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“On the Origin of the Video Essay”

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Beginning with this Spring 2010 edition, *Blackbird* is featuring a new form of creative nonfiction we’ve chosen to call the video essay. In its intent the video essay is no different from its print counterpart, which for thousands of years has been a means for writers to confront hard questions on the page. The essayist pushes toward some insight or some truth. That insight, that truth, tends to be hard won, if at all, for the essay tends to ask more than it answers. That asking—whether inscribed in ancient mud, printed on paper, or streamed thirty frames per second—is central to the essay, is the essay.

So it’s been, since shortly after Christ, when a Delphic priest named Plutarch wondered which came first, the chicken or the egg. A thousand years later in Japan, Sei Shōnagon compiled a list in her *Pillow Book* of “Hateful Things” and “Things That Give a Hot Feeling.” These early works of nonfiction were meditations, lists, biographies, diary entries, advice. But it took an amateur in the time of Shakespeare—a French civil servant in midlife crisis who quit his job to become a writer—to attach a name to the act of exploring the limits of what we know. He called these works *Essais*. Attempts. Trials.

Michel de Montaigne drew thematic inspiration from Plutarch, but his meditations could be associative, rambling, prickly, polyvalent. Like Shōnagon’s. Which isn’t to say a personal assistant to the Japanese empress during the Heian dynasty shaped the work of Montaigne. She didn’t, so far as we know. But Shōnagon’s essay, “Things That Quicken the Heart,” is the central, soulful motif of Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1982), one of the first great film essays of our time. In *Sans Soleil* Marker channels his meditation on truth and memory through Sandor Krasna, an offscreen personage whose letters (in the English-language version) are voiced by Canadian actress Alexandra Stewart. Despite the fictional scrim, *Sans Soleil* remains solidly an essay, a work of nonfiction that casts multiple lines of inquiry—among them, how images rewrite memory—and renders them as poetic evocations of lived experience. Watching *Sans Soleil*, you can almost hear Chris Marker whisper, *Here is the problem of being alive right now*.

I suspect the heart-quickenning now of sound and image is what drew the otherwise reclusive Marker to film. And by reclusive I don’t mean he was a poet and novelist with a promising literary career ahead of him—though he was, too, that kind of recluse, a writer, before he was anything else. Today, on the eve of his 90th birthday, Marker is still making films, yet less than a dozen photographs of the man exist. He avoids media, rarely gives interviews. When Marker appears in Agnes Varda’s video essay *The Beaches of Agnes* (2008), he does so in the guise of a talking cat. Filmmakers who let their work speak for itself, who hold their audience in high esteem, do exist. But they’re rare. And how like an essayist to refuse to explain his work. How like a poet to grant his audience a lasting measure of imaginative space.

Chris Marker grew up in Neuilly, on the posh rim of the Bois de Boulogne outside Paris. Probably he read Montaigne as a boy—not from any precocity we know of, but rather because French kids read their Montaigne, just as they memorize the poems of Hugo and La Fontaine. After World War II, in which he fought for the resistance, he published a collection of poetry and, in 1949, his first novel. Then, like so many other writers and

critics seduced by the French New Wave—Godard, Rohmer, Truffaut—Marker turned to celluloid, and so, for that matter, did the rest of the world.

Alongside Jean Cayrol, Marker wrote uncredited for Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), a film essay about the Holocaust, a work that welds haunting visuals (and a color scheme Spielberg later cribbed for *Schindler's List*) to a refreshingly human voiceover. In a brilliant essay he wrote for *Threepenny Review*, Phillip Lopate describes that voiceover as *worldly, tired, weighted down with the need to make fresh those horrors that had so quickly turned stale. It was a self-interrogatory voice, like a true essayist's, dubious, ironical, wheeling and searching for the heart of its subject matter.* That voice, I suspect, is Marker's. And it's the lone voice, decidedly unobjective, that resides at the heart of the visual essay. Or film essay. Or video essay.

What do we name it, anyway—this thing, this half-essay, half-film?

Lopate calls this hybrid literary form a centaur. *I have an urge to see these two interests combined*, he writes, *through the works of filmmakers who commit essays on celluloid.* The essay-film, as he terms it, barely exists as a cinematic genre. And this confounds Lopate. He puzzles over the rarity of personal films that track a person's thoughts as she works through some mental knot. Why, he asks, aren't there more of these things?

