

III. Book reviews

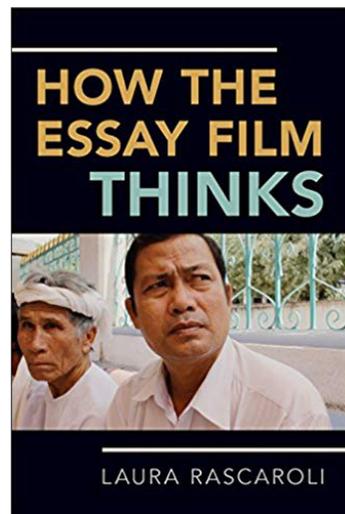
Mihai DRAGOLEA

Thinking Between the Gaps, the Essay Film's Mechanisms

Review of: Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

Laura Rascaroli's scholarly interests span in from art film, modernism and postmodernism, to film theory, spatiality and geopolitics, nonfiction, the essay film, and first-person cinema. This enduring interest in broad theoretical questions includes realism and representation, subjectivity and first-person expression in film, and communicative negotiation. Her latest book, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (2017) focuses on the mechanisms of reading and engaging the essay film and although the book's title positions us within the "mind" of the film as object, after reading Rascaroli's book one is compelled to ponder on the intellectual relationship the essay film engages.

In this current work the essay film is understood as a dialogue between enunciator/narrator and spectator (Rascaroli 32), as Rascaroli acknowledges the spectatorial experience of the essay film. The main interest of this book lies with addressing the dialectical tension between juxtaposed or interacting filmic elements and the gaps that this method



Mihai DRAGOLEA

Doctoral School of Film Studies
Babeş-Bolyai University
Email: dragolea.mihai@yahoo.com

EKPHRASIS, 2/2018

CINEMA, COGNITION AND ART
pp. 226-230

of juxtaposition opens in the text (33-34). The author maintains that the spaces of in-betweenness, created by the modes in which the essay film is constructed, are key elements in moving beyond logocentrism and understanding the inner workings of this extremely debated genre. As Rascaroli herself puts it, in the essay film thinking capitalizes on discontinuity (Rascaroli 8).

How the *Essay Film Thinks* is structured in seven main chapters, each bringing into discussion and reflection different aspects of filmmaking such as: montage, genre, temporality, narration, sound, framing and image. These concepts are analyzed using relevant film examples for each case. In the Introduction chapter the author gives away a key concept of understanding, that the confrontation of elements within the essay film produces something new, that is, a new image of thought (Rascaroli 3). Understanding, observing and reflecting on the interstice becomes the methodology Rascaroli proposes through her current work.

This practice is also used in the interactive non-fiction film, thus coined by Bill Nichols in his book, *Representing Reality* (Nichols 1991, 49). The interactive mode of meaning making lies in the relation established between filmmaker, social actor and spectator. This form of documentary film appears to also have a performance side to it, the present tense of the encounters within the film create a witness centred argument, rather than a voice of God, authorial one. The *Essay film* also makes use of the interaction between filmmaker, spectator and characters but in a different way. While in interactive documentary films the argument takes place on screen, by the engagement the filmmaker makes with the characters on specific issues, the viewer being most of the times enmeshed with the filmmaker in this meta process, Rascaroli sees the essay film reading quite different – rather than pretending to discover things, the essayist asks many questions and only offers few or partial answers (Rascaroli 16).

The first chapter, *Liquid Image, Fluid Cinema*, makes use of Aleksandr Sokurov's film, *Elegy of a Voyage* (2001), in order to exemplify how the essay film's images are working in disjunction with each other in order to make sense of a given concept. In *Elegy of a Voyage* the narrator, who is sunk in a disconcerting reverie throughout the film, is disconnected from himself, from thought, and from the world around him, thus the images flow in a liquid manner/flux (Rascaroli 32). The film's director, Aleksandr Sokurov, engages with the shots at a first person level, he sometimes appears onscreen, trying to create linkages between himself and the shots taken. The most relevant director intervention takes place during the museum sequence. Here the filmmaker seems to finish his physical/geographic journey through Europe (from Siberia to a museum in Rotterdam), only to undertake another trip, one that takes him within the picture frames that are exposed at the museum. The camera zooms in and out, freezes frames and often focuses on details within the pictures, the gaze of the director is synonymous with the curious camera-work, thus the painting grants the video textural richness and tactility, and video grants the painting temporal duration.

