

Dalí's Montaigne

Essay Hybrids and Surrealist Practice

Christy Wampole

1. Introduction

A hand attached to a sinewy arm writes delicately with a feather quill in an open book. The arm, its bicep muscles exposed, is buttoned to a skull that rides atop a tortoise through a desertscape. This ink-rendered frontispiece of Salvador Dalí's 1947 illustrated edition of Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* shows the compatibility of Surrealism and essayism as expressive, image-reliant forms (Figure 17.1).¹ Through the visible bones and muscles, Dalí conveys in a very literal sense Montaigne's desire to appear *tout nu*, completely exposed to his reader. In the image, the essayist's brain moves slowly through the world, collecting impressions along the way and transferring them directly from the head to the page. It is the essayist's vocation, Dalí suggests, to wander, to dream, and to collect images.

The introduction of a visual element to essayistic practices in the twentieth century—in the form of photograph, film, and video—allowed the essay hybrid to remain suspended in an interstitial space between the documentary and the dream world. This chapter analyses the conjunction of image and text in essayistic hybrids such as the photo essay, essay-film, and video essay and explores the possibilities of estrangement—the transformation of the everyday into the alien—that emerge from the encounter between visual and verbal expression. The familiar etymology of 'essay' suggests that the essayist is committed to some kind of trying or attempting. Texts assay in one way, images in another; their mutual influence allows for the essay to benefit from the kind of productive strangeness lauded by the Surrealists.

Such new hybrid forms as the photo essay, essay-film, and video essay are obviously more visual than the literary essay. Nonetheless, image-centred tableaux were always a key feature of the latter. Readers of Montaigne are likely to have a picture in their minds of the author falling off a horse or exposing himself, completely naked, like those who 'dwell under the sweet liberty of nature's

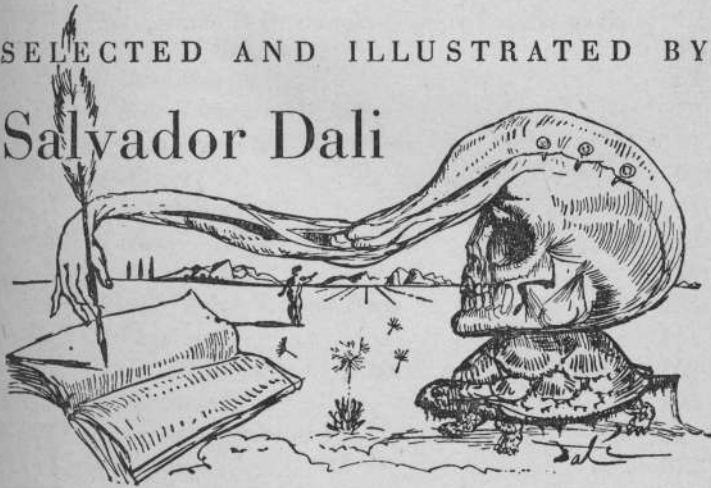
¹ Michel de Montaigne, *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton, illus. Salvador Dalí (1947).

Essays of
MICHEL DE
Montaigne

TRANSLATED BY Charles Cotton

SELECTED AND ILLUSTRATED BY

Salvador Dalí



DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC.

Garden City, New York

Figure 17.1 Salvador Dalí, untitled illustration, originally published in *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton (1947), n.p.

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primitive laws'.² In fact, Montaigne clues his readers in on his painterly imagination already in the introductory 'Au lecteur': 'car c'est moy que je peins': it is myself I paint.³ Yet this picture will differ from reader to reader; it has not been fixed by the essayist himself. All essayists rely on images and imagery, but the introduction of the camera and the artist's pen to essay-making changes the form's nature and expands the expressive capacity of the essayist while potentially diminishing the imaginative freedom of the spectator-reader.

A striking example of the transition from word to image in the life of the essay genre occurred in 1947 with Dalí's illustrated edition of Montaigne's *Essays*, commissioned by Doubleday Press. While other artists such as Gustave Doré had produced naturalistic engravings to accompany the *Essays*, Dalí was the first to allow the fantastical imagination to guide his drawings.⁴ Using rich colours and his customary dream-like imagery, the Spanish Surrealist translates the essayist's thoughts into allegories. Abstract concepts are morphed into human figures and suspended in an hallucinatory world where the laws of physics and logic do not apply. In his illustration of Montaigne's 'Of Drunkenness', this state of mind is depicted as a woman with a thorny body and a rose sprouting from her chest. Dalí's visual renderings reveal a latent oneiric tendency in Montaigne's prose, showing the extent to which everyday life is naturally infused with arbitrariness and uncanny beauty. The digressive, open-ended thought of Montaigne finds a correlative in Dalí's visual free association.

This postdated collaboration makes obvious many shared affinities between Surrealism and essayism. By essayism, I mean the open-ended 'trying out' of a theme by a reflective subject, particularly in the form of prose (the essay or essayistic novel) or in a visual form (the photo essay, essay-film, or video essay). A mode in favour of the dissolution of boundaries between art and science, intention and chance, and introspection and engagement with the world, essayism shares with Surrealism several features: both operate using a logic of digression and free association; both take interest in the subjective inner life of the individual and in the process of self-discovery; both disregard formal strictures, celebrating instead what Adorno called in the essay a 'childlike freedom'; both rely on sensory perception, memory, intuition, and imagination; and, importantly, both tend to rely heavily on images.⁵ In the hybrid visual forms of the photo essay, essay-film, and video essay, essayism gravitates naturally beyond the confines of literature.

² Montaigne, 'To the Reader', n.p.

³ Montaigne, 'Au Lecteur', in *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, ed. Pierre Villey, 3 vols (1930–1), I, 4.

⁴ Doré completed these drawings in the late 1850s. One illustration, meant to accompany tome one, book 2 of the *Essays*, is viewable through the Bibliothèque nationale's digital library Gallica, at <http://gallicalabs.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10322204b>.

⁵ Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique* 32 (Spring–Summer 1984), 151–71, here 152.

