

3. Deviation as Norm—Notes on the Essay Film

“It is incomprehensible to me how anyone can say that they write essays today. It only sounds pretentious. All the modesty that once spoke from the term has evaporated.”
Frieda Grafe¹

The preceding two chapters have dealt with specific cinematic procedures under the heading of “film as theory”: How can film, as a visual medium tied to concrete operations, depict abstraction or even create it from concrete single frames? How does cinema “perceive itself” and its production conditions? What role is played by a different visual medium, such as painting, when it is embedded into a film as a reflective point of reference? In short, what procedures can theorize within the medium of film and talk about images with images? These questions aren’t new, and their antecedents in Romantic literary theory have already been mentioned. However, they aren’t generally asked in relation to cinematic language. The term “essay film” tends to be used instead to define films that oscillate “between reality and fiction, between different media formats, between the genres.”² The question is displaced from the level of visual relationships to that of a specific film genre.

The term “essay film,” together with some of its derivatives,³ has become a fixed concept in German-speaking film studies and criticism since the 1980s. More subjective than the usual documentary film, and also less bound to linear narrative patterns than most feature films, the essay film is negatively determined in the first instance. The definition is made to distinguish a film from established cinematic registers and in reference to the literary form of the essay: “In fact, the viewer responds to the essay film like the reader to the literary essay,”⁴ a reference book from the 1990s states. But the question is deferred rather than answered, as the logical

1 Frieda Grafe, “Der bessere Dokumentarfilm, die gefundene Fiktion,” *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen. Texte zum essayistischen Film*, eds. Christa Blümlinger, Constantin Wulff (Vienna: Sonderzahl 1992), 138–143: 139.

2 Christina Scherer, *Ivens, Marker, Godard, Jarman. Erinnerung im Essayfilm* (Munich: Fink 2001), 23.

3 Above all “film essay” and “essayistic film.” For a discussion of these nuances, see *ibid.* 21–22.

4 Rainer Rother, “Art. Essayfilm,” *Sachlexikon Film*, ed. *ibid.* (Reinbek: Rowohlt 1997), 81–83: 82.

follow-up would be: how does the reader respond to the literary essay? The terminological connection seems less to clarify issues of definition than to delegate them to literary studies. This may be because it is possible that they cannot be resolved as questions of genre. For in discussing the essay film, it is often remarked that it is precisely the elusive, tangential, open forms that are at issue; that the term essay film defines an area in which different rules apply from those of other genres. However—and here lies its problematic aspect—this simply adds a further category to the existing generic scheme, without taking into account that these very films radically oppose strict categorization. For the identification of recurrences and repeating patterns that makes the classification “genre” useful⁵ doesn’t seem to be effective in the case of the essay film. In retrospect, the revaluation and theorization of the genre concept was aimed at a revisionist perspective of the normalized film productions from Hollywood. In the context of film studies, “genre” is not a neutrally descriptive term but denotes the standardized and conventionalized sub-forms brought about by the studio system: Western, musical, thriller, sci-fi, and so forth. The theorization of these genres reached a climax in the early 1970s, and can productively be understood as a counter-reaction to the European model of the auteur film.⁶ Instead of foregrounding the artistic act of an individual director, the interest lay in the creative relationship to the basic genre, against which the film could be seen as a deviation, variation, parody, and so on. This shift in perspective—like the specifically Anglo-American attempt to combine auteur theory and structuralism⁷—is a turnabout from the model of individual creativity to the potential of the discursive rules that precede every individual film.

Against this background, the term essay film is problematic because it is intended to combine a model of utmost individuality and permanent deviation—as derived from Michel de Montaigne in literature⁸—with that of a high degree of standardization and normalization. Yet this problem is not

5 For the Anglo-American discussion of the genre concept, see Barry Keith Grant’s *Film Genre Reader*, which collects numerous relevant texts on the subject: Barry Keith Grant, ed. *Film Genre Reader III* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2003).

6 See Jörg Schweinitz, “‘Genre’ und lebendiges Genrebewußtsein. Geschichte eines Begriffs und Probleme seiner Konzeptualisierung in der Filmwissenschaft,” *montage/av* February 3, 1994, 99–118.

7 See Peter Wollen, “The Auteur Theory” [1972], *ibid.*, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, expanded edition, (London: British Film Institute 1998), 50–78.

8 Montaigne formulates the problem of deviation most concisely in his essay “Of the Inconstancy of our Actions,” in which he considers inconsistency in almost anthropological terms: “I sometimes wonder to see men of understanding give themselves the trouble of reconciling such inconsistencies, considering that irresolution seems to me to be the most common and

specific to the cinematic form of the essay. Endeavors to define the filmic genre unintentionally reproduce a difficulty that the philology of the 1960s also encountered in its attempts to classify the literary essay. A history of the essay describes this as follows: “Zoologically speaking, the essay proved to be a genre that was believed to be able to be defined phylogenically on paper, but whose phenotype presented itself solely in deviations, and it was not even possible to say from what, exactly.”⁹ Defining the essay as genre therefore came down to the aporetic question as to how an accumulation of deviations could be described as a norm at all. A series of difficulties arising from this definition of the essay as fundamental deviation has been pointed out by Georg Stanitzek in relation to classical essays and equally classical attempts to define them.¹⁰ In its persistent repetition, the argument of incommensurability and randomness becomes the very thing that speaks against the possibility of defining the genre:

