more restrictive concept of a sign created by some existential connection with its referent.
4 One might point out that some philosophic systems, such as the thought of Martin Heidegger, would not endorse the idea that truth is simply a quality of propositions and that works of art and poetry may involve truth. Personally I am quite sympathetic to this approach, but I would point out that it does not support the sort of truth claim discussed here.
5 I am thinking here primarily of the extremely important discussions of the temporality of the trace in cinema offered in Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second* (2006), which I entirely agree with, except for the identification of this with the index.

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**"THE FORGOTTEN IMAGE BETWEEN TWO SHOTS": PHOTOS, PHOTOGRAMS, AND THE ESSAYISTIC**

Timothy Corrigan

I am an essayist . . . Film is a system that allows Godard to be a novelist, Gatti to make theatre and me to make essays.—Chris Marker, quoted in Nora Alter, *Chris Marker*

My aim here is to examine a key transition in the historical formation of the "essay film," a practice I consider the most important innovation in film practice since 1945. This transition period, roughly from 1940 to 1958, describes the emergence of the essay film out of the heritage of the photo-essay, which can in turn be seen adapting the imperatives and strategies of the literary essay to photography. This transition defines and distinguishes a cinematic tradition significantly different from the documentary practices with which it overlaps and is sometimes confused (such as cinema-verité or ethnographic film) and one that remains the driving force behind the most engaging and engaged films today (from Derek Jarman's 1993 *Blue* to Errol Morris's 2003 *Fog of War* and virtually all of Trinh T. Minh-ha's work).

My conceptual framework for this study grows out of a body of critical and theoretical work that has valorized and debated the centrality of the essayistic since the nineteenth century. Through the course of this work, the essay takes shape as a form of expressive thought and dialogue which places personal perceptions against the concrete pressures of the actions, objects, and communicative forms of public life: the essay becomes, by definition, expressive, provisional, reflective, and
critical, without the elevations of aesthetics or philosophical systems to remove it from the changing complexities of everyday life. As it has informed different material practices in the last one hundred years, it has become, I will argue, the central practice through which subjectivity and thought engage and measure themselves through two of the most dominant forms of twentieth- and twenty-first-century public life, photography and film.

Beyond the historical and theoretical groundwork, my argument here will focus on the early work of Chris Marker—specifically his 1959 photo-essay entitled Corénes (The Koreans) and his 1958 essay film Lettre de Sibérie (Letter from Siberia). Marker is now seen as one of the most relentless and innovative essayists working in film and new media, with his 1982 Sans soleil (Sunless)—a film paralleled by another Marker photo-essay, Le Dépays (Abroad, 1982)—considered one of the landmarks of modern cinema. Yet it is at the early crossroads of the photo-essay and the essay film where one finds most visibly his complex engagement with the possibilities of creating space and time for thought between the images of a moving world.

FROM THE ESSAY TO THE ESSAY FILM

The precedents for the essay film extend back through four hundred years of the literary essay, moving at least from Montaigne to Samuel Johnson and William Hazlitt to James Baldwin and Christa Wolf, with each of these distinctive voices representing different phases within the vast historical and cultural evolution of the essay. Through these many incarnations, the essay has been consistently characterized as some version of “personal expression,” aligning this practice primarily with its essentially romantic formulation as a “personal essay.” Far more than what seems self-evident here, this connection between the essay and personal expression opens, for me, the more complicated, dynamic, and often subversive qualities of the essay. Essayistic practices have been most innovative and suggestive, in short, in how they have troubled and complicated that very notion of expressivity and its relation to experience, that other cornerstone of the essay. If both verbal and visual expression can commonly suggest the articulation or projection of an interior self into an exterior world, essayistic expressivity describes, more exactly I think, a subjection of an instrumental or expressive self to a public domain as a form of experience that continually tests the limits and capacities of that self within a public domain. Experience becomes the linchpin in this activity with all the density and dynamics suggested by Miriam Hansen’s reformulation of Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge: for her “experience is that which mediates individual perception with social meaning, conscious with unconscious processes, loss of self with self-reflexivity; experience as the capacity to see connections and relations...; experience as the matrix of conflicting temporalities, of memory and hope, including the historical loss of these dimensions” (1991, 12–13). Within this framework, we find in the best of 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.

These points have been variously, differently, and certainly more fully engaged and articulated by the many twentieth-century champions of the literary essay, such as Georg Lukács and his notion of the essay as “judgment without verdict” (Lukács 1978, 18) or Robert Musil in his 1930 essayistic novel The Man without Qualities where the “essay is the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man’s inner life in a decisive thought” (Musil 1995, 273). Completed at my historical focal point of 1958, T. W. Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” is, for my purposes here, conceivably the most rigorous and theoretically sustained argument about the essay as “the reciprocal interaction of concepts in the process of intellectual experience” through which “the thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unraveling it” (Adorno 1991, 13). Indeed, these descriptions and definitions can, I believe, apply equally to nonliterary forms of the essay, such as the photo-essay and the essay film, although both significantly begin to recreate the public domain so central to the essayistic as increasingly defined by the imagistic and, more specifically, the technological image.

