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**Women's Essay Films in Francophone Europe.  
Exploring the Female Audiovisual Thinking Process**

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**Enunciative Devices of the European Francophone Essay Film**

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## **Abstract**

This article aims to analyse women's essay films in Francophone Europe, exploring the presence of a gendered audiovisual thinking process, and considering both the formal aspect and the thematic dimension. The research allows the characterisation of a female audiovisual thinking process determined by both self-representation and the vindication of women filmmakers as creators of images and women's topics through the reflection on female alterities. First, the research analyses the enunciative devices used and their evolution—the (self-)portrait, the letter, the diary, the autobiography, autofiction and dialogue—to create essay films whose audiovisual thinking processes are mainly generated within the images through the *mise-en-scène*, and through the juxtaposition between visual image and sound image. Second, the study analyses the topics addressed, which mostly revolve around gender issues and trace a path that goes from gaze to alterity, intersubjectivity, and sisterhood. Women's gaze makes possible the reflection on feminine alterities in order to confront or identify with them, leading to the construction of intersubjective spaces for reflection that become artistic practices of sisterhood. Finally, the study concludes women have been delayed in reaching the position of the essayist as a manipulator of images, due to the need to vindicate the figure of the woman filmmaker understood as a creator of images.

**Keywords:** essay film; women's cinema; Francophone cinema; enunciative devices, identity, alterity.

## **1. Introduction**

This article aims to analyse European Francophone essay films created by women, starting from the definition of this filmic form as an audiovisual thinking process carried out by a subjectivity or subjectivities. Thus, the thinking in act (Moure 2004) is generated through the materialisation of parataxic thinking (Català 2014) and interstitial thinking (Rascaroli 2017), through the creation of sentence-images: “[T]he combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image” (Rancière 2007, 46), which combines this dual nature of the audiovisual thinking process, oscillating “between two poles, dialectical and symbolic [...] between the image that separates and the sentence which strives for continuous phrasing” (58).

This analysis of female authorship in European Francophone essay films aims to determine its possible specificities in relation to two perspectives: first, the formal aspect, analysing the enunciation devices used; second, the thematic aspect, studying the issues addressed by the audiovisual thinking processes of women filmmakers. Finally, I will conclude how this female authorship in the essay film evolves from its first materialisations to the present. Taking the proposed definition, I have selected the corpus presented below, considering that these films are the most relevant and representative examples of essay films created by women in European Francophone cinema.

1975 *Maso et Miso vont en bateau / Maso et Miso Go Boating* – Nadja Ringart, Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig and Iona Wieder

1976 *Ici et ailleurs / Here and Elsewhere* – Jean-Luc Godard, Anne-Marie Miéville

1977 *News from Home* – Chantal Akerman

1977 *Le Camion / The Lorry* – Marguerite Duras

1977 *Papa comme maman* – Anne-Marie Miéville

1985 *Du verbe aimer* – Mary Jiménez

1988 *Jane B. par Agnès V. / Jane B. for Agnès V.* – Agnès Varda

2004 *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil / Why (Not) Brazil?* – Lætitia Masson

2008 *Les Plages d’Agnès / The Beaches of Agnès* – Agnès Varda

2009 *Face aux fantômes* – Jean-Louis Comolli, Sylvie Lindeperg

2020 *Ailleurs, partout / Elsewhere, Everywhere* – Isabelle Ingold, Vivianne Perelmuter

Therefore, I aim to explore the expression of a gendered audiovisual thinking process in women’s essay films, and to determine its specificities from both a formal and a thematic point of view. While the studies carried out to date focus on the possibility of female subjectivity that is linked to the camera and self-representation (Chamarette 2012; McFadden 2014; Ince 2017), even when it has been applied to the essay film (Eakin Moss 2016), this article aims to analyse the audiovisual thinking process of women’s essay films, which is not directly linked to the creation of the images, but specifically materialised in their subsequent manipulation to generate thinking in act, parataxic and interstitial thinking, through dialectic and symbolic sentence-images. Varda’s words perfectly illustrate how the vindication of the figure of the filmmaker is linked to the gaze, and hence, to the creation of images that embody it: “The first feminist gesture consists of saying [...] I look. The act of deciding to look [...] the world is not defined by how I

am looked at, but by how I look at it” (*Filmer le désir*, Marie Mandy, 2002). This research aims to analyse whether there is also a female gesture in relation to *how I think*.

## **2. Beginning and exception: The essayist as a manipulator of images and the encounter of subjectivities**

I situate the beginning of the female practice of the essay film in the European Francophone space with two works, *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* and *Ici et ailleurs*, which will become exceptions for two reasons. First, both films place the filmmakers in the position of the essayist as the manipulator of images in a space–time subsequent to the making of the images and identified with the editing room. Second, both works are generated from the encounter of subjectivities: in the first case, those of four women; in the second, those of a woman and a man, becoming a crucial exponent of the possibilities of male–female intersubjectivity in the essay film.

*Maso et Miso vont en bateau* is a work by the collective “Les Insoumuses” (Jeanjean 2011; Murray 2016; An 2019) that embodies the transition from militant cinema to essay film, in which feminist activism begins to manipulate documentary materials to generate critical thinking. Although it cannot be considered an audiovisual thinking process, it already instrumentalises some of its elements. The filmmakers take Bernard Pivot’s television programme, entitled “Encore un jour et l’année de la femme – Ouf ! – c’est fini !” [Just One More Day to Go and the Year of the Woman—Oof!—Is Over!] (Antenne 2, 1975), in which he interviews Françoise Giroud, the first Secretary of State for Women’s Affairs, on the occasion of the United Nations’ International Women’s Year (1975), in order to criticise its content by manipulating it: “Video, in its feminist practice as in any militant practice, serves indeed to analyse and highlight conflicts, contradictions, with a view to a radical transformation of society” (Fleckinger 2010, 36). The film is generated from the basic juxtaposition between the images of the television programme and some handwritten intertitles through which the filmmakers criticise and denounce in an irreverent and subversive tone both the intervention of Françoise Giroud in relation to the various controversies of which she is an object and the misogynistic and sexist comments of several male guests. In addition, they manipulate the images: repeating fragments, freezing the image and removing the sound image in order to emphasise the meaning and relevance of what is denounced. In the same way, the filmmakers also include other materials through which to explain the opposition between

the television programme and the feminist struggle: a fragment of an interview with Simone de Beauvoir; images of the 8 March demonstration in Paris that same year; and the cover of the September issue of *L'Express* “Le choc d'Histoire d'O,” featuring a topless photo of Corinne Clery from the film. Multiple musical fragments are used equally to generate irony and irreverence regarding the content of the television programme.

