal Language and the Birth of the Absolute Film."
18. Richter's elaboration of a temporal sense of rhythm is one of the key initiatives that motivated his *Rhythmus* films. See Malcolm Turvey, "Dada Between Heaven and Hell: Abstraction and Universal Language in the Rhythm Films of Hans Richter" *October* vol. 105 (Summer 2003) 13-36.
19. See Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, especially 111-114. Jacques Derrida also teases out Artaud's notion of art's potentially excremental relationship to the body of the artist in Jacques Derrida, "La Parole Soufflée."

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