Lopate cites "promiscuity of the image" as one reason for the rarity of essay-films—the tendency of the motion picture, owing to its density of information, to defy clear expression of a filmmaker's thoughts. And he gestures toward the belief, widely held in commercial film circles, that the screen resists language in higher densities. Even if an artist were to beat the odds, the thinking goes, even if she were to combine powerful visuals with an artful text and weave it all together with economy and grace, who'd pay twelve bucks at the cinema to see an essay?

That the image resists the precision of language is indeed a complication for the essayist. Much in the way, I would argue, that pianos complicate singing. That is to say another skill is called for but the payoff can be sublime. Images and sound are visceral stimuli that even animal sensoria can tap into. When my mother's Italian Greyhound sees another dog on TV, he lunges for it, tries to maul the Samsung. And when a fish takes its last dying gasp on a sunlit pier in Ross McElwee's *Time Indefinite* (1993), I'm consumed with sadness over our capacity for cruelty. Looking that creature in the eye while a young boy stomps on it, I find myself wanting to save the fish and stomp the boy. A canny essayist, McElwee knows that a literary text—the lone voice confronting hard questions—is only the beginning. Images and sound, those engines of emotion, have their own story to tell. Promiscuity of the image isn't a weakness of the essay-film. It's a feature. A volatile one, sure. And it's changing the way we write, changing our conception of what writing means.

Film is visual; the essay is not. Film is collaborative; the essay is not. Film requires big money; the essay costs little and makes less. Essays and film, Lopate notes, are two different animals, and I agree with him on one condition: that it's 1991. That's when Lopate wrote "In Search of the Centaur" for *Threepenny*. The internet was just a baby then, nursed by dweebs. Then, financial considerations reigned. If you wanted your film made, you first needed grants, financing, distributors. Today, to make a small-scale personal film, you can shoot the thing on an inexpensive digital camera and upload it to any number of free video sharing sites. In '91 you had to hustle for eyeballs. Now, of course, the artist still hustles (post a video in the middle of a digital forest, there's no guarantee it'll make a sound) but those once formidable barriers to entry—obtaining the

gear to shoot your film, and getting it in position to be seen—have been leveled by digital technology. As more literary magazines migrate online, editors are discovering that the old genre categories—fiction, nonfiction, poetry—which made perfect sense on the page, no longer do. The Internet is a conveyance for images and sound as well as text, and print media is scrambling to catch up.

Today artists have access to video editing tools that ship free on most computers. A generation ago, such capability didn't exist at any price. Now all it takes for a young artist to produce a documentary is an out-of-the-box Mac, a camera, and the will to see an idea through to its resolution. The act of writing has always been a personal pursuit, a concentrated form of thought. And now filmmaking, too, shares that meditative space. The tools are handheld, affordable, no less accessible than a Smith-Corona. You can shoot and edit video, compelling video, on a cell phone.

Brave new world, right? But what do we call it?

We're calling it the video essay. Because most of us experience the motion picture as video, not film. Film is analog. Film requires a shutter to convey motion. That shutter, Chris Marker told *Libération* in 2003, is what distinguishes film from video: *Out of the two hours you spend in a movie theater, you spend one of them in the dark. It's this nocturnal portion that stays with us, that fixes our memory of a film in a different way than the same film seen on television or on a monitor.* Video, on the other hand, from the way it's acquired (on small, light digital cameras with startling image quality) to the way it's consumed (on mobile devices, on planes, as shared links crossing the ether) is now being carried everywhere, the way books and magazines once were. And there's a certain texture to video, a telltale combination of compression artifacts, blown-out whites and noisy blacks that isn't pretty. But it's not ugly, either. It's real. (It may even be, as Don DeLillo once described it, realer than real.) The video essay. *Vidéo* from the Latin verb *vidēre*—to see. *Essay* in the Greek sense, meaning to ask. In the Japanese sense, to quicken the heart. In the French sense, to try. I can think of no better way to take on the problems of being alive right now than to write this way, with a pen in one hand and a lens in the other.