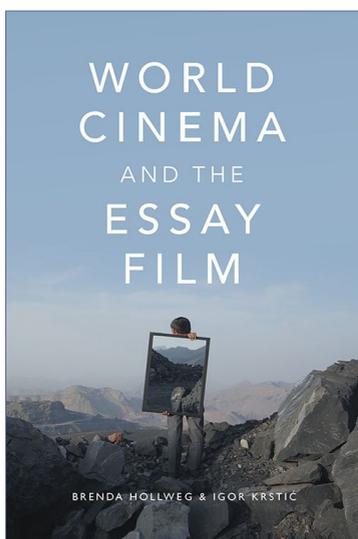


Mihai DRAGOLEA

World Cinema and the Essay Film: Research into Transnational Modes of Thought and Meaning-making



Review of:

World Cinema and the Essay Film: Transnational Perspectives on a Global Practice, edited by Brenda Hollweg and Igor Krištić.

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World Cinema and the Essay Film: Transnational Perspectives on a Global Practice, edited by Brenda Hollweg and Igor Krištić, raises the question whether essay films have lost their “radical potential” or have kept it intact. As it turns out, in the last decade—permeated with social, political and medical crises—the essay film, in fact, became an important ethical resource used by filmmakers to shed light on the problems experienced by many nations. In a truly globalized world, where people, geographies, and cultures are interconnected—as the current Covid-19 pandemic and the migratory waves that have impacted our planet show—the essay films can contribute to our “world-ing” practices (Hollweg and Krištić “Introduction” 2).

Mihai DRAGOLEA

Babeş-Bolyai University
mihai.dragolea@ubbcluj.ro

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THE ESSAY FILM
AS SELF-REPRESENTATIONAL MODE
pp. 193–197

By bringing together world cinema and the essay film, the main purpose of this collection is to survey various “essayistic practices” and to contextualize them in “exilic, diasporic or transnational contexts.” Brenda Hollweg and Igor Krstić manage to bring together multiple perspectives that expose the readers to several non-Western filmmakers and theorists in a dialogue with European film practitioners and authors, generating a positive space of in-betweenness made possible by the wide variety of articles and the many filmic examples presented within them.

The book is divided into five parts and includes a special section at the end (“Afterimages: A Photo Essay”). The opening part, titled “Cinephilic Dialogues,” includes conversations about meaning-making forms and practices. This is followed by “Mobilities and Movements,” in which the world essay films are linked to globalized events, and then “Laboratory of Memories,” connecting the essayistic mode of filmmaking with thinking and remembering. Part four, “Landscapes of Trauma,” showcases the essayistic practices of Japanese and Chinese filmmakers, and part five, “Archival Effects,” deals with personal archival materials and collaborative documentary practices.

Hollweg and Krstić point out from the start that their edited collection considers the essay film as a mode of thinking, an open process of attaining knowledge in a new globalized, but equally personalized, context. In Laura Rascaroli’s conversations with filmmakers in chapter 1, Nguyen Trinh Thi from Vietnam, Bo Wang from China, and Susana Barriga from Cuba, who consider their work to be essay films, present their essayistic practices and their thinking processes—self-reflexivity and autobiography among them—in an exploration of shared cognitive authorship. This discussion, together with Fernando Canet’s presentation of the project *The Complete Letters*, in which he focuses on the exchange of audiovisual correspondence between two exilic filmmakers, the Spanish José Luis Guerín (born in Barcelona) and the Lithuanian Jonas Mekas, create the adequate intellectual atmosphere of this book.

Part Two adds another in-depth interpretation to filmed correspondence between artists, with Igor Krstić discussing the “accented essay films” in a chapter titled “The Politics and Poetics of the Essay Film in the Age of Migration.” Krstić draws on the example of filmmakers such as John Akomfrah, Jeong-Hyun Mun or Sandra Kogut. In “Cottonopolis: Experimenting with the Cinematographic, The Ethnographic and the Essayistic,” filmmaker Cathy Greenhalgh discusses her own essayistic practices and the connection with Indian cinema, while engaging in conversation with relevant Indian filmmakers. Greenhalgh discusses ethnographic tools such as field notes and interviews, and refers to the incorporation of chance and accident in the films as experiences that allow viewers to engage with the work and be surprised, which from my own practical experience I can safely say is an effective tool for engaging viewers.

Giorgio Avezzu and Giuseppe Fidotta, in “The World Essay Film and the Politics of Traceability,” concern themselves with late capitalism and globalization, allowing the

appearance of what they call “World Essay Films.” Avezzu and Fidotta analyze the film *Ananas* (1984), made by Amos Gitai, about a pineapple that is cultivated in the Philippines, packaged in Honolulu, labelled in Japan and distributed in San Francisco. Avezzu and Fidotta stress the fact that post-industrialism, globalization and digitization have introduced a new form of invisibility into the circulation of all the most valuable things. Consequently, cinema itself also faces a new problem concerning the challenges that both the invisibility and the complexity of globalization pose to cinematic representation and to cinema’s traditional mission of making the world a knowable totality.