Furthermore, and importantly, they show the space and time for reflection—the editing room where a former material is manipulated—which is thereafter evoked through their voiceovers. In their first appearance (at minute 22) the camera portrays the four filmmakers from behind, while they work in a rudimentary editing room, and they react to the images just shown by singing. In these images, faced with Pivot’s demand for a reaction to Louis Feraud’s misogynistic statements, Giraud defends them by saying: “I think it’s the language of a man who loves women”, to which Pivot responds; “Really? So everything is fine?” The filmmakers repeat the fragment several times and add different subtitles: “like the man who ~~loves~~ fucks women,” “like the man who gropes us on the underground,” “like the man who rapes us in the suburbs,” and “like the clients of prostitutes” (Figure 1). Next, a zoom-out from the editing room monitor shows the filmmakers singing, “Everything is going very well, Madam Minister, everything is going very well” (Figure 2). Their second visual appearance in the film (at minute 39) shows them applauding while exclaiming “bravo” before a new response from Giroud. On this occasion, faced with the misogynistic statements of the food critic Christian Guy, Giroud replies, “You are right. Women don’t think. They let the meal burn every day. Then you sit down for dinner, it's never good! It's well known.” The appearance of the filmmakers in the editing room, the space–time of the audiovisual reflection, allows us to identify their voiceovers with it, without the need for the visual image. Again, with a sense of humour, the voiceovers are ironic about the images, instrumentalising the misunderstanding. In their last two appearances, at the end of the film, we hear the filmmakers singing again. In the last one, they offer an alternative version of the song “La femme est l’avenir de l’homme” [Woman is the future of man] that Jean Ferrat performs on set. They reformulate each lyric and its title becomes “Les femmes ont rencontré les femmes” [Women have met women]. The filmmakers not only find themselves in the cinematic work through the collective “Les Insoumuses,” but also place themselves for the first time in the position of the essayist who manipulates the images, and show themselves in it. It is necessary to point out here that this self-portrait of the essayist in

the editing room, extensively developed by Godard, began for his part that same year with *Numéro deux* (Godard and Miéville, 1975). This initial exception in the essay films made by women concludes with a final intertitle that shows the potential of video as a means of feminist activism: “No television image wants to or can reflect us. It is with VIDEO THAT WE WILL TELL OUR OWN STORIES.”

Figures 1 and 2. *Maso et Miso vont en bateau* (Carole Roussopoulos, Delphine Seyrig, Ioana Wieder, Nadja Ringart - Les Insoumuses, 1975). © Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir.

The beginning of Anne-Marie Miéville's film creation, through co-direction with Jean-Luc Godard (White 2013; Witt 2014), means that her essayistic practice is generated as an exercise in masculine–feminine intersubjectivity that has its beginning and its most relevant materialisation in *Ici et ailleurs*, in which Miéville analyses Godard's audiovisual thinking process to reveal the mistakes in his procedure and even to point out the filmmaker's macho practices (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2021a, 16-26). Thus, Miéville places herself alongside Godard in the position of the film essayists who generates their audiovisual thinking process from the manipulation of sound and visual images. This position, which Godard links in his essay films with Rougemont's “thinking with the hands” (1936, 147), is shared in *Ici et ailleurs* (Figures 3 and 4). Godard's and Miéville's hands appear alternately manipulating the volume of the sound, which had drowned out the revolutionary cry. Therefore, the equality of both filmmakers as essayists materialises in the shared position and in the dissent that Miéville shows regarding the images created by Godard. Her presence is clearly defined as a feminine and feminist gaze and thinking process. It is equally significant that the beginning of this female authorship also becomes the first essay film to present two subjectivities confronting their reflections. In this way, *Ici et ailleurs* stands as both the first essay film authored by a woman and as an exception within it, since we will not find shared male–female authorship again until *Face aux fantômes* (2009), but in the latter, there is no reflection on genre, so the film remains a reference work in this regard.

Figures 3 and 4. *Ici et ailleurs* (Jean-Luc Godard, Anne-Marie Miéville, 1976) © Gaumont.

After *Numéro deux* (1976), *Comment ça va ?* (1976) and *Six fois deux* (1976), Annie-Marie Miéville creates her first solo essay film, *Papa comme maman. Libres propos sur la fonction de mère*, in which she maintains the position of the essayist, who reflects through the manipulation of images—she only appears briefly as an interviewer—to again generate a feminine and feminist reflection, this time on motherhood through its absence. The experience of experience, a young woman in her late teens or early twenties, whose mother died when she was three years old, and her father’s decision to raise her alone allow Miéville to create her reflection through the hybridisation of different elements. The piece begins with photographs showing representations of motherhood that are followed by images of abused children, and Miéville wonders about the absence of images of abusive parent figures. Next, the depiction of Olivia and her father’s experience embodies the idea of the “absence of the mother” that takes on a masculine form. The essay film then shows a documentary portrait of the everyday relationship between father and daughter to give way to a first statement by Olivia recounting “The story” that evidences the intertitle. Olivia narrates her father’s decision to raise his daughter alone, her anecdotes, and the social attitudes she encountered in her environment. Next, the story told by the father is framed with an intertitle that gives the film its title “Papa comme maman” and that describes the replacement of the maternal absence by the paternal presence. “Comme maman” is inserted three times in the father’s statement, when he alludes to crucial questions about gendered work–life balance and tasks usually associated with motherhood. The second interview with Olivia, now in a close-up that contrasts with the general shot of the first, is preceded by the intertitle “Le manque” [the lack] that will forge Miéville’s audiovisual reflection: the absence of the mother causes Olivia to create an idealised image of her, which slides from motherhood to “femininity,” to the gender model. From the material shown, Miéville can then expose her reflection, which is introduced by the manipulation of the image, since we stop listening to its sound to give way to the filmmaker’s voiceover while Olivia continues speaking without being heard: “We have seen that Olivia creates a certain image of her mother; that she creates another image of another mother. Maybe she is correcting herself the traditional image we create of a mother.” The manipulation of the image then continues with repetition. After a new intertitle “Maman comme modèle”, Miéville show us again three fragments of Olivia’s reflection, preceded by the filmmaker’s words “We have seen this” and followed by new images that she again introduces: “We have seen this but we haven’t heard this.”

1. We have seen this: “A terrible need to have someone not exactly to copy but to have an example to go on in life.” We have seen this but we haven’t heard this [Images showing hands washing dishes]
2. We have seen this: “A mother is like a woman who guesses that for a moment... who guesses what will happen to her children.” We have seen this but we haven’t heard this [Images showing hands peeling carrots] (Figures 5 and 6)
3. We have seen this: “With her, it would be easier to discuss my life experiences, the way of seeing the world.” We have seen this but we haven’t heard this [Images showing hands washing clothes] Display quotations of over 40 words, or as needed

Figures 5 and 6. *Papa comme maman* (Anne-Marie Miéville, 1977) © RTS Radio Télévision Suisse.