An important sidebar to my argument is a broad debate within film studies as to the modernist heritage of the cinema as a whole: one side claiming that a modernist practice enters film culture after World War II, the other insisting that film is inherently a modernist form. At the center of these debates, I believe, is the representational confrontation between the technological image and language as expression. If film form has always reflected modernist concerns with spatial frag-
mentation and temporal motions, its early association with mass culture tended to undermine its radical potential for subjective expression and interpretation and to reshape them as realist transparencies. In this context, the precursors of the essay film appear only on the margins of classical film culture as lecture films like Eadweard Muybridge's demonstration of how animal locomotion fits a scientific logic or travelogues such as Lyman Howe's early movie presentations and tours.

The defining years for the essay film become, however, the turbulent period of 1940–45 when, amid the devastations of World War II, film culture on many fronts struggled with the new versions of experiential realism and how they might be the grounds for more complex reflections and spectatorial activity—distinctly different from classical contemporary modes of identification or cognition. As Paul Arthur has noted, it was only "after the Holocaust—our era's litmus test for the role of individual testimony in collective trauma—that essay films acquire a distinct aesthetic outline and moral purpose" (Arthur 2005, 61). In 1940 the experimental filmmaker Hans Richter writes a commentary in which he coins an innovative genre called "The Film Essay," a new practice which he claims evolved out of the documentary tradition but which, instead of presenting what he calls "beautiful vistas," would aim "to find a representation for intellectual content," "to find images for mental concepts," "striving to make visible the invisible world of concepts, thoughts, and ideas," so that viewers would become "involved intellectually and emotionally" (Richter 1992, 195–96). Very much related, André Malraux delivers at about the same time his Esquisse d'une psychologie du cinéma arguing for "the possibility of expression in the cinema" (Malraux 1946, 14). And in 1948, in his essay "The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: The Caméra-Stylo," Alexandre Astruc announces the foundational terms for the essay film and the French New Wave:

To come to the point: the cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the other arts have been before it... After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or the means of preserving the images of an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. This is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of the camera-stylo (camera pen). This metaphor has a very precise sense. By it I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language... It can tackle any subject, any genre. The most philosophical meditations on human production, psychology, ideas, and passions lie within its province. I will even go so far as to say that contemporary ideas and philosophies of life are such that only the cinema can do justice to them. Maurice Nadeau wrote in an article in the newspaper Combat: "If Descartes lived today, he would write novels." With due respect to Nadeau, a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his Discours de la Méthode [sic] would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily. (Astruc 1999, 159)

These claims would immediately become technologically viable with the arrival of portable lightweight camera technology, introduced as the Arriflex system in Germany in 1936 and as the Éclair 35mm Cameflex in France in 1947. More than coincidentally, these different "camera-styles" would also feature reflex viewing systems linking the pragmatics of filmmaking with the conceptual reflexivity of the emerging essay film and its "idea of the cinema expressing ideas" (159).

That these original intellectual foundations are so largely French (and German) should help explain the prominent place of the French New Wave (and later New German Cinema) in establishing the essay film from 1948 through the 1960s. Clearly significant is the bond between the critical essayists writing for Cabiers du cinéma in the postwar years that generated this movement, but, more specifically, two early documents stand out as signaling a cinematic sea change: (1) André Bazin's essay on a film portrait of Stalin, suggesting how the essayistic might free cinema from film's dominant narrative logic and situate itself in the more exploratory logic of the editor or cut, and (2) Alain Resnais's 1948 film Van Gogh, a short essayistic portrait much less about painting than about the grounds for cinematic expression. In 1953, Resnais, Chris Marker, Agnès Varda, and Astruc become part of the "Group of Thirty," urging the development of the short film as the grounds for developing essayistic film practices, and by the mid-1950s the term essai cinéma...
graphique (cinematographic essay) is in frequent use in France. By the
1960s, Jean-Luc Godard, perhaps the most renowned and self-proclaimed
film essayist, transports the logic of essayism to longer films such as
Two or Three Things I Know about Her and La Chinoise. Explicitly draw-
ing on the tradition of Montaigne and implicitly dramatizing with each
film that central problem of thinking through our daily and public experi-
ence of signs, sounds, and images, Godard characterizes his work
during this period as that of an experiential improviser and a think-
ing critic. In December 1962, referring to his beginnings as a writer for
Cahiers du cinéma, Godard would claim, “Today, I still think of myself
as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing
criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed. I think
of myself an essayist, producing essays in novel form and novels in the
essay form; only, instead of writing, I film them. Were the cinema to
disappear, I would simply accept the inevitable and turn to television;
were television to disappear, I would revert to pencil and paper” (Milne
1972, 171). One glaring irony within this symbiotic relationship between
the French New Wave and essayism is, as we will see, that the latter
works expressly to trouble and often undermine the coherency of what
is commonly thought the hallmark of that new wave: auteurism.

