

## CHAPTER 6

# Narration

### *Epistolarity and Lyricism as Argumentation*

[T]o me, narration and argumentation are still very closely linked. I strongly hold that discourses are a form of narration. (Farocki and Hüser 2004, 313)

As outlined in Chapter 5, the prevalent understanding of the essay film is colored by a logocentric perspective. This is in no small part a result of its derivation from the literary essay, as well as the influence of a specific tradition, that of French 1950s and 1960s “Left Bank” cinema, best embodied by Chris Marker with films like *Sans Soleil* (1983). In his early contribution on the essay film, André Bazin (2003) wrote indeed of Marker’s approach: “I would say that the primary material is intelligence, that its immediate means of expression is language, and that the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence” (44). This book positioned itself differently and moved beyond the emphasis on verbal intelligence, as well as the classificatory urge to define the essay film on the basis of a series of generic features, bringing the issues of functioning, rather than of essence, to the fore. The current chapter will nevertheless engage with voiceover, but as part of the narrative function that is present in all essay films, even in the least logocentric ones. Narration in the essay film has normally been linked to the expression of subjectivity and most directly to the narrating “I.” As Timothy Corrigan (2011) has suggested,

An expressive subjectivity, commonly seen in the voice or actual presence of the filmmaker or a surrogate, has become one the most recognizable signs of the essay film, sometimes quite visible in the film, sometimes not. Just as the first-person presence of

the literary essay often springs from a personal voice and perspective, so essay films characteristically highlight a real or fictional persona whose quests and questionings shape and direct the film in lieu of a traditional narrative and frequently complicate the documentary look of the film with the presence of a pronounced subjectivity or enunciating position. (30)

Whereas in a previous study of the essay film I devoted significant attention to the enunciator and to the expression of subjectivity through voiceover (Rascaroli 2009), here, in line with the specific aims and concerns of the current investigation, I will focus on problems of usage and on the functioning of narrative operations in light of strategies of in-betweenness and gap. I argue that narration, intended as the act of telling a story via specific narrative structures, is not to be seen as a separate layer, as the superimposition of a fictional element on documentary matter—a layering that has often been characterized as the essence of the essay film. I argue, indeed, that the essay film is not merely a hybrid, a documentary film with a nonfictional component; rather, it is a specific form of textuality, and narration is a constitutive element of its epistemological and signifying strategies. Argumentation and narration, in fact, are one and the same; as Harun Farocki (Farocki and Hüser 2004) has rightly remarked, “discourses are a form of narration” (313). Consequently, my aim in this chapter is to unravel how narration expresses argumentation by capitalizing on the essay form’s disjunctive ethos. More in detail, this chapter coincides with an investigation of the fragility that is intrinsic to the essay form, of its potentiality for breaking down, for disassemblage—which was first explored in the introduction via an engagement with work by theorists such as Adorno, Deleuze, Burch, and Bensmaïa. The chapter will also deal with counternarration, that is, with strategies that sabotage narrative structuring.

Narration is not simply equivalent with narrative voice; narrative form and style, point of view, focalization, ordering of events, and temporality are some of the textual elements that participate in the process of telling a story. Taking all these elements into account, this chapter will explore two case studies of narration and counternarration in the essay film. The first is the letter. Janet Gurkin Altman (1982) defined epistolarity as “the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning” (4), and this is precisely the focus of the first part of the chapter. My aim will be to investigate how epistolary narratives shape essayistic meaning, as an example of the range of narrative forms on which the essay film may draw. The second part of the chapter will reflect on a counternarrative mode: lyricism. I refer to lyricism as counternarrative for its propensity to fragmentariness, incompleteness, and lacuna and for it being a force that produces meanings associated not to story or

rational discourse, but to affect. The aim is to show how argumentation can be constructed also through poetic affect and aesthetic form.

Overall, the aim of this chapter is to explore some of the ways in which narrative too is a field of disjunction in the essay film. This is a potentially contested notion, because narrative normally is what keeps a text together; it is its fabric itself. The task, therefore, is to show how narration contains the possibility of its own undoing and how this equates with meaning-making in the essay film.

### DEAR SPECTATOR: ADDRESS, DISTANCE, AND SELF-EVALUATION IN THE FILM-LETTER

The letter is to be found at the heart of the tradition of essay filmmaking that may be said to originate with Chris Marker. Many of Marker's films are, indeed, epistolary, including *Letter from Siberia*, in which the male narrator addresses an unidentified recipient who comes to coincide with the spectator; *Sans Soleil*, with a female narrator reading letters that were sent to her by cameraman Sandor Krasna, an alter-ego of the director; *Le tombeau d'Alexandre* (*The Last Bolshevik*, 1992), made in the form of six video letters posthumously addressed to the late Soviet filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin; and *Level Five* (1997), in which a woman addresses her disappeared lover and, through him, the spectator. Marker's repeated choice of this narrative mode, sometimes coupled with the travelogue, has at least two implications that are worth highlighting for the purposes of the current discussion. The first is the connection between Marker's films and the philosophical epistolary essay. This long-standing tradition, which goes back as far as the Hellenistic age and philosophers such as Epicurus, flourished among the Romans, counting examples such as Cicero and Seneca—for whom “the epistolary essay [. . .] became a literary type of the highest order” (Hassler 2012, 478); it then continued in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Alexander Pope, Voltaire), through to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Edmund Burke, Thomas Malthus). Meaningfully, one of the key theorizations of the essay form, by György Lukács (2010), was written in the form of a letter to Leo Popper.

