

PROPOSAL FOR A TUSSLE

DISQUIET. To gather fifty-seven films under the title *The Way of the Termite. The Essay in Cinema, 1909-2004* is, to say the least, a prescription for controversy. The list is bound to irritate or to infuriate, and with every showing its revocability will be most likely pointed out. The choice of this or that film will be contested, derided or even heckled, and a dozen other titles will be deemed unjustly forgotten. The historical panorama will be held haphazard and lacunary, the result of eclectic taste rather than of proper scholarship. More likely than not the hecklers will be right; and yet the brouhaha, wherever it takes the viewers of this retrospective, will be in keeping with the notion of the essay itself. There is, as essayist Elizabeth Hardwick pointed out, no “serenity of precision” to the term. She was referring, of course, to the essay in literature, opposing this shape-shifter to the relative formal stability of fiction or poetry. Things get even more difficult when it comes to the cinematic essay. We know or we pretend to know what fiction or documentary are, and we live a content viewer’s life inside this dichotomy that seems as old as the confrontational staging of Louis *vs.* Georges, Lumière *vs.* Méliès, in the wax museum of film histories. Introduce the notion of the essay and this certitude is blown to bits. Here is a form that seems to accommodate the two sides of that divide at the same time, that can navigate from documentary to fiction and back, creating other polarities in the process between which it can operate. Nothing too different here from literature, except that in the mercantile world of cinema such radical refusal of allegiance to genres, such attention paid to the individuality of expression, to expressiveness unfettered, seems far more impolite than in literature. It is as if, to quote and to adapt Hardwick, “freedoms had been exercised, freedoms almost illicit in the mind of some [viewers], freedoms not so much exercised as seized over the borders.” However modest the film essayists, they will always be condemned to the arrogance of their modesty. Theirs is a claim that whim can and

should be exercised, an assertion that style and personal manner are paramount and can be proposed to the viewers' pleasure in a radical ignorance of the sacrosanct strictures of commerce. They come in all sizes, shapes and hues - and they will continue to do so. Fictions always conjure up the image of the studio and documentaries thrive in institutional contexts. They both speak of molds, recipes and enshrined constraints. The essay in film as in literature is not "a closed shop" (Hardwick). How can one even attempt to draw its floor plan, sketch its history and catalog the idiosyncratic products that appear in its inventory? The hecklers will be right.

THE BLACK HOLE. One could hope to go through the maze of that shop by clinging to the Ariadne's thread of literature. That anyone would want to write an essay let alone film one is always astonishing. Like their literary counterparts, film essays seem to be here to help us understand that the subject matter is what matters to the subject. At the core of all essays is an interest in something that matters to the ones who decide to write them or to give them a cinematic existence, an interest so intense that it precludes the possibility of naming it simply and efficiently, of filming it in a straight line, so to speak. At the core of the essay is something so charged that it prompts the existential necessity not to talk about it but to talk or film *around* it. Without this black hole the essayist's gait (and the gait precedes and conditions the essayist's voice) cannot exist. And there lies the strange paradox of the essay: that in the end we will have learned less about the thing that prompts it than witnessed the declension of its importance to the one who talks about it. And in that lies the strange exchange that links the essay to its readers or viewers: we get summoned not by the thing itself but by the dance it imposes upon the one who finds the compulsion to talk about it, in words or in words, images, sounds and music. We might be indifferent to what prompts any of the of the fifty-seven films that compose this

retrospective; but we can't ignore the restlessness with which they dance around their own premise. The essay reveals style as a form of compulsion that matches and opens us up to our own. Hardwick, again speaking about the literary essay: "Essays are addressed to a public in which some degree of equity exists between the writer and the reader." Change the word "reader" for the word "viewer" and this economy remains the same.

THE ARIADNE'S THREAD CUT. Yet if the reader has time on his hands, the viewer has none. On the page the argument always begs to be interrupted, read again, savored, retraced and understood anew. The literary essay more clearly than the novel or even the poem hints at the fact that readings that do not set up a second, a third, an *nth* repeat do not qualify as true readings. Can one read any page of Montaigne without interrupting oneself often in mid-phrase and retracing one's steps? This stutter consecrates his writing as viaticum. We know from it that we will have to carry him in our backpack, and that we will never be finished with him. Replace the name Montaigne by the names Emerson, Hazlitt, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Rilke, whatever your fancy. The results will be the same: whoever pretends to read them in one sitting is either lying or confusing them with Alexandre Dumas. Films, as we know, live another life entirely. In the darkness of the theater in which they are meant to be seen, we cannot interrupt their flow, let alone retrace it. Their images are less appearances than disappearances, each inexorably leaking into another, their sounds passing to sounds. Fiction has always had an easy relationship with this flow. Its characters thrive in its temporality. Essay films, in contrast, are always in battle with their own. In an essay film, the status of an image, the status of a sound, be it a voice, a noise or a few chords of music, radically differs from the status the same elements tend to occupy in a fiction film or in a documentary. It is not that more is at stake, but something definitely different. There is linearity to the chronologies of fiction (however scrambled the

order of their presentation) and to the factual exposition of documentaries (however complex the realities described) that do not put in question the nature of the film image and its flow. But a film essay seems to be endlessly engaged in operations that try to stop or divert this flow and redirect it upon itself. The image in an essay film never passes through; it revisits itself, and it resists its own temporality and passing. This resistance can take the form of an untouched recurrence or a reframing by sound. The success of a great essay film may well be its thousand and one ways of resisting time, of delaying it. Scheherazade dwells in the palaces the film essayists build.

