

Title	The essay film as methodology for film theory and practice: Disruptions and expansions for film research
Authors	Sourdis, Carolina;de Lucas, Gonzalo
Publication date	2019
Original Citation	Sourdis, C. and de Lucas, G. (2019) 'The essay film as methodology for film theory and practice: Disruptions and expansions for film research', <i>Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media</i> , 17, pp. 80-96. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.05
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue17/ArticleSourdisDeLucas.pdf - https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.05
Rights	© 2019, the Author(s). - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2025-04-22 03:45:29
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/8220

The Essay Film as Methodology for Film Theory and Practice: Disruptions and Expansions for Film Research

Carolina Sourdis and Gonzalo de Lucas

Abstract: *The essayistic device in film often brings together two temporalities of film creation: the present of the filmed image and the present of the editing process. Through the interaction of both moments, provoked by the critical revision of the raw material and its possibilities of montage, the essay film is constructed through the filmmaker's exploration of the filmic apparatus, thus revealing film forms as a way of producing and disseminating knowledge. The essay film, therefore, subverts a common theoretical practice: thought is no longer assumed as a procedure for unveiling an image, but it is rather produced by film forms. We claim that the essay film, as a research methodology and a theoretical approximation to film informed by practice, must be unfolded through creative gestures, this is to say, images and sounds that present an audiovisual synthesis of the conscious and intuitive work that both precedes and is synchronic to the moments of filming and editing. This article addresses the essay film through a comparative association of several filmmakers that express and study both concrete and abstract issues of cinema and filmmaking through their own creative practices.*

Camera and tape recorder: carry me away from the intelligence which complicates everything. (Bresson 74)

Introduction: Towards Film's Creative Gestures

The opening of *Passion* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1982) is a shot of an afternoon sky (Figure 1). The camera, without displaying much technical skill, follows the movements of an airplane passing through the clouds. It moves between the nuances of light and shadow. It is a shot, we know today, filmed by Jean-Luc Godard himself with the 35-8, a portable 35mm camera he designed together with Jean-Pierre Beauviala, owner of the Aaton Company. The camera was by then an old idea of which several prototypes had been produced: one of the first had been tested in the shooting of *Slow Motion* (*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1980), the film that marked Godard's return to fiction after his long political militancy and his works on video with Anne-Marie Miéville. Although this camera, a professional one with amateur features that synthesised the width of professional images with the lightness of 8mm technologies, was tested in the 1980s, the idea for its invention is dated to long before, when Godard first discovered *Journey to Italy* by Roberto Rossellini (*Viaggio in Italia*, 1954).¹ This film was compared by Jacques Rivette to Michel de Montaigne's essays, for it was guided by a fascination towards a "successive composition" that was revealed in the "lack of balance, this divergence from the customary centres of gravity, this apparent uncertainty which secretly shocks you so deeply" (56). In that film, he stated, "the eye of the camera invariably assumed the role of a pencil", as if cinema had discovered how to sketch, erase and start over with film (59).



Figure 1: The opening of Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion*. Sonimage, 1982. Screenshot.

This shot of *Passion* synthesises a long search by Godard and his collaborators to produce a tool that subverted the dynamics of industrial film production and allowed filmmakers “to make experiments, sketches, to do research” (Beauviala qtd. in Godard 553; our transl.). The invention of this camera also shows the need to close the distance that industrial production imposes between the filmmaker and his trade—the linearity of the shooting plan, the heavy equipment, the large number of people in the crew—to work filmic images with the flexibility of painting or writing (the *caméra-stylo* foreshadowed by Alexandre Astruc or the camera-pencil suggested by Jacques Rivette). Furthermore, regarding the first failed attempts with the camera, Beauviala argued that part of the failure consisted of the fact that Godard let other cameramen operate the “small object” (530). This, he argued, had damaged their invention because it had passed through “hands accustomed to other gestures” (530; our transl.). The camera, then, was conceived not as a technical device, but as a soft object that both registers and prints the working gestures of its operator. As Serge Daney asserted, “cinema isn’t a technique of displaying images, it’s an art of showing, and showing is a gesture, a gesture that demands looking and watching. Without this gesture there is just imagery. But if something is shown, someone must acknowledge its receipt” (64). After all, behind every finished image there is an invisible trace, the experience of the filmmaker who desires and imagines a shot, who sees and touches the image with their vision and camera, and attempts several associations between images, words and sounds until the right form is achieved.

The purpose of this article is to address the essay film as methodology for film theory and practice from the filmmaker’s perspective. We first examine some theoretical proposals of the essay film as a term, mainly regarding its procedures and the nexus it offers between film and theory. We then address the essayistic device through a comparative association of several filmmakers that express and study both concrete and abstract issues of cinema and filmmaking

through their own creative processes and filmic forms, in order to determine a space of reflexivity that arises in the filmmaker's creative practice. We suggest that the essay film as a research methodology and a theoretical approximation to a filmic medium informed by practice is unfolded through creative gestures. This unfolding happens through images and sounds that present an audiovisual synthesis of the conscious and intuitive work that both precedes and is synchronic to the moments of filming and editing. As Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet stated in Pedro Costa's *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie? (Où git votre sourire enfoui?, 2001)*, a film that documents the re-editing process of *Sicily! (Sicilia!, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, 1999)*: "You cannot expect form before the idea [...] for together they'll make their appearance".

