

THE ESSAY FILM

by

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the essay film and its practice. Criteria are established for the form: It should be less than feature length. It must have text. The text must represent a single voice, and the speakers attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem. The text must have a strong personal point of view. The text's language should be as eloquent and interesting as possible. Three films are analyzed that illustrate the essay film form: Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia*, Cindy Stillwell's *Mating For Life*, and Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*. I conclude that the essay film form is a viable alternative to traditional documentary filmmaking styles. It is particularly useful in specific historical, social, and political contexts as a means of influencing public opinion and advocating for change.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Documentary filmmakers are storytellers and truth seekers. The ways we tell our stories and reveal our truths are as large as the number of documentarians. In the barely 100 years that documentary filmmaking has existed, a taxonomy of style has evolved that allows us to codify the manner in which we tell our stories (Nichols, 142). Human nature compels us to put things in order. This is a good thing. It gives us a point of reference when we are discussing, say, a documentary film we wish to describe as belonging to this or that genre. Storytelling is unique to our species as well. It is in our nature to tell stories, and we do it all day, and even at night, in our dreams (Gottschall, 8). The structure of the way we usually tell our stories is circumscribed. The narrative framework is most often linear, with a beginning, middle, and an end which comes to a resolution. This is done to make our stories as compelling as possible, in order to sway our audience to our point of view, and to entertain. It is logical.

Imagine that a different way of telling stories and seeking truths emerged. This way would defy the conventions of narrative structure without abandoning storytelling, reverse traditional ways of editing, re-think the relationship of the filmmaker to his audience, and offer an “overtly personal, in-depth, thought-provoking reflection” on documentary truth (Rascaroli, 35). This new way would have great power to engage spectators and address specific historical, political, and social viewpoints, and thus change public opinion. It would easily absorb the technological advances of filmmaking in the new mil-

lennium, and incorporate with aplomb the multichannel stew of images and sounds that characterize contemporary documentary filmmaking. That way is the essay film, the subject of this paper.

The essay film has been the focus of much scholarly debate and writing in the new millennium. Many have tried to define it, but the essay film form remains elusive. Much of the writing on the subject is confusing, inconclusive, and sometimes diverges on small, unimportant points (Arthur, 58). We need something fit for use.

Before trying to define the essay film, I would like to briefly mention some specific historical cinematic events which lead us to the place the essay film now occupies in contemporary documentary filmmaking.

In 1948 an experimental, avant-garde movement developed among French filmmakers. A branch of this movement called itself The Left Bank Cinema, and consisted primarily of Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnes Varda. These filmmakers had strong literary backgrounds, especially Marker, and were more interested in filmic writing and the flow of mental processes, than in the cinematic process (Flitterman-Lewis, p.261).

In the same year, Alexandre Astruc, a writer, playwright, and occasional filmmaker, wrote that the camera should be used by directors of film in the same way a writer uses his pen in writing an essay. This foreshadowed the coming of an essayistic style of filmmaking (Astruc 17-23).

The year 1957 produced Marker's *Letter From Siberia*, and Andre Bazin's prescient characterization of that film as an "essay film" (Corrigan, 87). Bazin continued to write effusively about Marker's essayistic style. Given Bazin's stature in the French film community, it was the most important writing that referred to an essayistic style of filmmaking:

These events are key historical markers in the emergence of the essay film from the literary and photographic heritage that preceded it. Both the subject matter and the formal innovations of those earlier traditions, set against the dominance of narrative film, partially anticipate the more pronounced innovations of essay films (Corrigan, 88).

## 2. DEFINING THE ESSAY FILM

The essay film should be short. Scholars and critics who have written on the subject of length generally agree that it should be longer than fifteen minutes, but less than feature length (Arthur, 59).

They offer no reasons for this. My personal experience as a spectator of the essay film is that it takes me about fifteen minutes to establish an intimate connection with the enunciator. An essay film that is longer than an hour, taxes my powers of concentration. Other than that, I see no reason to impose these length restraints on the essay film.

