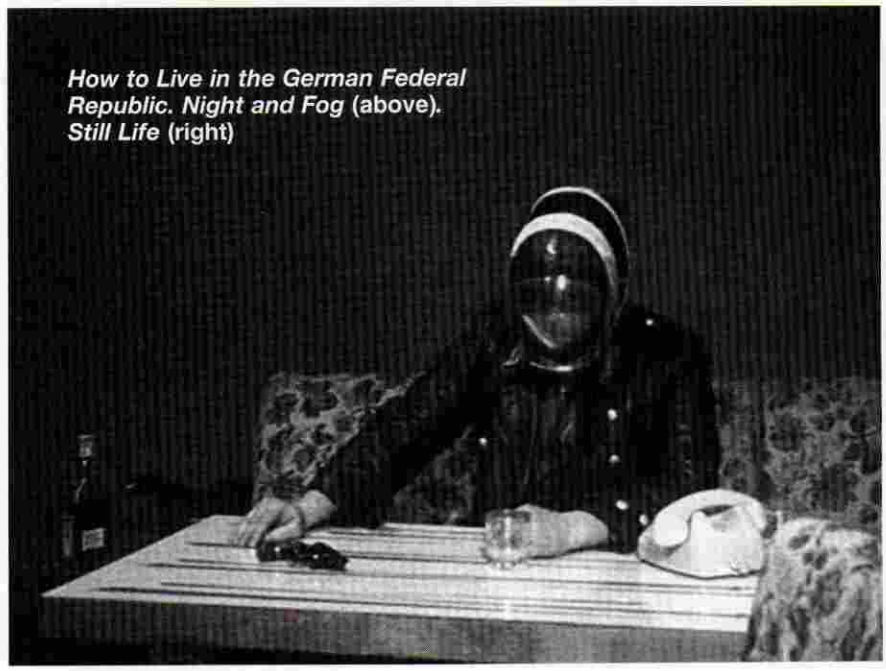
ESSAY QUESTIONS

FROM ALAIN RESNAIS TO MICHAEL MOORE: PAUL ARTHUR GIVES A CRASH COURSE IN NONFICTION CINEMA'S MOST RAPIDLY EVOLVING GENRE.

Clarity, Simplicity, Transparency! An alternative credo for the French Revolution? No, a partial list of traditional documentary's first principles. Those principles have gotten a solid thrashing of late as nonfiction filmmakers embellish otherwise forthright accounts with MTV-style cutting and graphics, revive the forbidden practice of dramatic reenactment, and—perhaps worst of all—allot to themselves the kind of on-screen face-time usually reserved for box-office stars. Whether the directorial turn is Nick Broomfield acting like Sam Spade with a boom mike (*Biggie & Tupac*), Agnès Varda posing as a figure in a famous painting (*The Gleaners and I*), or Michael Moore slogging his massive ego through benighted backwaters (*Bowling for Columbine*), an increasing number of documentarists are refusing to play the vaunted fly-on-the-wall. The myth that "actuality" should not only dictate but totally subsume any subjective discourse or overt aesthetic design—the longstanding realist ideal of "styleless style"—is being challenged with some success by this recent onslaught of essay films.

Galvanized by the intersection of personal, subjective rumination and social history, the essay has emerged as the leading nonfiction form for both intellectual and artistic innovation. In contrast to competing genres (the PBS historical epic, the updated vérité portrait, the tabloid spectacle), the essay offers a range of politically charged visions uniquely able to blend abstract ideas with concrete realities, the general case with specific notations of human experience. The filmmaker's onscreen presence—like similar gestures by New Wave directors, an acknowledgment that what goes on in front of the camera bears the imprint of a distinct shaping sensi-



How to Live in the German Federal Republic. Night and Fog **(above).** ***Still Life*** **(right)**

bility behind it—is not in itself an infallible guide for tagging this notoriously tricky form, but it reminds us that a quality shared by all film essays is the inscription of a blatant, self-searching authorial presence. Admittedly, some prominent essayists—Harun Farocki, Harmut Bitomsky, Patrick Keillor—are far from household names. Nonetheless, it's helpful to remember that the essay has been around for 50 years—Jean Rouch's *Les Maîtres fous* (55), Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (55), and Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (58) are crucial milestones—and has been an occasional source of inspiration for the likes of Welles, Godard, Ruiz, and Herzog.