The images that result are no less essayistic than text; they simply give a new form to the act of attempting. What results is a juxtaposition of images, tried out on the spectator as a visual digression, the image-work of a meditative subject.

While Surrealism was a specific, historically and geographically located movement with great influence beyond its time and place, essayism is more diffuse and less localizable; it is not a movement and has no clearly defined method, no manifesto, and no political intentions. Nonetheless, it is possible to highlight specific and remarkable similarities between the use of images by Surrealists and essay hybridists. Surrealism might be described as an enlistment of images in the service of self-discovery. These images allow a meditative subject to work through her memories, dreams, misunderstandings, errors, and anxieties, much in the vein of Freudian *Durcharbeitung* (working through). Though it would be a stretch to call Montaigne a proto-Surrealist, it is accurate to say that his loosened style and its heritage in subsequent essayistic writing opened the door for the kind of digressive image sampling integral to Surrealism.⁶ The influence also works in reverse: I claim that the newer hybrid essayistic practices (photo essay, essay-film, and video essay) take up the Surrealists' project of disclosing the subconscious aspects of the psyche via pictures, and in doing so, bring to the fore features latent in the tradition of the literary essay.

These hybrid, imagistic forms are more economical than the literary essay in conveying the kinds of impressions that would require an abundance of words. The brevity and suggestiveness of many literary essays already tend away from the long-windedness of discursive prose; the addition of the image to its expressive repertoire in the new hybrids allows the essay to increase meaning while maintaining its usual textual frugality. These hybrids allow for a multiplication and expansion of the singular reflective voice, moving beyond the constraints of thematic cohesion which the literary essay already stretches, and using images as emancipatory stimuli for conflating the conscious and the subconscious, in a way which furthers the inclination of the literary essay to think associatively and to render the dynamism of thought processes. In each case, latent tendencies in the essay tradition as a whole are realized in ways not available through text alone.

The special properties of the image, moving or still, allow the dream to enter waking life: its economy, colour, movement, visual rhythm, appeal to the fantastical component of the human imagination, repeatability or reorderability, exaggerative power, and its capacity to be manipulated, edited, or synthesized. In both surrealism and essayism, the image is a useful tool for contingent thinking, that is,

⁶ In an unpublished conference talk, Réginald Dalle argued that Dalí's Surrealism shares many features with Montaigne's humanism. In his abstract, he writes, 'Le but de cette communication est de montrer grâce à diverses illustrations choisies comment Salvador Dalí a su saisir par son génie créateur et artistique le génie de Montaigne et voir que le surréalisme dalinien est proche de l'humanisme de Montaigne'. See Réginald Dalle, 'Montaigne vu par Salvador Dalí', *Montaigne et les Essais, 1580-1980, Actes du Congrès de Bordeaux* (Juin 1980), ed. Pierre Michel et al. (1983).

reflection that does not have a pre-established itinerary but lets itself be guided by the new configuration of each passing moment, and resembles the logic of dreams. I argue that the images attempt to show through a first-person perspective—as seen through the eye of the camera—the complicated subjectivity of observant, thinking individuals who summon up pictures following the digressive logic of the essay and the dream. In this, the hybrid essayists turn to the Surrealists as strong antecedents and models. My claims will be supported by a close analysis of four essay hybrids: Dalí's illustrated edition of Montaigne's *Essays* (1947), James Agee and Walker Evans's photo essay *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Chris Marker's essay-film *Sans soleil* (1982), and John Bresland's video essay *Mangoes* (2010).

2. Dalí and Surrealist Essayism

The Surrealists privileged images over words, particularly words in their literary iteration. In one of their many declarations, the Surrealists wrote that '[w]e have nothing to do with literature; but we are quite capable of making use of it when necessary like anyone else'.⁷ Salvador Dalí certainly made use of it in his commissioned illustrations of Montaigne's *Essays*, which consisted of both black ink drawings and brilliantly coloured watercolour and ink illustrations. In this case, the literary text is at once the artist's font of inspiration and what constrains his work; because he was asked to illustrate the essays, they provided structure to an otherwise unbound flux of images. While there are plenty of episodes in the essays that lend themselves to illustration, Dalí was not content to produce mimetic depictions of exempla or anecdotes. Instead, he opted for allegorical renderings of passages that are not so neatly imagined in pictures. The reader who comes across the images dispersed throughout the book is put in a special position; she or he is invited to determine the relationship between Dalí's image and Montaigne's text but not to conjure her or his own image.

The black ink illustration for the essay 'Of Thumbs' is signature Dalí (Figure 17.2); in the dark shadows and near architectural bearing of the thumbs, one recognizes Giorgio Di Chirico's influence—a digitized Di Chirico. A little grass, the hint of a ground, and the strong light source suggest that the figures are somewhere outside; nearly all of Dalí's dreamscapes are set in an otherworldly outdoors. He is an externalizer of the internal, as he tries to render al fresco the unventilated complexities of human interiority. The thumb in the foreground resembles an erected condom with its rolled up edges at the bottom; the phallic implications of the image stand out like a sore thumb. These six statuesque

⁷ José Pierre (ed.), *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives* [1922–39], 2 vols (1980), I, 34.

XII
OF THUMBS

TACITUS reports, that among certain barbarian kings their manner was, when they would make a firm obligation, to join their right hands close to one another, and intertwist their thumbs; and when, by force of straining, the blood it appeared in the ends, they lightly pricked them with some sharp instrument, and mutually sucked them.



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Figure 17.2 Salvador Dalí, untitled illustration, originally published in *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton (1947), n.p.