What we have to do with here is the unreasonable demand to see the norm in the deviation, so that only the frustration of expectations can be expected. This is hardly convincing, however, as the question immediately arises as to how the minimum of order and recognizability that justifies speaking of the essay nevertheless comes about.¹¹

In the literary essay, this recognizability is often found in the individuality of the author—that is, in the principle for which the auteur film stands in cinema history¹²—or, normatively, in the literary value of the respective work. The essay is either defined by the prominent voice of a writer or his or her stylistic brilliance. A further reaction may be to “firmly redesignate” the classificatory difficulties, as Stanitzek points out, as “characteristics of

manifest vice of our nature.” Michel de Montaigne, “Of the Inconstancy of our Actions,” *The Essays of Michel Seigneur de Montaigne*, ed. 8, vol. 2 of 4 (Dublin: James Potts 1760), 38–46: 38.

9 Christian Schärf, *Geschichte des Essays. Von Montaigne bis Adorno* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1999), 14.

10 Georg Stanitzek, “Abweichung als Norm? Über Klassiker der Essayistik und Klassik im Essay,” *Klassik im Vergleich. Normativität und Historizität europäischer Klassiken*, DFG symposium 1990, ed. Wilhelm Voßkamp (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler 1993), 594–615.

11 Ibid., 597.

12 For the debate on the auteur film, see the collection of texts by John Caughie, ed. *Theories of Authorship. A Reader* (London: Routledge 1990), which also contains key texts from literary theory. The German development of a “cinema of auteurs” is summarized concisely in Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema. A History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1989), chapter 3. See also Joachim Paech, “Autorenfilm,” *Deutsche Literatur zwischen 1945 und 1995. Eine Sozialgeschichte*, ed. Horst Albert Glaser (Stuttgart: UTB 1997), 693–712.

the essay itself."¹³ The weaknesses of the definition are thus declared to be the strength of the genre being defined.

The question of the essay, like all questions of genre, points to a problem of mediating between the specific and the general. Genre definitions have to reflect an average: they should be able to precisely distinguish the form from related genres, while the number of elements they contain necessarily increases the distance from the matter in hand and risks leading to indeterminacy. This holds true for literary genres, but the degree of uncertainty is even more pronounced in the description of cinematic essays. For the category of the literary essay is anything other than clearly outlined, as Christian Schärf's history of the form clearly shows. As an alternative to inserting the essay into the catalogue of genres, Schärf therefore suggests discussing the essayistic as a basic operation of writing. "The question of genre must be modified in such a way that the essay and essayism are seen as hidden factors which pervade the actual, so-called main genres and through which the generic poetics are opened out."¹⁴ Ironically, Schärf's doubts about the literary genre of the "essay" don't lead him to call the concept into question but on the contrary to enhance it as a catalyst to opening up the taxonomy of genres. Particularly because it is not bound to a specific genre, the essay appears as a strategic equivalent to modern thought. Only with the essay and its procedures, according to the tacit assumption, does modern thinking come about.

The film essay has to struggle with difficulties similar to those outlined by Stanitzek and Schärf. Here, too, there is uncertainty about the criteria, and what the works have in common is defined as how they differ. However, the implicit unease that accompanies generic categorization can also be seen in the works that use the term in a continual attempt to redefine it. In the introductory part of her wide-ranging examination of the films of Jean-Luc Godard, Derek Jarman, Joris Ivens, and Chris Marker, Christina Scherer writes:

The film essay receives its essential impulses from the documentary, and could also be described as "essayistic documentary" (that is, as a subcategory of the documentary), but the essay films selected here owe their aesthetic repertoire to developments both in the area of the documentary and that of the experimental film and the feature.¹⁵

13 Stanitzek, "Abweichung als Norm," 597.

14 Schärf, *Geschichte des Essays*, 37. It should be mentioned in passing that Schärf himself falls short of this insight when his discussion of the history of the essay nevertheless deals with the usual established authors (from Montaigne and Bacon to Benjamin and Adorno).

15 Scherer, *Ivens, Marker, Godard, Jarman*, 22.

In the same breath, the normative positing—the allocation of the essay film to the category of the documentary—is countered by the resistance of the films themselves, whose impulses don't apparently keep to the postulated categorial restrictions and owe as much to what we have become accustomed to describe in the unclear terms of the experimental film and the feature.