An essay film also must have words. The words may take the form of a spoken text, or they may be inserted in the film as subtitles or inter-titles. The writing should be as “eloquent, well-written, and interesting as possible” (Lopate, 19). The words must represent the author’s attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem. The words should provide more than just information. The words must establish intimacy between enunciator and spectator.

An essay film must establish intimacy between the enunciator and his spectator. Exactly how this is done is something of a mystery. The filmmaker comes before the spectator presenting himself in the first person. At first, this insistence can seem arrogant. What the enunciator is really saying is that he has only himself and his thoughts to offer, an act of humility. This bold intrusion takes the filmmaker out from behind the camera through



the vehicle of the text. The filmmaker asks only that his ideas and thoughts be accepted or rejected by the spectator.

The key to establishing this intimacy “comes from being let in on an intimate one-on-one dialogue with the author as he/she works out his/her thoughts, somehow managing to make these thoughts relevant to the viewer” (Stillwell, email).

The “I” of the essay film always clearly and strongly implicates a “you”. “You” is called upon to participate and share the enunciators reflections. It is important to understand that this “you” is not a generic audience, but an embodied spectator. This spectatorial position is unique to the essay film because the essayist does not pretend to discover truths to which he holds the key, but allows the answers to emerge somewhere else, precisely in the position occupied by the embodied spectator (Rascaroli, 35).

An essay film has no dominant narrative organization. Instead, narrative structure is replaced by the author’s thinking and intelligence. The interlocutor continually asks questions in the search for truth. Solutions are usually not forthcoming. Resolution is left to the spectator. At the same time, we are always aware that however capricious the narrative style of the essay film may seem, there is an underlying sense of organization that is taking us somewhere.

True practitioners of the art of the essay film can be counted on the fingers of one hand. This comes as a surprise to me. I would have thought that a style of filmmaking that welcomes and incorporates the multilayered, multichannel mixture of our new digital age, that abandons traditional narrative but not storytelling, that allows viewers to con-

struct their own resolution, and that has so much promise as a way of advocating causes and changing public opinion, would have exploded in popularity.

Many films contain essayistic elements. Films by Ross McElwee, Michael Moore, Werner Herzog, and Errol Morris all have essayistic colorations in varying degrees.

McElwee's *Sherman's March* and *Bright Leaves*, Moore's *Roger and Me*, and *Bowling For Columbine* and Morris' *Thin Blue Line* all contain features of the essay film.

The films of Alain Resnais, Agnes Varda, Francois Truffaut, and Jean-Luc Godard have essayistic elements, and, although they were contemporaries of Marker, and even collaborated with him, they all failed to meet the high standard Marker set for the essay film.

Except for Chris Marker, there have been no filmmakers who consistently use the essay film form in their work. I believe this is due to the difficulty of dealing with the cumbersome process of essay filmmaking. The essay filmmaker must be an excellent writer, not just an average one. Like Marker's writing, the writing must be almost poetic. The essay filmmaker's currency is intelligence, and the ability to connect with the spectator through the writing.

Another difficulty in constructing the essay film is with the awkwardness of the editing process. The essay film reverses traditional documentary editing. The soundtrack, with its spoken words, text, music, and other sounds is primary. The visual elements of the film are edited to the sound track. Traditional documentary film editing is rephrased by putting the words of the sound track ahead of the visuals (Rascaroli, 29).

The result is that the essay film handles montage in an unfamiliar way. Sergei Eisenstein wrote that “montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots. Each sequential element is perceived not next to the other, but on top of the other” (Eisenstein,44). The vertical positioning of these images, their duration, and subsequent collision, give rise to a meaning which is greater than the sum of the parts of the two vertically placed images, or so the theory goes. Only the collision of images is considered in this style of montage.

Essay films use montage, too, but in a very different way. Bazin coined the term “horizontal montage” (Kehr,43-44). There is a collision, but it is between the text and the images, which are horizontally, or laterally, oriented. The distinction is critical to the construction of the essay film.

As a practical matter, construction of the essay film is a rigorous affair. The essayist must be a good writer, willing to work through the strenuous editing process, and, in return for that, receive little reward other than the satisfaction that must surely come from being able to pull off so difficult a job. Like many documentarians, essayists work in cinematic backwaters, marginalized and economically disadvantaged. This probably accounts for the scarcity of film essayists and essay films.