It is precisely the irregular movement of thought, creation, composition, and the sparking of contact between images and ideas that the essayistic device in film is able to show. Thus, the creative gestures that we address in this article propose an assemblage of film forms that show a dialectical relation between cinematic thinking and practice, and settle a space for film research where a way of working with cinema is discovered and expressed through cinema's own means, often implying an appropriation of technical tools and a reformulation of production standards, as well as a personal conception of cinema as a way of thought and emotion. These creative gestures also reveal a pedagogic dimension of the essay film in as much as they can be conceived as a process of documentation of film creation and a form of dissemination of the filmmaker's working methods. In the third chapter of *Diary (Yoman, 1973–1983)* by David Perlov, Yael, his daughter, becomes the editor of the film. Thus *Diary*, besides being a learning process for Perlov himself—who searches for and finds a new way of making films—is also a space for working side by side with his daughter and teaching her the craft of the cinema. In a fragment of that chapter, just after Perlov films a portrait of his master Joris Ivens in Paris, Yael displays for the camera, back in Tel-Aviv, those working gestures that she has learned from her father: how to place the pencil to mark the celluloid, how to use the splicer, the "secrets" she has learned to assess her work as an editor. "Working side by side with my daughter has been a deep experience, hard to put into words. As if following the joy of the dictators of nature", the filmmaker comments. That "deep experience" of teaching and learning through creative gestures implies the transformation of the heavy machinery of cinema into a soft tool that is modified in the filmmaker's hand and enables them to trace, sketch and draw with film.



Figure 2: Yael Perlov at the editing table. *Diary (Yoman, 1973–1983)*, Chapter 3, (1981–1982). Screenshot.

The Essay Film as Practice Research

As a term, the essay film refers to a heterogeneous group of, mostly, nonfiction films that are independent from both the facticity of documentary and the dramatic construction of fiction. The essay film has been defined as being derived from documentary and avant-garde cinema and is primarily founded on theories of the literary and philosophical essay by Theodor W. Adorno and György Lukács; and secondarily on Max Bense's reflections. The term started to receive increasing academic attention in the early 1990s, with the celebration of retrospectives and symposiums that resulted in the compilation of reflections on the subject (Blümlinger and Wulff; Biemann; Gorin; Weinrichter). Accordingly, a group of texts associated with the cinephile culture, which foreshadowed the emergence of the essay as a film form, were identified (Bazin; Richter; Rivette; Astruc).² Since then the term has evolved significantly. It went from a definition of its characteristics emphasising its verbal component and the importance of the inscription of a subjective voice (Lopate), to the determination of its historical development (Alter, "Translating"; Corrigan; Rascaroli, "Essay Film"), its imbrications with the electronic image and digital devices (Biemann) and, in a wider study that was the first monograph published on this subject, the identification of its rhetorical strategies (Rascaroli, *Personal Camera*).

In 2017, a second monograph was published by Laura Rascaroli, in which the essay film is studied based on its functions and effects, rather than its essential characteristics. This study is based on the Deleuzian concept of in-betweenness and puts an emphasis on the essay film as a philosophical discourse that uses filmic procedures like decoupage, framing and montage. Furthermore, the recent publication of a compilation of voices on the essay film by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan provides readers with a variety of different theoretical approaches. Some contributors raise concerns on the uses of the term as a "commodity form" in a global and neoliberal context (Elsaesser; Steyerl). Lastly, the publication of a study by Nora M. Alter where the essay is approached from a historical perspective refutes the identification of the term with the exploration of subjectivity, as the first academic studies had proposed (*Essay Film 17*), pursuing its expansion to the political and also including studies of essay films in minor cinemas.³ Nevertheless, despite this wide array of perspectives, there is still a relative lack of attention regarding the creative processes that the filmmakers transform with the essay film and an approach to the field based on the internal work of cinema. The working methods of the filmmakers and their contributions towards a concept of film creation thus reveal a dialectical tension between film theory and practice. This approximation prepares the ground to generate a theoretical approach to film based on filmmaking, rather than developed through discursive arguments or philosophical concepts.

In that sense, Max Bense's propositions with regard to the essay are fundamental. According to Bense the essay is "an expression of an experimental method" which alludes to the critical category of the intellect and cannot be made simply with ideas (58). It is a literary configuration and as such, a creative procedure that stands in the "strange border" between prose and poetry (58). The essayist is defined by Bense as a "combiner" who looks and produces "visible anew" configurations for its objects (60). These configurations arise from an experimental, rather than a deductive observation, and "pure knowledge" is replaced by "imagination" through "*ars combinatoria*", a procedure that can be closely related to film editing (64). The discontinuity and multiplicity of the essay form was also proposed by Adorno when asserting that the essay "thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over" (81). But what Bense highlights in his early contribution is the possibility of conceiving the essay as an experimental procedure,

rather than a deductive operation, stressing the creative/experimental essence of it, which in cinema is decisive, since filmmaking always demands the use of technological devices and concrete operations with images.

