Origins of the Twenty-First Century
The Impact of Digital Technology on the Construction of the Cinematic Essay

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of technology on the practice and theorization of the cinematic essay, with a particular emphasis on the ways in which digital tools have shaped the form in the early twenty-first century. I first argue that the cinematic essay has been associated with technological evolution throughout its history, and then discuss recent examples of the form which utilize aesthetic strategies, editing techniques, and modes of spectatorial address that are rooted in the capabilities of digital technologies. I conceptualize the cinematic essay as a self-reflexive mode of nonfiction cinema that foregrounds the filmmaking apparatus and the act of its own making. In doing so, the cinematic essay launches an inquiry into the ontological nature of the cinematic image, the tools which construct it, and the wider artistic landscape in which it is embedded. To illustrate how digitization has opened new opportunities for essayistic expression, this paper draws parallels between the current use of digital moviemaking tools and earlier periods in which new technologies were utilized to reimagine essayistic craft.

1. Conceptualizing the Cinematic Essay

The use of the term "essay" in relation to filmmaking practice is not a new phenomenon. The act of comparing acts of filmmaking to acts of essaying dates back to the theoretical writings of the Soviet montage filmmakers of the 1920s, and scholars such as Jacques Rivette, André Bazin, and Noël Burch employed the term to conceptualize innovative feats of non-fiction filmmaking within the context of the post-war European avant-garde. However, critical research into the cinematic essay as a distinct mode of filmmaking has gained substantial currency over the past two decades, and it has only recently evolved into a substantial branch of film studies in its own right. In her seminal study of the mode, Laura Rascaroli writes that "less than a decade ago, the expression 'essay film' was encountered only sporadically; today, the term has been widely integrated into film criticism and is increasingly adopted by filmmakers and artists worldwide to characterize their work" (1). Since the onset of the new millennium, the concept of the "cinematic essay" (otherwise referred to as the "essay film" or the "video essay"), has increasingly garnered attention within journalistic and scholarly discourse, as well as being employed as a descriptor mobilized by non-fiction filmmakers to describe their own work.

Despite the increase in scholarly attention dedicated to advancing our understanding of the mode, the question of what constitutes a cinematic essay remains open, and scholars of the form have expressed differing perspectives on what should be considered a cinematic essay and what should not. A useful description of the cinematic essay which takes this resistance to taxonomic classification into consideration is offered by Nora Alter in her study of the work of Harun Farocki, *The*

Political Imperceptible in the Essay Film. Alter notes that the cinematic essay is "[n]ot a genre, as it strives to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint. Like 'heresy' in the Adornean literary essay, the cinematic essay disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, it is self-reflective and self-reflexive" (68). Alter argues that, because the cinematic essay is, by nature, resistant to strict definition, it cannot be reduced to a homogeneous set of conventions such as voice-over narration, intertitles, dramatic re-enactments, etc. What primarily defines the cinematic essay, according to Alter, is that it is acts as an attempt to "expand [...] the realm of thought within an audio-visual mass medium" (169).

In a similar vein, David Montero argues that "the association between film and essay has tended towards the exploration of the former's ability to generate thought" (2). As he continues, the documentary is "anchored in the idea of representing reality" while the essay is concerned with establishing a "subjective/critical discourse" (2). Montero emphasises that, in articulating this discourse, the cinematic essay also reflexively addresses its own construction, becoming an investigation into the mechanisms of audio-visual art itself. He refers to this process as "thinking in and about images" (1). The key difference between the classical documentary and the cinematic essay, then, is that the former tends to approach the image as a straightforward record of truth, while the latter problematizes the relationship between text and referent—in the process, taking into consideration how the filmmaker interacts with the subject.

Following Alter and Montero, I argue that, in order to achieve a thorough comprehension of the essay as a cinematic form, it is necessary to move away from strict schemes of classification and towards a more flexible understanding of the governing philosophy of the cinematic essay and how this philosophy informs its formal construction.

Thus, this paper does not treat the cinematic essay as a stable genre with a fixed checklist of formal criteria which must be adhered to (i.e. intertitles, voice-over narration, and the interplay of fictional and non-fictional elements); it instead describes the cinematic essay as a fluid mode of filmmaking that is driven by an ambition to articulate theory through sound and image. I posit that there are four elements that have been integral to essayistic discourse in film as it has been practiced throughout the history of the mode: the cinematic essay offers a sustained meditation on a subject (or subjects) through the formal language of cinema, without a reliance on the spoken or written word; it is self-reflexive, addressing issues regarding the nature of cinema and its own textual strategies; it exists between the poles of avant-garde and documentary cinema, and therefore may incorporate a wider range of expressive means than would be associated with the classical documentary mode; and, lastly, it establishes a structure of communicative exchange, wherein the viewer is communicated to through direct address.