Miéville shows how patriarchy manages to generate distortion in the reading of audiovisual materials through the paradox between “seeing” associated with words and “listening” associated with images. Any allusion to the mother figure is intimately linked to the gestures of non-salaried work fused with the notion of maternal love. Miéville’s reflection continues by juxtaposing the images of that work with its absence in Olivia’s life experience. The filmmaker exposes the convenience of the distortion between the words we see and the gestures we hear created by patriarchy:

This is why when we see the word “Mum” [hands washing dishes] we actually understand by that all the gestures that are performed by the mother, and the image of this sum of gestures replaces the image of a woman capable of other things than endlessly reproducing trifles. Olivia does not make this mixture. Not having had a mother allowed her to rectify these images a little in her own way, allowed her to no longer confuse love and dishes in any case.

Four more fragments of Olivia’s interview preceded by the intertitle “Maman comme modèle” [Mum as model] evidence the maternal model Olivia has created in the absence of her mother, which is not linked to the gestures of women’s unpaid work, since she has not experienced them. Miéville’s final reflection links feminist progress to the transformation of the associations of images the essay film has analysed:

I don’t have a message, I just wanted to say two or three things from the situations that necessarily interest me since they are part of me; since the condition of mother is mine too and that I encounter all these problems every day. In Olivia’s case, there



is something new, something novel [...] she has also gained other means of associating images differently. When there will be a little more of this newness, this novelty, perhaps the function of the mother will no longer be only [images showing mothers] this gigantic scam which consists of reproducing gestures we are never paid for.

Therefore, Miéville remains in the position of the essayist who reflects through images that she manipulates, generating a dialectical sentence-image of enormous potential: the self-interested distortion by patriarchy regarding the function of the mother figure, which manages to link the discourses of maternal love with the images of non-paid domestic work carried out by women. Through the absence of such a figure in Olivia's life experience, Miéville shows the need for a feminist "newness": to destroy this association in order to create new ones. As in *Ici et ailleurs*, Miéville generates the analysis from female subjectivity and the feminist activism of the essayist who observes and manipulates images to generate thought from a dialectical sentence-image that embodies the problem in an audiovisual way, but without appearing in the image, without the need to vindicate her identity as a filmmaker who creates images, but rather as an essayist who creates audiovisual reflections.

As I will argue through the analysis of the rest of the corpus, the position occupied by "Les Insoumuses" and Miéville, the latter both in the intersubjective work with Godard, and in her solo film, are the exception to the rule of essayistic creations by women, which are mainly linked to self-representation in the image as a vindication of their condition as filmmakers. This causes their reflections to be defined by the creation of images to the detriment of their reflexive manipulation, intrinsic to the essay film. Until very recently, women filmmakers have extensively deepened their relationship with the camera—as creators of the images—while they have rarely explored their position in the editing room—as essayists who manipulate them.

### **3. From gaze to epistolarity and self-portrait: Alterity and identification**

The same year as the creation of *Papa comme maman*, Chantal Akerman instrumentalised the epistolary device in *News from Home*, starting a crucial relationship between epistolary cinema and women filmmakers (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2021c, 2021d). She generates an essay film that arises again from the figure of the mother and from a new form of absence in which the gaze that Varda spoke of is the protagonist. The letters that

Akerman's mother sends her from Brussels are read by the filmmaker, while the visual image shows us her gaze on New York. Akerman thus constructs "a simulacrum of communication" (Margulies 1996, 151), "an irreparable divide [...] the daughter's insurmountable difference from the mother, a difference that is at once spatial, generational, political and sexual" (Longfellow 1989, 79). While Miéville manages to show the functions of motherhood through the absence of the maternal figure, Akerman embodies the mother–daughter bond through a maternal absence that becomes epistolary speech. However, Akerman does situate herself in the position of the filmmaker who creates images, and her gaze identifies with them. The essayistic reflection on maternal–filial alterity is built from the juxtaposition of the sound image of the reading of the mother's letters—through the filmmaker's voiceover that is confused with the direct sound—and the visual image of Akerman's gaze on the city of New York (Figure 7).

The first letter already establishes the relationship and situation between the addresser and the addressee: the yearning mother writes from Brussels to the absent daughter, who lives in New York, asking for news while narrating family events. The visual image, therefore, develops a personal portrait of daily life in New York City, based on the temporal evolution in the exterior space of the streets and a kind of timelessness in the interior space of the subway. This everyday life becomes an experience, as Janet Bergstrom indicates, through film capture: "The streets and the outskirts gradually acquire the significance of an everyday experience that is, however, distanced, simultaneously objective and subjective" (2004, 181). Fixed shots for the most part—with some panoramic shots and very significant but exceptional tracking shots—always edited through hard cuts without a single fade to black or crossfade, create a photographic essence in the portrait that Raymond Bellour calls its photographic capture:

In *News from Home* there are no photo(s), but something photographic. This means that each of the shots, or almost all of them, is like a fixed and often very long shot in which movement is produced, no doubt, but a kind of open, random, documentary movement, comparable to the development of what it captures. a snapshot (2002, 139).

The fixed shots make up the visual image from the rhythms and visual ruptures that are generated by their juxtaposition and that implies a crucial work in the conception of duration.

The sound image, for its part, offers an epistolary enunciation of daily family life that, faced to the forcefulness of the sounds of the city, is hardly intelligible. This option not only implies the preponderance of the reception and reading space of the letter but also defines and characterises the perception that the filmmaker has of the text. Thus, the letters are defined by the perception of their addressee, who receives them as the concerned, demanding, and constant maternal murmur; the murmur of concern for the daughter and also the insistent request for letters that sometimes becomes a sort of family ambient sound, which is not always paid attention to. The maternal narratives about family, work, and small daily events become mere excuses for the reiterative and increasingly anxious demand for the daughter's responses in order to deal with the experience of her absence: "Write to me," "Please, write soon," "You write to me but you never answer my letters, it's very annoying," "I only ask you for one thing: write as often as possible. It's all that counts for us." Epistolary writing represents for the mother the conservation of memory and hence of her maternal-filial bond: "Don't forget us. Write." She also wants to preserve memory through images; photographs she sends to her daughter and that she also demands: "Darling, write soon and send some pictures." The mother-child bond approaches the pathological identification: "I live to the rhythm of your letters", where the life experience of the sender depends on the epistolary production of the addressee; the epistolary discourse of maternal identity that finally vanishes in the face of the urban noise of an already resolved New York geography, in the last letter (Figure 8). In this way, a feature that will be representative of the essay film made by women is outlined: the priority of placing herself first and then representing herself in the position of the filmmaker as the creator of images that transmit their subjective experience of reality in relation to other female alterities with which to identify or to confront.

Figures 7 and 8. *News from Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1977)

Also that same year, Marguerite Duras creates the only film in which she appears on screen, *Le Camion*, to generate an essay film on artistic creation and political criticism that, once again, is not generated from the position of the essayist who manipulates the images, but from that of the writer-filmmaker who imagines the film that could be made. Duras and Gérard Depardieu, sitting face to face, in a room—Duras' chambre noire—read a dialogue between filmmaker and actor, between author and spectator; a digression that fabulates the film they could make, in a conditional past and present that multiplies the layers of Duras' artistic creation and narrative deconstruction. The first exchange

between Duras and Depardieu summarises the proposal: “– Is it a film? – It would have been a film. It is a film, yes.”

