

ESSAY FILM NOW!



# ESSAY FILM NOW!

It's January. It's 2017. We're all here together in a cinema in London. Outside Donald Trump has just been inaugurated President of the United States. People are protesting. Theresa May has just explained that as Britain has voted to leave the EU it may become a tax haven – radically re-imagining the nature of this country. Across the world people are talking about whether or not to build walls on their borders. Across the world people are on the move because of war, because of poverty, because of environmental change, because they want to see another place.

Few of us will know this from first hand experience. Most of us will have understood this as information mediated partly through the documentary image. My concern is what role the image performs in this re-mapping of the given-reality of our shared world.

For a strange moment this week global critical vigilance was momentarily suspended because of the revelation that somewhere in the world images might exist that prove that the brand new leader of the Western World stage-managed a sex act in Russia as a petty symbolic attack on his predecessor. It was one in a long line of media dazzlings that have characterized Trump's campaign and have stirred up dissent. It rightly brought into question the power that the manipulation of secrecy through surveillance exerts over the population of the western world, however privileged the individual.

But lost somewhere in all the media excitement was the quiet revelation of the power of the 21st century image. It's seemingly no longer enough to rely on a written report, however expert the author. No, in January 2017, an image is needed to corroborate that expert's analysis. The idea that the FSB holds compromising footage of Trump is part of the conjuring trick of distraction. Our prurience about those images, however, is a revelation of how titillated and controlled we are by the documentary image's *performance* of evidence. The missing/hidden images make us want to see at the same rate as we stop being able to hear and make meaning of the event.

Because of this strange economy between hearing and seeing I can't

think of a time in history when the essay film and its facility to critique the relationship between image and voice has been more vital and more full of potential. The form can offer the thought space to pull back from the horizonless deployment of the image as information and re-invent the image for what it was intended, a place of entertainment, of human communication, of connection, of curiosity, of thought. So, in the spirit of inaugural speeches and sudden ideological shifts, here is my three-point manifesto for the essay film.

# 1. Critical vigilance

The essay film begins in language, in France. The word *essai* originated in *exagium*, the Latin word for weighing. It journeyed into usage in Old French, then into Middle French, and then into the French spoken today. *Essai* originally borrowed from its Latin roots and came to mean assessment, the weighing up of things. As centuries went by this meaning adapted to be associated with the weighing up of the law, of a trial, the recognition in the word that legal process far from being about objective truth, is rather about the making of a case, an attempt to weigh up the pros and cons to find balance, to make justice.

The word migrated across the Channel into the English language. We adopted it as essay to mean much the same. Both its Latin and French antecedents hover around its meaning-making in English. Essay: an attempt. *Let's attempt an assessment. Let's assess an attempt.*

It is the impact the word had on French aesthetic traditions that has bearing on how I think about the essay film. It produced a rhetorical form in 16th century French literature when Michel de Montaigne invented a new form designed to not only intrigue and involve the reader, sometimes appearing to move with the illogic of idiosyncratic thought but which also deployed a structured style, a form of rhetorical logic to propel and clarify the didactic intent that underpinned his arguments. In other words the essay in Montaigne's hand was entirely human, a form of rhetoric that balanced and used the relationship between subjective and objective, personal and public.

It is worth keeping this definition in mind. It reveals the distinction between the essay film form for instance and the documentary. Essay film, rather than making an argument, critiques the making of argument by laying out all the workings. It doesn't stick with the polish of objectivity but includes the mess of subjectivity, using the human, the idiosyncratic, the psychological as a springboard for the translation of impetus into argument and into meaning. Like a court case, it is an attempt to present a convincing argument with the

recognition that it is the argument rather than any form of truth that will win the day.

The laying out of argument is one of the many ways essay film is relevant today. I'm feeling tired of hearing about post-truth as though that euphemism is going to blind us to the lies we've been showered in the last twelve months but in a landscape where disorientation is predicated on ambiguity and lies, the trusty essay form can offer an alternative. Truth, the move towards singularity is not its aim. Instead, the emphasis is on engaging the viewer's critical vigilance.