2. Placing Technology at the Forefront of My Study of the Cinematic Essay

Throughout its history, the cinematic essay has been conceptualized by scholars as a mode which is rooted in radical formal experimentation and has, therefore, often

been positioned at the forefront of modernity. Before delving into the ways in which digital filmmaking tools have shaped the practice of essaying in the contemporary cinematic landscape, this paper will first delve briefly into the influence of 16mm and video technology on the mode at various points in its historical development.

Alexandre Astruc's seminal article "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo" makes a connection between technological innovation and the formation of a formally radical, intellectual cinema, and prefigures the blossoming of the European essay film in the decades which followed. Writing on the cusp of the widespread proliferation of 16mm cameras and editing equipment, Astruc claimed that this moment marked a point of technological change which would fundamentally alter the way that directors would be able to construct cinematic texts, and therefore usher in a new era of personal filmmaking. He outlines three qualities of the 16mm camera that would allow for this to happen. Firstly, it was flexible and lightweight, thereby allowing for spontaneous and fluid shooting situations in which the filmmaker could shoot intuitively and respond to their immediate environment without needing to operate cumbersome equipment. Secondly, it was relatively easy to utilize, thereby allowing for a single individual to produce high quality images without the need for assistance from a large technical crew, and without the need for extensive technical training. Thirdly, it was cost-effective, thereby creating a situation where amateur and counter-cultural filmmakers were more effortlessly able to produce streams of images and sounds away from the intervention of producers and studios.

Indeed, 16mm film equipment was central to the advancement of the essay as a cinematic mode throughout Europe in the 1950s and 60s. In particular, the critics and filmmakers of the French New Wave demonstrated a fascination with both the potential of the cinematic essay as a form of counter-cultural, non-systematic nonfiction filmmaking and 16mm technology and radical essayistic strategies. A prominent example of this tendency is Chris Marker's *Classe De Lutte* (1969), which details strike action organized by workers at the Yema Watch Factory in Besançon. To helm the production, Marker placed 16mm cameras into the hands of the workers so that they might record their own experiences of the strike. Marker and his crew taught the strikers the basic principles of operating the cameras and gave them lectures on some editing theory proposed by the Soviet montage artists, illustrated by clips from Eisenstein's films. In an interview conducted at a later point in his career, Marker stresses that his ambition in making the film was to realize the "possibility of organizing film production along cooperative and non-hierarchical lines, and of using film as a tool within political struggles rather than as simply a medium of entertainment" ("Medevkin and the Invention of Television"). He goes on to stress that such a project could not have been undertaken without the specific capabilities of 16mm film: "The means of the time was 16mm silent," he explains, "which meant three-minute camera rolls, a laboratory, an editing table, some way of adding sound— everything that you have now right inside a little case that fits in your hand". The portability and flexibility of this equipment allowed for the unidirectional power relationship between filmmaker and subject to break down and for a more reciprocal relationship to be established. More than being a documentary solely about the direct action, then, *Classe De Lutte* is about the role of images in the class struggle, and, in

particular, how the 16mm camera may be mobilized as a socio-political tool to enable subjects who are typically marginalized from mainstream methods of image production to materially shape their own strategies of representation.

Just as the capabilities of 16mm technology proved vital to the blossoming of the cinematic essay over the course of the late 1950s and 1960s, video technology gained increasing currency within essayistic circles over the late 1970s and 1980s. For many cinematic essayists, video offered similar advantages to the 16mm camera, but in a more refined form. As the video camera required the use of magnetic tape rather than bulky film stock, it became easier for filmmakers to record long takes without the need to change reels and enabled even more spontaneous and flexible shooting methods. In addition, the nature of video imaging as rooted in electronic signal rather than the physical inscription process of photochemical film, facilitated new methods for applying image manipulation techniques in post-production through the video mixer, and the release of a huge number of cinematic texts in the form of VHS tapes meant that the material of cinema history was made widely available, in electronic form, for the first time.