My suggestion of doing away with the category of the essay film and of examining the films in terms of their theoretical content instead is a reaction to these difficulties, among other things. Harun Farocki, whose most well-known films—above all *IMAGES OF THE WORLD AND THE INSCRIPTION OF WAR* and *AS YOU SEE*, but also *STILL LIFE*—are regularly described as essay films,¹⁶ rejected the category as unusable in a long interview with Rembert Hüser:

This category is just as unsuitable as “documentary film,” sure. When there is a lot of music on TV and you see landscapes—they've started calling that an essay film as well. A lot of stuff that's just relaxing and not unequivocally journalistic is already called “essay.” That's terrible, of course. That's as vague as those “experiments” from the 1950s. Hans Magnus Enzensberger had already noted that the scientific concept of experiment was completely unsuitable for art. The term “essay” has devolved into a similar vagueness. But to me, narration and argumentation are still very closely linked. I strongly hold that discourses are a form of narration. World War II hasn't quite made it into a novel by some new Tolstoy, but instead it has found its way into the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*.¹⁷

Farocki's remarks are instructive for several reasons: if he criticizes the vagueness and lack of precision in the concept of the essay, he also refers to the narrative potential of any text and the close connection between narrative and discourse for which both his and Godard's films stand. As far as the possibility of recording “reality” goes, there is no principle difference between the categories of fiction and non-fiction; both cinematic registers are equally capable of serving as an instrument of research and of analyzing how reality functions in their images.

16 Tilman Baumgärtel categorizes these films under “reflection”: Tilman Baumgärtel, *Harun Farocki. Vom Guerillakino zum Essayfilm. Werkmonografie eines Autorenfilmers* (Berlin: b_books 1998), 156–177.)

17 Rembert Hüser, “Nine Minutes in the Yard. A Conversation with Harun Farocki” [2000], *Harun Farocki. Working on the Sightlines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP 2004), 297–314, 313.

The reflections that have historically been made under the heading of the essay film are certainly useful here—although not in an attempt to define the genre but as indications of the link between film and thought. Writing about Chris Marker, whose name works like a center of gravity around which all manner of essay-film concepts revolve, Jürgen Ebert says: “The form of the film essay (Balázs also speaks of the ‘film of ideas’) cannot be separated from the idea that every film attempts to establish a structure that reflects how the human mind functions.”¹⁸

While Ebert’s description operates at a high level of abstraction, the generic delineations in a narrower sense are widely diverging: sometimes—and particularly in the American discussion of the genre, which began with a certain delay in the mid-1990s¹⁹—the essay film counts as the most subjective of the cinematic genres,²⁰ inseparable from autobiographical aspects and an emphasis on the respective “author.” Essay films thus end up in close proximity to the diary or the letter.²¹ Evidence of this is found in the frequently occurring commentary by the filmmaker or his or her integration into the reflection process of the film. Different from the classical documentary, the focus doesn’t lie in the subject matter portrayed but in the filmmaker, who groups, arranges, and often explicitly comments on the material according to his or her ideas. The presence of an authorial voice—as in the films of Alexander Kluge, for example—which is often foregrounded as a structuring and interpreting element, fits neatly in this concept. From this perspective, the essay film is the most personal way of filming, and in the end is more about the filmmaker than about the subject matter.

A contrary attempt at a definition attributes a high degree of objectification and scientific method to the essay film. In his attempt to understand what is meant by the “adventure of the essay film,” Hanno Möbius names Harun Farocki as a representative of a type of essay film that operates more on the analytical than the autobiographical level. In Farocki’s films, Möbius claims, language has a more functional character than in Marker’s poetic films. Consequently, Möbius places this variety of essay film in the

18 Jürgen Ebert, “Der Film von Morgen. Chris Marker und das Kino,”... *sie wollen eben sein, was sie sind, nämlich Bilder... Anschlüsse an Chris Marker*, eds. Natalie Binczek, Martin Rass (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 1999), 113–125: 120.

19 Phillip Lopate, “In Search of the Centaur. The Essay-Film,” *Essays on Nonfiction-Film*, ed. Charles Warren (Hanover: University Press of New England 1996), 243–269.

20 “‘Subjectivity’ is therefore one of the key words in the academic discussion of the essay film.” Scherer, *Ivens, Marker, Godard, Jarman*, 24.

21 See Martin Schaub, “Filme als Briefe,” *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen*, ed. Blümlinger, Wulff, 109–118.

proximity of scholarship and education, which aim more for “analytical insight” than the “work of the imagination.”²² By differentiating between two types of essay film, Möbius reintroduces the distinction between art and science, between imagination and analysis, which the filmmakers he discusses—Farocki and Godard among them—are interested in abolishing. It will become clear in this brief discussion of the two poles of subjectivity and scientific objectification, which mark the spectrum of what is meant by the term essay film, how vague the description must ultimately remain. Particularly because further opposites can be assigned to these boundaries: narration versus documentation, poetic vagueness versus scientific exactness, action versus reflection; a vast field extends between these poles and ends up encompassing practically every film imaginable, rather than a terminologically explicable genre.

No other work has determined the discussion of and conceptual approach to the essay film more than Chris Marker’s *SANS SOLEIL*,²³ which comes up as often as Montaigne’s *essais* in the literary field.²⁴ The film often serves as the blueprint from which the attributes of the genre are taken. Moreover, a normative function is usually linked to this more descriptive one and elevates *SANS SOLEIL* to the standard for essayistic filming against which all other films of the genre are measured. What is responsible for this is not only its structural openness, a montage of footage from Japan, France, Cape Verde, San Francisco, and Iceland that indeed suggests a global cosmos of imagery, but above all how the heterogeneous material is linked, using fictional letters that are read on the soundtrack. Alongside complex thoughts about time, memory, and various visual practices, these letters recurrently contain an element of self-reflection, through which the functioning of electronic images and their readability is discussed. It is probably because of its poetic text that this film has become a preferred object of study for literary scholars²⁵ like no other essay film.