As the essay film comes more clearly into historical view, one of its
most distinguishing features—especially visible from Godard’s films of
the sixties to Alexander Kluge’s films of the eighties and nineties—is the
foregrounding of its literary heritage in the material performance of lan-
guage as part of an encounter with the dominance of a public culture of
visual technology. While inheriting from the literary essay a critical en-
counter between subjectivity and a public history, the essay film (and its
relative the photo-essay) adds a key third dimension to the evolution of
the essay: the foregrounding of language across and through the moving
image as part of the production of thought and thinking through film.
This is where and why Gilles Deleuze becomes, I believe, one of the few
to suggest incisively a theoretical basis for postwar cinema that does
service and justice to the practice of the essay film. Running counter to
models of both classical film narrative and avant-garde cinema, the essay
film swerves from the naturalization processes of both documentary
realism and narrative fiction, in redefining models of both expressivity
and receptivity in the cinema. Or, in Deleuze’s brashly suggestive words:
“Give me a brain” would be the other figure of modern cinema. This

is an intellectual cinema, as distinct from a physical cinema” (Deleuze
1989, 204).

“AND”: CHRIS MARKER, PHOTOS,
AND PHOTOMAR

If the essay film inherits many of the epistemological and structural
distinctions of the literary essay, the key transitional practice linking
these two practices is the photo-essay. The photo-essay has taken many
shapes at least since Jacob Riis’s 1890 How the Other Half Lives, transla-
ting essayistic concerns with expression, experience, and thought into a
variety of formal configurations of photographic images. Rhetorically,
photo-essays assume a spectrum of positions, from the social and poli-
tical pleadings of Riis’s landmark work through the sociological por-
traits of August Sander and the meditative celebration of local life in the
essays of W. Eugene Smith. This variety shares, of course, a structural
foundation built on linkage of separate photographs whose implied rela-
tionship appears in the implicit gaps or “unsutured” interstices between
those images. Often this relationship can be considered analogous to
the shifting and aleatory voice or perspective of the literary essay as it
attempts, provisionally, to articulate or interpolate itself within the public
spaces and experiences being represented. Not surprisingly, therefore,
the photo-essay has frequently relied on these vestiges of the literary,
verbal text, to dramatize and concretize that shifting perspective and its
unstable relationship with the photographic images it counterpoints.

The 1930s are perhaps the heyday of both the photo-essay and its
formulation as a dialogue between verbal text and photographic image,
culminating in James Agee and Walker Evans’s 1939 collaboration Let
Us Now Praise Famous Men. The photo-essay remains a rich and cre-
ative practice today, but this transitional period, from the 1930s through
World War II, becomes, significantly, the prefatory years for the essay
film. As Chris Marker demonstrates in his work just after the war, the
photo-essay provides a transitional paradigm that allows film to dis-
cover its capacity to explore the conceptual and intellectual spaces be-

between images and for Marker to define himself, as Richard Roud puts
it, as “1 to 1:33 Montaigne” (1962–63, 27).

Best known for his 1962 film La Jetée (The Jetty), his futuristic “photo-
roman” of still images, and the 1982 Sans soleil (Sunless), his extraordinary

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essay film about a cameraman traveling the globe between “the two extreme poles of survival,” Marker has created a multimedia body of work that ranges through novels, literary criticism, museum installations, and the CD-ROM Inmemory (1998). As different as his subjects and media practices are, however, his concerns have remained remarkably consistent: memory, loss, history, human community, and how our fragile subjectivity can acknowledge, represent, surrender, and survive these experiences. Across the continual undoing and redoing of expression in different forms and places, Marker’s work becomes a concomitantly rigorous, witty, and poignant effort to document the human experience as a struggle to understand itself in an increasingly smaller, fragmented, and accelerated global space. If the literary appears as a consistent mode within his early experiments with expression (including a 1949 novel, The Forthright Spirit), in 1952 Marker recognizes a new cultural dominant in the public domain. Concluding a book-length literary essay on Jean Giraudoux, he acknowledges that now it is the technological image and specifically the cinema that will recapture the “miracle of a world in which everything is at once absolutely familiar and completely strange” (Marker 1952, 43). At this personal crossroads of the literary and the cinematic, for Marker the photo-essay becomes a critical articulation. Just after the completion of his second short film, the 1953 Les Statues meurent aussi (codirected with Alain Resnais), he edits a series of photo-essays for Éditions du Seuil, produced from 1954 to 1958, an experience that lays the groundwork for his own photo-essays. In her excellent book Chris Marker: Memories of the Future, Catherine Lupton describes this first venture into the photo-essay in a way that suggests the larger concerns that would permeate all of Marker’s work:

A potent sense of the prospective disorientation of world travel informs Marker’s announcement of the Petite Planète series, which appeared in the Éditions du Seuil house magazine 27 Rue Jacob. He pinpoints a growing sense that the post-war world has come within reach as never before, but that as a subjective experience this prospect of increased access seems confusing and elusive: “we see the world escape us at the same time as we become aware of our links with it.” To combat this disorientation, Seuil is launching a series of books that, to adapt one of Marker’s metaphors, are intended to be user manuals for life on a small planet. He proposes that each volume is “not a guidebook, not a history, not a

propaganda brochure, not a traveler’s impressions,” but is intended to be like a conversation with an intelligent and cultivated person who is well-informed about the country in question. (Lupton 2005, 44)

Marker would bring his own distinctive voice to that conversation with his 1959 photo-essay The Koreans, an essay fittingly published as the only volume in Edition de Seuil’s “Court métrage” (“Short Film”) series.