Starting as a trickle during the Sixties, the essay gathered speed through the Seventies before bursting into a recognizable international phenomenon in the last 20 years. In truth, "recognizable" is a bit misleading, since definitions and inclusionary criteria have been briskly contested when they aren't hopelessly capricious. For some, the ambiguous critical status of the essay film is refreshing—who needs more constraining cinematic formulas anyway? Yet as unholy alliances between fiction and nonfiction continue to mutate across the landscape of television and publishing, it's important to prevent documentary's bracingly heterogeneous field from being collapsed into an ahistorical lump, wherein *COPS* and *Survivor* carry the same cultural meaning as, if rather more economic clout than, say, Frederick Wiseman's *Domestic Violence*. Distinctions between Wiseman's work and the way essays such as *Bowling for Columbine* function are, predictably, more nuanced but just as essential.

Mind over Matter

As a self-consciously liminal category, what makes a film "essayistic"? Everyone recognizes a literary essay when they see one; applying the formal attributes of writing to cinema is another matter. Among other differences, since film operates simultaneously on multiple discursive levels—image, speech, titles, music—the literary essay's single determining voice is dispersed into cinema's multi-channel stew. The manifestation or location of a film author's "voice" can shift from moment to moment or surface expressively via montage, camera movement, and so on. Given nonfiction's long-standing reticence about asserting personal "opinions" or other markers of subjectivity, it's not surprising that few documentarists actively embrace the label, while still fewer adopt the essay as their sole domain. On the other hand, various films conventionally classified as ethnographies or portraits—starting with *Les Maîtres fous* and continuing through Herzog's poignant *Land of Silence and Darkness* (72) to Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (82)—are best understood in their family resemblances to other essays. Leaving aside exceptions like Marker's three-hour *A Grin Without a Cat* (77/93), most essays are sub-feature-length, some as short as 15 minutes, making both distribution and critical evaluation a persistent struggle.

Consequently, the smattering of previous attempts to define or historicize the essay's parameters—in particular by Michael Renov and Philip Lopate—are inconclusive and tend to diverge on issues such as the necessity of spoken narration or irony versus sincerity.

As with other elusive genres, enumerating what it is *not* can be a useful jumping-off point. For starters, essays are not constructed around public personalities or the rehearsal of discrete events. Nor do they narrate the past from a neutral perspective following strict chronology, the domain of classical documentaries or contemporary spinoffs by Ken Burns and company. Instead, essays tend to blend several clashing time frames that layer what we think of as literary "tenses." The impression of formal admixture is often extended by borrowing idioms from vérité, poetic, or social-problem docs. As with literary essays, essay films may segue between separate styles, tones, or modes of address. In doing so, they fracture epistemological unities of time and place associated with documentary practices from John Grierson and Thirties New Deal tracts through Sixties vérité. The binding aspect of personal commentary is typically constituted by voiceover narration enhanced by musical selections, editorial as well as factual intertitles, and is often reinforced by compositional devices. When spoken narration is either subdued or absent, other traces of authorial presence may replace direct speech; Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (73) is punctuated by lengthy intertitles. On the other hand, a number of Farocki's films eschew foregrounded narration altogether.

It's tempting to cite the deployment of found footage and collage as endemic to the essay, given the multitude of films that rely on juxtapositions of archival images and present-tense commentary. However, if essays are not invariably heterogeneous in materials, their segmental and sound-image relationships tend to entail collision or dialectical critique. The emphasis is on converging angles of inquiry rather than historical nostalgia or pastiche. It follows that essays are infused with found footage yet resist the urge to flaunt or fetishize images from the past. Conventional political docs like *Union Maids* (76) or *The Atomic Cafe* (82) celebrate the existence of vintage footage while essays prefer to gnaw at the truth value, cultural contexts, or interpretative possibilities of extant images.

This raises the crucial question of "authority," how nonfiction film signals its fidelity to, or unimpeachable view of, an identifiable reality. In this sense, the portrait, serial interview, city symphony, travelogue, and other species behave more or less alike in their insistence on continuity, mastery, and closure. Essays typically pile up a series of stylistically diverse fragments—"discursivity" in the original meaning—whose individual codes seem familiar, yet when bunched together subvert documentary's privileged, transparent aura of control. That is, essays confound the perception of untroubled authority or comprehensive knowledge that a singular mode of address projects onto a topic. Which does not imply that the brunt of argu-

ment in essay films is inevitably confused—although it may be—but that the rhetorical focus is at once directed outward to concrete facts and inward to a realm of mercurial reflection. Argument must proceed from one person's set of assumptions, a particular framework of consciousness, rather than from a transparent collective "We."