22 Hanno Möbius, “Das Abenteuer Essayfilm,” *AugenBlick* 10, June 1991 [special edition on the essay film], 10–24: 18. Möbius’s suggestion of using the term “film essay” for those films in which the analytical impulse is stronger than the poetic-autobiographical and retaining “essay film” for more personal works is somewhat confusing.

23 *SANS SOLEIL*, F 1982, director: Chris Marker.

24 See Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film. From Montaigne, After Marker* (New York: Oxford UP 2011).

25 Such as Michael Wetzel, “La Japonaise. Die Faszination des Fernöstlichen in den Filmen Chris Markers,” eds. Natalie Binczek, Martin Rass, ... *sie wollen eben sein, was sie sind, nämlich Bilder...*, 159–172.

A decade after Marker's film, when a series of academic attempts to classify it were made, the term essay film primarily served to get to grips with the growing number and heterogeneity of films that principally shared an inability to be placed in the established categories. The publications that put their weight behind the term essay film²⁶ contain analyses of films by such different filmmakers as Derek Jarman, Joris Ivens, Chris Marker, Hartmut Bitomsky, Johan van der Keuken, Chantal Akerman, Orson Welles, Jean-Luc Godard, or Alexander Kluge, often alongside Errol Morris and Michael Moore in American publications.²⁷ An attempt to find a pattern in this unequal series brings out two things: essay films, so the list suggests, are a recent phenomenon. Most of the directors named—with the exception of Ivens and Welles, but with them, too, it is usually their late films *UNE HISTOIRE DE VENT* (1988) and *F FOR FAKE* (1976) that are described as essay films—began making films in the late 1950s. So a connection between the auteur theory propagated in France and the development of the essay film suggests itself, particularly as Chris Marker, one of the most prominent representatives of the essay film, began making his first films in the mid-1950s on the periphery of the New Wave. Following Frieda Grafe's suggestion of seeing the essay film as the "auteur film of the documentary,"²⁸ Christina Scherer's examination of the genre stresses this tradition:

The essay film should be seen in this auteur tradition: the film essayist counters the conventions of form and content with a variety of expressive possibilities and individual experiences. These are the organizing and inspirational principle of his creative process.²⁹

This line of affiliation, which emphasizes the concept of the filmic "author"—developed more strategically and polemically than systematically by Alexandre Astruc and François Truffaut—as the point of reference for the essay film, seems plausible at first. However, the argument contains an unintentional point: the emphatic concept of individuality named here as the essence of the essay and auteur film counters the very concept of genre. Asking about genres means looking for an impersonal matrix to which the individual elements of the genre can be related as variations, deviations, quotes, parodies, pastiches, and so on. A negative classification of the essay

26 See *AugenBlick* 10, June 1991. See also *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen*, eds. Blümlinger, Wulff.

27 For example by Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions," *Film Comment* 1/2003, 58–63.

28 Grafe, "Der bessere Dokumentarfilm, die gefundene Fiktion," 139.

29 Scherer, *Ivens, Marker, Godard, Jarman*, 30.

film that invokes “expressive possibilities” and “individual experiences” against the “conventions of form and content” is in fact an implicit departure from the principle of generic description. The logical next step would be to abandon the term essay film and replace it with the individual concept of the auteur film.³⁰

Aside from these principle objections, the emphasis in the above quote on “individual experience” and the central figure of the author is hard to maintain in regard to the films of Harun Farocki and Jean-Luc Godard. Their works do sometimes centre on the person of the director and his work—particularly in the portrait-like *INTERFACE* and *JLG/JLG*, which will be dealt with later—and in many of their films the various perspectives are focused by the author’s commentary. This is most evident in the video collage *HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA*, in which all four chapters are accompanied by Godard’s distinctive voice. Yet on the other hand, it is precisely the interconnection of personal and other kinds of experience, of individual and history, that is one of the constants in the work of both filmmakers. The author is also the “receiver”³¹ here, and the films are not motivated by a narcissistic view of the self but move ahead in a dialectic back-and-forth between subject and historical context, between seer and seen. The filming subject is thus as much a product of social circumstances as it produces and analyzes them through filming. The fact that this interconnection of authorial subject and basic political conditions occurs in a debate with auteur theory is indisputable for both Farocki and Godard. Yet it is the theory’s ambivalences and contradictions, which were present from early on, that they have been able to put to productive use. During the 1960s, Godard in particular, who was initially a fervent advocate of a *politique des auteurs*, turned vehemently against the implications associated with the enthronement of the director. In January 1969, not too long after Barthes published his text “The Death of the Author,” he wrote: “The concept of the author is a completely reactionary one. Perhaps it wasn’t at the time when the author had a certain progressiveness over the feudal bosses. But from the moment the writer or director himself says, ‘From now on I want to be the boss because I’m the poet and I know,’ it’s completely reactionary.”³² Ten years later, he voices this criticism less dogmatically, but his reservations

30 In this sense, Frieda Grafe’s suggestion should also be understood as subversive, as it makes the tacit operations of most analyses of the essay film explicit and shows how the discussion of genre is hardly carried on as a discussion of genre at all.