Art: © 2019 Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society.

phalluses are surrounded by six people—a finger for each—who take up various positions, but who all display their own thumbs. What could be more surreal? One wonders whether Georges Bataille's 'The Big Toe' could be read as a surrealist refashioning of Montaigne's 'Of Thumbs'.⁸

If Dalí overstates Montaigne's theme, inflating the thumbs to gargantuan proportions and reiterating them insistently, he at the same time performs a compelling exercise in thematics. After all, what is a theme? It is the isolation or amplification of a particular concern, the privileged inscription of a space dedicated to one topic, to the exclusion of others. When essayists announce the theme of an essay, usually through the title, they delineate the dimensions of their content, surveying its field. Digression within this field is welcome as long as the theme remains a potentially reliable centre to which the essayist can return. Yet essayists occasionally toy with the expectations set up by their titles, using them as mere jumping-off points to which they never return or as enticing hooks used to flirt with the reader, an irony shared by the Surrealists who rely on their wit and the frustration of readerly expectations to stage playful surprises. Surrealist digressive practice, even less restricted than the essayist's, works like a pinball machine; a thought or some external stimulus ricochets the mind from surface to surface. It has no theme per se, no centre around which to circle, only a starting point. This leads to a claim: essayism has centric tendencies, while Surrealism tends to be eccentric. Dalí's illustrations are of interest in part because the commission constrains him to illustrate *something specific*; he is not granted the usual licence to let his fantasies fly completely free, as is customary in Surrealist automatism. Because 'Of Thumbs' presents an obvious and easily illustrated theme, the illustrator's constraint is clear and his images remain centred.

But what about more abstract themes that don't lend themselves easily to illustration? How would one render 'Of the Force of the Imagination' visually, for example? It would seem that such a title invites total freedom on the part of the artist. Dalí's treatment confirms this (Figure 17.3). His outdoor dreamscape shows the undoing of gravity as architectural forms come apart and mountains, rocks, and trees hover in midair. A yellow-green cube floats in the foreground with a bowl and pomegranate suspended above it. Three human figures levitate and reach upward. The image caption reads '*Fortis imaginatio generat casum*' ('A strong imagination begets the event itself'), the dictum Montaigne cites to begin his essay. The anti-gravitational aspect of Dalí's illustration, which tries to resist the downward pull of the *casus* or fall, suggests a pinpointing of the imagination and the images it generates as located somewhere upward and beyond. The word 'Surrealism' already suggests this spatialization; even though the movement deals heavily with the subconscious, it could never have been called

⁸ See Georges Bataille, 'The Big Toe' [1929], ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939* (1985).

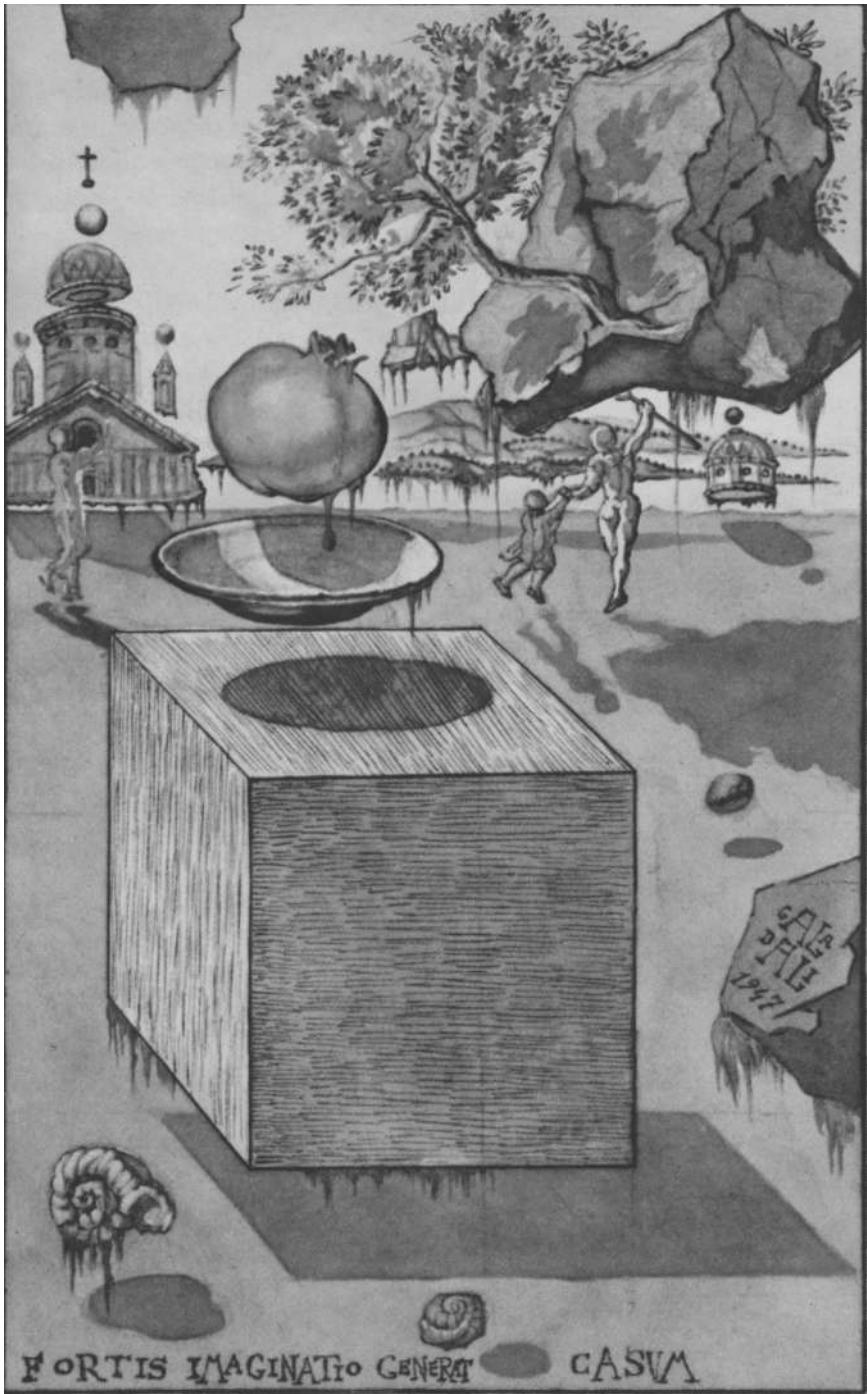


Figure 17.3 Salvador Dalí, untitled illustration, originally published in *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton (New York: Doubleday & Company, inc., 1947), n.p.