The second aspect uncovered by Marker's use of the form is that the reflective stance in epistolary essays is coupled with a particular form of address; to quote Catherine Lupton's (2006) description of *Letters from Siberia*'s voiceover, this “uses the intimate and seductive address of the personal letter to draw the viewer directly into the scene” (54). In other words, the choice to debate philosophical issues via the epistle generates an intimate, shared space, in which argumentation takes on a personal and

inviting tone. This may be best seen in Marker's *Level Five*, in which the protagonist addresses her missive "to her absent lover as viewer or perhaps also to her viewers as distant discursive lovers" (Murray 2000, 119). Arguing that epistolarity is what links Marker to Henri Michaux, indeed, Raymond Bellour (1997) wrote that "[t]he letter, for Michaux, is only the crystalline form of a larger manner of always addressing the reader, of calling upon him with all the means of the language" (111).

Although Marker frequently positioned his work between the traditions of the philosophical essay, the travelogue, and the letter, epistolary cinema is a form frequently used by displaced, exiled, and diasporic filmmakers—such as Atom Egoyan, Chantal Akerman, and Jonas Mekas, among many others. Accordingly, the epistolary form in film was most thoroughly explored by Hamid Naficy in his work on accented cinema. Letter-film is the term introduced by Naficy (2001) to describe films that "are themselves in the form of epistles addressed to someone either inside or outside the diegesis" (101) and that are distinguished from films that inscribe the diegetic characters' act of writing and/or reading letters. Naficy's investigation sets off from the observation that "[e]xile and epistolarity are constitutively linked because both are driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss and by the desire to bridge the multiple gaps" (101). The position from which the narrative emanates in epistolary cinema is one of distance, which is at once emphasized and overcome by the intimate address. The adoption of an epistolary address is, indeed, particularly apt to inscribe a disjunction that deeply colors the narration, and I will argue in what follows that this is precisely what its use has to offer to the distinctive practices of the essay film.

Naficy has also explored the complex dialogical relations in epistolary films, where addresser and addressee can be diegetic, extradiegetic, or both, and has highlighted how self-reflexivity and self-referentiality are frequently to be found at the core of their project: "Epistolary filmmaking also entails a dialogue with the self by the filmmaker, as well as self-evaluation" (2001, 104). This is another element of the epistle that is germane to the essay film. Finally, the letter is, like the diary, a form that radically mixes and merges private notations and commentary on public matters, the record of both everyday life and momentous events, thus lending to the epistolary essay film its hybrid approach.

All these elements will be emphasized and explored in the discussion that follows, which focuses on the case study of an epistolary essay film by Nguyễn Trinh Thi. Other examples from both past and recent productions include, in addition to Chris Marker's films, Roger Leenhardt's *Lettre de Paris* (1945), an epistolary portrait of Paris in 1945; Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Le Mura Di Sana'a* (*The Walls of Sana'a*, 1971), a plea to UNESCO to protect

Yemen's endangered cultural patrimony; Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Lettre à Jane* (*Letter to Jane*, 1972), a critique of a photograph of Jane Fonda in Vietnam; Jean-Luc Godard's *Lettre à Freddy Buache* (*A Letter to Freddy Buache*, 1981), an exploration of the director's inability to make a film commissioned by the city of Lausanne on the occasion of the five-hundredth anniversary of the town's founding; Eric Pauwels's *Lettre à Jean Rouch* (1992), an essayistic discussion of the inheritance of Jean Rouch and of the essence of the cinema itself; Pauwels's *Lettre d'un cinéaste à sa fille* (1998), an exploration of memory and storytelling; Rebecca Baron's *okay bye-bye* (1998), which, through an epistolary address, examines issues of memory and history in the context of the Cambodian genocide; *Life May Be* (2014), a cinematic exchange between Mark Cousins and Mania Akbari; and Eric Baudelaire's *Letters to Max* (2014), a correspondence of the filmmaker with his friend Maxim Gvinjia, focusing on the post-Soviet, unrecognized country of Abkhazia.

#### THE EPISTOLARY ESSAY FILM AND THE RIGHT DISTANCE: *LETTERS FROM PANDURANGA*

*Lettres de Panduranga* (*Letters from Panduranga*, 2015), by the Hanoi-born filmmaker and media artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi, is a thirty-five-minute video essay in the form of an epistolary exchange between a woman and a man, who write to each other from two different Vietnamese provinces they are visiting; the letter format, thus, merges here with the travelogue. The woman (voiced by Nguyễn Trinh Thi) is in Ninh Thuận, formerly Panduranga, the only remaining area of the ancient Hindu culture of the Cham. The man (Nguyễn Xuân Sơn) is north of where she is, in Central Vietnam, first in Trường Sơn or Long Mountain, famous for the Hồ Chí Minh trail, which, used during the Vietnam war, is considered one of the great achievements of military engineering of the twentieth century; then in Đà Nẵng, near the ruins of Mỹ Sơn, the Hindu temples erected by the Cham kings between the fourth and fourteen century AD, today a UNESCO World Heritage Site and host to a Cham museum; finally, he writes from "the future," as he says, in Quảng Trị, northern Central Vietnam, an area where landmines are still present today, decades after the war, and are made to explode every day.