Laura Rascaroli sees the director/narrator as being disconnected from himself, from thought, and from the world around him (35). A disjunction appears due to the

nature of the involvement within the film. Rascaroli believes the film is in danger of disassemble, only to be held together by fluidity, the unifying visual and conceptual force of the film's probing of issues of history, society, identity, subjectivity, culture, art, and the cinema (Rascaroli 46).

Rascaroli respects a certain filmmaking order in the book. After discussing the image she centers our attention onto montage. The author is not interested in the classical way of creating meaning through montage, editing images towards an unified whole, the author brings forward a view that is concerned on the meaning generated by the impact of colliding different images, sequences, the disjunctive role of dialectical montage.

Harun Faroki's *Respite* (2007) is used to illustrate the concept of letting a new image sprung out from the junctures of, and in the gaps between, passing images (Rascaroli 26). *Respite* consists of silent black-and-white films shot at Westerbork, a Dutch refugee camp established in 1939 for Jews fleeing Germany. In 1942, after the occupation of Holland, its function was reversed by the Nazis and it became a 'transit camp.' In 1944, the camp commander commissioned a film, shot by a photographer, Rudolph Breslauer.

Taking this process as a source of inspiration, Harun Farocki chose to place the peaceful sequences of Westerbork in resonance with other tragic scenes and images from World War II, that populate the collective memory and imagination. These connections arguably do not result in progress, in the development of schemata. In narrative cinema, the film offers structures of information – narrative system and stylistic system that encourage the spectator to execute story constructing activities (David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 2014). Farocki avoids constructing an overarching narrative of the Westerbork camp, of the Breslauer film, or of the Holocaust. Laura Rascaroli suggests that re-winding the footage, Farocki creates respites or gaps into which the spectators may insert their own repertoire of images of the Holocaust (56). As in narrative cinema, these respites are meant to forestall the relentless logic of automatically attributed meaning. The retardation of information, what Hitchcock calls frustration (Bordwell 44), gains whole new levels in essay films as the director, positions himself not as a producer of images and schemata but as a critical spectator of the world as image (Rascaroli 66). Procedural and template schemata (a search of appropriate motivations and relations of causality, time and space) are substituted by dialectical montage that generates an intellectual dialogue, established when or if the spectator and filmmaker are on the same level of involvement and prior acquired knowledge.

When discussing about temporality in essay films Laura Rascaroli focuses on temporal interstitially and diptychs (pairing two films). In the case of the fine arts, the "activation" of a diptych, that is to say, the actualization of its effects and meanings, can be said to take place in the space between the two plates. Laura Rascaroli expands the diptych concept to essay films, by using Cynthia Beatt's two movies *Cycling the Frame* (1988) and *Invisible Frame* (2009). By being a pair, with the second film

being a remake reload—of the first, *Cycling the Frame* and the *Invisible Frame* attract attention to a series of dualities that are brought into being by their contra-position, including past and present, before and after, presence and absence, memory and oblivion (Rascaroli 99).

Both films feature Tylda Swinton riding her bike in Berlin, 20 years apart. The journey is the same, but the filming did not always take place in the same locations, although some recur; the locations themselves have changed in the course of twenty years—and the second film takes advantage of the freedom to shoot in the eastern side of the city. Laura Rascaroli observes that when watching the two films one after the next, as a diptych, further meanings are activated and new meaning is generated by their in-betweenness. Both films can stand alone but as a pair a new discourse emerges. The 20 year gap invites the spectator to ponder on the visible evidence of the passing of time, of history in its development and constant changes.

Rascaroli enforces her main argument of the book, that the space created by interstice, may it be through montage, images or a diptych in this case, makes way for a new argument. From the in-betweenness established between the two Beatt's films, surfaces engagement of the spectator in a process of readjustments of the present incongruity, giving rise to new intertextual meaning.