Art: © 2019 Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society.

'Subrealism'. The 'sur-' prefix reinforces the above-and-beyondness of the free associative, image-based practice, depicted as the surpassing of reality.⁹ The essay is already an open form in that it is bound to very few conventions and its style and content resist the gravitas of ideology, but the incorporation of Dalí's images allows Montaigne's essay to aim for the yonder. The image, in the form of wall-hung paintings, frescos, the altar, dreams, or the spectacle of a cloudscape or a starry sky, is above our line of sight. Here the essay hybrid borrows this uplifting effect, targeting what is beyond.

Most of Dalí's colour illustrations are allegorical in that they suggest that a second, secret meaning accompanies the 'literal' one. Two images—one in colour, the other in black ink—accompany the essay 'Of Drunkenness'. The latter, as one might anticipate for an allegorical depiction of inebriation, shows a recumbent Dionysian figure out in nature raising his glass towards the spectator. The colour image, on the other hand, conjugates Thanatos and Eros as the heads of two cadaver figures are absorbed into the rose-like body of a woman (Figure 17.4). A rose sprouts from the middle of her chest, thorns protrude from her sides, and petals fall from her arm. The rotting figures, seated across from one another on tree stumps, have perhaps gotten drunk together and are sharing the same intoxicated vision. Alcohol decomposes their consciousness. The rose-woman is drunkenness in a human form, delighting the senses but pricking the drunkards as well. She arouses but cuts. However, this is only one of many possible readings; inevitably, the allegory veils its meaning. Moving away from the literal and towards the figurative, imagery becomes subjectivized. The mind's eye is liberated from objects as the subject takes over. Dalí is not under the thumb of mimetic representation; the phenomenon of drunkenness has no fixed image, which gives him permission to craft his own.

When Arthur Benson defined the essay as 'a thing which someone does himself', he emphasized the self-reliance of the essayist as free subject, as a creator of customized connections.¹⁰ The freedom that binds essayist and Surrealist is one of the key features of their poetics. Assaying, through words or pictures, requires a certain autonomy from the constraints of form, mimetic representation, and even logic. Essayism and Surrealism are permanent invitations to digress, to dream, and to discover or test an idea without committing to it. In Montaigne's case, he proffers a brief Western history of the thumb, leaving the reader to reflect on the cultural power a single digit contains. He politicizes the thumb. Furthermore, he shows implicitly that he just as easily could have dedicated an essay to the index finger or the pinky. Every part of our bodies and every banal object that surrounds

⁹ Appropriating the term coined by Apollinaire in 1917, André Breton defines Surrealism in his 1924 manifesto thus: 'Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of associations neglected until now, in the omnipotence of dream, and in the disinterested play of thought' (André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (1972), 26).

¹⁰ Arthur Benson, 'The Art of the Essayist', in *Modern English Essays*, ed. Ernest Rhys (1923), 50.



Figure 17.4 Salvador Dalí, untitled illustration, originally published in *Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton (New York: Doubleday & Company, inc., 1947), n.p.

Art: © 2019 Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society.

us is a potential catalyst for essayistic thinking. Dalí's treatment of the thumb is as fragmented as that of Montaigne. These two aesthetic practices shun the conventions set forth by earlier generations of writers and artists and rely instead on the improvisational genius of the daydreamer.

Salvador Dalí's illustrations of the *Essays* are significant because they demonstrate the natural sympathies between essayism and Surrealism. The twentieth century saw both the essay's hybridization and its surrealization, as the inclusion of images coaxed the genre towards the kind of unexpected juxtapositions, blending of the conscious and subconscious, and imagistic economy specific to Surrealist practices.

3. Evans and Agee Keep It (Sur)real

In the late 1930s, the American photographer Walker Evans and the American writer James Agee took on an unorthodox essayistic project that would allow them to forge a double subjectivity through which the suffering farmers of the Dust Bowl would be observed and studied. Originally commissioned but then rejected by a New York magazine as a journalistic piece on US cotton tenantry, Evans and Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was finally published in 1941. On first leafing through the book, one might assume it to be a straightforward piece of documentary journalism, until this sentence in the preface appears: "The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word. The governing instrument—which is also one of the centers of the subject—is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness."¹¹ This is the first of many signals of the experimental nature of their project and its reliance on Surrealist principles, particularly apparent in Agee's essays that accompany Evans's photographs, written while he was reading Freud.¹² Indeed, Hugh Davis has called the project 'a work of surrealist ethnography'.¹³ Agee uses his own memories, flaws, dreams, and the tangled threads of impressions he collected in the field to work through his anxieties about the project, never sure that he will have done justice to the reality of his subjects. He prizes 'works of the imagination', which 'advance and assist the human race, and make an opening in the darkness as nothing can', and

¹¹ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (2001), x.

¹² William Schultz has argued that the text to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is Agee's 'covert autobiography' and that traces of the 'primal scene schema' can be found in the book. See Schultz, 'Off-Stage Voices in James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: Reportage as Covert Autobiography', *American Imago* 56.1 (1999), 75–104.

¹³ Hugh Davis, 'The Making of James Agee', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tennessee (2005), 53. Elsewhere Davis argues that Surrealism greatly influenced both Evans and Agee: see "'Drinking at Wells Sunk beneath Privies": Agee and Surrealism', in *Agee Agonistes: Essays on the Life, Legend, and Works of James Agee*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (2007), 85–104, especially 86.

sees in the unmediated and incommunicable experiences of his travels in the South a kind of surreality.¹⁴ He pre-emptively admits the failure of the project because no images or words could communicate the surreal experience of direct contact with the people and places he and Evans encountered (Figure 17.5). The text abounds with free associations, oneiric lists, dream imagery, and, in some sections, what resembles unrestrained, Surrealist-inspired automatic writing: one passage, a single sentence that lasts a page and a half, ends '[...] beneath the table the dog and the puppy and the sliding cats, and above it, a grizzling literal darkness of flies, and spread on all quarters, the simmering dream held in this horizon yet overflowing it, and of the natural world, and eighty miles back east and north, the hard flat incurable sore of Birmingham'.¹⁵



Figure 17.5 Walker Evans, untitled photograph, originally published in James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1939), n.p.

