

ANALYSING CHRIS MARKER'S SANS SOLEIL: A STUDY OF ESSAY FILM

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Literary essay and essayistic films are tremendously unique forms of criticism, because they essentially depend on senses, perception, understanding and what Lukacs calls “solely on the strength of my feeling”. Essay in any form is an authentic fusion of the subjective and the objective. This is not a search for something new, but a search for the already existent concealed entities, lying deep and dark within the folds of the ‘self’. Lukacs himself insists: We are not concerned here with replacing something by something else, but with something essentially new something that remains untouched by the complete approximate attainment of scientific goals. (4, *Soul and Form*) For Adorno however, the essay film in its texture is somewhat disjointed and constantly seeks to avoid tantalization. He says that “the essay’s innermost formal law is hereby”. (Retallack 55). While a literary essay is instantly recognizable, its transition and manifestation into the cinematic form could be a little erratic, both structurally and conceptually. Paul Arthur argues. Among other differences, since film operator simultaneously on multiple discursive levels image, speech titles, music – the literary essay’s single determining voice is dispersed into cinema’s multi channel stew. The manifestation or location of a film author’s “voice” can shift from moment to moment or surface expressively via montage, camera movement and so on. (59, *The Essay as Form*) Essay film seems to develop their central argument into the course of being made. They put forth the struggle against certain critical practices and procedures and their attempt to find new ones to fit this particular approach to films. Such films struggle and search to find an appropriate critical language which in one way or another, forms the substance of the film. In an essay film, the self is seen as a text whose meaning lies in its struggle with itself, a meaning which it revises and rewrites, hence, in a way makes this reading of self; a form of interpretation from the analysis of the individual entities constituting of self, a progression is traced, which in turn widens the scope of the reflexive practices. In the process of tracing the self and assimilating it, we negotiate both with the resistance as well as the receptivity of the self. Essay film questions the independent existence of ‘reality’ outside the ‘self’ and due to its reflexive and analytical practices endlessly delays the site of conclusive unity. An essay film, as a process, intertwines

certain stylistic and aesthetic characteristics, into its peculiar form: repetitions, at times arbitrary repetitions of words and images, a stylistic quality of unfinishedness and open-endedness. Such films serve as an embodiment of felicity of expression, ambiguous meaning and complexity of treatment and subject matter. One cannot fail to notice the multiplicity and plurality of placement in an essay film. Its denoted subject i.e. the self is plural, fragmented, incomplete, uncomposed and possibly scattered in its intentions and projection. And this trope of scattering and fragmentation becomes clearer as the film critically engages with the self. The open-endedness and scattered temperament of the essay films has led me to approach them using the notion of 'intertextuality'. The word 'intertextuality' in a specific sense of the word where the subject of an essay film. Each essay film, with self as its text, is made up of recognizable assortment of entities which recur within the fabric of the larger self-reflexive discourse. Thus 'intertextuality' refers to examining the entities and also identifying the self-reflexive discourse, which all the essay film also constantly refer to. Julia Kristeva defines 'intertextuality' as a term which denotes.

[T] his transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of 'study of sources', we prefer the term transposition because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of thethetic – of enunciative and denotation positionality. If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transposition of various signifying systems (an intertextuality), one then understands that its 'place' of enunciation and its denoted 'object' are never single, complete and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated. Another concern which arises is how the plurality of placement of self in an essay film has affected its reading: what politics and subversions do they represent, and in what ideological context do they exist. The essay itself somewhat similar to Jacques Derrida's idea of *aporia*. In *A Handbook to Literature*, for example, *aporia* is identified as "a difficulty, impasse or point of doubt and indecision." (Harmon 39). Derrida, however, employed the term to 'indicate a point of undecidability, which locates the site at which the text most obviously undermines its own rhetorical structure, dismantles or deconstructs itself." (Kofman). What an essay film undertakes is replacing meaning by non-meaning, without disturbing the closed frame around the text of self. An essay film looks for self, but it is gone. The boundaries of the being disappear into the humdrum of the outer world. The essay film however instills a sense of awareness, whereby a voice returns to oneself. This awareness turns on itself and foams, and with every foaming bit, another body, another being takes form; for whatever we are looking for can only be found inside of us. Adorno argues that: Thought does not progress in a single direction. He insists that the moments of thought are 'interwoven as in a carpet', their reception and assimilation 'depends on the density of the texture. The thinker does not actually think but makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience without unraveling it. He further asserts that, "the essay is the critical form par excellence, as immanent critique of intellectual construction, as a confrontation of what they are with their concept, it is a critique of ideology." (20) The essay film increasingly concentrates on disruptions and aberrations within the traditional notion and concentrates on self. It demands from its reader an imaginative leap, a leap which it undertakes on its own to produce a circularity of vision and also the lack of a fixed Centre. This aforementioned imagination, at times, soars in altitude at times it pauses, lingers, may even stoop and eventually in its puzzling, haunting dislocation of meaning finds traces of self-reflexivity. There is an assertion on viewing the images of the self, in isolation, in close up, and this reception of the 'self' by our senses, in turn, creates meaningful disturbances in the whole fabric of our being. Essay films insist on adopting an idiosyncratic personal opinion, incorporating a tremendously polemical voice and submerging itself completely into a state of artistic transcendentalism. On a crucial level, it serves as the criticism and parody of the self by drawing attention to itself, as a means of exposing the limits with a free play of self-reflexivity; and therefore a fair attempt at communicating the