Furthermore, what we are willing to emphasise from Bense's formulation about the essay is the centrality he provides to the concept of imagination. As Georges Didi-Huberman states—based on Baudelaire's concept of imagination—when characterising the forms of a “visual knowing”, “imagination accepts the multiple and constantly renews in order to detect therein new ‘intimate and secret relations’, new ‘correspondences and analogies’ that will be inexhaustible themselves, as is every thinking about relations that a new montage might show” (5). Between the visual experience and the positivist thinking, the concept of “visual knowledge” that Didi-Huberman proposes establishes, at the same time, an assessment to rationalism and a rejection of simple empiricism (94). As Bense asserted in his reflections on the essay:

It would be prudent for poets and writers to comment from time to time on their experiences with objects of their trade, such as prose, fragments, verse, and sentences. From this I think a rather respectable theory could emerge, a theory with the added advantage of having an empirical origin. (57)

This kind of theory, we claim, is what the filmmaker's creative gestures might allow us to elucidate—and see—because, as Giorgio Agamben defines it, “the gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such” (54).

Along the same lines, Volker Pantenburg's study on Farocki and Godard subtitled *Film as Theory* must be mentioned. Pantenburg traces the “dialectical interweaving of theory and practice which does not merely seek a transition between the two areas but understands practical thinking as the ‘reverse side’ of theoretically handled problems” (149). Through his comparative study of both filmmakers Pantenburg establishes that both “understand theory as the result of observation, the investigation of visibility” (33) and therefore construct a theory of images in which pictures “stage the self-knowledge of pictures” (149). This approach is thematically very close to the issues addressed in this article, but beyond (or before) a theory of images capable of being formulated under scholarly standards, unfolded by concepts or related to the “authority” that theoretical or scientific discourse implies (Adorno 77; Mulvey 333), we address the theory of film as a reflexive space that is engendered through practice, in contact with film materials and techniques, and incorporated through the filmmaker's commentary almost as a pedagogical strand (how to frame, where to cut, how to associate one image with another, where to add sound). In this regard, it is relevant to bring the essay to the fore, as the “methodically unmethodically” procedure—in Adorno's words—to think/research on the reverse side of scholarly tradition (78).

Between Imagination and Work: Assessing Creative Gestures

In *Kitch's Last Meal* (1976) Carolee Schneemann reflects on her own artistic activity. The film is composed of a double vertical projection accompanied by sound recordings of commentaries about the male-dominated cinema circuit, her feminist perspective on being a female filmmaker and conversations on the processes linked to the construction of her own filmic and performative forms. At several points in the film, Schneemann includes images of drawings that seem to be part of the film's conception—sketches of her cat Kitch's meals,

images of herself at her studio surrounded by hanging film strips or working at the editing table, surrounded by notebooks and books in the company of her cat. Her working space as an artist is her own domestic space; the materials she works with exist alongside her kitchen utensils, her living room, her garden. As Schneemann affirms in the film: “My work is where I live, I want everything right there [...]. If I need a medium I go and teach myself how to use it.” She even comments that the most important piece of equipment in her Super 8mm collection is a cloth pin that, as she asserts later, she used to test versions of the montage without pasting the rolls together—the pin was used as a temporary juncture between the pieces of celluloid (De Lucas 100). Thus, *Kitch’s Last Meal* is both a portrait of her studio, a reflection of her work as an editor and performer (there are recurrent images of herself dancing in a fixed shot or moving shots that film the space while she spins her body in the dining room) and a portrait of her daily domestic life.

We claim that the appropriation of technical tools is fundamental to enable practice-led research on filmic forms and it expands the possibilities of a creative documentation by filmmakers around their own creative practice. In a moment of the film where Schneemann strings together shots of herself and her partner, the artist Anthony McCall, she answers his question regarding the certainty of the type of film she wanted to make. She alludes to editing as the longest procedure in her process, and refers to “evidence”, collected in the form of notes, drawings or dreams, that have shown her that despite the transformations that her “potential imagery” go through in the process of their making, the “original seeds” of the idea are usually contained in the final work: “I discover what the piece is going to be in the process of making it. But then, what happens is that it often contains all the original seeds, which by then I’ve kind of forgotten”.⁴ Thus the revision and composition of the material on the editing table is established as the procedure in which to observe the transformation of images in their gestational processes, both in their fragility and fecundity.



Figure 3: Carolee Schneemann at the editing table in *Kitch’s Last Meal* (1976). Screenshot.

When David Perlov withdraws from the industrial cinema circuit in Israel to start filming what will become *Diary*, he begins by filming the windows of his apartment, finding the active angles of his home and creating, in his domestic space, mechanisms that permit the production of film.⁵ Perlov integrates the dynamic of trial and error as an essential form of his poetics. He registers in his images the irregular movement of creative thought, which

continuously needs to see in order to assess, to assess in order to choose, to consider the possibilities and discard. In a shot where he attempts to film two women in a café in Tel Aviv the filmmaker affirms: “Beauty and ugliness still don’t affect me: it is only in the gestures that I find sometimes an interest. At the Polish Café, I don’t even hear their voices, their language. It is like drawing a rough draft”. Perlov finds through the visor of the camera the gestures that produce the desire to capture an image: “These two girls. I enjoy looking at them. They are natural. I want to watch them more and more”. It is evident that the presence of the camera generates discomfort in both women, to the point that one of them changes her place to block the point of view of the camera with her back.