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¹⁴ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 205.

¹⁵ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 193.

The role of the camera is fundamental in Agee and Evans's project and is held superior to the writer's pen in its ability to document a specific scene.¹⁶ Agee explains that one reason he cares 'so deeply for the camera' is that it is 'incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth'.¹⁷ He argues that 'the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time'.¹⁸ The nature of the photographic image as trace allows for a phenomenon to leave a lasting mark, albeit dislodged from its original context. This dislodging is the photographic equivalent of the characteristic digression of the literary essay. Surrealism takes particular interest in decontextualized images, pictures that leave their residue on the psyche as on a photographic plate. Rosalind Krauss claims that 'surrealist photography exploits the very special connection to reality with which all photography is endowed. [...] On the family tree of images [the photograph] is closer to palm prints, death masks, cast shadows, the Shroud of Turin, or the tracks of gulls on beaches'.¹⁹ Agee expresses the desire for an even more fundamental kind of trace-making when he laments the fact that the project had to appear as a book.²⁰ For him, the ideal format would have been radically different:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. [...] A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.²¹

Agee wanted pure trace—or, even better, the trace-leaving phenomena themselves. In Evans's photographs, one sees the hard faces of the sharecroppers and their families, their brows as furrowed as their fields. He also captures the objects and places that surround them: a pair of worn boots abandoned in the sterile sand, an empty bed, the dilapidated interiors emptied of people. The necessity of a direct and personal encounter with the *trouvaille* or found object, a component of Surrealist practice, has an afterlife in the photographs of *Let Us Now*

¹⁶ Agee argues that words 'are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication' (Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 209). For lack of a better medium, his goal as essayist is to try to let the phenomena he approaches express themselves 'in [their] own terms' (Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 208).

¹⁷ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 206.

¹⁸ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 9.

¹⁹ Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography in the Service of Surrealism', *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism*, ed. Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston (1985), 15–42, here 31.

²⁰ 'The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative. [...] This is a *book* only by necessity' (Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, xi).

²¹ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 10.

Praise Famous Men, albeit as surrogates for unmediated contact.²² Because the encountered objects, people, and places cannot be delivered into the hands of the reader, the photograph is the closest proxy. In this collaboration, Evans is a hunter of images while Agee is a collector of impressions. The project is composed of two kinds of traces, those left on film and those left on the psyche.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men required two people to come to fruition. The essay is not typically a collaborative endeavour. One voice expresses a single subjectivity. This is true even in the case of Dalí's illustrated edition of Montaigne because the images were added after the fact; the two men, separated by centuries, were independent agents. However, the collaboration of Agee and Evans, and essay-films like Chris Marker's *Sans soleil*, which as we will see required a hired narrator, a production crew, and film clips from other directors, suggest that the essay is not necessarily a solitary undertaking.

In fact, comparing Evans's pictures and Agee's text, the two seem at times to be having two different conversations. If we take the photographs alone, there are few visible traces of Surrealist influence, no hint of Man Ray or Hans Bellmer. Most of the images are black and white portraits or shots of interiors, landscapes, or objects, like the pair of shoes left in the dirt (Figure 17.6). There is nothing conspicuously experimental in their composition and their mode seems purely documentary. Yet in conjunction with Agee's essays, they change character, and accrue dream-like, meditative qualities. Through the pictures, meanwhile, Agee's ruminations are given context; grounded in an unequivocally real place and time. Since Montaigne, the essay has been conceived as dialogic; he imagined the pieces as his side of a conversation he'd never be able to have with his deceased best friend Étienne de la Boétie, who was commemorated in the essay 'On Friendship'. Essayists often write with an intimacy toward their interlocutors who will never answer them. The essay hybrids of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries at times attempt to incorporate the absent interlocutor and realize a dialogue only implicit for the companionless essayist. Even between friends, conversations are sometimes difficult. These tensions can be felt in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*: the photographer tended towards the real, the writer towards the surreal.

Agee and Evans's collaborative photo essay illustrates the power of the photographer to go where the essayist cannot and vice versa. The essay has thus added another dimension to its already rich expressive repertory, with the photograph providing residual evidence of experiences actually lived. Furthermore, the images placed before the reader provide an occasion for reverie and aesthetic contemplation

²² On the Surrealist *trouvaille*, see 'La Trouvaille (the lucky find); le hasard objectif (objective chance); le trouble (the surrealist uncanny)', in Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (1993), 140–5.



Figure 17.6 Walker Evans, untitled photograph, originally published in James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1939), n.p.

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and set the essay reader on a different course than a pictureless essay. The image is an interrupting force, a surface from which thoughts will be deflected in a new direction. One image shows, for example, a rustic hearth with a sign above it that reads 'PLEASE BE QUITE [*sic*] Every body is welcome', written in a childlike hand, a picture with the power to summon thoughts about literacy, poverty, community, and perhaps even democracy, despite its minimalism. It is an invitation to the reader to digress in a new way. Since we dream and think through images, it is enriching to include them as a resource for the meditative subject alongside the written word. This acceptance of the image as a viable form of essayistic expression accommodates Agee's claim that 'Humans may be more and more aware of being awake, but they are still incapable of not dreaming.'²³ The photograph has the power to ground the prose in the actual world through its authority as trace and provides at the same time a kind of dream image to supplement the written word. The photo essay is a form of lucid dreaming.

²³ Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 209.

4. Marker's Dislocated Subject

In the late 1940s, Alexandre Astruc proposed the metaphor of the 'camera-as-pen', insisting that cinema would be futureless unless it adopted the language of the essay and embraced the possibilities of the non-mimetic and the abstract.²⁴ Conversely, the essay adopted the camera as a different kind of pen, one capable of recording impressions in a new medium.