That is to say, the potentiality of the work, the fabulation about its creation, is its own realisation; a step further in the narrative deconstruction pursued by Duras through a literary–cinematic coalescence of non-representation (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2018, 136–146). Once again, the film is built through the juxtaposition between the filmmaker and the actor’s conversation and the journey of the imagined truck, filmed through exterior panoramic shots and from within, generating tracking shots of the road and its landscapes. The essay film is hence constructed through “the fluctuation between the actual and the virtual” (Beaulieu 2015, 122): the actual image of the filmmaker and the actor, the virtual image of the fabled film (Figures 9 and 10). In this way, Duras unifies gaze and self-portrait: “The filmmaker’s self-portrait produced during the creative act expresses her cinematic thinking through a filmic gaze that causes narrative deconstruction” (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2016, 65). The filmmaker’s voice, voice-in in the first space and voiceover in the second, is the key element for both the essay film and the identification between author and character, as indicated by Youssef Ishaghpour: “[T]his irreducible identity and duality of Duras and the woman in the lorry” (1982, 263), and by Duras herself:

It's me [the woman in the lorry] as well, of course, as I can be all women [...] Anyway, I've reached this point: talking about myself as if about someone else, getting interested in myself as someone else would interest me. To talk with myself, perhaps, I don't know (Duras 1977, 132).

The film’s fabulation and the character of the woman in the lorry allow Duras to make a political and social reflection on the times that places her in a space of intellectuality, identified at the same time with a particularly invisible feminine condition: “A woman of a certain age, small, thin, grey, banal, invisible,” “déclassée,” and also with motherhood that seems to justify the trip: “She could also go to see her daughter who has just given birth.”<sup>1</sup> Duras instrumentalises the juxtaposition between the essayistic digression and the poetic image to generate a new non-representation of “the absence of

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<sup>1</sup> English translation from *Le Camion* by Daniela Hurezanu and Eireene Nealand: “On the road: The first English translation of an extract from the screenplay of the 1977 film *Le Camion* by one of the greatest French writers of the 20th century.” *Index on Censorship* 48(3): 79-88.

revolutionary possibility” (Ishaghpour 1982, 246): “Let the world go to its ruin, that is the only form of politics.”

After describing political conviction as religion:

The last avatar of the supreme Saviour, the proletariat. She’d believed it. A sacred God: the proletariat. She’d believed it. No one has the right to question the proletariat’s responsibility. She’d believed it. The responsibility of the activist should never be called into question again—that would mean risking blasphemy against the working class. She’d believed it.

Duras enunciates the lie of the proletariat and its class struggle: “And then one day she saw: the complicity between the owners and the workers. Their identical fear. Their identical goal. Their identical politics: the infinite delay of any free revolution. Killing the other man in each man, robbing him of his fundamental nature: his own contradiction.” Before the female authorship and protagonism, the male presence is positioned as actor and spectator, listening, both recipients of Duras’ reflection, which is only contested by the character of the truck driver through macho contempt: “He says: I get it. You are a reactionary.” “Then, he says: I get it. You’ve escaped from the psychiatric asylum of Gouchy.” “He says: you lie.”

Figures 9 and 10. *Le Camion* (Marguerite Duras, 1977) © Gaumont

*Le Camion* could be considered one of the first female essay films that instrumentalises lyricism as “a counternarrative mode,” “an undoing that is essential to the disjunctive textuality of the essay” (Rascaroli 2017, 144, 163) to take it to the limit of narrative destruction and Durasian non-representation. As Ishaghpour observes, “Essay and lyricism each limit the other’s claim to unambiguousness: speech and questioning make and unmake the film as it progresses, so the image is not reduced to what exists, since it is only there as the absence of an impossible” (1982, 266).

#### **4. Identity trauma: The fracture between autobiography and self-portrait**

In *Du verbe aimer*, Mary Jiménez generates the confrontation between autobiography and self-portrait from, once again, maternal absence. The film becomes a “pretext for a way back:” that of her return to her native Peru, in 1983, ten years after her departure and five years after the death of her mother, the victim of a gas explosion. The filmmaker begins

the essay film with a relevant reflection on its cinematic nature and its construction. The definition of film already configures the link with the experience of psychoanalysis, crucial in Jiménez's life:

A film is never the film you want to make [...] the finished film becomes a different quality of matter, and this matter, like the child in their mother's womb, cuts themselves off from her definitively. And the mother fades away, she dies [...] What you wanted to do was masked by the film.

The work is defined as the pretext for a return, which will mask the filmmaker's purpose, starting from the juxtaposition between a previous sound text and the creation of images during the trip, which is also confronted with the family's photographic archive. Next, the filmmaker instrumentalises a first device that embodies the problematisation between autobiography and self-portrait: the interview, which she films in black-and-white images. The introduction of the father is generated through an interview filmed through a mirror, which allows us to observe both the daughter and the father as well as the filmic elements of the work. The same exercise is repeated with her mother's friend. Jiménez's reflection on the nature of filmic material now extends to the position of the spectator: "To make a film is to mask; hide a part of oneself, so that it emerges for others, on those who see, listen to."

The autobiographical account begins with the first childhood memories in the Andes, where Jiménez lived until she was six years old. The early childhood memory of Lima is then associated with the memory of the mother. This is how the central device of the film begins: the revisiting of the physical spaces of her memories and, in some cases, the recreation of the experiences lived in them. Thus, the earliest memory of the mother, the taxi ride to the ballet, is narrated from the present physical position in this space. The daughter hands her mother her school reports: "I know that if I am number 1 instead of 37, my mother will love me again. I'm going to try. But I don't know why this idea hurts me." The film turns the autobiographical memory into a filmic revisitation and also into a kind of psychoanalytic regression in which the child character takes the floor. Jiménez confirms the mutation of the memory, the transformative capacity of these recreations already enunciated regarding the Andes: "From now on, when I think of my pain in the absence of my mother's love, it will be the images of this film that will come to mind." The recreation of memory continues in the theatre, a new space that Jiménez now runs

through as an adult, while we hear her voiceover describing the moment when she managed to be the first in the class: “I have to work to be loved.” In this way, the essay film establishes its structure as the oscillation between the documentary images of the adult reflection belonging to the autobiography, and the images of the revisitations/recreations from which the childhood reflection and the fracture of the self-portrait arise. A third reflection on the filmic nature occurs later: “And when I make a film, I would like other people’s ears to become the ears I had. The eyes of others, my eyes.” The third fragment of the interview with the father links the recreation exercise that the film embodies with the unwrapping of the mummies he worked with, which will give rise to a ritualisation around the mother’s objects. Jiménez recounts the beginning of her psychoanalysis at the age of 12 at the request of her mother: “I learn the evil of the permanent interrogation, of the continual question [...] me, about me, I don’t trust [...] I become psychoanalysis.” The images then show the father unwrapping a mummy, while the filmmaker describes the damage she suffered because of psychoanalysis initiated in childhood. The father finishes the unwrapping at the moment when Jiménez pronounces the word “scission”: “[B]etween myself for my mother, myself for my father and me.” Jiménez achieves the symbolic sentence-image of the identity fracture on which the film is built: the split between the past autobiography and the current self-portrait.