The former Champa kingdom referenced in the film peaked in the seventh to tenth centuries and came to an end after wars with both the Khmer and the Viet; its last remaining parts were annexed to Vietnam in 1832. Not recognized as an indigenous population but merely as a minority, the descendants of the ancient Cham have seen their history, cultural heritage, and religious practices being progressively threatened and erased, both

in historical accounts and in material ways. Their living conditions, then, are substandard when compared to those of ethnic Vietnamese, pointing at issues of discrimination and unequal access to resources. The film was sparked by the decision of the Vietnamese government to build the country's first two nuclear power plants in Ninh Thuan by 2020—and by the absence of public debate on this program. As Nora Taylor (2015) has written, for a long time the Cham were subjected to colonialist discourses that tended to present them as “an inferior race, diluted by foreign cultural influences, inauthentic, unlike the pure and original Chinese and Indian civilizations” (57). The same strategy of presenting Champa as a land of the distant past, even a mythical place, already discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to what I called ethnolandscape and to colonialism, has shaped for Taylor the Vietnamese scholarship on the region, so much so that “[t]he land of Champa was detached from its history” (59). It is precisely this absence that is at the core of *Letters from Panduranga*. As the man remarks over images of the temples of Mỹ Sơn, the place was made a UNESCO site as evidence of an Asian civilization that is now extinct, and so he ironically wonders whether the Cham his friend is meeting in Panduranga are evidence of the same extinction. The film addresses a range of problems and tensions, including neocolonialism and enforced assimilation, the control and erasure of cultural identities, the preservation of cultural heritage versus its touristic exploitation, ethnography and the ethics of speaking on behalf the other, gender, and self-determination.

The film opens with an image of water, over which the woman's voice recites, “I'm writing you this letter from what seems like a distant land. She was once called Panduranga”—a direct citation of the opening address of Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (“I'm writing you this letter from a distant land. Its name is Siberia”). The reference is repeated because, as in Marker, the line is spoken again later in the film, in slight variations. The direct citation inscribes the film in the epistolary travelogue tradition and is a nod to Marker's lifelong reflections on travel, culture, history, and ethnography, as well as to *Letter from Siberia's* approach to the “distant country” as one perched between myth and history, past and modernity. It is significant that, at the start of the film, rather than a landscape view of the region from a vantage point, the image of a shifting expanse of seawater is offered—on which a single person floats on a small boat, capturing the impression of a lonely and fragile existence, as well as suggesting the filmmaker's reluctance to assume a position of power over her subject matter. The film presents, indeed, the Cham as an ethnic and cultural island that has undergone processes of silencing and erasure, containment and dispossession.

The two geographical areas visited by the narrators, in southern and central Vietnam, respectively, are juxtaposed throughout. Images are shown

of Cham people, shot as in portrait photography, individually, in couples, or in groups; these alternate with images of landscapes from both regions. The narrators debate the two different approaches and discuss the ideology behind modes of portraiture. At one point, the man refers to an article he once read in the *National Geographic*, analyzing the photos of non-Western people the magazine had published over the years:

They said that those who are culturally defined as weak—women, children, people of color, the poor, the tribal rather than the modern, those without technology—are more likely to be depicted facing the camera while the more powerful or “sophisticated” are to be represented looking elsewhere.

Questions of the ideological and power structures of looking at and photographing people and landscapes are discussed throughout the film; at one point, the male narrator references the landscape theory of Masao Adachi (director of *AKA: Serial Killer*, 1969) and other radical Japanese filmmakers of the 1970s who, influenced by Marxist film criticism, posited that every landscape contains power structures—although, replies the woman over images of a quiet landscape at sunset, she is unsure that the landscapes she is seeing reveal such a thing.

Another essay film quoted in *Letters from Panduranga* is Alain Resnais’s collaboration with Chris Marker *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*, 1953), a critique of colonialism that discusses Sub-Saharan African statues as museum pieces, separated from their original cultural, religious, and spiritual values and lived contexts—a similar reflection is present in *Letters from Panduranga*, which pauses on the equally “dead” sculptures in the Cham museum. Issues of tourism, seen as a form of control, dispossession, and exploitation, are also discussed in relation to the temples of Mỹ Sơn: “Culture is being vulgarized; invisible beauties are forced into hiding in the name of tourism,” comments the woman in one of her letters. One of the statues discussed in the film, however, tells a different story: a replica of the Statue of Liberty in Hanoi, erected by the French colonial government, was toppled in 1945; the man reports that, in an ironic twist, it was melted down to cast a bronze of Buddha.

The epistolary dialogue between the two subjects shapes the whole narrative. The letters are read out by their authors; however, there is some ambiguity as to whether they are written letters or if they are audiovisual texts exchanged by the two correspondents—and, so, whether they are to be considered part of the diegesis, in the first case, or if the whole film is made up of fragments of letter-films (to use Naficy’s terminology) and fully coincides with them. The narrative ambiguity in *Letters from Panduranga* also pertains to the characters, which are not identified by their names or

specific roles; they could be two filmmakers, intellectuals, activists, photographers, or media artists—or a combination of the above. Although the details of their status and relationship are never clarified, the two address each other on the basis of deep reciprocal familiarity, as collaborators, colleagues, or friends, who share similar interests and practices.

In temporal terms, the narration is chronological; yet, it is difficult to tell exactly how much time elapses between letters, which are not dated. Because only parts, sometimes fragments, of letters are read, the exchange seems instantaneous and comes across as a close dialogue; once, however, the man remarks that some time has elapsed since he received her previous letter. The narrative plausibly lasts a few weeks; in his first letter, the man says he has two weeks to travel along the Hồ Chí Minh trail on his old motorbike. Temporality in the film is complex, however, not least because the present is seen as a symptom of various layers of pastness, which are examined in their historicity and in their being shaped by ideological discourses of containment and control: the mythical substratum, the distant historical past of Panduranga, and the recent, conflictive history of Vietnam. At one point, the man says he writes from the future—probably that of the nuclear power plants to be built, to which the futuristic uniform worn by a person seems to allude (Figure 6.1).