The Koreans is a meditative travel essay about extremes and oppositions but mostly about lists and inventories—and the spaces made visible by all these organizations. Shadowing the images and text are the cold war politics dividing North and South Korea, yet oppositions such as this are less central than the categorical abundance found in the experience and fabric of everyday Korean life, the multiplicity of things that, to borrow a phrase from Marker’s film Sunless, quicken the heart. “I will not deal with Big Issues” (Marker 1959, 135), the commentator concludes in an address to his cat. Rather it’s the daily routines, legends and myths, conversations, relics of history, a “list of the spirits and stars that govern human life” (85), and fragments of a developing industrial future that are photographed and observed from numerous angles at passing moments. Even the seven-part organization of The Koreans is a set of numerical categories—“The Six Days,” “The Two Orphans,” “The Seven Wonders,” “The Five Senses,” “The Three Sisters,” “The Nine Muses,” and “The Four Corners”—that weave together lists and inventories of particular historical, imaginative, relational, emotional, and sensual experiences. “The Seven Wonders” mentions explicitly only the “wonder of ginseng” and, as a free association, “the seventh wonder . . . the work of builders” who took “fifty years to complete a ginseng plant” (51–53). The other wonders appear in the markets and street scenes that come in and out of view as a series of ten photos:

A great deal of Korea strolls by on Koreans’ heads . . . . Baskets, earthenware jars, bundles of wood, basins, all escape the earth’s gravity to become satellites of these calm planets, obeying exacting orbits. For the Korean street has its cycles, its waves, its raids. In this double décor, where hastened ruins and buildings still balancing themselves in a second of incompletion, the soldier who buys a civilian’s sun hat, the worker leaving the construction site, the bureaucrat with his briefcase, the woman in traditional dress and the woman in modern dress, the porter carrying a brand new allegory to the museum of the Revolution with a woman
in black following step by step to decipher it—all have their route and precise place, like constellations. (44)

In Adorno's words, here the "elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion" becoming a constellation or "force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily a force field under the essay's gaze" (Adorno 1991, 13).

These lists, inventories, and oppositions are primarily fading scaffolding that constantly draws attention to the conjunctive intervals that hold them together: the "and" that momentarily connects without a teleological logic. They create continual movement, a recollection and anticipation as a serial activity whose accumulations are endlessly generative and open-ended. If the fundamental structure of all photo-essays tends to approach that of a spatial categorizing of images, for Marker this inventory of images always approximates a photogrammatic series of film frames. In The Koreans, he notes, "A marker place is the Republic of things... It all went by as quickly as a forgotten image between two shots" (39), a barely visible conjunctive place where the "and" opens potentially as the space of intelligence. As Deleuze notes about the cinema (and Godard's films specifically), through this conjunctive "and," categories are "redistributed, reshaped and reinvented" and so become "problems which introduce reflection on the image itself" (Deleuze 1989, 185–86). "The whole undergoes a mutation... in order to become the constitutive 'and' of things, the constitutive between-two of images" (180). No episode in The Koreans dramatizes the poignancy and power of this conjunctive place better than an encounter at the theater where the experience of a celebrated play based on the well-known legend of Sim Chon suggests both a mythic categorization and the emotional and intellectual energy within anticipatory conjunctives: Marker encounters a female friend crying during an interval over the plight of the heroine, despite her having seen the play two hundred times, and when he tries to assure her that all will be well in the end, she replies in bewilderment, "How could I be so sure of the future?"

Several key sections of The Koreans are especially dramatic illustrations of that wavering line between the photo-essay and essay film, places in the book where the photos become virtual photograms that draw attention to the space between the images as an interpretive "void" for the photographer/commentator. In this instance especially, the writer's voice as "expressive subject" documents the experiential expressions around him as faces "literally embodied [as] a smile that melts away, a face that comes undone" (25). At one point, a series of nine photos depicts a woman looking out of the frame telling "her life story." Or "more exactly," the text fills in, "she told us that there was nothing to be told, really nothing" (21–24). Immediately following, one of the most dramatic conjunctions in the book presents just two shots of two expressions. First there is a woman's smiling face answering questions about her personal life (her boyfriend, her prospects for marriage), but, when asked about her parents, the second photo captures the ruptured transition between the two images as she explains that her parents were killed during the Korean War: "At that moment," the commentator remarks,

I was sunk in my [Rolleifflex] camera. It was on the Rollei's ground glass that I saw the metamorphosis, the smile vanishing into pain like water drunk by sand... and now the young woman's face was covered in tears, but she did not lower her head, and the hands that had hidden her laughter lay immobile on the table. The instant was hers... The extraordinary hymn of hate and will power that followed would need more than a story and an image to do it justice. (25–26)

Here the camera lens itself becomes both a physical and metaphoric interface upon which the commentator engages a radical shift in the expressions of the self and its relation to a world and a history. The "vanishing" that marks the space between his experience of her experience is precisely where he relinquishes himself, his images, and his stories—that is, his thoughts—to the unrecoverable reality that "was hers."