Figures 4 and 5: Perlov’s gaze is interrupted when one of the women he films blocks the point of view of his camera. *Diary (Yoman, 1973–1983), Chapter 2 (1979–1980)*. Screenshots.

These images are like colour samples, matter without form, “technical tests”—as Perlov himself defined a spin of his body with the camera on his hands. The work is made up of sparks of ideas and thoughts that arise through contact with the materials. Thus, Perlov’s voice reveals

his thoughts while filming, the images show us his decisions as a filmmaker, and an essential part of his diary relies on him showing how it is constructed: “My editing is such that in the final product I want also to discover the ‘seams’, the raw material, the craft: the shots, their length, their angles [...] what is still important is found in the shot itself and not in the transition between shots, between one sequence and the next”. Thus, the friction between the interrupted or inhibited shots, and those that are completed according to the filmmaker’s desires—the portraits of his loved ones—generates a form that shows a technical ability when demonstrating transformations of the process as a visual fluctuation. A reflexive space constructed through the cinematographic medium and the filmmaker’s work is formed in presenting the intimate relation between the filmmaker and their technique, even shaping the interruptions of the gaze that the dispositif provokes. This is the same concern that Philippe Garrel proposes in *She Spent So Many Hours Under the Sun Lamps* (*Elle a passé tant d’heures sous les sunlight*, 1985) when he interrupts the film to insert a conversation with his friend, filmmaker Jacques Doillon, with whom he shares his doubts regarding how to film his son.⁶ And even though he does not ultimately film his child, his desire is represented in the insertion of a photograph of him carrying the boy at the end of the sequence. The reflexive processes generated through film practices thus allow a laboratory of filmic forms where a theoretical consciousness of the medium is generated by the filmmaker through the dialectical friction between their desire and their possibility of filming.



Figure 6: A photo of Philippe Garrel carrying his child in *She Spent So Many Hours Under the Sun Lamps* (*Elle a passé tant d’heures sous les sunlight*). G.I.E., 1985. Screenshot.

In an interview on his creative process, Jean-Claude Rousseau asserted that he often went back to these words by the poet José Ángel Valente:

Perhaps the supreme, the only radical practice of art is a practice of withdrawal. Creating is not an act of power (power and creation negate each other); it’s an act of acceptance or acknowledgement [...]. Creating means generating a state of readiness, in which the first thing that is created is the void, an empty space. Because perhaps the only thing the artist creates is the space for creation. (De Lucas 279)

In his first film, *Jeune femme à sa fenetre lissant un lettre* (1983), shot in Super 8mm, Jean-Claude Rousseau studies his “space of creation”. In this film, he makes visible his creative

gestures through studies on light and framing. The film, at forty-six minutes long, observes how the light transforms the shot and its ever-changing nature impacts on the objects, frame, film, and filmmaker. Recording and showing together these transformations brings to the fore the multiple formal possibilities of both shot and space expressed through the conventions of cinema, to the extent that the film is composed of several layers of slightly different frames, all captured in the interior of an apartment. At the beginning of the film, for example, the yellow light that is projected onto the window on the reverse of a canvas is also filmed as white and blue at different moments of the day and with several exposures. The shots follow one another as if they were a trace of the previous image, a rough sketch, until they are interrupted by intervals of grey producing a rhythm that accentuates the imperceptible movement of light. Thus, the film makes visible the fleeting duration of light and captures the “invisible” passing of time and the transformation of the image.

The film is structured in four parts that correspond with groups of film reels. The first group of images presents the space as a succession of still shots, with variations of the framing and the direction of the camera, which are presented as camera movements in the second group. Showing the jump cuts against the fluid movements is a way of observing, studying and comparing two gestures, two ways of tracing a distance with the camera, of constructing and expressing an idea of space and landscape: two creative procedures, conducted by intuition, that are included in the film as part of the “history” of the film that is being made. That history, which is the history of “those reels and their encounters” are oriented to discover how images transform in their relations (Neyrat and Rousseau; our transl.). “Outside, we don’t know what the landscape is”, we hear the filmmaker’s voice in some moments of the film, in an unclear, hardly intelligible sound, that is constantly interrupted. It is not the idea or the words that will formulate or conduct the questions in Rousseau’s essay: “That the questions are raised is enough in itself, answering them in a certain way is to erase the question, to make the problem disappear by finding the solution” (Rousseau and Diez Ferrer; our transl.). Rather, the images and their correspondences will shape his inquiries.