31 See Silverman, “The Author as Receiver,” *October* 96, spring 2001, 17–34.

32 Jean-Luc Godard, “Deux heures avec Jean-Luc Godard” [1969], *Godard par Godard I*, 332–337: 335.

about the position of the author remain. About the politics of the author he now self-critically says:

What we did was really stupid, and afterwards it did me a lot of harm when I thought it had been good for me. At a certain point it was those of us at Cahiers—Truffaut, Rivette, Godard, Chabrol, the three or four us who were there—we said: “It’s not the producer who is interesting, it’s the author.” We tried to give back, I don’t know, what we might call his letters of nobility. But the nobility, it wasn’t worth it to cut off their heads in order to give others their letters of credit like that!³³

In 1996, for different reasons, Harun Farocki came to a critical assessment of the filmic concept of the author when he sought to replace the criterion of originality with that of the perception and interest that should guide the portrayal:

It’s clear that authorship is nonsense if it’s only about uniqueness. Everyone wants to be unique, but once you’ve met five other people in the nuthouse who also think they’re Napoleon, you’ll begin to have your doubts. An author whose perception, whose interest in things, guides the portrayal is something else. It’s about the aliveness of the narrating person, no matter how invented and pre-produced it is. I won’t be able to give up wanting to be that kind of author.³⁴

This is why bringing in the term *auteur film* in order to qualify the essay film more closely makes things even more complicated. By replacing one contradictory generic concept with another one, we gain no further theoretical awareness of its difficulties, as Godard and Farocki both remark.

If I place a different emphasis here in a discussion of film as theory, this is inspired by earlier attempts to define the essay film. The conventional definition obscures this part of the discussion by limiting it to the genre of the sound film and describing it—following André Bazin’s concept of “horizontal montage”³⁵—in terms of its contrapuntal relationship between

33 Jean-Luc Godard, *Introduction to a True History of Cinema and Television*, ed., trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: Caboose 2014), 358.

34 Rolf Aurich, Ulrich Kriest, “Werkstattgespräch Harun Farocki,” *Der Ärger mit den Bildern. Die Filme von Harun Farocki*, ed. ibid. (Konstanz: UVK 1998), 325–347: 347.

35 See André Bazin, “Letter from Siberia” [1958], *Film Comment*, July/August 2003, 44–45: 44. Bazin understands horizontal montage to be the interlinking of spoken commentary and image carried out by Chris Marker (in *LETTRE DE SIBÉRIE* and other films).

image and sound. “It [the essay film] developed from the insight that images often say too little or are ambiguous, and that a commentary is needed to make them speak.”³⁶ From this perspective, the essay film is a reaction to visual deficits; it attempts to rectify the muteness of the image by adding sound and thus to guide the viewer’s visual perception. An incompetence is ascribed to the image, at least in relation to abstract concepts, that can only be met through the use of the word: “Writing and language are particularly conducive to the essay film in its conceptual search, because concrete images can only be understood as signs for abstract concepts through interpretive adjustment.”³⁷ It has already been pointed out that this proposition has often been contradicted in the course of cinema history, and that the endeavors of Eisenstein, Farocki, and Godard can be seen as an alternative model. Yet it is noticeable that despite these efforts, sound is still often described as indispensable to the essay film. It comes first in Phillip Lopate’s catalogue of criteria: “An essay-film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled, or intertitled. Say all you like about visualization being at the core of thinking, I cannot accept an utterly pure, silent flow of images as constituting essayistic discourse.”³⁸ Paul Arthur agrees with him, describing the link between language and image as the “key ingredient of the essay film,”³⁹ and a little later celebrating Harun Farocki as the “most accomplished current essayist,” ironically almost exclusively citing pure “observation films,” which do without authorial commentary.

A look at the early history of thinking about the essay film shows that as early as the 1920s the term was aimed more generally at the possibilities of cinematic thought than generic description. Sergei Eisenstein’s plan, developed in 1927/28, to adapt Karl Marx’s *Capital* is the most notable example. But Hans Richter’s text “The Film Essay. A New Form of the Documentary,” which attempts to systematize techniques from one of his silent films under the term “film essay,” also points in this direction and joins up at certain points with Béla Balázs, who in 1930 had referred to the possibilities of what he called the “montage essay” or “film of ideas.”⁴⁰ As distinct from the later conceptualization of the essay film, Marx, Richter, and Balázs weren’t concerned with activating cinematic reflection through the use of sound but with the question of which elements of the visual language

36 Wilhelm Roth, *Der Dokumentarfilm seit 1960* (Munich, Luzern: Bucher 1982), 185.

37 Möbius, “Das Abenteuer Essayfilm,” 19.

38 Lopate, “In Search of the Centaur,” 245.

39 Arthur, “Essay Questions,” 58–63.

40 Christina Scherer’s extensive study of the problem of memory in the essay film, which opens with a lengthy chapter on the form, fails to mention either Richter or Eisenstein.

itself (independently of any spoken commentary) could be theoretical. It is obvious that this also shifts the focus to the aspect of montage.