It is critical vigilance and our powers of analysis that will save us. It's what we used in Prehistoric times to run away from mammoths. It's our instinct, it is individual, our survival component, honed over time so that we can navigate our immediate environment. We don't know it's there until we're landed in an unfamiliar landscape, like when we step off a plane on holiday and suddenly realize we can't read any of the local customs. We get confused. If only we'd been more in dialogue with our critical vigilance we might have found otherness less frightening.

To this end my first manifesto point is that essay film should be deployed as a space to awaken critical vigilance. By modeling thought-process it can be a form that encourages thought. By going back to its roots, being about weighing up, the approximation of an attempt, it can model forgiveness about the very human act of trying. It is about the freedom to make proposals about thinking the form and the world anew.

To this end my first commandment for essay film is that it must

**AWAKEN CRITICAL VIGILANCE!**





## 2: Collage

Sticking with the sense of experimentation that is inherent in essay film I want to focus quickly on my particular approach. It is based in the techniques of collage. Collage is another migrant word. It comes from the French. It literally means to stick together. It is an artform about collectivity.

Forget the isolation of those poor isolated images of Trump trapped in the prison of the FSB archive! What would they mean if they were freed? Imagine what they would mean if they could jostle next to other images in an edit. New meanings might be possible. It is the lesson the Surrealists taught us, the Soviet film pioneers: meaning is in connection and these connections, the blink of meaning that happens in the film edit, are thought and felt.

Collage is about making a space in art where difference, the disjuncture of certainties and of meanings, can be felt. It does this by creating a new landscape, an open landscape, one which is without border where difference, discrepancy, alienation is central. Collage is – as Ali Smith describes in *Autumn* her very recent, very vital collage of a novel – ‘where all the rules can be thrown into the air, and size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of these skills everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange.’

For me this rule-breaking quality of collage is a strategy for serious play. Play, as part of human development, is where we learn to work imaginatively with other people. For me essay film can provide a space for play, an invitation to the viewer and the maker to meet in a kind of experiment in collaboration. As walls and fences go up then collage is one aesthetic strategy we can offer to provide space for the people who want to think of alternatives.

With this in mind my second instruction for essay film action is a command:

INTERVENE IN THE IMAGE:  
MAKE IT HUMAN

### 3. Resistance

In the spirit of sticking together, thinking of alternatives, the final thing I'd like to mention, the element that keeps me making films is the way the essay film functions as a form of resistance.

It is no surprise that essay film flourishes at times of struggle. It is rooted in the notion of transition. It was first experimented with in the aftermath of the Russian revolution, we saw it remade in this country in the aftermath of the Second World War, in Europe in the ideological negotiations after May 68'.

It is a form that is about resistance. There's really no point in defining essay film because it naturally argues against definition. It is an evolving, restless, hybrid form.

I'm just about to show you *Boat People* that I made last summer for the wonderful Whitstable Biennale. It is a film about Britain as an island nation and asks how, in the face of the refugee crisis, being an island inflects our attitudes to hospitality. I didn't have to look far to find essay film allies to open the dialogue for the film. There was Humphrey Jennings, there was Derek Jarman – agitating the space of the image to make arguments for a more inclusive cinema and a more inclusive Britain.

For me essay film is a communal act and a resisting act. It is naturally ornery. It resists the status quo. It is precisely the form for now – to think about the movement of people, the speed of information, populism and the possibilities for the communal. Essay film is at the heart of resistance: the stop that makes new beginnings possible.

My final commandment for essay film is:

RESIST THE IMAGE TO SAVE  
THE IMAGE

*Essay Film Now!* was a talk given at Whitechapel Gallery, London on January 21st, 2017. It was part of an event organised by the Arts Foundation to showcase the work of the four filmmakers Charlie Lyne, Marianna Simnett, Sam Stevens and Sarah Wood, shortlisted for that year's Essay Film prize. Outside the gallery London was alive with the sounds of the first Woman's March staged in opposition to Donald Trump's presidency – a spring-like flourish of resistance on a bleak winter day.

Essay Film Now!

© Sarah Wood 2017