Another relevant example is the chapter written by Christa Blümlinger, which examines the provocative works of the Thai artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul. His works indicate how the various strategies in essayistic filmmaking are, in many ways, analogous to those of memory. This is close to an observation made by Mary Carruthers (1998), who links the “craft of composition” and the image-making processes to thought production. In “*Lovers in Time: An Essay Film of Contested Memories*,” Thomas Elsaesser explores the unstable nature of the essay films. Using filmmaker Agnieszka Piotrowska as a case study, the late film theorist exemplifies how the performative documentary can handle traumas and personal experiences through practice-based cinematic and dramaturgic research. Author and filmmaker Agnieszka Piotrowska reflects on how knowledge is formed in a film and how much of it is inflected by one’s subjectivity, a phenomenon David Bordwell, in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, calls “schemata,” organized clusters of knowledge that guide our hypothesis making (31). As the filmmakers using practice-based essay modes of expression reveal their thinking processes to their viewers through self-reflexivity processes and autobiographical involvement, subjectivity can work both for and against the essay films.

Another important topic of this book is illustrated by the chapter “Indigenous Australia and the Archive Effect: Frances Calvert’s *Talking Broken* as Essay Film,” in which Peter Kilroy analyzes Frances Calvert’s documentary films. How this non-Indigenous Australian filmmaker presents the Torres Strait islanders, is relevant for colonial and post-colonial essay film practices. These local inhabitants remained virtually unknown until 1988 when they made a brief claim for independence. By watching Calvert’s film, viewers who had no prior knowledge of these islanders become engaged in a participatory activity, one in which the archival materials are transformed into “citational practices,” integral to the reflexive capacities of the essay film.

Ilana Feldman, in “Between Autobiography, Personal Archive and Mourning: David Perlov’s *Diary 1973–1983* in Tel Aviv,” explores the personal and political dimensions of David Perlov’s *Diary* in the context of his biography. As Perlov was born in Brazil and lived in Israel, Portugal and France, his personal photos and visual archives are reservoirs of meanings offered to the viewers, by means of collages containing, for example, Carl Dreyer’s film *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) juxtaposed to Vincent Van Gogh’s lithograph *Sorrow*

(1882). Feldman recounts her own experiences as researcher and questions the implied neutrality of the researcher, explaining her participatory involvement in the relationship she nurtured with Perlov as she was entrusted with his personal archive.

By bringing together such a variety of contributions, Hollweg and Kristić help the readers understand the ways in which contemporary essay filmmakers think. The readers become acquainted with a multitude of viewpoints in a tableau of cinematic voices that often comes to life. Through the shared practices of meaning-making, we also grasp the world as a larger reality, simultaneously endowed with an intimate and personal dimension. We can assemble our own particular ways of seeing and understanding. As Tim O’Farrell notes, there is a “prismatic” view that the essay films can provide. Using Grant Gee’s essay film *Innocence of Memories* (2019), which addresses both personal experiences and public issues in the culture and history of Istanbul, the author exemplifies how the essay film can function as a palimpsest, a medley of meanings.

Films that explore issues regarding global natural disasters and climate change related-practices are also important in contemporary essayistic approaches. Marco Bohr, in “No Man’s Zone: The Essay Film in the Aftermath of the Tsunami in Japan,” highlights how the philosophical debate about the role of images produced in a disaster zone is conveyed primarily through the aesthetic, formal and structural device of the essay film. In *No Man’s Zone* (2012), the director Toshi Fujiwara is seen interacting with local residents during interviews or depicted traversing the ravaged landscape. Thus Bohr observes that his film is less about a disaster than about a filmmaker attempting to understand the disaster. By using an essayistic form, Fujiwara has not simply made a film about a complex, surreal and often contradictory crisis, but actually made the crisis visible and personal. In “Image-Writing: The Essayistic/*Sanwen* in Chinese Nonfiction Cinema and Zhao Liang’s *Behemoth*,” Kiki Tianqi Yu explores other film practices of experimenting through moving images. Tianqi Yu does a close reading of Zhao Liang’s *Behemoth* (2015), and its uses of parallelisms and juxtapositions. Zhao Liang’s essay film deals with the harsh realities of coal mining in Mongolia, and the filmmaker comments critically on sensitive issues and people, stifled by an oppressive context. Liang uses associative montage techniques (parallelism and juxtaposition of shots and scenes) to create tension between the rapidly shrinking green pastures and the deadly effects of the massive toxic mining industry. Viewers are shown a consciousness of the world, and in an indirect manner the filmmaker can adopt an eco-critical attitude which can only be addressed through cinematic processes.

The last part of the volume includes a remarkable contribution from Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, literary theorist, composer, and academic, Trinh T. Minh-ha, who explores the natural landscapes and anthropic influenced environments of Vietnam in a photo-essay titled “Strangely Real: A Reassemblage from the Film *Forgetting Vietnam*.” This encompasses topics such as memory, environment, auto-reflexivity, subjectivity and

associative cinematic techniques, exploring the possibility to generate new meanings and ways of seeing. Here the illustrations and the text function as a stream of consciousness, activated by an act of contemplation. As viewers, we are invited to fill in the gaps and reflect on the endangered balance between the natural and the artificial.

To conclude, *World Cinema and the Essay Film: Transnational Perspectives on a Global Practice* manages to perform a double function. Readers are presented with concepts related to changes in the essay film practices and, at the same time, are given access to the solutions encountered by filmmakers in a transnational environment.

Works Cited

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Author's short bio:

Mihai Gavril Dragolea specializes in documentary and hybrid fiction filmmaking. He made some films that premiered at important film festivals in Europe and have garnered awards. Some of them are *The Golden Robot* (2015), *PhoeniXXX* (2017), *One month of their life* (2017), *Everything for Riana* (2020), and *A dog's life* (to be released in 2022). His documentaries focus on the destitute and unrepresented in the media, be it humans or other type of vulnerable sentient beings, on which subject he is also doing a PhD. He lectures on Documentary Practice, among other subjects, at the Faculty of Theater and Film of Babeş-Bolyai University.