Hans Richter outlined his point of view retrospectively in a newspaper article in 1940.⁴¹ He proceeds from the difficulty that abstract processes—such as the functioning of the stock market—can't be portrayed directly and requires a new form of film. The essay film (or film essay, as Richter calls this “new form of the documentary”) thus responds to a transformation of economic structures in capitalism: visible labor disappears in favor of invisible transactions,⁴² and film has to react to this with new techniques of visualization. Richter takes up an idea here that was most trenchantly described by Bertolt Brecht in his famous remarks on photography in the “Threepenny Trial”:

The situation thereby becomes so complicated that a simple “representation of reality” says something about reality less than ever before. A photograph of the Krupp works or of A.E.G. yields nearly nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, such as the factory, no longer produces the latter. So there is in fact “something to build up,” something “artificial,” “contrived.” It is similarly a fact that art is necessary. But the old concept of art, drawn from experience, simply breaks down.⁴³

Brecht's remark is not a rejection of realistic description but a call for a modification of its purposes and possibilities. Instead of a direct depiction of reality, he seeks a model-like simulation whose emphasis is on structures, not things. If the determining factor has slipped into the “functional,” the task of the filmmaker must be to make this function visible. But because a function—in the mathematical sense of the word too—always means a relationship, the step towards montage, which Hans Richter at least implies, is predetermined:

41 Hans Richter, “Der Filmessay. Eine neue Form des Dokumentarfilms” [1940], *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen*, eds. Blümlinger, Wulff, 195–198.

42 The title of the first film by the Lumière brothers (LA SORTIE DES USINES, 1895) also prophetically describes the changes in working conditions that took place in the twentieth century. Harun Farocki (WORKERS LEAVING THE FACTORY, 1995) and Hartmut Bitomsky (DER VW-KOMPLEX, 1988/89) later explored this subject.

43 Bertolt Brecht, “The Three Penny Trial: A Sociological Experiment” [1931/32], *German Essays on Film*, eds. Richard W. McCormick and Allison Guenther-Pal (London: Continuum 2004), 111–132, 117.

In this way, the documentary is given the task of visualizing conceptual ideas. What is inherently invisible must also be made visible. Both the acted scene and the merely depicted fact are aspects of an argument that aims to make problems, thoughts, even general ideas understandable. For this reason, I find the term essay applicable to this form of film, for in literature too essay means the treatment of difficult subject matter in a generally comprehensible way.⁴⁴

Richter's deliberations end up in a schematic and rather diffuse concept of the essay. Yet it is still worth taking up the elements he suggests, because they can be read as an indication of a development of film into a form of theoretical expression. First, Richter has no doubt that the film essay is a particular kind of documentary; he assigns it to the factual, not to the fictional. Second, he considers its subject matter to be "conceptual ideas."⁴⁵ Godard's statement that the cinema is a thought that becomes form and at the same time a form that enables thought is a later direct link to this characterization of the essay film.⁴⁶ Third, the function of the film goes beyond simple illustration: Richter speaks of "argument," implicitly displacing film from the arts to the sciences. From this perspective, films neither serve as mere entertainment nor as direct political agitation, as the Russian filmmakers of the 1920s saw it. Through montage, the image becomes an element of a precise argument.⁴⁷

The apparent rigor of this concept, which lies in the idea of film as (hard) science and makes one think of educational films for use in schools, is countered by the openness of means and form:

Because in the film essay one is not bound to the representation of outer appearances or to a chronological sequence, but on the contrary has to take the visual material from everywhere, one is at liberty to jump

44 Richter, "Der Filmessay," 197.

45 See also Thomas Tode, "Ein Bild ist ein Argument," *Navigationen* 2/2002, 99–108.

46 "Cinema is just as much a thought that takes on form as a form that enables thought." Jean-Luc Godard quoted in *Théories du cinéma. Petite anthologie des Cahiers du cinéma*, eds. Antoine de Baecque, Gabrielle Lucantonio (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma 2001), 5.

47 The closeness between Richter's theory and the Russian concepts of montage in the 1920s can be seen in his programmatic text "Filmgegner von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen" [Today's Film Enemies – Tomorrow's Film Friends] from 1929. Even the emphatic capital headings ("We Montage!" "Seeing Expanded!" "Form Associations!") can be seen both as an adoption of Vertov's ideas and as an imperative of the essay film. Hans Richter, *Filmgegner von heute – Filmfreunde von morgen* [1929], with a foreword by Walter Schobert (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1981).

through space and time: from objective representation to fantastical allegory, for example, and from here to an acted scene; one can depict the inanimate and the animate, artificial or natural things; one may use everything that exists and what can be invented—if it can only serve as an argument for the visualization of the basic thought.⁴⁸

This multiplicity of possible associations makes it difficult to identify an essay film on the level of the material it uses, as it can potentially absorb everything. As for the hierarchization of genres that Richter had undertaken shortly before, in his determination of the essay film as a subgenre of the documentary, a different classification can be imagined here. For in its ability to combine an extremely wide variety of levels, the essay film now looks either like an integrating meta-genre or a particular attitude or energy that cannot be subsumed under a particular genre. This directly connects with Godard's poetics since the mid-1960s. In a programmatic text written in the context of *2 OR 3 THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER*, film is described as a reservoir of different impressions, thoughts, and themes: "During the course of the film – in its discourse, its discontinuous course, that is – I want to include everything, sport, politics, even groceries. [...] Everything can be put into a film. Everything should be put into a film."⁴⁹ However, if in fact "everything" can be put into a film, as *PIERROT LE FOU* had shown, how can its form be determined? Doesn't this inevitably lead to amorphous contours?