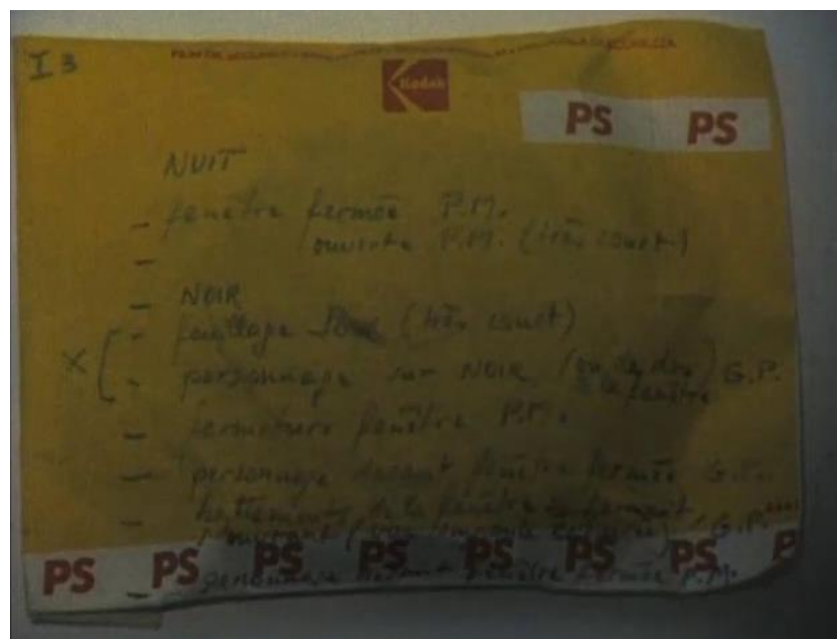


Figure 7: The package of the revealed cartridges in *Jeune femme à sa fenêtre lissant un lettre* (Jean-Claude Rousseau). Rousseau Film Production, 1983. Screenshot.

This opens another aspect related to the creative practice that is revealed in the film. Beyond inscribing himself as the only performer, through his comments in off, or by crossing the space that is filmed, by recording his reflection behind the camera or that of the camera itself, the reflexivity that is proposed in this essay points out the way in which Rousseau conceives and practices editing, this is to say, the process of discovering the “correspondences” between the images to give form to the film as a whole: “The agreement between the elements is not limited to the preceding, since, using cinema vocabulary, the agreement of a shot with another is not limited to the one that precedes or follows it, but rather to the set” (Rousseau and Diez Ferrer; our transl.). This idea, very close to Alexander Kluge’s perception of montage as an impossible union of images,⁷ is alluded to by the voice of *The Enclosed Valley* (*La Vallée Closée*, Jean-Claude Rousseau, 1995), his most prominent work, also shot in Super 8mm and later amplified to 16mm, where the theory of atoms by Lucrecio—where void and distance are proposed as essential for movement and encounters between particles—is constantly evoked.⁸ Rousseau’s editing practice searches for the observation of that distance and void. His work at the editing table consists of creating a set of images that can define their own place in the montage. One of the recurring images in *Jeune femme à sa fenêtre lissant un lettre* is, in fact, a shot of the working table of the filmmaker with four piles of reels gathered by the side of the viewer. He describes the creative process of his film *The Enclosed Valley*:

The assemblage consisted of conforming piles of reels on a table where I put a black matt paper... Then, it was necessary to place all these matters, all those reels—mute at the beginning—in relation to each other, in a place where the correspondences were allowed, without looking for connections between them. (Neyrat and Rousseau; our transl.)

In *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000), Jonas Mekas comments on the principles of montage he uses to assemble the work we are about to watch: the images follow an aleatory assemblage, because, as Mekas asserts, he is not able to define an order that corresponds to his experience and, accordingly, disorder and hazard are the only possible structures.⁹ Mekas’s reflective voice tends to be set at night pondering; it is an expression of a solitary and introspective reflection of the filmmaker at his editing table. As Mekas points out in his film *Out-Takes from the Life of a Happy Man* (2011), the last film he made with celluloid: “Late at night, late at night, the city is sleeping, everybody is sleeping. Only the filmmakers are awake, working late into the night, yes, when everybody is sleeping, when the air cleaned from the daily bustle, when the muses [...]. Oh, those nights, those nights working on my film”. When Mekas takes those images in his hands or contemplates them in the editing room, as Patrice Rollet points out, the mnemonic traces inscribed in the film are even more truthful or real than his memories (75). The vision and revision of the images that confront imagination and work are placed between the current celebration of the images, reinforced by Mekas’ voice, and the confrontation of the remnants of time that evoke his “glimpses”. The creative gesture is, thus, an introspective meditation and an approximation to reality through cinema’s aesthetic experience:

They say my images are my memories. No, they are not memories. This is all real what you see. Every image, every detail, everything is real [...] It has nothing to do with my memories anymore. Memories are gone, but the images are here, and they are real. What you see, every second of what you see here is real, right there in front of your eyes.



Figure 8: Closing image of the first chapter of Jonas Mekas's *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000). Screenshot.

As Godard and Miéville asserted in *The Old Place* (2000), an essay film commissioned by MoMA about the origins of artistic creation where they reconfigure many of the images of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (Godard, 1988–1998), “the artistic work not only consists of observing, collecting experimental data, and then drawing out a theory, a painting or a film. The artistic thinking starts with the invention of a possible world or a fragment of a possible world, to confront it with experience and work”. The essayistic form in film shows the tension between experience and work and sets a strange border—to use Bense’s words—between the theoretical and creative thinking to trace proximity and tension between them. “That eternal dialogue between imagination and work”—as Godard and Miéville continue arguing in *The Old Place*—“enables the consolidation of a keenest representation of what has been agreed upon to call ‘reality’”.