Keeping in mind their refusal of a privileged, universal stance, it is no surprise that the majority of essays cast themselves as oppositional, interrogating received wisdom or status quo ideologies from left perspectives. Further, a significant number of women (Agnès Varda, Yvonne Rainer, Jill Godmilow, Ngozi Onwurah) and artists of color (Marlon Riggs, Patricio Guzman, John Akomfrah, Raoul Peck) have adopted the essay as an instrument of creative struggle. Nonetheless, there is no a priori reason why essays cannot accommodate less radical views, the case perhaps in Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (92).

Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's 'Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene'

In his *Dictionary* of 1755, Samuel Johnson construed the written essay as "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition." Although his definition might take some serious flak from fans of Theodor Adorno or Walter Benjamin, Johnson does point to a couple of salient conundrums. Essays are distinctly process-oriented; they are rhetorical journeys in which neither an exact route nor final destination are completely spelled out. Of course, documentaries in general frequently discover themes and structures after the fact, as a result of culling accumulated footage in the editing room. The essay, however, assumes that what it tells us and the order in which it is communicated could have taken an entirely different route, that it is one of several possible versions of the same concept. It delights in quirky arcs of logic, sudden digressions, unexpected epiphanies, pauses for self-reflection. In the finest examples, that which remains "indigested," or at least not totally consumed, are its conditions of cinematic enunciation: how meaning is created, by whom, under what social or historical circumstances. To be sure, not all essays are directly reflexive; nonetheless, a formidable cadre ranging from Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Letter to Jane* (72) to Bitomsky's *B-52* (01) actively probe or, alternatively, allegorize the manner in which film's capacities and limitations inflect the conduct of factual inquiries.

The conjunction of language and image, fundamental to film grammar, is a key ingredient of the essay film. In some sense all great essays are about complex relationships between words and pictures, the mechanisms by which speech can annotate, undermine, or otherwise change the signification of what we see—and vice versa. For instance, spoken commentary matched to a piece of found footage splits our perception of time, superimposing past and present to emphasize historical gaps or tonal clashes inherent in the visual-linguistic interface. When we hear someone reminiscing over supposedly illustrative file footage, we are encouraged to ignore, in the name of seamless narration, possible discrepancies between a speaker's account and accompanying visual evidence. Essays tend to exploit rather than smooth over such contradictions. Tension also surfaces because images are commonly perceived as products of a third-person, "objective" observer, while speech contains a first-person subjective undertow. The point is that essays hold up for scrutiny precisely those conventions that other documentary genres suppress and, in that sense, fuel meta-critical speculation on nonfiction cinema's blind spots.

Roots and Branches

Jean Cayrol's celebrated narration for *Night and Fog*, probably the only essay enshrined in the cinematic canon, more than justifies the film's reputation as the essay form's *locus classicus*. Critics have noted that Cayrol's script, in concert with Hanns Eisler's dissonant score, instills an uncanny emotional intensity by yoking gruesome death-camp imagery with lyrical speech. Lulling the viewer with a nuts-and-bolts review of the development and operation of Nazi camps, Resnais then shifts gears—alternating archival images with present-tense tracking shots of Auschwitz—accelerating a recognition of the absurdity of any artwork trying to "sum up" the Holocaust. Statements such as "There is no use even describing what went on here" and "There's nothing left to say" limn the failure of language *and* image to offer a fully intelligible portrayal of events. Lurking behind this failure is the suggestion that Resnais's method implicates himself and, by extension, the medium in the horrors he documents. A portion of the footage was shot by SS officers and Nazi functionaries as an adjunct to brutal procedures of classification and dehumanization. Thus, the collecting of images exists alongside piles of eyeglasses, hair, silverware, and, finally, corpses as by-products of the manufacture of death. In a sense that is what the photographic process does: turn living entities into objects. *Night and Fog* is haunted by the possibility that Resnais and anonymous Nazi cameramen participate in kindred practices, albeit with antithetical goals. Resnais's achievement is to steer clear of polemic or arrogant self-reference while forging a link between two historical moments in order to expose, to remember, scattered traces

of a *photographic* legacy that official European culture was at pains to ignore.

Against-the-grain narration had been around since Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (31); Resnais himself utilized the technique previously in *Tout la mémoire du monde* (55). Leaving aside Cayrol's innovative contribution, *Night and Fog* stands as a pivotal essay on several grounds: the disturbing mixture of blunt camp footage and elegiac landscape shots; the theme of historical memory; the relation of public memory to movie images. Twisting Adorno's well-known admonition that after Auschwitz the writing of poetry should be impossible, it is only after the Holocaust—our era's litmus test for the role of individual testimony in collective trauma—that essay films acquired a distinct aesthetic outline and moral purpose. War and remembrance—more broadly, the suffering of civilians under brutal dictatorships—would become an important touchstone in the development of the essay, treated with reflexive urgency in Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (88), addressed as a geopolitical lever in Paul Yule's *After Auschwitz: The Battle for the Holocaust* (01), hailed as media event in Marcel Ophüls's *The Troubles I've Seen* (95), and freighted with bitter personal irony in Guzman's *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (97). In each case, as in Godard's magnificent *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (89-96), historical comprehension is mired in contradictions around the mediation of catastrophe by moving images.