In a later sequence the centrality of this subjective space in its encounter with the world reappears as a typically askew or inverted exchange. In this case two photographs of construction cranes operating over an urban site show first a relatively empty lot and then the shapes of emerging buildings: "All night long, the aurora borealis of welding torches, spotlights on cranes, reflections of the moon and the headlights on the great glassy facades of new buildings," the commentator observes about the two photos. Yet comparative images such as these and the interval they document, he quickly notes, are not about that scene and the temporal passage it records but about the experiential space from which they are seen, from which subjectivity and thought have ventured
forth to test themselves: “I don’t care much for propaganda photos in the style: ‘Yesterday . . . Today.’ But I still took these pictures of what I saw out my window, at fifteen days distance. In order not to mistake the room” (53–55).

*The Koreans* follows a temporal and spatial journey through these conjunctive spaces between numerous faces, things, activities, and images, searching those “forgotten image[s] between two shots.” As he notes early in the text, “There are many ways of traveling” (16), and one way to view the photographic and photogrammatic travels might be as a mimetic attempt to represent the dynamic continuity of these active and changing people and this place. The journey of *The Koreans*, however, is better characterized according to the ambitious model offered by Henri Michaux’s surrealist travel memoir *Plume*, in which, according to Chris Marker, the traveler embraces the transitions in time and place as disorderly “rhythms, waves, shocks, all the buffers of memory, its meteors and dragnets” (Marker 1959, 15). The opening photo on this trip is thus appropriately a women descending from a plane, described as the “first Korean girl descended from heaven with the gift of transitions” (10).

The textual commentary that documents these personal experiences of a vibrant and changing world becomes then a string of insertions or interpolations into these rhythms, waves, and shocks. In *The Koreans*, unlike the consistent voice of some traditional photo-essays, this one is multivocal, mobile, scattered, and both historically and geographically layered. Weaving together poetry, photos, ancient maps, quotations from historical reports, literature, reproductions of paintings, Korean tales and legends, and comic book images, the commentary sometimes precedes the photos; sometimes it follows or is interspersed in the spaces between a series. It recounts parables, historical events, personal reflections, observations, and reminiscences of other places, melding myths with daily observations, anecdotes about ginseng, profoundly serious commentaries on the atrocities of war, and self-debunking and whimsical humor about the commentator’s own efforts. Sometimes it describes the photos; sometimes it gives voice to the images. Each becomes a way of speaking/seeing as a different representational encounter with a world that resists denotation. As Marker would later insist in his photo essay *Le Dépays* (Abroad): “The text doesn’t comment on the images any more than the images illustrate the text. They are two sequences that clearly cross and signal to each other, but which it would be pointlessly exhausting to collate” (Lupton 2005, 62). Like the images it responds to, the intense, inquisitive, and reflective subjectivity of this traveling voice and text dissolves into the fissures between the different representational materials they struggle to occupy, as moments of reflection and thinking, in the space between the photographic images.

These doubled fissures—within the textual commentary and between that “forgotten image between two shots”—become in one sense a version of what W. J. T. Mitchell calls a “site of resistance,” produced in the photo-essay through its leanings toward nonfictional subjects, its subjective anchoring in a personal point of view, and its “generic incompleteness” (Mitchell 1994, 287): “The text of the photo-essay typically discloses a certain reserve or modesty in its claims to ‘speak for’ or interpret images; like the photograph, it admits its inability to appropriate everything that was there to be taken and tries to let the photographs speak for themselves or ‘look back’ at the viewer” (289). Signaled throughout *The Koreans* with faces and eyes looking directly at the camera, this spatial resistance is dramatized most poetically in one exchange featuring five sequential photos of six children playing and staring back at the camera, watching the author “watching them. A mirror game that goes on and on where the loser is the one who looks down, who lets the other’s gaze pass through, like a ball” (Marker 1959, 43). As he quickly acknowledges, “My third eye was a bit like cheating” (43). In this exchange and in the photo-essay in general, according to Vivian Sobchack, temporality itself becomes necessarily remade according to a spatial dynamics in which a “temporal hole” appears as a “gap” or “arena” opening up and staging the possibility of meaning:

The lack of depth and dimension in the still photograph seems less a function of the phenomenal thickness of the subjects and objects that it displays than of the temporal hole it opens within the world in which we gaze at it. Indeed, the most “dynamic” photojournalism derives its uncanny power from this temporal hole, the transcendence of both existence and finitude. . . . The photograph, then, offers us only the possibility of meaning. It provides a significant gap that can be filled with every meaning, any meaning, and is itself meaningless in that it does not act within itself to choose its meaning, to diacritically mark it off. Like transcendental consciousness, the photograph as a transcendental structure posits the abstraction of a moment
but has not momentum—and only provides the grounds or arena for its possibility. (60)

For Marker, however, the resistances and holes created in his photo-essays, where language and subjectivity lose themselves in images of the world, might be best understood with the cinematic framework used by Deleuze. Here, thinking and “intelligence” occur when comprehension and understanding encounter the world on its own terms—in what Deleuze labels “a void” or an “interstice” in the time and spaces of representations: “What counts is . . . the interstice between images, between two images: a spacing which means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it” (Deleuze 1989, 179). This is neither spectatorial “identification,” a position of a familiar emplacement in the world, nor a version of Brechtian “alienation,” a position of unfamiliar exclusion from that world represented. Rather this is a suspended position of intellectual opportunity and potential, a position within a spatial gap where the interval offers the “insight of Blindness,” where thought becomes the exteriorization of expression.