Conclusion

The irregular movement of creation traces the transformations of the potential imagery that engender a possible film. Images are able to change when they have the potential to activate a cinematic thinking, multiply their possibilities of association, constellation and shaping of other images, even internal and metaphoric. In such a process editing is established as the space of discovery of the creative gestures, where both a meditative and intuitive approach to the filmic medium generates a way of working with images. In the short film that Godard makes after the failure of his project in Mozambique, precisely titled *Change the Image* (*Changer d’image – Lettre à la bien-aimée*, 1982), the filmmaker exposes two of his recurrent ideas: “one must show resistance to change”; “one can change between images and what must be shown is that ‘in-between’”. In that instant he evokes a memory from his childhood. On Sundays, when he was with his siblings in the back seat of his grandparents’ car and they lost patience with the slowness of the traffic, they shouted “Change grandpa, change!” That desire,

stated Godard, is the same as that of a filmmaker who wants an image to change towards another, between the old and the new one, between imagination and work, the desire is to make an image that erases the previous one that blocks it. “Most of us begin with a cliché—not always, but most of the time—and that is fine, but you have to look at the image from all sides and clarify it”, asserts Jean-Marie Straub when he reflects on how the desire to film a mountain is transformed after filming several mountains, in a process of discovery that requires time and patience.¹¹

Thus, the filmmaker, through the assessment of their creative gestures, works and reflects on the traces of their own practice: thoughts inscribed in the shots or produced by them. Although these approximations do not conform to a philosophy proper—there is no system—nor can they be conceived as a scientific method, as their result is not measurable or verifiable, they do conform to a robust and sensitive thinking that implies a theoretical approach to the filmic medium indefectibly linked to creative practice. This kind of theoretical and experimental approximation to film proposes a method of thinking and producing thought through images. Furthermore, these films, in which an essayistic device is clearly constructed, can be considered as a document where the movements of creation are registered and observed by filmmakers. When the filmmaker creates and attempts to assess their own creative gestures, and is willing to observe their technique or question their trade, the essay film can be considered a pedagogical approach in as much as it instigates and disseminates specific knowledge on methodologies for film production.

Notes

¹ The genesis of the camera is detailed in the conversation between Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Beauviala in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard* (519–557).

² The possibility of creating an unedited form of knowledge through the cinematograph, respecting contextual differences, can be traced back to the theories and practices of the 1920s avant-gardes, such as Germain Dulac’s visual idea or Sergei Eisenstein’s intellectual montage. “To be visual, to reach the feelings through harmonies, chords of shadow, of light, of rhythm, of movement, of facial expression, is to address oneself to the feelings and to the intelligence by the means of the eye”, asserted Dulac regarding her definition of the “visual” (33). Or as Eisenstein stated in his notes for shooting *The Capital* by Karl Marx, an unfinished project which already in 1927 he identified as an “essay film”: “the ‘ancient’ cinema was shooting one event from many points of view. The ‘new’ one assembles one point of view from many events” (18). Nevertheless, the modern approximations have established the conceptual arena for addressing the essay film as a field of study, and particular emphasis has been placed on the idea of the *caméra-stylo* proposed by Alexandre Astruc, and the “horizontal montage” proposed by André Bazin (Blümlinger 49–52).

³ Michael Renov, one of the first theoreticians to approach the term, had already identified the emergence of a new autobiography associated with the idea of self-examination that could be traced from Montaigne to Barthes (110–120). Furthermore, Laura Rascaroli identified, in accordance with the coetaneous scholarly production, an authorial presence in the essay which appeals to the construction of an “embodied subjectivity” of both the author and spectator, identifying the essay with the construction of a “speaking ‘I’ who is inquisitive, pensive,

searching and self-searching, engaged and self-reflexive” and defined as an “interstitial authorship” (*Personal Camera* 191).

⁴ Carolee Schneemann asserts in the film: “I do have some evidence that makes it noticeable, plausible, even with the theatre pieces [...]. I have the strangest visions that become drawings and dreams and notes, and then, you take some, many steps in directions away for the kind of material sources you began with, those drawings or those notes. All the transformations that your potential imagery goes through before it actually turns into a performance [...]. I discover what the piece is going to be in the process of making it. But then, what happens is that it often contains all the original seeds, which by then I’ve kind of forgotten”.

⁵ In *A Day in Diary* (Asher Tlalim, 1984) Perlov asserted: “I thought I was going to completely abandon cinema. So, we had to make space for being able to film, project, edit, etc. It helped a lot when my daughters Yael and Naomi, the twins, moved out of home. I then had two empty rooms. There, we have the screen, the project is right there, and this lamp can be elevated as those in ships. It moves up to the ceiling, so this area is clear for projections. [...] This is the editing room, you know Yael, here she is, editing. By the way, this was her room. The editing table is where her bed was, now there is her moviola”.

⁶ Conversation between Philippe Garrel and Jacques Doillon in *Elle a passé tant d’heures sous les sunlight*:

GARREL: You, for example, the first shots, the first shot you took of your daughter. How did you go about it tactically?