The consensus today is that the essay-film 'rests somewhere between fiction and nonfiction cinema', fictional in its tendency to give the imagination an open, laboratorial space, and nonfictional in its use of footage of events that actually happened and places that really exist.²⁵ If one considers the essayistic novel as a 'novel that thinks', one could by analogy define the essay-film as a film that thinks.²⁶ There is certainly plenty of thinking in Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (1982), which, as Michael Richardson has noted, 'shows a clear link with a surrealist perspective'.²⁷ The assaying subject is decentralized. It is not Marker who speaks; instead, the film's thoughts are delivered through several mediators. Narrated by an anonymous woman, the textual portions of the film are observations and reflections delivered to her by a fictional correspondent named Sandor Krasna who travels in Japan, Iceland, the Cape Verde Islands, Guinea-Bissau, and other locations. Along with these words, he delivers filmed images to his interlocutor; this combination of text and living picture creates enigmatic, dream-like digression with a philosophical underpinning.

Many of the clips used by Marker are archival excerpts from other directors. Like the essayist who feels compelled to cite the wisdom of others constantly, Marker and many other makers of essay-films cite filmmakers past by folding their images into the new essayistic project. Reinforcing Roland Barthes's depiction of Japan as an empire of signs, Marker explores death, life, sex, sleep, consumption, memory, and countless other themes through representative images and semiotic codes that differ greatly from those of his native France. He does not show the similarities between the East and the West, only the most jarring

²⁴ 'Cinema only has a future if the camera ends up replacing the pen: this is why I say that its language is not the language of fiction, nor reporting, but of the essay. Or else if it wrests itself from the dictatorship of photography and representation faithful to reality. Or finally, if it becomes the port of call for the abstract' ['Le cinéma n'a d'avenir que si la caméra finit par remplacer le stylo: c'est pourquoi je dis que son langage n'est ni celui de la fiction, ni celui des reportages, mais celui de l'essai. Ou encore qu'il s'arrachera de la dictature de la photographie et de la représentation fidèle à la réalité. Et enfin qu'il deviendra lieu de passage de l'abstrait.'], Alexandre Astruc, 'L'avenir du cinéma', *Du stylo à la caméra. ... et de la caméra au stylo. Écrits (1942-1984)* (1992), 328-36, here 332 (my translation).

²⁵ Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (2009), 21.

²⁶ Milan Kundera uses the expression 'romans qui pensent' to describe Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* and Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* (Milan Kundera, *Le Rideau* (2005), 87).

²⁷ Michael Richardson, *Surrealism and Cinema* (2006), 88. Carol Rosenthal suggests likewise that Marker 'detects the bizarre in the normal and explores surrealism in everyday urban life': see *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: Explorations of the Urban* (2011), 206.

differences; scenes that through their sheer otherness would astonish a European tourist. The exotic has always been of particular interest to essayists, most famously in Montaigne's 'On Cannibals', and again in works such as Barthes's *Empire of Signs* or Victor Segalen's 'Essay on Exoticism'. The defamiliarized customs of cultures that are not our own create an uncanny effect, since their structures are similar but nonetheless otherworldly.

Near the halfway point in the film, a representative scene provides hints at the crux of Marker's project. The narrator cites a message from Krasna:

More and more, my dreams find their settings in the department stores of Tokyo, the subterranean tunnels that extend them and run parallel to the city. A face appears, disappears; a trace is found, is lost. All the folklore of dreams is so much in its place that the next day when I'm awake, I realize that I continue to seek in the basement labyrinth the presence concealed the night before. I begin to wonder if those dreams are really mine, or if they're part of a totality, of a gigantic collective dream of which the entire city may be the projection. [...] The train inhabited by sleeping people puts together all the fragments of dreams, makes a single film of them, the ultimate film. The tickets from the automatic dispenser grant admission to the show.²⁸

The spectator wonders, in the film's meta-reference to film, whether *Sans soleil* is not an attempt to be the ultimate film, the stringing together of dream fragments into a collective vision. Marker's conjugation of essayism and the surreal in this segment shows with elegance and subtlety the compatibilities between the two.

Many of Krasna's reflections are dedicated to the problem of the image, in its mediated form, in its remembered form, and in its dream form. We might consider Marker's film an essay on the nature of the image. Krasna's Japanese friend Hayao Yamaneko, a computer artist, claims that 'electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory, and imagination' and thus spends his time creating synthesized images—what he calls non-images—of everyday places, things, people, and political events. In these brightly coloured digital renderings, figures are often barely recognizable; only when they move can the spectator be sure that the figures are human (Figure 17.7). This world of non-images, what Yamaneko calls 'the zone' in homage to Tarkovsky, is admired by Krasna: '[Hayao] plays with the signs of his memory. He pins them down and decorates them like insects that would have flown beyond time, and which he could contemplate from a point outside of time: the only eternity we have left.' These images do not pretend to be reality and are thus, he suggests, more honest; they reveal more clearly than unmanipulated pictures that they are

²⁸ Chris Marker, *Sans soleil*, Argos Films (1993), 100 minutes, VHS.



Figure 17.7 Still from *Sans soleil*.

Source: Chris Marker © 1983.

only representations. In this sense, the synthesized images play a similar function to the rotoscopic animation in Richard Linklater's film *Waking Life* (2001), which consists of meandering, reflective dialogues set in a dreamlike world, seemingly superimposed over actual actors. The animated or synthesized image allows us to grant the thoughts their own world, not simply blend them into our own. These altered states help the viewer to remember that what he or she perceives on screen is a mediated reality.