If Marker’s photo-essays open a space, a changing geography in which thinking may pitch its tent, the essay film must aim to retrieve the possibility of that active intelligence within the continuous landscape of film. Bridging these different forms of the essayistic, the photogram describes a conceptual borderline between the photography and film, a kind of “stop action,” since it pinpoints the transformation of film’s moving image into the suspension of “real movement and time” as a series of overlapping photographic images. No doubt, The Jetty represents this reflexive merging of the photographic series and film form most famously (also constructed only of still images except for a few seconds when those series of photograms become a continuous movement), but, enlisting the narrative framework of a science fiction tale rather than an essayistic framework, The Jetty creates a significantly different viewing position from the essay film, one based in identification, memory, and desire, rather than observation, reflection, and belief.

Despite the canonical prominence of The Jetty, the majority of Marker’s films are best understood within the framework of the essayistic. Partly because of its historical proximity to The Koreans and its place at this historically formative stage of the essay film, and partly because it catches the narrative logic of the more renowned Jetty, I’ll con-centrate here on the 1958 Letter from Siberia, which represents an early paradigm for the essay film for Marker and for the practice in general. Writing about Letter from Siberia in 1958, André Bazin has the first and most prescient word: Letter from Siberia “resembles absolutely nothing that we have ever seen before in films with a documentary bias.” It is an essay on the reality of Siberia past and present in the form of a filmed report. Or, perhaps, to borrow Jean Vigo’s formulation of A propos de Nice (a documentary point of view), I would say an essay documented by film. The important word is ‘essay’, understood in the same sense that it has in literature—an essay at once historical and political, written by a poet as well” (Bazin 1985, 44).

Even more explicitly than The Koreans, Letter from Siberia presents itself as an epistolary travelogue, whose voice-over begins with lines appropriated from that exemplary traveler in The Koreans, Henri Michaux: “I am writing to you from a far country. . . . I am writing you from the end of the world.” Here too cold war, East/West, oppositions linger in the background, and here too a traveler commentator, now a disembodied voice rather than a printed text, negotiates and reflects on serial inventories and oppositional categories: lists of Siberian plant and animal life alternate with descriptions of daily activities, and the film concludes with the polarized journeys of underground scientists burrowing to the center of the earth while their colleague-cosmonauts launch themselves into outer space. Digressions into an archeological past jump quickly forward to the industrial future: from Yakut tribal rituals and drawings of the woolly mammoths that once populated Siberia to the construction of new highways and telephone lines. The representational heterogeneity of Letter from Siberia also parallels that of Marker’s photo-essay as Letter from Siberia mixes black-and-white and color film, still photographs, archival footage, and animation to underline, here too, how the bond between experience and representation is the fault line between the world and our knowledge of it.

Unlike the photo-essay’s efforts to inhabit the spaces between these images, however, this essay film opens a second dimension to its travels, that particularly cinematic dimension of the temporality of the moving image. Together with the rhetorical and spatial gaps found in the photo-essay, the film thus additionally depicts and examines the continual dynamics of movement captured on film, from the vertical ascents of flying airplanes to horizontally racing reindeer, through a visual synta-
of continual tracks and pans capturing those temporal rhythms with a similar array of directional movements. Early in the film, for instance, dramatically different materials create dramatically different forms of temporality as a fabricated image of the past, a realistic transparency of the present, and a visual rhetoric of a desired future: animated drawings of mammoths precede a transition to documentary shots of the Lena River bustling with its industry and commerce, and, shortly after, the film offers a “spot commercial” spoofing the market value of reindeer as pets, transportation, clothing, and food. Bazin goes so far as to identify these constructions as a “new notion of montage” that he calls “horizontal” or “lateral” where, unlike the traditional “sense of duration through the relation of shot to shot,” “a given image doesn’t refer to the one that preceded it” (Bazin 2003, 44). Comparable to the spatial openings mapped in The Koreans, in these instances Letter from Siberia opens the temporal “presence” of the moving images as an interstice (both spatial and temporal) containing multiple time zones ranging from past memories to future fantasies. As the commentator remarks in his conclusion, this Siberia is the image of a temporal vertigo: “between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century, between the earth and the moon, between humiliation and happiness. After that it’s straight ahead.”

