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

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Abstract

Review of Nora Alter. *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction*. Columbia UP, 2018. xii + 394 pp.

Keywords

film studies, essay film

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The last ten years have seen a rise of scholarly interest in the essay film. In particular, the publication of a number of key books on the genre, which have extensively theorized and historicized the essay film, have established essay film studies as an exciting line of inquiry in the broader field of film and media studies. Timothy Corrigan's monograph *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (2011), Elizabeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades's edited volume *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia* (2016), Laura Rascaroli's monograph *How the Essay Film Thinks* (2017), and Nora Alter and Timothy Corrigan's collection *Essays on the Essay Film* (2017), among other studies, have collectively shaped and advanced scholarly discourse about the essay film. Nora Alter's *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* is a most welcome addition to this scholarship.

The essay film, as Alter notes, has come to be defined as a genre "that moves freely from fiction to nonfiction, a neutralizing zone where fiction is unfictionalized" (5). Its playful relation to documentary and narrative film has, in fact, been a reason why the genre had, for a long time, not been discussed in its own terms. However, as Alter notes, the essay film "is part documentary and part invention, made as much for television or cinema viewing as for gallery or museum exhibition" (5). With this in mind, Alter's book surveys the history of the genre, which spans the earliest moments of cinema history to digital filmmaking today. The book is organized chronologically. It traces the technological innovations and intellectual circuits that inform and shape the genre's contours over time. As Alter notes, the genre has recently experienced an unprecedented wider appeal among artists and viewers alike—since filmmaking has become more accessible and digital and online exhibition opportunities more available. Notwithstanding this expanding popularity of the genre in recent times, it is important to trace its earlier history, which gives insight into how the questions the essay film pursued changed over time and what remained in place. This is the task Alter sets for the book at hand.

One key feature of *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* is its extensive engagement with a rich international archive of writing about the essay form by philosophers, cultural critics, and filmmakers. As Alter notes, writing about the essay form can be traced back to the sixteenth-century reflections of Michel de Montaigne, who considered it an integral form through which to negotiate the realm between imagination and reality. For the essay film, these and other reflections on the capacity of the essay as form to mediate between fiction and nonfiction have been central. However, as Alter successfully demonstrates, German language writing on the essay has been particularly influential for the genre's development over time: "Many essay films produced in disparate national context and languages

over the past half-century incorporate, either by direct citation or visual reference, the words, theories, and critical methods of Adorno, Benjamin, Brecht, Lukàcs, and Kracauer” (9). For Alter, the interest among essay filmmakers in the theoretical writings by these writers grew out of a resurgence of broader scholarly and intellectual attention their texts received incrementally since the 1970s. That is, the rise of the essay film in the last decades is deeply entwined with intellectual networks sustaining the proliferation of scholarship on and engagement with these writers’ works.

Throughout the book, Alter problematizes and expands what scholars have termed nonfiction filmmaking. Since for Alter the essay film is a distinct form that oscillates between fiction and nonfiction, it stands at odds with previous definitions used to categorize work that does not fall neatly within one or another. The book is thus a rewriting of film history in that its early chapter repositions as essay film early works such as Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and Bertolt Brecht’s *Kuhle Wampe* (1931), for example. At the same time, the book engages with the work of artist theorists such as Hans Richter, whose 1941 essay “The Film Essay” helped theorize the genre. Richter’s subsequent works, such as *Dreams that Money Can Buy* (1947), had for a time been seen as part of an experimental filmmaking tradition, scholarship on which did not attend to the hybrid nature of the film, one which bridges art cinema, fiction, and nonfiction forms. Alter’s chapter on the essay film “as the fourth estate” is particularly effective in showing how the genre’s fluid relationship to fiction and nonfiction came to be a major mode of critique about current events in the period roughly spanning from 1960 to 1990. In this chapter, Alter notes that the essay film’s successful relationship to ambiguity—the form of the essay permits (even cherishes) ambiguity as it permits the artist to explore a number of perspectives at once without ever having to settle on one—has been a central means by which essay filmmakers came to criticize the “ineffective banality of news reporting and the inadequacy of the documentary genre *tout court*” (193). From here, the subsequent chapters of the book focus on the essay film’s longstanding relationship to global diaspora cultural critique and on the essay film’s digital afterlives, respectively. Both offer rich analyses and a strong overview of global impulses central to the understanding of the international development of the genre.

The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction is an exceptional study. Its lucid engagement with intellectual history and analysis of a variety of factors that helped shape, advance, and define essay filmmaking globally makes it an invaluable study for anyone working on the genre. Moreover, the book is of particular interest to students and scholars who work on the distinction between fiction and nonfiction filmmaking.

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