It is hardly coincidental that the film cultures most responsible for nurturing the essay are France and Germany. With Fassbinder as a prominent exception, it is not far-fetched to claim that postwar German cinema was shaped by constant dialogue with the prerogatives of essay films. Along with Herzog, Farocki, and Bitomsky, discursive tendencies in Alexander Kluge and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg had an impact on the evolution of the form. Directors celebrated for their fictional output produced occasional essays (Wim Wenders's *Notebook on Cities and Clothes,* 91) and strange hybrids materialized from obscure precincts (Helmut Costard's *A Little Godard,* 78). On the fringes of an already iconoclastic group, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's 'Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene'* (72) confirms a peculiarly Germanic taste for blending cultural politics with formal rigor. Taking advantage of a TV contract to make a standard artist's bio, Straub/Huillet transform Schoenberg's 1930 musical composition for an unproduced film into a dialectical argument on artistic responsibility and capitalist barbarism. At one level, they supply visual and spoken "accompaniment" to the music by contextualizing it within personal reactions to the triumph of fascism. A scathing letter from Schoenberg to Kandinsky is read, rejecting the painter's invitation to join the Bauhaus in order to avoid increasing persecution of Jews. Schoenberg's humanist diatribe is then countered with a materialist text by Brecht dissecting the role of capitalism in support of fascist aggression. Spurning the temptation to leave the argument safely confined to the past, the film abruptly cuts to library footage of a bombing mission in Southeast Asia. At the very end, shots of a recent newspaper article reveal the acquittal of Nazi architects tried for complicity in mass murder.

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In the course of a densely austere 16 minutes, *Introduction* covers an amazing amount of territory. Straub/Huillet affirm a modernist heritage of social consciousness epitomized by two preeminent artists who, like themselves, went into voluntary exile, and whose refusal to insulate creative activity from political concerns implicitly models a directive for artists during the Vietnam War. Bolder than the handful of American antiwar essays—Nick Macdonald's *The Liberal War* (72) and Jon Jost's *Speaking Directly* (74) among them—*Introduction* offers a critically unsung instance of a biting essayistic voice cobbled together entirely by quotation.

Like any cultural practice, the essay film was affected by a combination of internal and extra-cinematic factors. By the Seventies, robust currents in Anglo-European intellectual thought provided a kind of theoretical cover for the intersection of first-person discourse and the analysis of social ills. New models for researching and writing history, from Michel Foucault's archaeology to the material focus on everyday life by the Annales school of historiography writers, burnished the idea of re-creating a "usable past" for groups traditionally excluded as historical subjects. Meanwhile, post-structuralist philosophy was busy dismantling idealized notions of the individual ego, along with the romantic cult of authorship, while feminism and minority initiatives pounded away at traditional bastions of white male privilege. In this light, Godard's *Six fois deux* (76), Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen* (77), Gorin's *Poto and Cabengo* (81), along with Marker's *Sans soleil* (84) examine processes by which language creates—and deforms—social identities. Tenets such as the personal as political, quotation as antidote to the fetishization of originality, or the fragment as ineluctable state of human consciousness and expression served to validate diverse impulses floating around the still-amorphous essay format.

One result of the haphazard assimilation of critical theory was a renewal of irony and even humor as tactics in documentary rhetoric. An early instance of the essay's growing insouciance, Ruiz's *Great Events and Ordinary People* (78) takes as its nominal theme political attitudes in a Paris neighborhood on the eve of an election—interweaving fake news broadcasts, an intrusive narration that keeps subverting its own professed goals, and man-in-the-street interviews repeated with baffling variations. Lurching into sarcastic tangents, it mocks vérité practices—with potshots at Marker's *Le Joli mai* (63)—as it flips utopian ideas about citizenship upside down. The philosophical position that every-

thing we know of the world is already secondhand, derived from shopworn ideological nostrums, creates palpable openings for the essay's characteristic gesture of anti-authoritarian recoding.