DOILLON: I don’t remember. It was, well it was in *The Crying Woman*. But which was the first shot in *The Crying Woman*, I don’t remember. Well, the tactic was to chase people away. There was a hidden camera that was not as noisy as this one. There was a microphone here and I thought that way I was disturbing her a little less. We had chased the invaders and I found myself with her again. So the idea was, I suppose, that once the invaders went away and left us alone together, I supposed she could be delighted and be less scared.

GARREL: You mean the technical crew?

DOILLON: Yes, I think she was making it, but she knew too. She was three-years old and she knew we were shooting. I suppose. It was concerning us, nobody else, no one was watching us.

⁷ Kluge asserts: “Let’s think on an image, let’s suppose ‘Mnemosyne’, and then another, a painting of ‘Melancholy’. In the middle, as it is impossible to join images together, there’s an empty space and in that hole a third invisible image emerges [...]. I strongly believe in invisible images. Aby Warburg wouldn’t think different, and if Godard heard me, he would praise me, he would say: That’s montage!” (76; our transl.).

⁸ Mekas’s voiceover in *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*: “I have never, never been able to figure it all out. What it’s all about, what it all means. So, when I began now to put all these rolls of film together, to string them together, the first idea was to keep them chronological. But then I gave up and I just began splicing them together by chance, the way I found them on the shelf. Because I really don’t know where any piece of my life really belongs. Let it be, let it go, just by pure chance, disorder. There is some kind of order in it, order of its own, which I do not really understand, same as I never understood life around me, the real life, as they say, or the real people, I never understood them”.

⁹ Straub reflected in *Danièle Huillet/Jean-Marie Straub: Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lies?* (*Danièle Huillet/Jean-Marie Straub: Où gît votre sourire enfoui?*, Pedro Costa, 2001): “You say to yourself: ‘Yes, after having filmed Mount Thebes in *Moses and Aaron*, after having filmed Mount Etna, Mount Sainte-Victoire, why add another one?’ And so, you renounce, slowly. Then one fine day you realise that it’s better to see as little as possible. You have a sort of reduction, only it’s not reduction. It’s a concentration and it actually says more. But you don’t do that immediately from one day to the next. You need time and patience. A sigh can become a novel”.

References

A Day in a Diary. Directed by Asher Tlalim, 1984.

Adorno, Theodor W. “The Essay as Form.” Alter and Corrigan, pp. 69–91.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. Translated by Vincenzo Binette and Cesare Casarino, U of Minnesota P, 2000.

Alter, Nora M. *The Essay Film after Fact and Fiction*. Columbia UP, 2018.

---. “Translating the Essay into Film and Installation.” *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 6, 2007, pp. 44–57, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412907075068>.

Alter, Nora M., and Timothy Corrigan, editors. *Essays on the Essay Film*, Columbia UP, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/alte17266>.

As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty. Directed by Jonas Mekas, 2000.

Astruc, Alexandre. “Naissance d’une Nouvelle Avant-Garde : La Caméra-Stylo.” *Du Stylo à La Caméra et de La Caméra Au Stylo. Ecrits 1942–1984*, L’Archipel, 1992, pp. 324–328.

Bazin, André. “Lettre de Sibérie: Chris Marker.” *France-observateur*, no. 443, 30 Oct. 1958, pp. 22.

Bense, Max. “On the Essay and Its Prose.” 1948. Alter and Corrigan, pp. 57–68.

Bergson, Henri. *Extraits de Lucrèce, avec un commentaire, des notes et une étude sur la poésie, la philosophie, la physique, le texte et la langue de Lucrèce*. 11th ed., Librairie Delagrave, 1884.

Biemann, Ursula, editor. *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*. Voldemeer, 2003.

Blümlinger, Christa. “Lire entre images.” *L’essai et le cinéma*, edited by Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Murielle Gagnebin, Champ Vallon, 2004, pp. 49–69.

- Blümlinger, Christa, and Constantin Wulff, editors. *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen. Texte Zum Essayistischen Film*, Sonderzahl, 1992.
- Bresson, Robert. *Notes on Cinematography*. Translated by Jhonathan Griffith. Gallimard, 1975.
- Change the Image*. [*Changer d'image – Lettre à la bien-aimée*]. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Sonimage, 1982.
- Corrigan, Timothy. *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, after Marker*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Daney, Serge. *Postcards of the Cinema*. Translated by Paul Grant, Berg, 2007.
- Danièle Huillet/Jean-Marie Straub: Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* [*Danièle Huillet/Jean-Marie Straub: Oú git votre sourire enfoui?*]. Directed by Pedro Costa, Contracosta Produções, 2001.
- De Lucas, Gonzalo, editor. *Xcentric Cinema. Conversations on the Creative Process and the Filmic Vision*. CCCB - Centre de Cultura Contemporanea de Barcelona, Terranova, 2018.
- Diary [Yoman]*. Directed by David Perlov, 1973–1983.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?* Translated by Shane Lillis, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2010.
- Dulac, Germaine. "The Essence of the Cinema: The Visual Idea." *The Avant Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, edited by P. Adams Sitney, Anthology Film Archives, 1978, pp. 36–43.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. "Notes for a Film of 'Capital.'" Translated by Maciej Sliwowski, Jay Leyda and Annette Michelson, *October*, vol. 2, 1976, pp. 3–26, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/778416>.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "The Essay Film: From Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form?", 2015. Alter and Corrigan, pp. 324–28.
- The Enclosed Valley [La Vallée closée]*. Directed by Jean-Claude Rousseau, 1995.
- Godard, Jean-Luc. *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*. Vol. I, edited by Alain Bergala, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1998.
- Gorin, Jean-Pierre. "Proposal for a Tussle." Alter and Corrigan, pp. 289–95.
- Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Canal+, 1988–1998.
- Jeune femme à sa fenetre lissant un lettre*. Directed by Jean-Claude Rousseau, Rousseau Film Production, 1983.
- Journey to Italy [Viaggio in Italia]*. Directed by Roberto Rossellini, Italia Film, 1954.