Two things should be remarked here: in the final analysis, Richter doesn't see the film essay as a cinematic genre but as "cinematic thinking" oriented to scholarly practice and in this sense more experimental than narrative—or as presenting narration as experimentation and dissolving narrative structures experimentally. The necessity for this had already been formulated as a problem in the film theory of the 1920s. Béla Balázs described it as a challenge for film in 1930, anticipating Brecht's argument. In an explicit reference to Sergei Eisenstein, he describes a type of film that he characterizes as a film of ideas, film essay, or "montaged essay." Under the heading of "Flight from the Story," he takes up Eisenstein's notion of a film of ideas that "depicts neither stories nor destinies, neither private nor social fates, but only ideas. Purely abstract subject matter is to be communicated in a purely sensuous manner: intellectual ideas

48 Richter, "Der Filmessay," 198.

49 Godard, "One Should Put Everything into a Film" [1967], *Godard on Godard*, ed., trans. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo 1986), 238–239: 239.

transmitted via the image.”⁵⁰ The development of this type of film exceeds the aesthetic realm, as it results from the lack of visibility of decisive social mechanisms: “Economic and political forces have no visible form and thus cannot simply be photographed for a newsreel. They can, however, be rendered visible.”⁵¹ The constellation in the 1920s can be described as follows: after a phase of discovering visibility and emphatically filming reality in the films of the New Objectivity,⁵² a fundamental doubt begins to be articulated: What if crucial processes evade the eye of the camera? How can the cinematic recording of the world,⁵³ which affirmatively duplicates what it finds in reality, be given a critical aspect? One possible answer can be found in an uncompleted project by Eisenstein.

A dialectic interweaving of theory and practice, which doesn’t merely seek a transition between the two areas but understands practical filming as the “reverse side” of theoretically handled problems, can be seen in Eisenstein’s development in the second half of the 1920s.⁵⁴ In his *Capital* project, Eisenstein developed a further type of montage, in a continuation of and differentiation from other types (the “montage of attraction,” still rooted in theater; metrical, rhythmic montage; tonal montage; and overtone montage), which he called “intellectual montage” and saw as paradigmatic for a new art of filmmaking that was still to be established.⁵⁵ Different from the earlier forms of montage, which were primarily used to produce physiological and psychological effects in the audience, “intellectual montage” addresses the viewer’s rational capacity. Alongside

50 Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*, ed. Erica Carter, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Berghahn Books 2010), 149.

51 Ibid., 154.

52 The most prominent examples of this tendency are Walter Ruttmann’s *BERLIN: SYMPHONY OF A GREAT CITY* from 1927 and *PEOPLE ON SUNDAY*, D 1929, director: Robert Siodmak.

53 Because of this apolitical tendency, Siegfried Kracauer in retrospect interpreted the films of the New Objectivity as an expression of “cynicism, resignation, disillusion.” Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of German Film* [1947], ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton: Princeton UP 2004), 165.

54 See, for example, Hans Joachim Schlegel’s remark: “This correspondence and cooperation between theoretical and art-practical avant-garde is an essential precondition for Eisenstein’s basic dialectical thinking, which also determines his interest in film semiotics: theory and practice are indissolubly linked for Eisenstein.” Hans Joachim Schlegel, “Eisenstein und die zweite literarische Periode des Films,” *Literaturverfilmungen*, eds. Franz Josef Albersmeier, Volker Roloff (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1989), 38–54: 44.

55 See Oksana Bulgakowa, “Montagebilder bei Sergej Eisenstein,” *Handbuch der Filmmontage. Praxis und Prinzipien des Filmschnitts*, ed. Hans Beller (Munich: TR-Verlagsunion 1993), 49–77, particularly 58–67.

emotion, thought was now intended to be brought to the screen (and from there into the viewer's head).

Eisenstein's notes on his planned filming of *Capital*⁵⁶ clearly show how montage—and thus the conjunction of thoughts—becomes the core of what he too had often described as a cinematic “essay.” The form of organization he chose in the conception phase of the project is illuminating. Eisenstein didn't note his ideas in linear sequence in a book but tacked them as (moveable) slips of paper onto the wall of his editing room. So even the arrangement of his notes follows the combinatory, montage principle that would be required on the level of the cinematic structure. With the pathos of a pioneer, Eisenstein declares his current production OCTOBER to be the first essay film: “After the drama, poem, ballad in film, OCTOBER presents a new form of cinema: a collection of essays on a series of themes which constitute OCTOBER.”⁵⁷ However, OCTOBER is obviously about an event—the revolution ten years before—and thus not about an abstract idea in Richter's sense. Intellectual montage is accordingly restricted to a few sequences: a dull speaker coupled with a lyre; the war minister and naval secretary Kerenski, whose vanity is illustrated with the insert of a peacock. Only with the projected filming of *Capital* did Eisenstein plan a complete “de-anecdotalization”⁵⁸ of film—the abandonment of a continuous film fable.