Two sequences stand out in this effort to open the cinematic image as planes with different temporal zones. The most famous is a single shot of a Yakutsk town bus passing an expensive car shown four times with different types of commentary. The first is silent, the next a Soviet panegyric, the third an anti-Communist denunciation, and the last the voice-over’s description of the commentator’s own impressions. Each commentary not only creates a very different interpretation of the street scene but also directs the perspective toward different details and activities in the shot: for one, the Zim luxury car dominates the scene; in another, the voice-over points out a man’s injured eye. For the commentator this series of judgments without verdicts most immediately questions the impossible notion of objectivity regarding a landscape “with huge gaps and the will to fill them.” Indeed, a major problem with “objectivity” is that it “may not distort Siberian realities but it does isolate them long enough to be appraised.” Instead, the four different commentaries here offer four interpretive planes or zones which describe the street scene and direct our attention in a way that maps the tempo-

ral fullness of a short interval where “What counts is the variety and the driving momentum.”

The second, considerably longer, sequence follows these four shots to suggest that even this layering of a cinematic present is inadequate. “A walk through the streets of Yakutsk isn’t going to make you understand Siberia,” the commentator admits. “What you might need is an imaginary newsreel shot all over Siberia” in which “the commentary would be made up of those Siberian expressions that are already pictures in themselves.” Locating and measuring its own voice in “those Siberian expressions” it aims to document, here the commentator literally evokes images of those expressions by opening a second frame within the center of the image of the street scene, which then expands to fill the entire frame and become a collage of winter images. As the collage proceeds, this “imaginary newsreel” assumes a future-conditional voice developing through a series of conjunctive “ands”: “And then I’d show you” the snow, the Yakut, the spring festivals, and so on.

As these sequences suggest, the voice-over in Letter from Siberia becomes a time traveler and guide through a world that will always elude him and us temporally as well as spatially. Whereas the text-image relationship in The Koreans identifies a fissure or gap, the audio commentary offers a more temporally mobile relationship with the fragmented chronologies of the film image. The changing voices, incorporated quotations, and music and sound recordings—from the lyrical to the bemused to the pedagogical—describe a series of shifting subject positions surrounding and intervening in the visuals. This address of the voice-over can even be dramatically insistent in attempting to direct the viewer according to a specific chronology: at one point, the commentator anticipates the contrast between the past and present in the image of a large truck passing a horse-drawn cart and quickly reminds the viewer that this is “the shot you’ve been waiting for.” The unusual mobility of this voice exploring time between images creates, in Bazin’s words, a “montage . . . forged from ear to eye” (Bazin 2003, 44). Through it, Letter from Siberia insists, according to Bazin, “that the primary material is intelligence, that its immediate means of expression is language, and that the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence” (44).

It seems to me a curious paradox that Deleuze says nothing about Marker’s films in his monumental Cinema 1 and Cinema 2, for few
writers have theorized the cinema in terms so sympathetic to Marker’s essayistic films and their aim to elicit a “cinematic thinking.” Although Deleuze’s perspective on “thought and cinema” casts a much wider net than the essayistic, it accommodates Marker’s work and essayistic cinema in general in a manner that few theoretical models can—which is the justification for my selective appropriation of Deleuze. For Deleuze, thought is “the essence of cinema” (Deleuze 1989, 168), and it can be discovered in various orders throughout film history, beginning with the “movement images” of Sergei Eisenstein, Abel Gance, and Alfred Hitchcock. Of a different order, however, is “the modern cinema,” the cinema of the “time-image” (169) and, for me, the essayistic. In these films, of which there are no better examples than Marker’s, thought in the cinema is brought face to face with its own impossibility (168) where “the suspension of the world” “gives the visible to thought, not as an object, but as an act that is constantly arising and being revealed in thought” (169). As the essayistic subject personal expression to the public domain of experience, “thought finds itself taken over by the unimportance of a ‘belief’ outside any interiority of a mode of knowledge” (175). For Deleuze and Marker, encountering the interstices and time zones between film images is the pathway to “belief” in a world always eluding and refusing thought. 15

Although the genealogical relationship between the photo-essay (and literary essay) and the essay film is not, I believe, a difficult argument to make, few writers, photographers, or filmmakers demonstrate their intricate and compelling connections better than Chris Marker, a writer and photo-essayist who can deservedly be characterized as one of the earliest, most consistent, and most articulate practitioners of the essay film. Essay films have arguably become one of the most innovative and popular forms of filmmaking in the last fifteen years, producing a celebrated variety of examples from filmmakers around the globe. However, extremely they may vary in style, structure, and subject matter, the best of these, I believe, work in the tradition of Marker, a tradition that draws on, merges, and recreates the literary essay and the photo-essay within the particular spatial and temporal dynamics of film. Without assuming that one practice anticipates or prepares for the other in Marker’s career, it seems certain that, in his early essayistic encounters with words and photographic images, Marker discovers an essential modern territory between images where the fading spaces and black time lines ask the

film viewer to become a thinker. After all, as Marker notes in The Koreans, the twentieth century “may have been nothing but an immense, interminable fade” (23).