The images of the mother’s tomb, visited by father and daughter, give way to a new device: the letter, again in black-and-white images, that Jiménez addresses to her late mother, to in turn give way to the ritual that would justify the trip, “Mother, when my sister came from Peru to bring me your rings, I could not look at them [...] I brought them with me on this trip [...] I will look at your rings, your hands, your fingers, which will never be there again.” The mother’s friend first, and another woman after, stand in front of Jiménez at the same interview table and show the objects they have kept from the deceased. Finally, Jiménez shows the mother’s rings and looks at the camera (Figure 11). The scene concludes with the final clapperboard; the ritual is self-conscious of its audiovisual nature. The identification between the images of people with mental health problems and the filmmaker, which has been progressing throughout the film, now occurs with a woman from the street in Lima: “The images of the madwoman make me feel good.” They are followed by that of Jiménez herself manipulating a Polaroid camera with which now, and for the first time, she executes her own photographic self-portrait using

her hands: “I feel left out. Another me develops [...] I remain as if on the sidelines. As away from these deaths. Neither alive nor dead.” (Figure 12)

Figures 11 and 12. *Du verbe aimer* (Mary Jiménez, 1985) © Cinélibre.

The autobiographical account, and the revisiting of places, continues with her admission to a clinic where Jiménez was subjected to electroshocks, attempted suicide, and received nine months of treatment before being discharged. In a room that could have been hers, the filmmaker generates a new *dédoublement*. We do not listen to the narration in voiceover but through a recorder that Jiménez holds, which we see in the image. In this way, the fracture between autobiography—voiceover story—and self-portrait—Jiménez’s current presence in those spaces—manages to find an element of transition, inserting the sound narration materially into the image. Jiménez recounts how she finished her architecture studies to gift her mother the diploma and finally managed to move to Belgium to study cinema: “When she sees my films my mother will love me again.” In a final excerpt from the interview with her father, this time in colour, in contrast to the previous ones in black and white, Jiménez asks him about the moments after her mother’s death. Later, Jiménez appears in that same interview space, but this time alone, while her voiceover describes how she found out about her mother’s death: through a telegram from her uncle. The film concludes with the recreation of the wake that Jiménez did not attend, and that she herself defines as a simulacrum: “In the same house, in the same room, with the same people. A simulacrum. The vigil I was absent from.” Once again, in these recreations/rituals/simulations of greater intimacy, Jiménez includes the film clapperboard and the technical crew since it is essential to keep in mind their cinematic nature. The essay film ends with the repetition of the initial reflection, along with the images of the filmmaker next to her mother’s grave, now also in colour compared to the previous black-and-white ones: “What you wanted to do has been masked by the film.”

##### **5. Female intersubjectivity and sisterhood through (self-)portrait and autofiction**

In *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, Agnès Varda generates Birkin's portrait through intersubjective work from her identity as a filmmaker. At the beginning of the film, Varda explains her theory to the actress:



It's as if I were filming your self-portrait. But you won't always be alone in the mirror. There will be the camera, which is a little bit me, and never mind if I sometimes appear in the mirror or the background [...] You just have to follow the rules of the game, and look at the camera as often as possible. Look into it. Otherwise, you won't be looking at me.

The filmmaker creates this sentence-image, as the premise of the essay film that begins, in a single shot. A panoramic shot shows Birkin looking at Varda through a mirror, then Varda's reflection in it, and finally the actress looking at the camera through it (Figure 13). Thus, the filmmaker affirms how the portrait and the self-portrait will be generated by their relationship with each other by a filmic device that becomes a mirror in which one must look at oneself. A shot of the camera and Varda behind it expresses the need to include the vindication of the filmmaker's figure. The spectator then meets with the creation of a space of intersubjectivity: "It's as if I were filming your self-portrait." As Dominique Bluher indicates, "the 'true' portrait has to encounter the other" (Bluher 2019, 68). Therefore, the essay film is generated from the position of the filmmaker in front of and behind the camera through a succession of both "documentary" and "fictional" portraits and self-portraits of the actress and the filmmaker in her capacity as such. The audiovisual thinking process is built within the images, and by means of the filmmaker's voiceover. Again, the subsequent manipulation of the images is minimal.

The various fictional portraits of the actress will serve to generate, through humour and irony, a reflection on female stereotypes in general—the classical portrait, the romantic muse, the housewife, the widow, etc.—and the strictly cinematic stereotypes—the presence of women in romantic, suspense, or Nouvelle Vague cinema. In these fictional portraits, Birkin's gaze at the camera becomes a denunciation of the gaze of patriarchy, of the objectification of women and their bodies. It is brought to the point of subversion by generating female portraits of male stereotypes; Laurel and Hardy in comedy and those of Westerns through the female figure of Calamity Jane. In addition, these fictional portraits also represent the stereotype to which Birkin is subjected as a movie star and celebrity, and especially about her gender role in her relationship with Charles Gainsbourg: "[T]he film explores the constant, reversible oscillation of public and private contained in Birkin's status as a media star" (Flitterman-Lewis 1996, 348). To these two fictional levels, Varda opposes the documentary and realistic portrait, outside any stereotype, of Jane Birkin in her different facets: woman, actress, mother, etc.

The articulation of this space of intersubjectivity through the device of the (self-) portrait evolves to transform the dialogue between the filmmaker and actress through the camera into a conversation in front of it. On the first occasion, both talk about how to continue the film. After the images of Birkin rehearsing “Le moi et le je”, the actress points out that it was the first time she sang in front of an audience and also the first time that she showed someone something written by her. The reader is Varda: “You showed it to me. I read it. I liked it, so we will put it in the film.” Varda creates a second panoramic shot, in correspondence with the initial one; a symbolic sentence-image of artistic sisterhood turned into creative empowerment. In her house’s bathroom, Birkin looks at the camera before it pans across the room while we hear her voiceover explaining the story: “The story is about a woman like me, in fact, she is me. She falls in love with a very young man [...] It might begin like this.” The panoramic shot then reaches Birkin again, now characterised as the character of the story, who looks at the camera through the mirror, to do it then directly, while we continue listening to her voiceover, now as the author of the text and protagonist of the story: “I remember how I loved him [...] I could not care less what people think or say about us. It was our story. I remember it all, especially him.” While the first panoramic shot synthesised the audiovisual thinking process of the essay film, this one synthesises the process of sisterhood and empowerment that turn Birkin into a literary author and fictional character through the same elements: the movement of the camera, the mirror, and the gaze. The second conversation in front of the camera now takes place on the stairs of Birkin’s house, discussing how to carry out the story. Their images alternate with images from the already-finished film *Kung-Fu Master!* (1988), made that same year. Thus, feminist criticism becomes artistic sisterhood first and creative empowerment afterwards. Next, the intersubjective work is also materialised in a joint fictional self-portrait, placing both of them in a casino (Birkin as a croupier) where Varda would try to win the necessary money to finance the film. (Figure 14): “Your teenager’s love story is not for this film. It would take time to tell it right. And time is money. We would have to finance it, take risks.” It is this intersubjective work that allows the creation of the essential (self-)portraits of the two women artists, and also making and featuring the final portrait of Jeanne d’Arc dying at the stake, now freed from stereotypes and patriarchal impositions: “Through the body of the director and her subject and an assertion of their artistic authority, they both use a general reflection on artistic creation to reveal their own involvement and open up a new space for the female subject” (McFadden 2011, 322).