The two correspondents are the two main narrators; only one other point of view is expressed directly by somebody else: a Cham intellectual who comments on his people's history and present state, quoting Nietzsche. With the exception of this sequence and, to a lesser extent, of two sequences in which first a man and then a woman sing the same Cham



**Figure 6.1:** The future: *Letters from Panduranga* (Nguyễn Trinh Thi, 2015). Screenshot.



popular love song, all information in the film is filtered through the two main narrators; because they speak in the first person and the images we see are a direct visualization of their speech, they are the focalizers of all sounds and images and of all the knowledge that is conveyed to the spectator. There are, however, moments when the presence of a separate level of enunciation becomes tangible; for instance, when female hands appear on screen manipulating photographs and objects, even if the male narrator is speaking; or when the woman and the man speak in turn, one after the other, over the same images, which contradicts the way in which the rest of the narration is organized. In such moments, the split between the textual figures is felt most strongly, and the source of the narration and focalization is problematized.

These moments of uncertainty, in which a gap appears more evidently in the narration and between its levels, echo the broader questions that are raised by this highly disjunctive text on who speaks, who sees, who knows, and who is addressed. Disjunction is, indeed, the cipher of a film in which dualism is pervasive. Not only two are the narrators, a woman and a man, and two the locations from which they write to each other; but also a whole series of binaries are highlighted—such as portrait versus landscape, foreground versus background, past versus present, close up versus distance, looking into the lens versus looking out of frame, and so on. Some of the figures of two emphasized in the film are the pairs of stones under which the Cham Bani bury their dead (Figure 6.2), the two power plants to be built in the two-thousand-year-old civilization, and the paired photographs and paired images of statues; as well as the postproduction interventions



Figure 6.2: The Cham Bani's cemetery. *Letters from Panduranga*. Screenshot.

that visualize duality, such as the superimpositions of images or, even more striking, the split screens showing the same place from two slightly divergent angles or two slightly different moments in time (Figure 6.3). These split screens create the uncertainty of optical illusions because the two shots are often joined in a way that tricks the eye, concealing the “joint” and suggesting an impossible continuity, which is both emphasized and violated by bodies moving in and out of frame. Elsewhere, the same shot appears twice but separated by an imperceptible delay—our understanding of the sequence’s temporality being further challenged by the fact that the clip is run backward, suggesting the evocation of the past of the Cham, as well as their obliteration.

All this epistemological uncertainty chimes with the doubts voiced by the female narrator, who repeatedly alludes to her problem of how to relate to the story she came to tell: “I’m still struggling to find a way in,” she admits at one point. “I have made friends,” she acknowledges; “still, I can’t help but feeling conscious of being an outsider.” Being outside the story one wants to tell is a problem with which the man also grapples; after he describes being interrogated by the police about some footage of women he took one day, he comments that, finally, this time he found himself inside history. The importance of this issue is clarified when the man observes, “You are trying to access the story of another culture, another people, and I the story of the past, of history.”

The question of where the essayist should be positioned in relation to the story to be told is central not only to this film, but also to the essay film tout court, because querying the narrating stance and its ethos (its proximity to/distance from the story) is part of the essay’s self-evaluative process. As the woman clarifies, “I’m trying to avoid speaking on behalf of the other.” This effort produces self-doubt, which is expressed, for instance, by the woman as a question on the functions and motivations of the essayist: “I want to leave. I am not an ethnographer systematically studying the Cham’s ways of life, traditions, rituals; nor am I a journalist who could write about issues directly. I don’t know what I’m doing here.” Neither ethnographer



Figure 6.3: A split screen in *Mỹ Sơn. Letters from Panduranga*. Screenshot.

nor journalist, the narrator admits to having explored different methods of documentary and fiction, but “nothing seems right.” The advice of her correspondent is to “work at a distance”; as he comments, “I think there’s a point for you to use fiction in the Cham story. It gives you a bit of a distance. Documentary is often too close.” If documentary is too close, however, fiction can be too far; as he adds, “reality is more exciting than fiction,” because “it’s full of holes, gaps.”

Narration in the essay film is thus portrayed in *Letters from Panduranga* as the process of finding the right distance: as in a meaningful sequence in which a hand holding the picture of a standing stone slowly moves closer to the lens, so that the image, which was initially out of focus, becomes progressively sharper (Figure 6.4). In essay films, which are essentially performative texts incorporating a trace of the process of thinking, these progressive readjustments are often visible; they coincide with the film’s own narrative development. A state of narrative in-betweenness is identified as the best distance, the best way to tell the story of an interstitial place: “I write to you from what seems like a distant land. Her name is Panduranga. She lies somewhere between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century. Between the earth and the moon, between humiliation and happiness.”