incommunicable. An essay film is undoubtedly drawn from life: a life seen, a life lived, a life seen but not lived but not seen; a life which somehow evades transcends and escapes all the rules of expression and signification. Chris Marker interrogates the manifestation of self-reflexive practices in the film *Sans Soleil*. *Sans Soleil* is a 1983 French film with running time of 100 minutes. The title is taken from *Sunless*, the song cycle composed in 1874 by Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, a Russian composer. As a true auteur Chris Marker is the writer, director, editor and the cinematographer of this film. This film mediates on the nature of human memory and its radical impact on the perception of personal as well as global histories. *Sans Soleil* was an accumulation of his cinematic experience. Hence, it is pertinent to attend to his assembly of films involving Japan before reaching the juncture where *Sans Soleil* exploded. Japan had been the object of Marker's fancy and curiosity. He filmed Japan, pondered over it, re-visited and re-filmed it, pondered over it again and presented it in intensely poetic manner. For him Japan was a virtual hole, filled with explosive neon imagery, a parade ground of idiosyncratic indulgences and a preoccupation to be revealed. Daniel Potter projects Marker's fantasy for Japan, as displayed in *Sans Soleil* thus: Chris Marker finds in Tokyo a living cinema, a city on display constantly and basking in the proliferation of the image and the media landscape (as in a scene of a few poor men watching a huge bank of TV screens displaying a major sumo wrestling match). There is a surveillance of the viewer by Japanese television – the eyes of prostrate women look straight into ours. The gaze is male, and murderous – filming is murder, as it presences but also kills memory, and Marker cannot circumnavigate desire in his filming – a visual adulation of women, in short suffuses the film.(4)

Sans Soleil testifies Graham Good's suggestion that the aim of the essay is to "preserve something of the process of thinking." (Good 20). Marker hints at the mystery surrounding the unseeing movement of time, memory, their ongoing encounter, occasional fragmentation and how their perverse relation infiltrates every corner of human existence. Hans he comments: In asking what time it is, Marker may perhaps be asking what it is time for in addition to reflecting on temporality itself. With which has been obscured, that which has been ignored, that which has been eclipsed, that which has been disfigured and that which erupts from us without control, spontaneously, our becoming animal, which is both beautiful and terrifying.(29) Time as a notion, involves a strategy of transition and it essentially spaces away frames of moments from one another. *Sans Soleil* incorporates this strategy into the essayistic format and project a location from another time and place. It moves to a number of international locations and so does the voice over. Potter says: There is a transcendental homelessness to *Sans Soleil*, and it represents one of the most poignant aspects of the masterpiece, as expressed for instance in the two sequences from Iceland, one filmed by Marker of three blond children walking on a country road, one filmed a year later by Harun Tazieff, footage of the volcano eruption which covers the town where Marker lived and filmed, and where his memory is trapped.(2) The geographically spaced out images and sounds imply that image and sound can never coincide or be internalized as one which, in turn, veil the momentum of image and sound from the perspective of memory. This technique is frightfully intellectual and effectively dramatic in stimulating the idea of impermanence of time and memory. The whole film utilizes reflexive narrative technique wherein the present constantly interrupts the past and vice-versa. There is a constant break in the commentary and the flow of imagery juxtaposed with change in setting, as if it is entirely shot from the hindsight. And within these endless pauses and digressions Marker positions the experience of human memory in a capsule of timelessness. Time and memory are sometimes positioned as a contagious comic failure and sometimes as a misunderstood personal tragedy. Rainer J. Hanshe points out: In form, Marker articulates the anguish of ruptured time through the continuously recurring digital feeds of the video installation as well as his refusal to close his text with periods – nothing ever ends and nothing can ever end. There are only brief pauses and questions. To truly experience the

implications of the work then, to be jettisoned into timelessness, one must view it several times in a single duration, and its density warrants this continuous engagement. (30). Image serves as the catalyst for memory. Image is what carries us from one realm to another, to past, present or future, to a certain state of timelessness; a state where sensibility can romp around fearlessly without the concerns of time, place or memory. *Sans Soleil* is not a linear kind of memoir, it is broken in experimental fragments; a fusion of trance and madness. The fabric of this film embraces a loose association of the faceless and the sightless time, even if it is a single tender moment. Philip Lopate comments: Place and homesickness are natural objects of the essay film: *Sans Soleil* is a meditation on place in the jet age, where spatial availability confuses the sense of time and memory. Unlike Wim Wenders, who keeps whining (in *Tokyo Ga* and elsewhere) that every place is getting to look like every other place – an airport – Marker has an appetite for geography and local difference; his lament is that, if anything, he feels a home in too many places. (251).

He bombards the screen, with a series of non-conformist imagery, immerses in oppositional stances; transforming the content into a contemporary even. *Sans Soleil* evokes a complex philosophy of time and building a palace for memory; a palace he built, a palace he never leaves, a palace where he continues to walk back and forth. There is a totally different energy that seeps in, an energy that is sometimes angry, sometimes positive and almost always finds an excuse to jump forward. This jumping forward can be best understood by a scene in *Sans Soleil* (as shown in the figure below) where two Cape Verde man are seen hugging each other in celebration and the narrator announces: “To understand it properly one must move forward in time. In a year Luis Cabral, the President, will be in prison, and the weeping man he has just decorated, Major Nino will have taken power.” (*Sans Soleil*).

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