- Kitch's Last Meal*. Directed by Carolee Schneemann, 1976.
- Kluge, Alexander. *120 Historias Del Cine*. Translated by Nicolás Gelormini, Caja Negra, 2010.
- Lopate, Phillip. "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film." *The Threepenny Review*, no. 48, 1992, pp. 243–269.
- Lukács, György. *Soul and Form*. Translated by Anna Bostock, Columbia UP, 2010.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *Complete Essays*. Translated by Donald M. Frame, Stanford UP, 1965.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Riddles as Essay Film." Alter and Corrigan, 2017, pp. 330–340, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/alte17266-024>.
- Neyrat, Cyril, and Jean-Claude Rousseau. "Entrevista con Jean-Claude Rousseau. *La Vallée close*." Translated by Francisco Algarín Navarro, *Lumière, Especial Jean-Claude Rousseau*, 2012, www.elumiere.net/especiales/Rousseau/01_web/01_Rousseau.php. Accessed 9 May 2019.
- The Old Place*. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, MoMA, 2000.
- Out-Takes from the Life of a Happy Man*. Directed by Jonas Mekas, 2011.
- Pantenburg, Volker. *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory*. Amsterdam UP, 2015, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048527557>.
- Passion*. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Sonimage, 1982.
- Perlov, David. "A Conversation in Two Parts with David Perlov." *The Medium in 20th Century Arts*, edited by Rachel Bilesky-Cohen and Baruch Blich, Or-Am and The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 1996.
- Rascaroli, Laura. *How The Essay Film Thinks*. Oxford UP, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190238247.001.0001>.
- . "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2008, pp. 24–47, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/frm.0.0019>.
- . *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*. Wallflower P, 2009.
- Renov, Michael. *The Subject of Documentary*. U of Minnesota P, 2004.
- Richter, Hans. "The Essay-Film: A New Type of Documentary Film." 1940. Alter and Corrigan, pp. 96–97.
- Rivette, Jacques. "Lettre sur Rossellini." *Rivette: Texts and Interviews*, edited by Jonathan Rosenbaum, BFI, 1977, pp. 54–64.
- Rollet, Patrice. *Diaries, Notes and Sketches de Jonas Mekas*. Yellow Now, 2013.

Rosseau, Jean-Claude, and Oriol Diez Ferrer. "Jean-Claude Rousseau, Paris, 17 Août 2012." *Lumière, Especial Jean-Claude Rousseau*, 2012, www.elumiere.net/especiales/Rousseau/index.php. Accessed 9 May 2019.

She Spent So Many Hours Under the Sun Lamps [*Elle a passé tant d'heures sous les sunlight*]. Directed by Philippe Garrel, G.I.E., 1985.

Sicily! [*Sicilia!*]. Directed by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Pierre Grise Productions, 1999.

Slow Motion [*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*]. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Sara Films, 1980.

Steyerl, Hito. "The Essay As Conformism? Some Notes on Global Images Economies." 2011. Alter and Corrigan, 2017, pp. 297–307, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/alte17266-020>.

Weinrichter, Antonio, editor. *La forma que piensa. Tentativas en torno al cine-ensayo*, Gobierno de Navarra, 2007.

Suggested Citation

Sourdis, Carolina, and Gonzalo de Lucas. "The Essay Film as Methodology for Film Theory and Practice: Disruptions and Expansions for Film Research." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 17, 2019, pp. 80–96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.17.05>.

Carolina Sourdis is Adjunct Lecturer at Pompeu Fabra University where she achieved her PhD in Film Studies with a dissertation on the essay film as dialectics of film creation. Her main research interest lies in the intersection between art theory and practice to explore visual-based research methodologies. Her field of expertise combines filmmaking and film curation, with qualitative analysis and ethnographic and comparative studies from an interdisciplinary/intercultural perspective. Her visual works have been screened at festivals in Spain, Colombia and Iran.

Gonzalo de Lucas is Senior Lecturer at Pompeu Fabra University and member of CINEMA Research Group. He is academic director of the postgraduate programme *Audiovisual Editing* at BSM/UPF, and film programmer for Xcèntric (CCCB). He has written the books *Vida secreta de las sombras* and *El blanco de los orígenes*, co-edited *Jean-Luc Godard. Pensar entre imágenes* (with Núria Aidelman) and edited *Xcèntric Cinema. Conversations on the Creative Process and the Filmic Vision*. He has also written articles for several books and journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma–España* and *Sight and Sound*. His main lines of research are comparative cinema, editing, film essay and visual thinking, history of cinema through the actor's performance and filmmaking learning processes.