Developing between two correspondents, the epistolary form is inherently intermediate. It highlights a distance and a lack and at once offers temporal and geographical proximity. The intimate address of the letter compensates for the ethical distancing of the essayist from her subject matter, creating the ideal positioning between participation and detachment. But the apparent equilibrium of such a narrative form is deeply problematized in *Letters from Panduranga*. The pervasiveness of the figure of the



Figure 6.4: “Reality is full of holes, gaps.” *Letters from Panduranga*. Screenshot.

double in the film points, in fact, to a schism, a disjunction—at once of the Cham from their past, their culture, and their land and of the subject from itself. The dualism of the narrators hides, indeed, a split subjectivity. As Nguyễn (2016) has confirmed, talking of her two narrators,

They are my self-portraits. They are both mostly myself, or to be more precise my different selves, my selves of different times and spaces. For example, in a way, the woman's voice can represent my thinking and approach of a few years earlier, and the man's voice represents the shift in my approach (shifting to the background, etc.). Or the woman's voice represents my tendency when I was close to the scene, or being in the field; while the man's voice represents my other self when I come back home from fieldwork, gaining a distance, and starting to do reflections.

This subjectivity split in time and in space, with two parts of the “I” taking the form of correspondents who cinewrite letters to one another, is at the basis of a narrative strategy of profound disjunction, barely concealed by the stratagem of the intimate epistolary exchange. Letters always weave a fragile textuality, one dependent on the next epistle being written, reaching its addressee, and being read and understood; the whole text is perched on the continuation of a dialogue that is deeply contingent and subject to a range of material and emotional conditions. In *Letters from Panduranga*, in turn, the split self is at the origin of an added risk of textual dissolution that, however, is also the necessary condition for the creation of that in-betweenness that, I have argued throughout this book, is at the core of the essay form. As Nguyễn (2016) has meaningfully commented, “I usually find myself being pulled by different impulses and desires. And I find myself typically being in some kind of in-between spaces.” It is this split and this in-betweenness that the epistolary narrative most distinctively has to offer to the essay film and its disjunctive practices.

## THE LYRIC ESSAY, FROM LITERATURE TO THE CINEMA

Just as narrative forms such as epistolarity, with their fictional structures, seem to openly clash with the nonfictional ethos of the essay, lyricism seems to run contrary both to rational argument and to the workings of narration. Yet, the lyrical is clearly distinguishable in the history of the essay film. Most obviously associated to the cinema of poets, such as Feroz Farrokhzad with her *Khaneh siah ast* (*The House Is Black*, 1963), Jean Cocteau with *Le Testament d'Orphée* (*Testament of Orpheus*, 1960), and Pier Paolo Pasolini with *La rabbia*, it has also been associated with the work of essayists such as Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Joris Ivens, Jonas Mekas, Rithy Panh, and

Aleksandr Sokurov. The term is adopted with increasing frequency by critics and by filmmakers alike to describe a diverse range of films.

In literature, the term “lyric essay” first emerged when the magazine *Seneca Review* began to publish a section thus named in 1997. Although a lineage of work using an allusive, evocative language and approach perceived to be closer to that of poetry than of prose can be traced from the ancient times to the age of the Internet, before doing so it is important to acknowledge that the lyrical is in fact at the core of the essay form, if we consider that linguistic eloquence is one of its constitutive features, so prominent that some, like Max Bense (2012) in a 1947 contribution, have described the literary essay as existing precisely on the frontier between prose and poetry (72). In “On the Nature and Form of the Essay,” in turn, Lukács (2010) refers to poetry as the “sister” of the essay (29) and, indeed, of essays as “intellectual poems” (34).

More specifically, the adoption of a lyric approach to convey an argument may be said to spring from the end of the code of strict separation of genres prescribed by classical doctrine and from the emergence of hybrid forms such as the prose poem and the poetic prose. Horace’s (65 BC–8 BC) work, especially his *Epistles* and *Ars Poetica*, are early examples of philosophy and literary criticism in verse; among his many imitators, Alexander Pope (1688–1744) is worth citing for his didactic poems *Essay on Criticism* and *Essay on Man*. Thomas de Quincey (1785–1859), Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), and Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921), in turn, are often cited as prominent examples of authors who wrote essays in a lyrical prose.

Despite its “slight implication of literary nonsense” (D’Agata 2014, 7), the lyric essay has been described as a form that draws from two traditions:

The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with fact, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form. (D’Agata and Tall 1997, 7)

This definition places the accent on the use of a poetic language and of what could be termed formalism as features distinguishing the lyric essay from an “ordinary” one. In an article on the online blog as a form that revives the classic essay, Sven Birkerts (2006) refers with the term to essays that “do not necessarily march forward logically but present their elements associatively, sometimes without obvious connective tissue; or they combine their materials more in the manner of collage, juxtaposing several themes or kinds of narrative sequences. In some ways, they adopt the resources of poetry.” The lack of connective tissue is suggestive of a looser, fragmentary structure. Ander Monson (2008), indeed, emphasizes both

attention to form and a poetic fragmentariness that can be described as a structure of gap:

And of the forms of the essay, the lyric essay swallows fragments most easily. In order to accommodate gap, the essay must ape the poem—it must create an openness, an attention to beauty rather than meaning, at least on the micro-scale, it must jump through gaps and continue on, an elision of the white space on the page.