Techniques such as slowing down and accelerating footage, abstracting the image with video noise, multiplying the number of images playing on the screen concurrently and manipulating "found" audio-visual materials through the video mixer demonstrate new methods of essaying electronically. The reflexive interrogation of the artistic and socio-political potential of video is the central ambition of the cinematic essays produced by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, under the

banner of Sonimage. With Sonimage, Godard and Miéville sought to establish their own independent studio and laboratory, in which all tools of production were owned and operated by themselves. The process of acquiring the necessary material began in 1973, and by 1975, the Sonimage group had at its disposal three televisions, twelve monitors, six video cameras, and two telecine machines (machines capable of transforming still photographs to videotape). The sound and image recording technologies were relatively easy and cost-effective to acquire, and once they had a storehouse full of them, Godard and Miéville were able to produce features with small crews and near autonomy. Rather than needing a separate location for scripting, production, editing, and projection, video enabled the Sonimage group to conduct all stages of the filmmaking process at a single site, with a minimal crew. By removing themselves from the centre of cultural production in France, and establishing a studio that was essentially self-sufficient, Godard and Miéville sought to revitalize their filmmaking craft. The ideology of Sonimage as a cinematic project is thematized in their cinematic essay *Numéro deux*. In this feature, the foregrounding of the technological apparatus and the reflexive emphasis on the site of postproduction serves an investigation into the cultural role of video as an artistic tool, and how it may challenge the orthodoxy of mainstream filmmaking, alter editing processes, and give rise to new forms of creative expression. Its engagement with imperfect aesthetics destabilizes the traditional hierarchy between professional and amateur filmmaking, and its focus on the domestic as a site of cinematic production demonstrates a desire to outline a mode of counter-cultural production that may be facilitated through video equipment.

3. The Cinematic Essay and the Digital Turn

There are several elements tied to the developed of the cinematic essay during the 16mm and video eras that have been intensified and reimagined by filmmakers through the technological capabilities of digital technology: these include the establishment of perceptually active viewing situations which interpolate the viewer in a shared space of dialogical exchange; the utilization of cost-effective, lightweight filmmaking tools; and the capacity to materially repurpose existing sounds and images and subject them to complex processes of audio-visual investigation.

To understand the essayistic potential of digital technology, it is first vital to delve into its essential ontological difference from its analogue predecessor. While video signals code for visual media as a flux of analogue information to be transmitted on an electronic screen, digitized images rely on digital sensors transforming data that is stored as calculable binary digits. When digitized, the image breaks away from its connection to magnetic tape and electrical recording and exists entirely as a grid of mathematical abstractions. Because the digital image is no longer continuous with the durational or light properties exhibited in a particular pro-filmic time and place, it is open to be manipulated by a potentially infinite degree of computerized transformations. Analogue editing is a process of manually orchestrating the mechanisms of analogical transcription, which lend themselves to discrete spatial wholes, whereas digital editing involves the manipulation of numerical code within the immaterial ether of a computerized hard drive. Rodowick proposes that, because the causality of analogue recording is severed, the digital image inherently exists as "montage," in the sense that it no longer takes the form of a "block of duration," but

as a series of "discrete and definable minimal units (pixels) open to transformations of value and syntactic recombination" (166). As such, "capture, synthesis and compositing" as the "three principal creative operations of digital cinema." Rodowick continues, "as film disappears into an aesthetic universe constructed from digital intermediates and images combining computer synthesis and capture," the image becomes "fragmented into a discrete mosaic of picture elements, which are then read off as distinct mathematical values" (65). In digital filmmaking practices, the image is treated as an assemblage of modular elements rather than a whole and discrete visual object, capable of being manipulated through the application of computerized filters.

As the digital image (whether initially shot/composed with digital technology or originally shot on another format and digitized later) circulates within cyberspace as blocks of binary code, existing media images may be easily downloaded, manipulated with computerized post-production tools, and re-circulated, for potential further rearrangement by other subjects. As Victor Burgin argues, the "arrival of digital video editing on 'entry level' personal computers exponentially expanded the range of possibilities for dismantling and reconfiguring the once inviolable objects offered by narrative cinema" (53). When complex computer-based equipment is becoming increasingly cheaper, easy to use, and readily accessible, and the archive of cinematic history is within the grasp of everyday consumers, an increase in citizens taking hold of material citations and interacting with them through editing necessarily follows