NOTES

1 Musil’s lengthy reflection continues with the critical reminder: “Nothing is more foreign to [essayism] than the irresponsible and half-baked quality of ‘thought known as subjectivism’” (73). Of the growing scholarship on essayism, two early studies provide an important literary grounding: Graham Good’s The Observing Self (1988) is a solid introduction to some of these positions, while Reda Benama’a’s The Barthes Effect (1987) takes a more specific look at the theoretical formulations and practices of the essay in Roland Barthes.

2 For the essay in general and the essay film in particular, the dynamics of reception always have been a distinguishing feature, beginning in the 1920s with the ciné-clubs, the formation of an audience for whom film was less about entertainment than a forum for reflecting and debating social issues and experience, and evolving through Gilbert Cohen-Seat’s “filmology” movement in the 1940s.

3 Always the contrarian, Godard denounces the short films yet for reasons that, I think, make the relation of the short film and the essayistic so important: “A short film does not have the time to think” (Milne 1972, 110), later he notes: “If the short film hadn’t existed, Alan Resnais surely would have invented it. . . . From the blind, trembling pans of Von Gogh to the majestic traveling shots of Styrone what in effect do we see? A survey of the possibilities of a cinematic technique, but such a demanding one, that it finishes by surpassing itself, in such a way that the modern young French cinema could not have existed without it” (115).

4 François Porcelle makes this appropriate comparison in writing about the short film: “Next to the novel and other extensive works, there is the poem, the short story or the essay, which often plays the role of the horseman; it has the function of revitalize a field with fresh blood” (Porcelle 1965, 19).

5 The photo-essay figures prominently in the early twentieth century, but J. Hillis Miller has identified some of the precedents for this practice in his Illustration (1992), where he examines precursive examples such as the photographic frontispieces that accompany Henry James’s The Golden Bowl (1904).

6 There are numerous reasons for the spread and success of the photo-essay during this period. Responding to a mass-market visual culture, the first publication of Henry Luce’s Life magazine on November 23, 1936, was the most famous product of a decade of expansion of photojournalism in Europe and America. Stretched tensely between two wars and strained by an economic depression, this trend was in part a response to general desire for increasing documentation of the events in the world that the cultural politics of the 1930s often refocused on social issues and crises. In his 1937 “The Camera as Essayist,” Luce writes: “When people think of the camera in journalism they think of it as a reporter—the best of reporters: the
most accurate of reporters: the most convincing of reporters. Actually, as Life has learned in its first few months, the camera is not merely a reporter. It can also be a commentator. It can comment as it reports. It can interpret as it presents. It can picture the world as a seventeenth-century essayist or a twentieth-century columnist. A photographer has his style as an essayist has his” (Luce 1937, 60).

7 Besides Lupton’s recent book, also of note is the two-part series on Marker in Film Comment in 2003.

8 Despite these political reminders, the book focuses largely on North Korea.

9 Telling of the critical relation between the photo-essay and the essay film, two of Marker’s own photo-essays are in fact companion pieces to specific films: “China’s Light: A Film in the Guise of a Greeting Card,” a series of photos and commentaries published in Esprit to accompany his film Sunday in Peking (1956), and the 1982 companion piece to Sunless, the photo-essay Abroad. Lupton notes that in these cases the “film and the photo-text publication are not designed to explain or absorb each other, but as an open-ended relay that invites fresh perspectives on their shared subject matter” (52). Marker’s If I Had Four Dromedaries (1966) is another version of his exploration of this intermediary zone: a film made up entirely of still images whose premise is “a photographer and two of his friends look through and comment on a series of images taken just about everywhere in the world between 1956 and 1966.”

10 In Between Film and Screen Garrett Stewart describes The Jetty as a “text of decelerated process” where “Marker’s plot is a perfect allegory of this devitalization” (Stewart 1999, 103).


12 That Marker seems to regard his work preceding Le Joli mai (1962) and The Jetty as juvenilia suits my argument in that that work clearly represents a testing and exploration of a new practice.

13 Since Bazin’s observations, scholarly work on the essay film has, especially in the last ten years, grown considerably. See, for instance, Michael Renov’s “Lost, Lost, Lost” (1992), Nora Alter’s “Documentary as Simulacrum” (1997), and, for broader discussion about the new strategies of contemporary documentary, Bill Nichols’s Blurred Boundaries (1994).

14 Deleuze’s three relations to thought at the level of the movement image: (1) forces thinking and thinks under shock (critical thought); (2) with a “second movement” or “spiral” between “intellectual cinema” and “sensory thought” or “emotional intelligence” (hypnotic thought) (157–59); and (3) “identity of concept and image” or “the externalization of man” (action thought) (162–63). It is worth considering Garrett Stewart’s strong counter-argument to Deleuze’s bipartite, particularly as he insists on a much broader photogrammatic tension in film practice that encompasses the “movement-image” as well as the “time-image.” He writes: “Everything Deleuze resists attributing to the movement-image as an already textured or textualized imprint of the scopic field seems displaced onto the time-image, where betweenness, stratigraphic layering, interstitial and lacunary process . . . where the whole opalescent faceting of indeterminacy takes place” (89).