Although references to the lyrical component of essayistic cinema start as early as André Bazin's article on Marker's *Letter from Siberia*, which he describes as "an essay at once historical and political, written by a poet as well" (44), far less critical attention has been paid to the definition of the lyric essay film than to the literary one. This may be because of the oxymoronic edge of the term, on which I remarked above. Although acknowledging that the essay film's voiceover can include the lyrical mode, for instance, Corrigan (2011) describes the lyrical as being almost at odds with the essayistic:

With a perplexing and enriching lack of formal rigor, essays and essay films do not usually offer the kinds of pleasure associated with traditional aesthetic forms like narrative or lyrical poetry; they instead lean toward intellectual reflections that often insist on more conceptual or pragmatic responses, well outside the borders of conventional pleasure principles. (5)

Conversely, in an article on Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik*, David Foster (2009) explores the concept of a lyrical essay cinema drawing on Gerhard Richter's definition of *Denkbild*, or "thought-image," as practiced by Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Siegfried Kracauer, a method that "brings together the philosophical essay and the lyrical poem in a way that is both critically rigorous and personally engaged" (3). For Foster, "concerns of reflexivity, narrative and metaphor are central to an understanding of lyricism":

The metaphoricity of poetic discourse replaces narrative organization with strategies of correlation and re-imagination. Thus, lyric film might be summed up as mode of discourse that deploys various permutations and negotiations of subjectivities, inflected by reflexive or transtextual gestures and organized by counter-narrative procedures and the metaphoric "seeing as" that proceeds along lines of correspondence and relation. (8)

In an article on what he terms "personal-screen cinema," in turn, Steven Wingate (2015) discusses the lyric essay film as a new form whose roots he traces in creative nonfiction, a field he associates with the metafiction

movement in literature (Donald Barthelme), the subjective or poetic documentary in film (D. A. Pennebaker), and the recent lyric essay as identified and described above. Wingate, who is particularly concerned with the contemporary short video essay as a form of personal audiovisual expression, also discusses its links with experimental film and video art. Among its features, he insists in particular on its fragmentariness, generic hybridism, and power to reaestheticize our lives.

Of the essay films discussed in this book, Sokurov's *Elegy of a Voyage*, des Pallières's *Drancy Avenir*, and Pasolini's *La rabbia* may be described as lyrical. Sokurov's film is built on metaphor, in particular the metaphor of liquidity, to convey a dual argument on the increasingly fluid nature of the image on the one hand and of the Self in the contemporary society on the other. The film, furthermore, adopts an elegiac approach through its dusky images and overall poignant tone. Also a poignant text, *Drancy Avenir* produces metaphoricity through its slowly moving images, suggestive of the passing of time and of lives and of the ineluctability of the demise; its visual strategy is coupled with an eloquent, elegant voiceover narration. Both films, then, are characterized by the formalism of a highly aestheticizing gaze and proceed in an allusive rather than rational way. The work of a poet, Pasolini's *La rabbia* is a highly fragmentary text that mobilizes the concept of poetic rage and includes a lyrical commentary making use of rhyme and refrain; the visual language was also described as poetic for its use of anaphora and of gestural, symbolic, and formal rhymes. Also, the film analyzed in the first part of this chapter, Nguyễn Trinh Thi's *Letters from Panduranga*, has poetic features, drawing as it does on metaphor (of duality), on rhythm and repetition of both words and images, and on circularity (the film ends with the same images with which it opens and with the lines "Perhaps I've been dreaming in a poem that is coming to its end").

In line with the aims of this study, in what follows I will focus my attention on lyricism as a function of the essay film's thinking—hence, on its capacity for thought. My hypothesis is that the lyrical in the essay film is not subordinate to logical thinking or separate from it, as an addendum; rather, it is argument and instrument of argumentation.

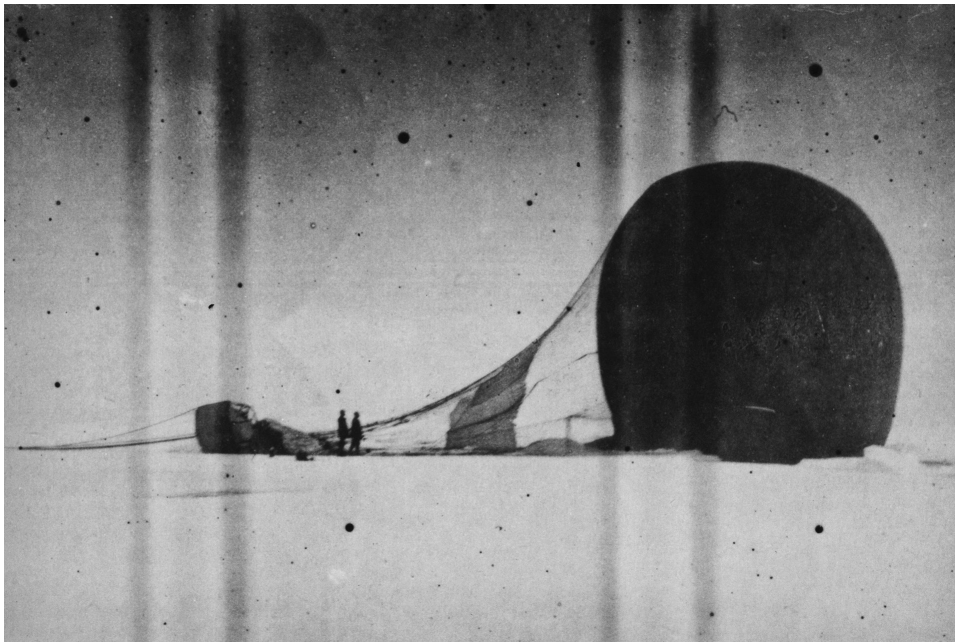
#### **BETWEEN SKEPTICISM AND AFFECT: THE IDEA OF NORTH AND NONVERBAL LYRICISM**