Now we have established some criteria that describe the essay film form: It should be short. It must use words. The words must be well written. The words must represent the speakers attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem. The

words must have a strong, personal point view, and impart more than just information. The essay film does not have a dominant narrative organization. It is replaced by the enunciators thinking. Traditional documentary editing is reversed, and the editing is done from sound track to image. Montage is done horizontally, not vertically. The essay film can accommodate many different types of visual images. There are very few essay filmmakers. I will use these criteria to analyze the three films I believe are representative of the essay form.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF *LETTER FROM SIBERIA*

To further our attempts at understanding the essay film, I turn to the analysis of a film I consider to be the purest example of the film essayist's art: *Letter from Siberia* by Chris Marker. The film illustrates every criteria I have established for the essay film form.

Marker was a journalist, essayist, novelist, and poet who only later in his career turned to cinema as a means of self-expression. His willingness to incorporate multiple art forms in his filmmaking is characteristic of his work, and the essay film form.

*Letters from Siberia* was produced in 1957, four years after Stalin's death. The Soviet Union was anxious, in the post-Stalinist era, to be perceived in a better light. Marker and his small crew of French filmmakers were welcomed because the Soviets hoped the film would do exactly that.

The film rejects the documentary style of Soviet social realism in which all images, “like the wife of Stalin, had to be above suspicion-something very strange coming from the country of the dialectic” (Marker,43). Marker presents the film in the form of a personal letter, reminiscent of the epistolary style of literary essayists who had gone before him.

The film begins with a long tracking shot of the Siberian countryside. It is shot in the Siberian summer and is full of color and texture. This is unexpected, as the very word Siberia conjures up an image of vast frozen wastelands. A Russian chorus swells in the background and collides with the images, almost overpowering them. Then comes the epistolary voice-over “I’m writing you this letter from a distant land.” The first cut is to the Siberian telegraph workers and is accompanied by the following narration:

This might be autumn in Ermenonville, or New England, if it weren’t for these telegraph workers, booted like Mikhail Strogoff, going through the motions of shoemakers at the altitude of tightrope walkers. They convince you that you’re looking at Siberia, and it’s not just the local color: the boots, the fur caps, and the peppermint collars around their horses’ necks; it’s the realization, for example, that if one of these climbing Cossacks absent-mindedly reeled in his line he’d find himself holding a ball of wire 8000 kilometers long (*Letter from Siberia*, 4:55).

The text is poetic. It instantly connects us to a primitive country in the throes of coming of age in the 20th century. A series of sharp cuts follows, each announced by a bell, and then another epistolary voice-over worded slightly differently: “I’m writing you this letter from the edge of the world. You should know it”. As Bazin has written, “The

primordial element is the sonorous beauty and it is from there that the mind must leap to the image. The editing is done from “ear to eye” (Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p 41).

The sound track is completely non-diegetic, musical, and guided by the narrator’s voice. The enunciator’s voice is used “to breathe life into the pictures, and listen to their sounds” (Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p180).

In the most celebrated passage in the film, in which workers are repairing a road-way, three different narratives accompany the same images. Each sequence produces markedly different results. Sound and image collide horizontally to produce markedly different meanings. In Alter’s view,

Marker thus illustrates the manipulative and deceptive effects of sound tracks and their powerful ability to alter the meaning of an image. He calls into question the possibility of a true or pure image with a stable meaning in cinema, because the medium does not exist without a sound track (Alter,29).

The effect of placing three different narratives under the same images is to show that “at least in relation to certain realities, impartiality is an illusion” (Kehr,45).

The rest of the film consists of a series of “actualities” of Siberian life. These are interspersed between playful and amusing animations which serve to reinforce the “tacit parameters of the essay, in which the element of play constitutes a crucial rhetorical strategy, at once complex and disarming” (Alter, 32).