Figures 13 and 14. *Jane B. par Agnès V.* (Agnès Varda, 1 988) © Ciné-Tamaris.

In *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil*, Lætitia Masson created an essay film based on Christina Angot's literary autofiction, *Pourquoi le Brésil ?* (2002), turning the adaptation of a literary piece into a parallel work of cinematic autofiction (Monterrubio Ibáñez, 2021b). The filmmaker builds an autofictional and metadiscursive essay film in which three dimensions coexist: nonfiction in her work as a filmmaker behind and in front of the camera, in which the writer also appears; the fictionalisation of Masson's own life; and the fiction of Angot's novel. The duplication of the filmmaker's first-person enunciation is established in the second scene of the film. Masson, in front of the camera, introduces herself and explains the economic circumstances that led her to accept the project. Next, that same shot is repeated but now the filmmaker is played by actress Elsa Zylberstein, who also plays Angot in the adaptation of the novel. From that moment on, the filmmaker uses nonfiction to reflect on the process of creating the film and the space of fictionalisation to fabulate her personal and professional experience during its creation; all these dimensions are based on the reflections that Angot's novel and its adaptation provokes in her. The essay film develops its audiovisual thinking process through a double juxtaposition: between nonfiction and autofiction regarding the conflict about using the narration in the first person and between nonfiction and fiction concerning the conflict about how to represent what is alien to the filmmaker's experience. Angot's narration implies the total exposure of her private life and the experience of the romantic encounter. Masson, married and the mother of two children, in a stable relationship, decides to explore this reality through her attraction to her children's paediatrician. In opposition to the instability of the camera over the shoulder of Angot's fiction about passion, Masson uses the fixed camera of her own fictionalisation to show the couple's routine. It is crucial to point out that the autofictional space exposes Masson's inability to play herself, to perform her personal experiences in the first person: "I could never say I love you, like that, in a film. Like Christine does in her book. I film other people's love, because I can't film my own."

After the initial sequence described, the space of nonfiction is constructed by means of two approaches: Masson's self-filming in her solitary personal space; and the exteriorised filming of her encounters with other people. In addition, both are overlaid with the filmmaker's voiceover, which also moves between nonfiction and fiction, thus

becoming the first level of reflection. Masson portrays herself in a revealing progression. First, she places the camera in fixed positions that capture her on-screen, occasionally looking at the camera. Next, she takes the camera in hand to film herself in the mirror, while her voiceover expresses the personal conflict that the project has caused: “No producer, no money, no more actors . . . Nearly no husband, he is sick of my shit.” As Julia Dobson observes, these shots “articulate a deeper ambivalence about the relationship between lived experience and creative agency” (2012: 150). Later, she films her surroundings through succinct panorama shots while continuing her musing on the creative conflict she is facing: “I can’t do it either. The book resists me. Their story resists me. How to I show the complexity of their relationship? I’m not sure I understand it.” However, except for the initial scene described, we will never hear her voice on- or off-screen in this first intimate space. Expressed in voiceover, her reflection carries over into the other two spaces. As Kate Ince indicates, these tactics imply “a feminist phenomenological approach to embodied female subjectivity, by allowing a female director’s self-reflexive approach to her own subjectivity to be explored as it is performed” (2017: 129). Masson demonstrates that her reflections are not only the result of an intellectual activity but also of the physical environments she inhabits and her behaviour therein. Once again, the filmmaker places herself in the position of creator of the images, and their reflection through the voiceover, and not as their manipulator in the editing process.

At the end of the essay film, Masson meets with Angot to explain to her the conflict she is going through and to try to overcome it: how to succeed in “exposing myself but protecting the others” (Figure 15). Angot’s response is resounding: “It’s impossible.” Her writing stems from what she calls a “hatred of secrecy”. Her literary experience of “disclosure of oneself and unmasking of others” (Dubois 2011, 8) is inaccessible to Masson, who finally resolves her creative conflict: “I don’t adapt, I don’t adapt myself.” A key instance of self-filming then occurs and for the first time, another camera captures the filmmaker while she films herself: “Christine, you say there are no secrets, no shame. You say you write everything in the book. I don’t film everything. There are secrets, my secrets, and my shame, too” (Figure 16). Confronted with Angot’s love story, Masson discovers that her artistic experience consists neither of adapting the literary work nor of filming her private life. Only two images justify her creative research: those of the real characters of the paediatrician and her grandmother. The film ends with

the disappearance of Masson, who decides to abandon the project, and the reflection to which this autofictional work has led her: “I don’t live things to make films. I make films because I can’t live things. That’s it, mostly.” The modification of the film title as opposed to the literary title synthesises the research carried out and the conclusion reached.

Figures 15 and 16. *Pourquoi (pas) le Brésil* (Lætitia Masson, 2004) © Rezo Films.

Masson builds an intersubjective space between the writer and the filmmaker, generating an experience of artistic sisterhood, where the spectator is situated to develop a critical reflection on the creation in the first person. Thus, the theoretical reflection on autofiction: “[T]o know the other of myself, through the autofictional narrative; to know myself in the other, through the transpersonal narrative” (Blanckeman 2000, 21) gives way to the audiovisual thinking process of the essay film.

## **6. Hybridisation between self-portrait and autobiography: Installation, performance, and recreation**

While in *Jane B. par Agnès V.* Agnès Varda reflected on the intersubjective space between the female portrait and the female self-portrait, in *Les Plages d’Agnès* the essay film is generated around the interstice between autobiography and self-portrait: “a new postmodern hybrid between autobiography and self-portrait” (Bluher 2013, 63). It is a hybrid built like a kaleidoscopic collage, where Varda, in addition to being the author and the narrator, is now the film’s main character. It is a film in which:

[T]he subtle sliding toward self-portrait manages to temper and metamorphose the impasses of the autobiography, by opening all kinds of intermediate paths [...] equally successfully, it achieves autobiography through the medium of the self-portrait and vice-versa, thus creating by herself, like a hapax, a unique form of use. (Bellour 2009, 17)

While in *Jane B. par Agnès V.* Varda reflected on the relationship between portrait and self-portrait through the gaze of the actress towards the filmmaker, *Les Plages d’Agnès* reflects on the relationship between self-portrait and autobiography through the filmmaker’s gaze into the camera that is now directed to the spectators: “If you want to look at the spectators, you have to look into the camera.” While Jiménez reflects on the conflict between both devices through the present revisitation of past spaces, Varda

presents a kind of dissolution of that conflict through the destruction of temporality: “Memories are like flies swarming through the air, bits of memory, jumbled up.” Thus, the past narrative is updated through three devices, three “intermediate paths” that instrumentalise the self-portrait, generating “performative self-portraits” (Bluher 2013, 59): installation, performance and recreation.