This ability to manipulate, recombine and reinterpret existing film footage with digital editing systems in a myriad of sophisticated ways has opened up new avenues for

creative expression within the practice of the cinematic essay. Steven Soderbergh's *Psychos* (2014), which was released for free on the filmmaker's personal website, intercuts images from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) with images from Gus Van Sant's remake of the same title (1998) into a single montage. Sometimes a full sequence from one film plays after a full sequence of the remakes, and sometimes corresponding images, shot forty years apart, are super-imposed atop of each other; to further confuse our ontological certainty, certain scenes from the remake have been de-colourized, so that its colour palette matches the original's monochrome. This process of "sampling," manipulating and re-circulating existing cinematic texts through the tools of digital media is becoming increasingly commonplace, challenging our notion of what constitutes a "complete" and "incomplete" text, as cinematic texts exist in the form of binary units, open to perpetual reworking. Soderbergh's manipulation and synthesis of two cinematic texts through the tools of digital media sheds light on the possibility for new technology to materially seize existing footage, convert it into binary code, and subject it to a critical reframing; in this case, challenging our notion of authorship, and pointing to subtle contrasts and echoes between a classical film and its remake. The jarring use of digital manipulation effects draws the viewer's attention to the constructed nature of the project, never allowing us to become comfortably immersed in the events being depicted but to be continuously aware of the cinematic strategies used by Hitchcock and Van Sant and how these strategies substantially alter the way that we interpret key moments of action and our perception of the characters.

Soderbergh's text, in placing images from both films together, side-by-side, parallels the perceptually charged viewing situation of the everyday viewer in contemporary digital culture. The techniques he employs are easy to achieve with any personal computer, and by enacting his digital manipulations of the chosen texts within full view, so that the spectator can clearly see the alterations being applied as the clips play out, places us in the editor's chair alongside him. In doing so, Soderbergh points to the way that commonplace digital technologies may enable any spectator to think in an essayistic manner.

Lev Manovich describes the digital interface as a fusion of the impulses of the classical cinematic screen and computing technology, marking a substantial step forward from the move towards interactivity represented by the VCR player. As Manovich argues, by inviting the spectator into a more active relationship with screen content, the digital screen is a medium which is fully two-way in its communicational abilities, granting an unprecedented degree of agency to the user, who is able to give input/output instantaneously and exert unprecedented levels of power over the moving image (80–99). Citizens increasingly gather information by actively synthesizing data through the digital screen, as opposed to consuming information through pre-organized narratives through one-sided technologies of communication.

The aesthetic design of many contemporary cinematic essays reflects the way that our relationship to audiovisual media has been shaped by the navigation of computers and online interactive databases. Exemplary of this tendency is Marker's *Immemory* (1995), a CD-ROM which enables the viewer to physically navigate the

collection of "found" and newly shot photographs, moving images and texts assembled by Marker. The electronic interface of *Immemory* facilitates conversation between the author and the user by setting up a variety of materials that the viewer must search through to make connections and forge out an individual essayistic journey on their own terms. When the viewer enters the CD-ROM of *Immemory*, they are first confronted with a title screen, with the options "Enter the Memory," "Commands," "Index" and "Quit." The "Commands" section provides the viewer with a detailed list of instructions on how to navigate Marker's text with the cursor. The project is based on a fairly simple design, with the viewer being able to skip forward to the next screen by clicking the arrow on the right of each page, skip back by clicking the arrow on the left, return to the main menu by pressing the arrow at the top of the screen, and return to the beginning of each "zone" by pressing an arrow at the bottom of the screen. *Immemory* is divided into seven different topographical "zones," titled "Cinema," "Travel," "Museum," "Memory," "Poetry," "War," and "Photography," each of which may be accessed through the CD-ROM's main menu.

Each "zone" is comprised of audio-visual material organized roughly according to a shared theme. These sections can mostly be explored by pressing the arrow on the right of each screen, thus providing some semblance of forward drive, but embedded within each screen are active "zones" which the viewer may click on to access further materials. Marker refers to these elements as "bifurcations," as they split the screen into multiple pathways that the viewer may embark upon, allowing their mind to wander, removed, as they are, from the central pathway which runs through each zone. Sometimes these bifurcations will lead the viewer to another forking pathway,

sometimes they will direct the viewer back to the page they were previously on, sometimes they will direct the viewer back to the main menu. As the viewer is able to navigate, in whatever they choose, between different artworks, fragments of autobiographical detail, and cultures, tenuous links and connections are bound to emerge which are not determined by the pre-programmed structure of the CD-ROM. Marker's interactive menus allow the viewer to search between multiple paths of bifurcation, enabling them to juxtapose archival materials in unique ways and subject pre-existing audio-visual fragments to new associations and connotations every time the spectator interacts with the text. As such, Marker invites the viewer to project different interpretations and readings of archival images according to the order in which they experience his assemblage of materials.

As this paper has illustrated, the digitally mediated cinematic essay offers a particularly fruitful prism through which these issues may be explored. This is because the essayistic mode, constantly evolving, constantly embracing new media and new strategies of image-making, simultaneously reflects on its own construction and surveys the impact of its chosen technology to the wider landscape of moving image culture.

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