A recent beneficiary of the satirical approach to essay-making is American

Bowling for Columbine

avant-gardist Craig Baldwin. His *Tribulation 99* (91), an hysterical history of postwar U.S.-Latin American relations conveyed through a thick collage of B-movie clips and mock-serious narration, is a lesson in the perils, and potential rewards, of movie classification. Paralleling the intensification of documentary agendas during the late Sixties, the typically introverted profile of avant-garde filmmaking began to acquire a political edge, led by the influential work of Yvonne Rainer and a younger generation including Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich, and Ken Kobland. Each has produced films that share recognizable features with the nonfiction essay. Indeed, as the pairing of Ruiz and Baldwin implies, one way to think about the essay film is as a meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses.

Now Voyagers

The dramatic increase in essay production since the early Nineties has introduced a host of exciting new filmmakers, bristling with fresh ideas and often ensconced in unfamiliar locales. The evils of rampant consumerism and its partnership with mass media are exposed in Sut Jhally's *Dreamworlds* (91) and *Advertising and the End of the World* (00), while Susan Stern's *Barbie Nation* (00) ricochets between critique of gender stereotypes and admiration for a pioneering businesswoman. In a similar vein, the dire consequences of economic globalization are portrayed in Stephanie Black's *Life and Debt* (00), Rustin Thompson's *30 Frames a Second* (00), and Raoul Peck's stunning *Profit and Nothing But* (01). There have been novel takes on the seemingly moribund travelogue—Patrick Keillor's *London* (94) and *Robinson in Space* (97)—and scintillating investigations of race, including Marlon Riggs's posthumously completed *Black Is, Black Ain't* (95).

Easily the most accomplished current essayist, and possibly the best unheralded contemporary filmmaker, is Czech-born, Germany-based Harun Farocki. A former film critic and performer in Straub/Huillet's *Class Relations* (83), he is a maverick among mavericks, placing a wryly minimalist stamp on the anatomy of class relations under late capitalism. Across nearly 20 nonfiction gems, Farocki cultivates a studiously deadpan formal repertoire—long takes and mechanical camera movements—and a central fascination with simulated experience and commodity fetishism. Imagine a tryst between Andy Warhol and a Marxist Frederick Wiseman. Like the former, Farocki makes us aware of the process of image formation and the ritualized behavior of social actors. With Wiseman he shares a knack for lurking behind the scenes to demystify seemingly transparent institutional—or in Farocki's case, corporate—protocols. Burrowing into a concealed nest of often maddeningly comic exchanges between objects and human automata, he discovers an intricate drudgery whose public face is desire, beauty, and power.

An Image (83) makes the shooting of a *Playboy* centerfold as sexy as a day spent flipping burgers. In *The Appearance* (96), a pompous advertising pitchman delivers a 45-minute campaign prospectus to an association of opticians that sounds like Immanuel Kant riffing on eyewear aesthetics. *How to Live in the German Federal Republic* (89) delivers a devastating critique of a society bent on leeching spontaneity and accident from every conceivable encounter, from midwifery to conflict resolution to stripping. As in his other films, the critique of robotic—in Jean Baudrillard's term, "hyperreal"—social relations springs not from subjective commentary but from the shrewd arrangement of blankly observed scenes. *Still Life* (97) has a double axis anchored by theorist Kaja Silverman's voiceover disquisition on 17th-century Dutch paintings. Insights into the mystified status of represented objects like fruit or clothing are interspersed with live-action shots of commercial photographers laboriously composing images for magazine ads. Of three sequences involving beer, a platter of cheese, and an expensive wristwatch, the finicky persistence of a Laurel and Hardy team of Frenchmen, handling their lumps of fromage like crown jewels, is a masterpiece of witty observation.

As a sort of postscript to the celebration of recent trends, a few words about possible pitfalls to the essay approach seem in order. Contrary to the parade of giddy highlights offered thus far, the designation "essay" is intended less as an honorific than as a descriptive term. To be sure, the creation of a felicitous balance between personal musings and external events is far from automatic; for example, in Ross McElwee's *Time Indefinite* (94) a necessarily uneasy dynamic is smothered by energy-sapping solipsism. On the other hand, failure to carve out enough space for contradiction and self-questioning can result in heated didacticism, a problem in Thom Andersen and Noël Burch's *Red Hollywood* (96). The popular reception of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* is cause for both hope—that future documentaries might garner a decent theatrical release—and dismay. Going beyond the autobiographical thrust of *Roger & Me* (89), *Columbine* satisfies basic criteria of the essay form, including a discernible subject and a segmental, discursive line of inquiry. As such, it is not the comic shtick, the rhetorical division between jerks and hipsters, or the self-aggrandizing treatment of personal tragedy that truly disturbs. Judged solely as a well-publicized entry in a heady climate of essayistic confrontations with power, Moore's film regrettably lacks the will to view itself as not just part of the solution but as part of the problem. That is, it avoids the intuition of its own complicity common to exemplary works in the genre.

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