My case study of lyricism as counternarration, *The Idea of North* (1995) is a fourteen-minute short by the North American director Rebecca Baron titled after Glenn Gould's 1967 radio documentary of the same name, produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in which five people

discuss their views of Northern Canada—a space that represents “the fulcrum of poetic loneliness and vast, empty places” (Neumann 2011, 37). The same poetic idea of North meets and clashes in Baron’s film with the North seen as an extreme horizon of scientific discovery and technological mastery of space. *The Idea of North* sets off, as Baron’s voiceover explains, from the narrator’s encounter with a set of photographs that were taken in 1897 during a Swedish hydrogen-balloon expedition to the North Pole. Led by Salomon August Andrée, an engineer, physicist, and explorer, the expedition was ill-fated: the balloon crash-landed after three days of flight, and the three men of the crew died in the attempt to reach safety, after surviving some thirteen weeks on the ice. The photographs were eventually found in the camera, which had been buried for thirty-three years in the ice; they were first printed in 1930. The film is a partial, allusive reconstruction of the expedition and of the last days of the explorers based on the photographs, on excerpts from the men’s diaries, and on contextual evidence found by the party that discovered the last campsite and uncovered the bodies.

Coming from an age of unfaltering faith in science, technology, and progress, the story told by the film is one in which the trust in man’s knowledge and will merged with adventurism to ruinous effects. The fate of the three men is sealed from the start of the narrative, locked in the fixity of the photos that captured their last reflections and in the ice that froze their bodies and their technology. The narrator’s impassionate voiceover starts in the first person, recounting her encounter with the first set of five photographs of the expedition printed in a book, and then moves on to a few further images she discovered later, some of which were enhanced to increase the focus, clean the marks left by time and the elements, and bring out the detail (Figure 6.5). The vicissitudes and outcomes of the expedition are described by the narrator in a radically lacunary way, stemming from the waning visible evidence and fragments of historical knowledge; we learn some of what happened to the men and hear that they continued to uphold their scientific commitment by collecting samples even under impossible conditions. The image track, meanwhile, supports what we are told; in the absence of sufficient original images, evidently reconstructed and allusively performed footage is introduced. We see, for instance, detail shots of hands carefully wrapping scientific specimens or breaking ice with a tool (Figure 6.6); a human figure slowly walking away from the lens on an icy surface; and hands trying to open the pages of an old frozen book. At one point, the narrator starts reading from one of the diaries that were found at the campsite, and so the narration suddenly switches to the first person plural, increasing our sense of proximity to the events and to the men. Our desire to get closer and comprehend, however, is at once titillated and frustrated. The narration is fragmentary and disjointed, just like





**Figure 6.5:** Original photograph of Salomon August Andrée's balloon expedition to the North Pole. *The Idea of North* (Rebecca Baron, 1995). Screenshot.



**Figure 6.6:** Reenactment: collecting scientific specimens. *The Idea of North* (Rebecca Baron, 1995). Screenshot.

the visible evidence is lacunary and waning. The film opens with a series of undistinguishable images and noises, giving the impression of somebody trying to tune into a transmission from a distant past. As they become clearer, images and sounds are nevertheless repeatedly disjointed by irrational cuts, black or white screens, and silence, suggesting the filmmaker's unwillingness to provide a comprehensive narration by filling the many, gaping holes of the story. At the end of the film, fragments of sentences from the diaries appear as captions on a black screen: the few words separated by the many elision dots visualize the acute lack of connective tissue of the story, the voids in a narrative that are too severe to be filled.

An argumentation thus develops from the interplay of images and sounds, which are radically different for quality and status (at the image-track level: still and moving images, original, enhanced, and reenacted images, black screens, scratched screens, superimposed captions; at the soundtrack level: music, noises, recorded voices, and the filmmaker's voiceover). These components incessantly come together to form constellations, lumps, layers of meaning—only to break apart again. The film explores at least two interconnected aspects of the theme of the gulf between man's trust in technology and its ultimate inadequacy. First, it foregrounds Andrée's misplaced faith in the balloon and in the expedition's scientific premises and technological tools, which from today's perspective look gravely inadequate, almost grotesque, in the face of the extremity of the conditions of flight over, and survival at, the North Pole. Second, the imperfect preservation of documentary traces through the written diaries and the photographic camera demonstrates the frailty of our technologies of record and memory, inviting by extension a reflection on film's limitations as a tool to preserve and mediate human experience.

Furthermore, an argument on narration as inference and speculation develops because of the deficiency of the elements of the story and of a narrative mode based on a radically fragmental approach. The faded photographs and diary words are incomplete, pale, almost illegible traces of an embalmed subjectivity and a distant human experience that remain largely unknowable; the film attempts not a full, perfected reconstruction, but mimics the allusive unfolding of an experiential engagement via performative elements that offer glimpses of knowledge and of empathetic understanding—while discouraging the illusion of full apprehension. By underscoring the “I,” then, along with the film's personal motivation and origination (as the voiceover recites, “I begin in the middle; I begin with a set of five photographs printed in a book of Scandinavian photography”), the text openly embraces contingency, partiality, and incompleteness (“the middle”), while declaring its interest in an experiential relationship with the world. At the same time, the logical argument extends to a meditation

on questions of temporality, with the creation of a compelling, “paradoxical interplay of film time, historical time, real time and the fixed moment of the photograph” (Baron 1997).