SCHEHERAZADE, ENGINEER. The essay films are thus condemned to playfulness. Their need to delay pushes them constantly outside of themselves. Film fictions and documentaries are dreams of concentration and coherence, whether achieved or not. The space in which they unfurl is always dense. They are sedentary and praised for it. Film essays are engaged in other sets of operation altogether. They are nomadic and often looked upon suspiciously because of it. For them, dissemination is the rule and the building of ever-opened networks of associations always imposes itself as their ideal. Fictions and documentaries tend to nail it down while film essays tend always to riff on it. Invention is not necessarily the rule of this game. The essay film does not labor toward the creation of a *sui generis* image as do fiction and documentary. It feels perfectly at ease quoting, plundering, hijacking, and reordering what is already there and established to serve its purpose. And it feels perfectly at ease doing that twice or three times over, so that the same elements switch into new configurations. It is the rhizomatic form par excellence, forever expanding and finding no better reason to stop than the exhaustion of its own animating energy. The essay is rumination in Nietzsche's sense of the word, the meandering of an intelligence that tries to multiply the entries and the exits into the material it

has elected (or by which it has been elected). It is surplus, drifts, ruptures, ellipses and double-backs. It is, in a word, thought, but because it is film it is thought that turns to emotion and back to thought. The strange thing is that as such it flirts with genres (documentary, pamphlet, fiction, diary...you name them) but never attaches itself to one. It flirts with a range of aesthetics but attaches itself to none. It is, both in form and content, unruliness itself, "termite art" and not "White Elephant art." I am, of course, borrowing from Manny Farber, and borrowing wholesale. Listen to Farber, and forget he might just be speaking about Laurel and Hardy, as the words stick even tighter to the film essayists: "They seem to have no ambitions toward gilt culture but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn't anywhere or for anything.... The most inclusive description of [their] art is that, termite-like, it feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement."

TERMITE (S). Let's take a few steps *Du Côté de Farber*. It is common for all who analyze the essay form to insist that without an *I* there is no essay. It is of course in the domain of evidence. And yet it mucks up the field. The autobiographical, the diaristic, the confessional that come with the pronoun do not necessarily an essay make. And to take a step back and tag the essay film to a persona that would appear in filigree of the utterances of an *I* does not necessarily help either: the field fractures itself along the lines of a typology endlessly refined. Let me risk a hypothesis. What seems at work here in this invocation/celebration of the *I* is a pusillanimity that does not want to separate the film essay from its laurelled literary kin. The advantage of bringing the Farber quote into the debate is that it takes the *I* out of the equation and aggressively replaces it with the instinctual energy of a bug that prompts generally more a call to the nearest exterminator than the celebration of an aesthetic. And what if after all the essay film

gained its stripes, its independence from this unsightly association? What if we had essay films less for the fact that a nominative singular pronoun spoke in them and less for the fact that a type of persona could emerge as a watermark of that discourse than for the fact that in certain films an energy engaged and redefined incessantly the practice of framing, editing and mixing, disconnecting them from the regulatory assumptions of genres? The tentativeness of the film essay would be then only accessorially the tentativeness of a soul confronting itself with the world to become the tentativeness of a practice confronting itself with the system of rules and regulations that shape it, and questioning them. The film essay not as illustration of the endless shimmer of the soul and a delivering of everything “a prancing human voice is capable of” (Susan Sontag) but as experience of the capacity of the *Id* of cinema to show itself through the practice and the manipulations of filmmakers compelled to map however tentatively new territories.

THE ID. Maybe in the end we should reconcile ourselves to the fact that the film essay is not a territory and that it is like fiction and documentary one of the polarities between which films operate. An energy more than a genre. And it might well be cinema’s last irreducible. You find it, arguably, at the origins of cinema with *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), but a few years later Griffith laments the fact that cinema has turned away from filming “the rustle of the wind in the branches of the trees”. Twenty years and ten days that shook the world pass, and you see it triumphant in Vertov’s *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929); but a few trials later you feel the Stalinist boot heavier by the day on its neck in *Enthusiasm* (1931) and *Three Songs for Lenin* (1934). You think it is done and over with when the oppressiveness of commercial cinema rules, but it reappears under the guise of Straub and Huillet’s *Too Early, Too Late* (1981), Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983), or Godard’s *Puissance de la parole* (1988). As soon as you wonder if it is after all just an *über*-Western mode, it

becomes Asian with Oshima's *The Man Who Left his Will on Film* (1977), Tahimik's *The Perfumed Nightmare* (1977), or Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000). And when you want to keep it there it bounces back to the Middle East or South America...

This is, of course, a fairy tale hurriedly told. One fact remains though: however dire the circumstance, the essayistic energy remains alive in the margins, an *Id* that haunts cinema. It is never more alive than when the times are more repressive and the dominant aesthetics occupy more squarely the middle of the road. In short, it might just be a perfect time to think about it.

ENVOI. And now it is time to conclude. Retrospectives are often paeans. This is anything but. It would be to betray the essayistic energy to have attempted it. Some of the films have been gathered evidently for reasons of taste, but not all of them. Some films are here for the argumentative bounce they might produce. They are lines of force that crisscross a field. They are here to provoke and to contradict assumptions. They are here to have their right to be present violently contested as much as celebrated. Risks were taken and no apologies will be offered for the fallout; compromises were made and they will be assumed. From the push and pull that is curating emerged something as extensive, unruly, contradictory as the essayistic energy it set out to explore. A proposal for a tussle.

Jean-Pierre Gorin
San Diego, California
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