As Alter also states:

Just as the essay was for Montaigne primarily a form about writing, the essay film always has a self-reflexive aspect. *Letter from Siberia* tries to implement a new form of montage “from ear to eye”. It also mixes various styles, forms, and conventions and re-thinks the use of commentary and the role of fiction and imagination (Alter, 37).

*Letter from Siberia* is an essay film that tells the story of Marker’s travels to Siberia. In the process, it tells us a great deal about the country. It tells the story in an epistolary style, and uses all the conventions of the film essay. It is the benchmark by which essay films are judged.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF *MATING FOR LIFE*

This film illustrates that the essay film can accommodate subjects that are very personal. It uses the conventions of the essay film form: a strong, single, personal authorial voice, which represents the speaker’s attempt to work out a reasoned line of discourse. The narrative takes precedence over the visuals, which are edited to the sound track. The film is short.

It is a film that explores the question of why the filmmaker has not mated for life. It uses the metaphor of Sandhill cranes, who do mate for life, as a fictive strategy. It is both

a nature film, and a personal essay. It is unique because this combination of a nature film and an essay film is, to the best of my knowledge, untried.

The film begins with the narrator's voice stating: "I am a pilgrim, I'm not sure what I'm looking for, I can't help wondering if I missed a turn somewhere, I'm not really a birder, It's just these facts about cranes." Between these questions, the narrator tells me that she has never married, that this state is common today, that it is socially acceptable, that she is in a certain place, and that these birds mean something to her.

The narrator's voice is agreeable. The writing sparkles. I'm engaged. I know, or rather feel, that I am about to watch an essay film, and maybe even a nature film. This kind of engagement between spectator and filmmaker is the essence of the essay film.

The film uses digressions, which is typical of the essay film. There are digressions about cranes, and we learn a great deal about their habits. There are digressions the filmmaker calls "Blind Lessons." These represent the mental noodling, the thinking, that goes on while the expositor sits alone in a concealed place, a blind, watching the cranes. These digressions give us time to breathe between considering other weightier issues, and tell us a great deal about the filmmaker's state of mind. The digressions use animations, archival footage, music and non-diegetic sounds to make their point.

There are four moments in the film that suggest how this film will play out for the viewer. The first such moment is the shot of the filmmaker as a child, sitting on a tricycle. The enunciator says, "I prefer to think of myself on the cutting edge." She is unmated by



choice, a socially acceptable thing. “I wonder what I will leave behind without a family,” says the narrator. The child looks back at the camera, and something in her eyes tells me that she already knows the answers to the narrators questions. I have seen this look before on the now-adult face of the filmmaker. It says, “I know something, and I know you don’t know what I know.” The filmmaker is my professor and introduced me to the essay film. So personal acquaintance with the filmmaker can be problematic, but in a good way. Then comes that instant between hearing the words and seeing the child’s knowing eyes. The connection between the two provides meaning. This is ear-to-eye horizontal montage, and perfectly essayistic filmmaking.

Another important moment takes place in “Blind Lesson One” when the filmmaker observes that “much of what I have accomplished in life is losing its meaning.” This is a common experience.

At some point in our lives, most of us come to a place where we pause and take stock of where we have been and what we have done. We ask ourselves if it all matters, if we matter. Because of the ubiquitousness of this experience, it lets the film appeal to a large number of embodied spectators.

“Blind Lesson One” concludes on a hopeful note as the narrator says, “I am convinced that this is the beginning of a metamorphosis.” The visuals that accompany this statement are strongly similar to Marker’s panning shots of aspen trees in *Letter From Siberia*. In *Mating For Life*, the visuals show trees metamorphosing through three sea-

sons. It is another example of the ear-to-eye horizontal montage characteristic of the essay film.

Suddenly, we are in a car driving down a highway, a fictive choice which is used several times in the film. It tells us that the enunciator is moving on, and that we are about to go on yet another trip.

In my opinion, the most important scene in the film is the filmmaker's discourse about her parents. They are persons who have mated for life. I expected to hear about their relationship. Curiously, the narrative shifts here to describe not that relationship, but the relationship between father and daughter. "I have many of his things, still," the narrator says. The accompanying visuals show the filmmaker touching the objects he has left behind, perhaps hoping that this will provide meaning. She hopes these objects will give answers to her questions. Some of the objects are carvings of cranes. There is great meaning in this. For me, it ties together the many threads of the story. The filmmaker says, "These carvings did not exist until he created them." The implication is that the filmmaker did not exist either, until this mated pair created her.