In mixing extremely hybrid materials, *The Idea of North* experimentally shatters the distinction between fiction and documentary, record and argument, essay and art object. But there is yet another component that exceeds all this and must be accounted for. Although the narrative voiceover is not poetic, the film is undoubtedly lyrical: it has the brevity and compactness of a poem, as well as its profound linguistic (in the sense of film language) and epistemic allusiveness and affective poignancy. The lyricism may be said to be the result of a range of techniques, starting from the choice of format. Baron’s use of 16mm is indeed significant because this is a film that produces an aesthetic and affective “surplus” that, I argue, runs contrary to its logical argument on the fallibility and obsolescence of technology. The 16mm recreates the “grain” of an outdated image, thus evoking through form that past which, the film argues, is impossible to resurrect; simultaneously, it excites visual pleasures linked both to a film aesthetics strongly associated with formal experimentalism and to that nostalgia for “imperfect,” blemished past technologies that is typical of our flawless digital age (Haswell 2014). It is precisely this aesthetic/affective surplus, and its contribution to the film’s thinking, that I wish to investigate here.

In addition to the aesthetic grain of the image, lyricism springs from other elements of the film, including the allusiveness of its reconstructions of imagined moments of the expedition, which, albeit not devoid of an ironic touch, foreground detail in an aestheticized and poignant manner; they support the spectator’s momentary affective reconnection with states of loneliness, denial, hope, despair, pain, and death experienced by the three explorers. The complex layering of times in the film is also deeply allusive, at once affording the experience of transcendence of temporal limits and remarking on its illusionary and mediated nature. Whereas a loop from a Beethoven sonata at the beginning and end of the film alludes to a modernist, fragmentary approach, the main musical theme, from the poignant *Valse triste* by the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, underscores the somberness of an elegiac meditation on human failure and demise and introduces lyrical elements of rhyme and repetition. A poetic idea of North as the ultimate limit of our imagination of the world, and of our experience of it, underlies the whole text.

Baron’s film is sustained by a skeptical intellectual inquiry in the fallibility of our technologies of record and memory and the injudiciousness of our absolute faith in science and progress and in the dominion of man over nature. Yet, as the film’s form gravitates toward formlessness (static noise, undistinguishable voices, scratches, black or white screens, indiscernible

images, gaps and voids, irrational cuts), critical thought in the film equally gravitates toward its crisis. *The Idea of North* at one level embraces and promotes skeptical thinking—its historicizing reading and denunciation of technology’s fallibility produce a dispassionate sanctioning of the irremediable temporal, cultural, and geographical distance of the events and their ultimate unreadability and nonnarrability. Yet the film is not fully resolved by its intellectual stance. In its striving to understand and reproduce its object, *The Idea of North* raises the possibility of an affective spectatorial response based on the lyrical impression made by images and sounds that, despite their evident fabrication, for a few moments become capable of bearing the distant echo of a human experience.

The affective possibilities of nonverbal lyricism are a point of crisis in the film’s skeptical thinking, but they are not separate from the argument, as an insignificant aesthetic surplus. To be an essay on the failures of the photographic image, the film must work against itself, put its own images into crisis, and deeply query their ability to be an effective record of human experience; at the same time, by radically disjuncting its own conceptual limbs, the film allows glimpses of experiential empathy to form in the lyrical interstices between images and sounds, between temporal strata, and between source media—thus somewhat undermining its own skepticism. The unreadability of the past and impossibility of apprehending it through our technologies of memory, on the one hand, and the affective evocation of human experience through an aesthetic and lyrical use of just such technologies, on the other hand, short-circuit, interminably contradicting and reinforcing each other, resulting in a powerful essayistic reflection on the contradictory nature of mediated knowledge and of narration.

## SUMMARY

Starting from the consideration that “discourses are a form of narration” (Farocki and Hüser 2004, 313), I proposed to consider narrative not as an addendum, a fictional layer superimposed on the documentary matter, seen as the real substance of the essay film and of its intellectual contribution, but as a fundamental component of the argumentation. As such, narration with all its components—including the adoption of specific narrative forms, plot structures, narrative functions, voiceover and captions, point of view, temporal organization and rhythm of the story, and music as narrative—participates in the same strategies of disjunction analyzed throughout the book.

The chapter then explored epistolarity and lyricism as examples of narration and counternarration, both seen as disjunctive strategies that may be

mobilized by the essay film to create a “form that thinks,” to use Jean-Luc Godard’s expression from *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1997–1998); indeed, to create a form that, while thinking, questions and challenges its own thinking, thus gravitating toward a crisis of rationality.

In detail, epistolarity, frequently adopted by film essayists and by many authors and philosophers before them, was discussed as a narrative form marked not only by the intimacy of its address, but also by distance and gap. *Letters from Panduranga* by Nguyễn Trinh Thi was explored as an example of essay film that exploits such a gap to create a disjunctive form predicated on duality and schism—between past and present, myth and history, fiction and nonfiction, and positions from which to look and to frame (portrait or landscape, proximity or distance, participation or detachment). Another form with a long history of association to the essay, lyricism apparently contradicts both rational thought and narrative structuring, but was here explored as part of the essay’s argumentation. The lyricism of my case study, Rebecca Baron’s *The Idea of North*, is not linguistic: as Baron has commented, with *The Idea of North* she wanted to explore “what film could offer history in excess of language” (Baron and Sarbanes 2008, 121). Through aesthetic and poetic affectivity, *The Idea of North* strives to capture an echo of a lost, nonnarratable human experience. At the same time, lyricism in Baron’s film participates in argumentation by counteracting the film’s skeptical thinking. In this, lyricism is an undoing that is essential to the disjunctive textuality of the essay, one that can break off at any time, just like epistolarity offers the essay film a structure of gap that is a potential for disassemblage—and that at once facilitates the location of the right distance from the subject matter.