Marker could not have rendered the eeriness and atemporality of these synthesized images with words alone. Language insufficiently reproduces the alienating effect of the new media of his time, so the film essayist is reliant on the pictures to do the talking. To read the full transcript of *Sans soleil* without watching the film is to decrease its potency by one dimension—or two, if we keep sound in mind, which does its own kind of work. The same goes for the subtraction of words; viewing the images alone, we seem to be watching several ethnographic documentaries and some sci-fi and horror films whose footage has gotten mixed up. In words alone, Marker's avatar is an intellectual, a chronicler and analyst. As an image collector like Walker Evans, he is a voyeur and his dark sensibilities are made more palpable than in his words. The theme of this essay-film is the nature of the image, but Marker also uses the images themselves to test theories such as Yamaneko's claims that 'electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory, and imagination' and that the video game Pac-Man is 'the most perfect graphic metaphor of man's fate'. The images test or attest to what

the words state. For this reason, the medium of essay-film becomes an ideal laboratory for an understanding of what is possible through pictures.

Through *Sans soleil*, one quickly understands the potential of the conflation of essay and moving image: tensions may be built by contrasting seemingly incompatible voiced thoughts and moving scenes; the reiterative poetics of repeated images creates a dream logic that may operate in consonance or dissonance with the spoken words; new media that allow for the manipulation of images allows the essay to be pushed into a different kind of reality, one that vaguely resembles our own but is by no means equivalent to it. Marker's essay-film is surreal in its themes, in its reiteration, manipulation, and choice of images, and in the digressive, displaced subjectivity of the essayist. This thinking film leaves the spectator with a breadth of meditative material and a set of images that work as visual analogues to the thought process. Marker provides the visual matter through which his ideas should be imagined. This ex-centric essay-film moves erratically like the Surrealist pinball, ricocheting from the digitized face of a cat to the opaque face of woman who knows she's being watched back to the smiling faces of three blonde Icelandic children playing together in 1965. Marker strings together his essayistic image theories in one long and tangled strand.

5. Bresland's Anxious Images

Marker, the self-veiling essayist, puts the narrator and several avatars between himself and his interlocutors. Other practitioners of hybrid essay forms such as the video essay are straightforward in their self-inclusion, much more in the spirit of Montaigne's autobiographical exhibitionism. Often, the medium itself determines how much of the self is visible. In contrast to film, which often requires a bulky camera and perhaps a crew, the video is more manageable and allows everyday life to be recorded in a less disruptive manner. For this reason, it is as portable as a journal, with which the essay shares many features, from its short prose form to its autobiographical imperative and its immediacy with its subject matter. This ability to record one's thoughts and impressions easily, to move through the world unhindered by a cumbersome apparatus, means that the filmmaker can retrieve images that most closely resemble one's lived experience. The video essayist John Bresland writes:

Film is analog. Film requires a shutter to convey motion. [...] Video, on the other hand, from the way it's acquired (on small, light digital cameras with startling image quality) to the way it's consumed (on mobile devices, on planes, as shared links across the ether) is now being carried everywhere, the way books and magazines once were. And there's a certain texture to video, a telltale

combination of compression artifacts, blown-out whites and noisy blacks, that isn't pretty. But it's not ugly, either. It's real.²⁹

This realness would have perhaps attracted essayistic writers of the pre-cinematic age who wished to create a visible, audible analogue for their abstract musings. Perhaps Montaigne would have left behind a different kind of cultural artefact had a camera been available to him: 'Je suis moi-même la matière de mon film'.

Bresland's 2010 video essay *Mangoes*, a sustained, autobiographical reflection on paternal anxiety communicated through image, spoken word, and sound, illustrates the flexibility and the realness of the video format.³⁰ But it also shows the potential for a surreal treatment of everyday life while maintaining the essayist's posture (Figure 17.8). Bresland narrates the video essay, recorded on an iPhone and inspired by Lars Von Trier's *The Five Obstructions* (2003). Its ethereal, pulsing soundtrack, recorded using an app called Euphonics, and its handheld dynamism push everyday life into a dreamlike sequence. Bresland and



Figure 17.8 Still from *Mangoes*.

Source: John Bresland © 2010.

²⁹ John Bresland, 'On the Origin of the Video Essay', *Blackbird* 9.1 (Spring 2010), at http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v9n1/gallery/ve-bresland_j/ve-origin_page.shtml.

³⁰ *Mangoes* can be viewed online at http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v9n1/gallery/ve-bresland_j/mangoes-video.shtml.

his actual wife, child, and landlord are the key players. Over the first shot, which shows Bresland's wife walking outside with their child strapped to her chest, he narrates, 'We were on vacation when my wife asked, pretty much out of nowhere, why I hated the BabyBjörn.' The BabyBjörn, that baby carrier fastened to the mother, becomes the departure point for a reflection on the new emasculated father, the fragility of life, as well as a critique of capitalism and the enfeeblement of the male half of the human species. Bresland's stout landlord, a Vietnam vet with tattoos, a Harley Davidson, and a cigarette in his hand, considers the BabyBjörn 'gay', 'unnatural', and 'not manly' when worn by a male. The new man, softened by consumerism and the culture of fear, has become the unconvincing imitation of a woman. The video essay continues with amusing if not unsettling scenes, like the one in which Bresland's child giggles over and over each time he repeats the words 'Banana Republic' as his wife tries on clothes in the fitting room. In the most significant scene, the one that gives the video essay its title, Bresland feeds his son mangoes despite the fact that the child could have inherited an allergy from his mother. A mango in itself is not a threatening object. But Bresland delivers the mango slices to the baby on the flat side of a sharp knife, which he films moving across the room toward the child sitting in its high chair (Figure 17.9). Bresland cuts up the fruit next to a small toy human figurine



Figure 17.9 Still from *Mangoes*.

Source: John Bresland © 2010.

placed on the cutting board, and evokes in the viewer's mind the long cinematic history of prominently featured sharp edges. Recall that one of the most canonical Surrealist films, *Un Chien andalou* (1928), a collaboration between Buñuel and Dalí, shows in its first scene a man's hand appearing to slice a woman's eye with a razor.