Varda generates the autobiography from a premise of thematic installation, “les plages d’Agnès”, which will present different materialisations throughout the film: “If we opened people up we would find landscapes. If we opened me up, we would find beaches.” The film begins with this original beach, a symbolic sentence-image of the relationship between autobiography and self-portrait, in which the installation materialises through multiple mirrors that offer infinite portraits and self-portraits (Moure 2020). In this way, autobiography is defined by this conjunction: “We find ourselves in a subtle, strange, in-between, where cinema acts as contemporary art” (Bellour 2009, 19). Later, the beach moves to Daguerre Street to create a *mise-en-scène* for her production company, Ciné-Tamaris. It is a new sentence-image that transforms a symbol of autobiography into cinematic creation. Finally, the film concludes by showing the installation *Ma cabane de l’échec* (2006), a space that is covered with the photochemical film of the projection copies of *Les créatures* (*The Creatures*, 1966), where Varda’s presence generates a new self-portrait that also gives the installation a new and powerful meaning: “When I am here, I have the feeling that I inhabit cinema, which is my home. I feel that I have always inhabited it.” The beach has completed its transformation, just as the filmmaker’s autobiography has narrated it.

Varda includes in the first image of the film another symbolic sentence-image, in this case belonging to the performance: walking backwards and forwards (Moure 2020, 29). The first gesture is associated with autobiography, with the memory journey into the past; the second is linked to the self-portrait and converted into a dialogue with the spectator. Thus, performance is another intermediate path between autobiography and self-portrait with which she updates the past experience, celebrates it and gives it a new meaning. We contemplate the tribute to Pierre by his sons: the net fishing by Biascamano’s sons, Varda’s boat ride on the Seine; her incarnation as Jonas in the whale; or her recreation of the manoeuvres to park her first car in the yard of her house. In the same way as the installation, the performance reaches a final materialisation that synthesises the filmmaker’s vision. Her family members, gathered together and dressed

in white, are inserted into a country setting first and finally the beach, while Varda walks towards them (Figure 17). In this way, autobiography and self-portrait merge into a single gesture: “Together, they are the sum of my happiness. But I don’t know if I know them or understand them, I just go towards them [...] Family is a somewhat compact concept. We mentally group everyone together and imagine them as a peaceful island.”

Finally, the filmmaker recreates old autobiographical scenes, sometimes including herself in them, generating the *mise-en-abyme* of the self-portrait in its creative and playful sense: “She constantly emphasises her self-invention [...] It is as if Varda created herself, *sui generis*” (Conway 2010, 133). In the childhood recreation on the beach, Varda puts herself next to her fictional child self-portraits to declare, “I don’t know what recreating a scene like this means. Do we relive the moment? For me, it is cinema, it is a game.” Later on, she recreates the family environment at Sète, her photographic activity in *La Pointe courte* (1955), and the writing of her first screenplay. In the latter, the *mise-en-abyme* of the self-portrait is produced through the reproduction of the same action in the same space by both presences: the past and fictional, and the real, present one, highlighting a sort of therapeutic experience of subjective time that makes the fusion between past and present possible (Figure 18). The acceptance of this subjective temporality implies the acceptance of “a fragmented world, in perpetual re-composition” (Moure 2020, 32) of the same nature as the self-portrait, which also becomes a veil (36).

Varda’s autobiography and self-portrait are defined by the filmmaker’s multi-presence through different positions in simultaneous devices: in front of and behind the camera; reflected in multiple mirrors; as a fictional recreation that is the product of self-invention; as an artistic creation in the space of the installation and the performance. Autobiography and self-portrait are defined as a collage-puzzle, constantly transforming and being updated, and that is only possible thanks to the mirror of alterity. Varda’s autobiography and self-portrait are therefore configured as the narration and portrait of her creative experience, of her process of cinematic reflection on that first gesture of *how I look*, destroying genre stereotypes. It is a gaze that longs to meet others and generates the multiplicity of its own image:

Varda’s (self-)portraits give us a sense of a personal identity and an experience of otherness integral of the modern subject. Their composition moves to and fro between revelation and concealment, fixing and deferral. These (self-)portraits look

at us and we look at them. They speak to us because they yield the possibility to be invested with our pensiveness. To see the other in a (self-)portrait we have to delve into our mirrored selves. (Bluher 2019, 75).

Figures 17 and 18. *Les Plages d’Agnès* (2008, Agnès Varda) © Ciné-Tamaris.

## **7. Towards the position of the digital essayist: The spectator position and the conversation**

In *Face aux fantômes*, Comolli and Lindeperg’s essay film emerges as an audiovisual reflection on the latter’s literary essay, *Nuit et brouillard : un film dans l’histoire* (2007). The reflection on the memory–history–art axis concerning the film by Alain Resnais (*Nuit et brouillard / Night and Fog*, 1956) is produced by placing the historian as a spectator, accompanied by the filmmaker (Monterrubio Ibáñez, 2022). Reflection aims to expand its territory to convert the literary spectator–historian into a filmic one, through a thinking process that the filmmaker transforms into an audiovisual process. To do so, both interlocutors are located in a kind of laboratory–projection room that will allow multiple reflections on the position of the spectator as an epistemological space: “Together, the filmmaker and the historian put themselves in front of the ghosts to consider the status of these images of the experienced bodies,” “each film situates the spectator differently and singularly in front of the ghosts” (Blümlinger 2014, 81, 82). The first image of the film exposes the synthesis of its purpose. In a fixed shot of the rails upon which the camera will soon move in an interior space yet to be discovered, we hear Comolli’s voice indicating the start of the shot. The camera then begins to move along the track. Finally, the shot ends with a superimposition of a close-up of the filmmaker’s hands, leafing through his co-director’s book. Therefore, *Face aux fantômes* provides us with a representation of this different positioning between men and women in the essay film. While Lindeperg, a literary essayist, represents her reflection in front of the camera, Comolli turns it into audiovisual thinking behind the scene, generating different camera movements and manipulating the images of *Nuit et brouillard* and all kinds of documentary material in order to achieve its audiovisual translation. In other words, Lindeperg stands as a spectator of Resnais’ film in front of the camera, offering one more experience of self-portrait, in this case through a kind of interview–exposition, and Comolli stands behind the scene and in the editing room to manipulate the materials and generate audiovisual reflection (Figures 19 and 20). This new materialisation of a



masculine–feminine intersubjectivity, more than 30 years after  *Ici et ailleurs* , confirms the scant presence of women filmmakers in the position of essayist–manipulator of images.