When discussing sound in essay film the author comes to a slightly different conclusion than in the montage, image and duration cases. Rascaroli explains that sound's power to produce meaning that can contradict as well as complete the verbal strata. The example, *La rabbia* (1963) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, used in the argument is not quite exemplary as the whole film is a dissonance. Sound here neither contradicts nor sustains the message. Laura Rascaroli also brings into discussion Álvarez's film, *Now* (1965). The short film manages to create unity between the sound and image mediums, a precursor of modern video-clips. A montage of photographs, reframed and edited together in such a way that the soundtrack song's call (*Now is the moment!*) brings the argument forward and makes it stronger and clearer. A similar case may be made for expositional documentary films, where the voiceover is accompanied by music in order to conceptualise feelings and emotions, bridging stronger dramatic relationships between viewer and film..

Narration wise, essay film is centred upon the narrator's voice, the I if you will. Laura Rascaroli begins her argument by citing Harun Farock: To me, narration and argumentation are still very closely linked. I strongly hold that discourses are a form of narration (Farocki and Hüser 2004 313). This gives the author a suitable starting point is observing how narrative works in essay argumentation, moreover in finding, again, how narrative generates meaning by the all present disjunction, interstice processes present in the essay genre.

Rascaroli acknowledges narration as a form of cohesion, but she sees narration as another field of disjunction and in-betweens, most of the times undoing itself as a process (145). The essay film is a performative venture, thus the readjustments the narrator or character undergo are visible, thus coincide with the film's narrative arch.

So we can trace the narrative disjunction to the subjective view of the film's director/narrator/character. By not having a clear progression, rather a vague investigation, the essay film insists that the viewer takes part in the director's intellectual reflections, thus the narrative becomes more volatile, nor cause and effect based but reflective oriented. Rascaroli sees narration not as a fictional layer, superimposed on the documentary matter, but as a fundamental component of the argumentation. As the spectators are invited to search for narrative points of view.

Similarly to the narration process. Rascaroli introduces framing as a visible search for an object, either in the living image of the world or within film or photo archives (189). As narrative perspective shifts, framing is the process through which the essayistic object is not in evidence, is not natural, but must be looked for, and that this process is always a fabrication and the selection of a perspective (Rascaroli 171). Framing becomes a performative act of essayistic reflection, an active practice of thinking made by the filmmaker, relativizing the essay endeavour. What is distinctive of the essay film is its shifting perspectives, its positioning, and its distance from the world; the visible result of this labor is that the essay film detaches objects from their background, thus introducing a gap of potentiality between object and world (Rascaroli 190).

Laura Rascaroli tries to demonstrate the idea that the essay film is a dialectical form that thinks not exclusively through verbal commentary, but also via an audiovisual and narrative disjunctive practice, that creates textual gaps from which new meanings are allowed to emerge. As I mentioned before, the book explores the in-between spaces and interstitial gaps present in this genre, claiming that they are of non-verbal nature, but the problem arises when thinking about how these gaps are created. While the author sees them as non-verbal or non-logocentric, their meaning making mechanism is centred on an inner intellectual verbal discourse, that has little to do with cinematic techniques/language. While the narrative film uses specific modes of creating arguments and telling a message through cinematic language, in the essay film the spectator has to think out loud, to verbalise what he has witnessed on screen and try to make intellectual verbal links between narration, perspective, framing, montage and sound. Thus, the essay film is very much confined in a textual base, the confrontation of images, sounds, reframing of photographs and the narrative voice are all subordinated to a logocentric, literary and argumentative view of cinema.

Works Cited

- Bordwell, David, 2014. "Narration in the Fiction Film", Oxon: Routledge.
- Farocki, Harun, and Rembert Hüser, 2004. "Nine Minutes in the Yard. A Conversation with Harun Farocki." In Harun Farocki. Working on the Sightlines, edited by Thomas Elsaesser.
- Nichols, Bill, 1991. "Representing Reality", Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Rascaroli, Laura, 2017. "How the Essay Film Thinks", Oxford: Oxford University Press.