The beach scene which follows is poignant and revealing. The shot is obviously filmed by the father, from a distance, and through a window. It frames the filmmaker and her sister playing in the surf of a beach. They are on vacation. The sisters look to be ten or twelve years old. Held in the lower right hand corner of the frame, is the filmmaker's mother, the cameraman's wife. She sits on a beach towel watching the girls play in the

surf. The camera lets her out of the frame only briefly. As tender as this composition is, it is done from a distance, and the filmmaker asks her father, “Why aren’t you on the beach with us? Why isolate yourself? What was your reluctance about?” She might be asking these questions of herself, as well: Why am I not playing in the surf of mating for life? Why isolate myself? What is my reluctance about?

The filmmaker goes on to say of her father: “You are part of my pilgrimage,” and “I am trying to say goodbye to you after all these years.” I understand why he is part of the filmmaker’s pilgrimage, but why does she feel the need to say goodbye to a father who is still so important and powerful in her life? Is this the root cause of why she holds people at a distance, and has not mated for life? At the very least, why not do as he did when he framed his wife and daughters so tenderly through his camera lens? Even though he is physically distant, it is obvious from the framing that he cares deeply about them. Saying goodbye to that seems unnecessary.

The final important scene in the film takes place at what the filmmaker calls “places we go to find meaning.” These places have a special meaning to her. She says they are places people go “to say goodbye,” or to say “I was here, I felt deeply.” We feel “the impulse to leave a mark” on these places. The visuals which accompany this remark are shots of radar installations, microwave dishes, and turning blades of giant wind turbines. The narrative suggests that even in these sacred places, the marks we impulsively leave are messy, ugly, and sometimes just plain sacrilegious. This is the essayist’s way of

showing that the visuals have no stable meaning by themselves. They only acquire meaning when they collide with the words.

Nowhere in the film does the enunciator address us with sound that is synched to a particular shot of her. The filmmaker is occasionally on camera, but only rarely looks at the camera lens. Her appearance and actions in front of the camera give us some information about her, but we know her best through her words. Her words connect us to the visual images. There is that fleeting moment between what our ears hear and what our eyes see that connects the two, and provides meaning in the essay film.

While there are numerous filmmakers, since Marker, who have essayistic tendencies, or who dabble in essayistic throat clearing, I could find no film that I considered a pure essay, or that came close to fulfilling the criteria we have formulated for such a film, except for *Mating For Life*. The film comes onto the landscape after a very long absence of film essayists. That makes this film an important one.

## 5. ANALYSIS OF GRIZZLY MAN

If *Letter from Siberia* is an epistolary travelogue essay, and *Mating For Life* is a personal essay, then *Grizzly Man* is a portrait essay.

This film illustrates the wide range of different subjects the essay film can embrace.

While the film is not a pure essay, it does lean in that direction. Herzog's narrative is the film's focus. The film incorporates found footage to construct the portrait of Timothy Treadwell. Herzog's narrative represents his attempt to work out some reasoned line of thought as he constructs the portrait of a man. The narrative is strong, and personal. It gives us more than just facts.

*Grizzly Man* is a portrait of a man obsessed by bears. Herzog is no stranger to dealing with obsessed, unstable people. The type appears in some of his other films such as *Fitzcarraldo*, and *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. The visuals are drawn mostly from the over 100 hours of footage shot by Timothy Treadwell, who is the main character in the film. Other visuals come in the form of interviews. The narration and writing is by Herzog.

Treadwell is a deeply flawed, troubled person. He has been addicted to drugs and alcohol, he has failed at an athletic career and an acting career, at relationships, and at life. He says that he has tried everything to cure his addiction. To get away from it, and the failures it has produced, he needs to re-invent himself. He does this by transforming himself into a self-styled expert on bears, and the self-appointed protector of the Alaskan

Brown Bears that live on the Katmai Peninsula. He spent thirteen summers living in the Alaskan Wilderness with the bears. In his final five summers he brought a videocamera along. Tragically, in the last summer, the bears ate him. More tragically, they ate his girlfriend.