Bresland reveals why he purposely fed his son the mangoes despite the risk: 'I didn't want him to become one of those effete little bubble boys, allergic to everything, allergic to the world.' The anxieties of fatherhood and the anticipation of his own failures and shortcomings permeate the full eight-and-a-half minute video. As a reader of Montaigne, Bresland was perhaps familiar with the essayist's writing on fatherhood and inheritance, such as the chapter 'Of the Resemblance of Children to their Fathers'. His video is a conduit for addressing his own mistakes and misunderstandings. There is no doubt who is the assaying subject; unlike the problematic doubled subjectivity of Agee and Evans's collaboration or Chris Marker's subjective deferral, the voice, thoughts, and images are identified squarely with Bresland. Using the video essay, he articulates the dilemma of the contemporary American man: have I become too feminine and, if so, how am I to reckon with this new femininity?

Of the new hybrid genre, Bresland writes, '[p]romiscuity of the image isn't a weakness of the essay-film. It's a feature. A volatile one, sure. And it's changing the way we write, changing our conception of what writing means.' An essayist who uses the image—moving or still—can deploy it as merely supplementary to her words, to ironize or complicate those words, or to convey something that words alone cannot. Bresland is cognizant of the image's power and makes full use of it to create a mood—along with the music—that is not part of daily life. Bresland employs the strong juxtaposition of gentle and dangerous images—for example, the mother and baby followed by a skull sitting on the landlord's table—which is a key feature of Surrealist film. Images recur and change meaning, toggling between life and death. Temporal linearity is uncertain. He frames shots in unexpected ways, placing the iPhone on the floor to show only the child's legs as he bounces in a suspended swing with bright natural light flooding the image; the landlord, a figure of darkness in his obscure dwelling, is filmed at an odd angle with the camera on the table among the man's pills and knickknacks, giving a biographical hint of how this person lives, even if he appears onscreen only momentarily. Again, the filmmaker pairs the mundane and the strange, offering yet another example of the congruity between essayism and Surrealism.

This video essay suggests that something in contemporary life is off kilter, a sensation reinforced by the haunting soundtrack. Bresland's essay is by no means as disorienting, sexually charged, or quick-cutting as many early Surrealist films, but he creates an atmosphere of precariousness and ephemerality through shots like a plastic shovel floating in the water, a *trouvaille* with an inexplicable symbolic charge, something like Dalí's and Montaigne's 'discovery' of our most useful



Figure 17.10 Still from *Mangoes*.

Source: John Bresland © 2010.

finger, the thumb, a neglected body part that remains invisible until it has been isolated and brought into the field of consciousness. His narration is minimal and suggestive, hinting that the autobiographically inflected meditations he offers are just the tip of a much larger existential iceberg. This attempt to reconcile the universal and the particular is a key feature of the essayist's practice; the images help in this task. He tries to render the subconscious conscious and to uncover the veiled aspects of his fear of fatherhood. Undermining the genre of parental home footage by transforming it into a series of self-interrogating pictures and adding a philosophical voice-over that demolishes any sentimentality the images might have had, Bresland shows that with a few adjustments, any art form can be made tentative (Figure 17.10). Like the Surrealists, who understood that any phenomenon can be transfigured through the lens of the surreal, Bresland realizes the potential of essayism to add a new contingency to life and art.

6. Conclusion

One might be tempted to think that the closest thing resembling an essay in the realm of the visual is the sketch—one of the definitions of 'essai'—that

preliminary, rough, and impressionistic first attempt by an artist to prepare for the final image to come. Certain essayists undoubtedly think of their work as an opportunity for the kind of preparatory, free reflection unwelcome in other kinds of writing. But the essay's open-endedness and its willingness to subsume various genres to its ends have proven viable as a free-standing means of expression. It need not be followed by anything. It is not the preparation for something, but is that thing already. The essay nonetheless leaves room for mistakes, dreams, hypotheses, memories, anecdotes, and perhaps Freudian slips. It isn't interested in air-tight logic, cohesion, or foregone conclusions. By putting Surrealism into conversation with essayism, their many compatibilities become clear, particularly striking in the essay hybrids which combine image and text. For the essayist and the Surrealist, images may be strung together in digressive, associative chains that have aesthetic value in their own right and that don't lead to some grandiose and final work to come. Their images are externalizations of the internal, and what they present is inherently autobiographical since it seeks to show the most intimate conscious and subconscious mechanisms of the individual. The essayist, like the Surrealist, includes himself in his observations, if only implicitly.

Surrealism, which cultivated the dissolution of cohesion in general, offers a model for the hybrid essayist. Salvador Dalí, who provided readers of Montaigne's *Essays* with a set of illustrations to push their imaginations in unanticipated directions, showed the power of the picture to reshape the essay. Separated by centuries, these two very different minds made obvious a latent point about the literary essay: that it is image-friendly and, often, even image-dependent. The collaboration of James Agee and Walker Evans showed the flip-side of the Dalí-Montaigne fusion; instead of down-to-earth prose with fantastical imagery, they experimented with down-to-earth images accompanied by fantastical prose. The difference between the projects begins to show the potential of such hybrid combinations. As for the moving picture, Chris Marker perfected a tangled subjectivity by borrowing images from other directors and creating fictional avatars of himself to communicate his ideas. His essay-film challenged the conventions of essayistic authorship and sought to emphasize the mediated nature of all representation, particularly film. Finally, John Bresland takes up Montaigne's first-person subjectivity again only to 'surrealize' it through stark, unsettling juxtapositions and the logic and atmosphere of dreams. The vivid image, produced by and for the imagination, is essential to essayistic engagement, whether in written, photographed, animated, or filmed form.

From these examples, it is clear that Surrealism and essayism have many irons in a shared fire. Both have recognized the potential of the image to estrange daily life and to provide the occasion for reflective digression, underscoring the link between image and imagination. Given the increasing reliance on screens in everyday life across the globe, this image-centred ethos seems already endemic.

Essayism is no longer limited to the printed word nor even to the printed image. Its use of both has become lighter through virtualization and will undoubtedly continue to shed weight. The Surrealists would have delighted in the possibility of taking their digressive thought chains out of the actual world and putting them into a virtual one, the great collective and dreaming brain that Marker imagined the Tokyo underground to be.