Eisenstein gives an example of how this was to look in practice: the dialectical method of *Capital* would be demonstrated by an everyday event. The framing structure of the film was to be the image of a woman making soup for her husband coming home. The arc traced from this banal image has global dimensions and owes its associative technique to a literary inspiration: “Joyce may be helpful for my purpose: from a bowl of soup to the British vessels sunk by England.”⁵⁹ How Eisenstein wanted to get from the saucepan to the sinking of the British fleet is sketched in a rapid sequence of images in which economic relations can be seen behind their purely associative combination (the name of Joyce primarily stands for the stream-of-consciousness technique):

56 Sergei Eisenstein, “Notes for a Film of ‘Capital,’” trans. Maciej Sliwowski, Jay Leyda, Annette Michelson, *October* 2, summer 1976, 3–26.

57 Ibid., 4.

58 Ibid., 5.

59 Ibid., 15.

Throughout the entire picture the wife cooks soup for her returning husband. N.B. Could be two themes intercut for association: the soup-cooking wife and the home-returning husband.. [...] in the third part (for instance), association moves from the pepper with which she seasons food. Pepper. Cayenne. Devil's Island. Dreyfus. French chauvinism. *Figaro* in Krupp's hands. War. Ships sunk in the port.. [...] It would be good to cover the sunken English ships [...] with the lid of a saucepan.⁶⁰

On the level of the conjunction of ideas, Eisenstein is guided by a domino effect that doesn't rely on an optical similarity of his images, but on their metonymic closeness to the concepts they represent.⁶¹ This method assumes a trust in the collaboration of the viewer, because a process of intellectual translation has to take place in order to understand the thoughts involved. The images have to be translated back into concepts and (political) backgrounds in order to grasp the causal connection between foodstuffs, colonial history, and war. In terms of purely cinematic poetics, Eisenstein's strategy can be variously assessed: if we recall Hartmut Winkler's characterization of film as a form of articulation that exclusively consists of concrete things,⁶² then the montage provides for the reintroduction of intellectual abstraction, which now is no longer seen as the precondition of speech but its result. In Eisenstein's chain of images, a sinking ship is not simply a ship but leads to more abstract thoughts about war and international economic relationships. On the other hand, this abstraction, in the conceptual translation it requires, obliterates the image to a certain extent. One starts to wonder why a film is necessary at all, if its underlying ideas could be presented more precisely and clearly in written or verbal form.

Let us summarize those aspects of the essay film that appear in my examination of Richter and Eisenstein. It seems that the essay film not only differs from the conventional definition of the genre but also questions the meaningfulness of a separate genre at all. For essay films are generally defined through sound-image relationships (productive discrepancy between commentary and image, subjective narrative); the essayistic aspects of a film are often even solely identified in its commentary and separated from

60 Ibid., 17.

61 In this sense, Roman Jakobson has ascribed the documentary as a whole to metonymy: "All documentary or near-documentary films are by definition more metonymic than metaphoric." Roman Jakobson, "Gespräch über den Film" [1967], *ibid.*, *Semiotik. Ausgewählte Texte 1919-1982*, ed. Elmar Holenstein (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1992), 267–280: 271.

62 See Hartmut Winkler, *Docuverse. Zur Medientheorie der Computer* (München: Boer 1997), 207.

the visual level to a great extent. The concept of film as theory, however, emphasizes the relationships between images and image sequences, as found in the early history of the essay genre in the 1920s. This doesn't necessarily mean that the usual definitions of the essay film become invalid. However, it seems to me to be helpful—particularly in relation to the films of Godard and Farocki—to describe the cinematic essay more on the level of the image and to depart from that of the sound. Moreover, it is also debatable whether there is any sense at all in discussing questions of abstraction/concretion, documentary/fictive, and so on in generic terms. More general problems are at issue in regard to visual relationships and the possibilities of representing ideas in the medium of film; problems that arise equally in every film.

In the early phase of the use of the term, "essay film" meant the filming of abstract concepts in the sense of Hans Richter, and the essay film made its impact primarily through the relationships between the images, not exclusively through individual images themselves—as Eisenstein's projected filming of Marx's *Capital* shows. The essay works in a combinatory manner and uses the techniques of montage. Jean-Luc Godard in particular has pointed out, with indefatigable persistence, that *two* images are necessary for the production of a context: "One thing that has always amazed me is: how do you move from one shot to the next? In other words: why put shots one after another?"⁶³

If the relationship between two images is thus described as the fundamental impulse for his own filmmaking, Godard later extends it to the determining aspect of film as a whole, particularly for the silent film. So it is difficult to designate the linking of images as the sharp criterion of a specific film genre, that of the essay film. As specifically as Godard uses the term, montage is one of the most general principles of filmmaking and can only be used to define a genre in its specific use. The next step, therefore, does not lead to a clear-cut generic definition but into the editing room.

63 Godard, *Introduction to a True History*, 113.