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Angelica Fenner

University of Toronto, angelica.fenner@utoronto.ca

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Abstract

Review of Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan. *Essays on the Essay Film*. Columbia UP, 2017. 371 pp.

Keywords

Essay Film, Critical Theory, Genre, Media Theory, Experimental Film and Video

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If Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne is often regarded as progenitor of an alchemical blend of peripatetics, poetics and polemics now associated with the literary essay, its proliferation in ensuing centuries speaks to its rich rhetorical potential, such that by the late nineteenth century it also surfaced in visual media, from early actualities, to photography, installation, video, and film, with the latter traversing documentary, experimental, and autobiographical modes. The past decade has witnessed renewed scholarly engagement with the essay film, especially among those reassessing the disparate historical contexts that have repeatedly provoked its formal and aesthetic repurposing. This most recent volume, spearheaded by two scholars with an established record of engagement with the issues at stake, further evinces the seeming inexhaustibility of the mode and its global reach in visual cultures of the twenty-first century.

If the essayistic can be characterized by peripatetic navigation between nonfiction and fiction—a dichotomy often parsed as distinguishing between observation and inspiration, scientific study and artistic experiment, and the empirical and the experiential—these qualities also inform the organization and content of Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan’s volume, which bridges both theory and practice through inclusion of fully a century of writings by theorists, scholars, and film practitioners alike.

Following the editors’ masterful synthesis of the genre’s history, the collection is subdivided into four parts. Part 1 includes five foundational texts by literary theorists and scholars of the earlier twentieth-century, beginning with George Lukacs’s narratological emphasis on the tentative, searching quality of the genre; indeed, the modesty evoked in the original French term *essai*, which translates as ‘attempt,’ seems to downplay through self-deprecation or even irony the gravity of life itself as the object of inquiry. Lukacs regards the mode as originating in and focusing on the author’s local, personal experiences. with the aim of drawing provisional conclusions of a philosophical nature about life more generally. Also included are a literary extract from Robert Musil’s *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*), and a first translation of Max Bense’s “On the Essay and its Prose,” whose title acquires a certain inadvertent reflexive irony, although it remains unclear whether the wooden quality of the writing is attributable to Bense, or is the result of a too literal fealty to German syntax in the translation. The extract from Theodor Adorno’s writing on the essay is, of course, a classic, and Aldous Huxley’s preface to his own essays does not mince words in summing the essay genre as “a device for saying almost everything about almost anything” (83).

Part 2 shifts to early and formative theorists of the film essay, beginning with a long-awaited first translation of a Hans Richter text, where he frames the art form as “able to reach deep into the mindscape of our time” (92) and “visualize thought on screen” (91). This leads chronologically to two key writings by, respectively, Alexandre Astruc (“The Future of Cinema”) and André Bazin (“Bazin on Marker”) that remind us that the French New Wave and postwar modernism more generally pose a key epoch for the advancement of the essay film, as directors drew inspiration from literary forms such as the *polar* (French crime thriller) and the essay, leading Bazin to proclaim, “the cinema that is being born will be much closer to a book than a performance its language will be that of the essay, poetic, dramatic, and dialectical all at once” (95).

Part 3 shifts from pre- and postwar theorists to scroll through a quarter of a century of film scholarly theorization of the mode, beginning with Phillip Lopate’s key article, “In Search of the Centaur” and closing with Thomas Elsaesser’s fascinating account of the essay form’s journey from a radical mode of oppositional critique to its cooptation under neoliberalism as flexible commodity form. His argument builds on an Hito Steyerl essay, also reprinted in this volume, in which she reasons that today’s film essays display a versatility analogous to that of capital and labor alike, traversing multiple media platforms, exhibition spaces, and distribution outlets while offering global spectators a variety of culturally adaptive points of entry into the material and disparate ideological positions from which to regard, i.e. ‘consume’ the material on offer. Elsaesser brings an intermedial dimension to this discussion, pointing forth how a film mode once adapted from the literary realm is now also inspiring new modes of literary production. This recursivity is aptly captured in W.G. Sebald’s books, whose meandering narratives—like those of Chris Marker’s films—encompass travelogue, memoir, and treatise, without maintaining full fealty to any of them. They furthermore place image and sound into productive tension—exemplified when Sebald’s characters are made to ‘listen’ to others in textual narratives interleaved with hand drawings that render the reader a viewer; this creates complex relays between text and image, speech and vision that are also characteristic of so many essay films. Indeed, Sebald’s literary texts have inspired further innovations in the essay film, as exemplified in Grant Gee’s *Patience (After Sebald)*, which pays homage to Sebald’s impact on writers and artists alike by translating his literary working method back into film.

Part 4 closes with the experiential perspectives of contemporary filmmakers elaborating self-reflexively, and, at least in Ross McElwee’s contribution, with wry humor the practical and ideological challenges and contradictions encountered when working within this mode. The inclusion of second-generation diasporic artists/theorists Isaac Julien, Hito Steyerl, and Rea Tajiri moreover facilitates an understanding that is geopolitically differentiated

with regard to the disparate historical contexts that have, as a totality, shaped the essay film's philosophical, aesthetic, formal, and political workings. While most contributions to this volume have been previously published, there is considerable merit to their curation within these book covers. Not only does it spare the specialist the retrieval of a motley assemblage of source texts, but through its chronological ordering and interplay between literary authors, theorists, scholars, and practitioners, it also enacts a dialogue across and among disparate generations of scholars, theorists, and practitioners. Overall, this is a gem of a book, a worthy investment for any institutional or personal library, and sure to be pulled off the shelf repeatedly for further perusal and for references indispensable both to research and to the instructional classroom.

Angelica Fenner
University of Toronto