Herzog, through Treadwell's footage, constructs a portrait.

The bears have saved Treadwell from his addiction and self-destructive behaviors because they live in the wilderness. Bears live in a place where access to alcohol and drugs is limited to what you can carry in, and where contact with other humans and civilization is minimized. These are the things Treadwell needs to avoid, in order to turn himself around. His gratitude towards the bears for saving him from himself is repaid by assuming the role of their savior. His personal culpability in the events that follow is not at issue. His subsequent behaviors, which end tragically, reflect only his underlying, untreated mental illness. Treadwell is bipolar. Sometimes he is manic, and, at other times he is depressed. He displays features of other kinds of mental illness which are revealed in his footage. He is a sociopath. This makes him appear narcissistic, and accounts for the narrow perspective of his world view. When the disease of addiction is added to this volatile mix, the resultant behaviors are as predictable as they are explosive. Tragedy is inevitable. Throughout the film, I get the sense that it will end with a senseless tragedy.

Herzog recognizes this, and he does not judge Treadwell. He even accepts Treadwell as a fellow filmmaker. Herzog becomes a witness to a man's extended suicide.

Herzog has flirted with the essayistic film form in other works. The most notable of these is *Fata Morgana*. He is not an essayist in the same style as Chris Marker, yet there are portions of *Grizzly Man* that are clearly essayistic. The film fits the criteria I have established for the essay film form. It is relatively short. It contains beautifully written and artfully intoned spoken words. The words are at the heart of the film, those that Herzog himself speaks, and the ones spoken by those he interviews. The narrative underlies some spectacular wildlife footage, but the visuals, compelling as they are, take second place and are edited to the sound track by horizontal montage.

The narrative does an excellent job of establishing the intimacy between the enunciator and spectator that is required of the essay film. Herzog's well-written narrative, his choice to be non-judgmental, and his agreeable, low-key delivery of the narrative insure it.

*Grizzly Man* has more of a traditional narrative structure to it because the story is presented in chronological order. I do not see this as something that would disqualify it from contention as essayistic. Even the purest of essay films give us the notion that, however often they may jump from place to place, there is always a sense of some underlying organization that will eventually take us somewhere.

Herzog presents Treadwell through his footage, and by interviewing others who knew him. In the scene called *Bear 141*, Herzog's narration reveals conclusions:

And what haunts me is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed I discovered no kinship, no understanding,

no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears, and this blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell this bear was a friend, a savior (Grizzly Man, 62:00).

Here is where Herzog makes it clear that it is all personal. Herzog sees a thoughtless, instinctive animal; Treadwell sees a furry Jesus. Herzog essentially says it's all personal and, thus, life is an essay film (Aig, email 2015).



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

I hope that this paper, with its historical perspective, its examination of the scholarly works written on the subject, and its commentary on *Letters from Siberia*, *Mating For Life*, and *Grizzly Man* has been useful in promoting a better understanding of the essay film. Mostly, I hope that readers will attempt their own essay films.

I think that documentary filmmaking is in need of a new way of expression. Documentary realism seems to be giving way to other forms of filmmaking which value a more personal, intimate, reflective way of expression. We do not need any more genres. I no longer wish to watch reality TV, historical revisionist films, docudramas, or films that provide only facts and information, complete with a voice-of-God narration. Such films are fundamentally journalistic, not essayistic. I would prefer to not watch any more performative films where the filmmaker spends more time on camera than a Hollywood box-office star does on a fiction film.

The essay film has promise for being able to rejuvenate the stale genres which, for me, characterize current documentary filmmaking. Give me a likable, intelligent enunciator. Let me engage with the filmmaker's thoughts and travel along with them to a conclusion, or, as in the case of many essayists, no conclusion at all. Let me be stirred by the mastery of the montage, and be provoked to thought, entertained, and enlightened by the process. Give me an essay film any day of the week.

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