Figures 19 and 20. *Face aux fantômes* (Jean-Louis Comolli, Sylvie Lindeperg, 2009)  
© INA – Institut National de l’audiovisuel.

They are the most recent essayistic practices that place women filmmakers in the position of digital essayist–editor, manipulating images—in most cases not created by them—through a computer. In *Ailleurs, partout*, Isabelle Ingold and Vivianne Perelmutter create a mediated and hybridised encounter as an audiovisual reflection on the ethics and politics of globalisation since the essay film is located precisely in the paradox between the interaction and the isolation inherent in the forms of globalised communication of our present. The story of Shahin, a 21-year-old man who left Iran in 2016 to seek asylum in Europe on a year-and-a-half journey that took him through Turkey, Serbia, Greece—where he met the filmmakers—and the United Kingdom, embodies the terrible paradox of the connected isolation suffered by an illegal migrant. As the film’s synopsis succinctly indicates: “On the net, Shahin crosses borders in one click, but the reality experienced by this young Iranian fleeing his country alone for Europe, turns out to be very different.”

The filmmakers build the essay film by hybridising different audio-textual elements that are accompanied by a visual image alien to them. The audio-textual narration is developed through the fragmentation and hybridisation of these elements: Perelmutter’s voiceover; Shahin’s voiceover reading the transcriptions of the interviews for his asylum application in the United Kingdom, both his answers and the interviewer’s questions; Shahin’s telephone conversations with his mother, in which we also listen to his sister and aunt; the text messages Perelmutter and Shahin exchange, reproduced on the screen; and finally a single phone call between the two. Therefore, the filmmakers decide to offer a sole character subjectivity embodied by Perelmutter’s voice, and Shahin’s experience is completed from the information he provides to his different interlocutors: family, authorities, the filmmaker. This provokes reflection on the nature of the “veracity” of the testimony required from asylum seekers: “The story must be logical, clear, unambiguous, monolithic and verifiable. But life is not like that. We wanted to offer another story, a ‘counter-story’” (Flass 2021, 8). This polyphony provides not only the expression of different subjectivities but also of different registers and devices that draw

an itinerary from emotion to reason, from direct to indirect style, and from subjectivity to its objectification. The direct telephone conversation occurs in the intimate field; the chat conversation is indirectly inscribed on the screen. The interviews for the asylum application are transformed into the reading of transcripts devoid of actual experience. Shahin's identity materialises fragmented and mediated by different devices of globalised communication. The perception of identity is transformed by the devices through which it is expressed.

Along with this audio-textual narrative puzzle, the essay film is completed with a visual image consisting of images from live webcams—surveillance and sightseeing cameras—from all over the world and accessible on the internet. Thus, internet spectatorship becomes the shared experience between the film's characters and viewers and the filmmakers offer a lucid representation of the non-places of postmodernity, where the human being seems to lose all notion of identity: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place [...] supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places" (Augé 1995, 77–78) (Figure 21). In addition, they offer another of the characteristics of non-places, essential in the experience of illegal migration: "The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude," and "The community of human destinies is experienced in the anonymity of non-places, and in solitude" (Augé 1995, 103, 120). To these non-places of solitude, the essay film adds a new element of its characterisation to reflect on: the nature of the images offered by live webcams. In this way, we become spectators of a non-gaze, stripping the spectatorial position of any relational aspect. In addition, these images of the non-gaze come from two activities that define our postmodern reality and its voracious capitalism: the surveillance cameras of the global society of control and the sightseeing cameras of consumer society. Therefore, the images represent the two axes that determine Shahin's life experience: the control that prevents his free circulation and the consumption that marginalises and isolates him.

From these images of the non-gaze, the filmmakers build a visual image that generates different developments. First, there is a progression of the images: from black-and-white to colour; from night to daytime; from exterior to interior; and from deserted landscapes to human presence. These progressive developments, in juxtaposition with the

sound narration, generate reflection between the personal experience of Shahin's journey and the globalised world in which it occurs. Second, these images are, in turn, considered artistic raw material, which the filmmakers select to achieve an aesthetic beauty that produces an inevitable conflict concerning their origin as proof of the surveillance policies of our reality. Third, the visual image is accompanied by a sonic atmosphere created with electronic elements that also insist on the aesthetic manipulation of the spectator's visual reading. The relationships between the different elements of the audio-textual narration and the audio-visual aesthetic creation from the images used generates reflection on our globalised reality with two simultaneous perspectives: the conflict between the infinite possibilities of communication and the loneliness, even isolation, from which they materialise, generated from the non-presence of the interlocutors in the image; the conflict between the endless access to the globalised reality and migratory policies that oppose human rights on many occasions.

Only one image was recorded by the filmmakers, taken from the ferry between France and the United Kingdom (Figure 22). It is the final image accompanied by Perelmuter's voice at the conclusion of the film. This symbolic sentence-image synthesises how the subjective gaze can refute the non-gaze of the live webcams and the society that it represents, embodying an audiovisual thinking process that generates reflection and critical thinking. Through the mediated encounter, *Ailleurs, partout* creates an experience of alterity that confronts us with a present reality in which the concepts of identity, subjectivity, and gaze are problematised. The dialectics between internet images and the polyphony of subjectivities allows us to reflect on identity loss and migration policies, defining our globalised reality. The hybridisation of the different enunciative devices is now not generated around the first person of the filmmakers and presents mediation as an essential characteristic. Similarly, it is essential to point out that the chosen position is again that of the spectator, in this case, the one who observes the images of the non-gaze of globalisation. The filmmakers are placed in the position of the manipulator of images and sounds, without the need to vindicate their authorship but to generate a reflection from them. Therefore, Miéville's work, produced in the seventies, would find its consolidation in the current audiovisual creation.

Figures 21 and 22. *Ailleurs, partout* (Isabelle Ingold, Vivianne Perelmuter, 2020)  
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## 8. Conclusion

Considering all of the above, it is possible to draw the following conclusions. The analysis shows how women's essay films are strongly linked to self-representation, to the feminist vindication of the filmmaker as the author of the images through their enunciation devices. While male authors of the essay film consolidate the figure of the essayist as the "manipulator" of their own images and/or those of others (Godard and Marker are the determining examples) in a space for reflection subsequent to the filming and associated with the editing room, women filmmakers remain in the position of the creator of images that must also appear in them, documenting their activity as part of the essential feminist vindication. Therefore, we observe how the women's essay film is strongly linked to the camera—and not to the editing room—and to a self-representation that evolves through all its possible materialisations. This would confirm the idea that women have been delayed in reaching the position of the essayist as a manipulator of images, due to the need to vindicate the figure of the woman filmmaker understood as a creator of images. This delay has meant that the female form of the essayist's position has been produced very rarely in the analogue editing room. Women have owned this position in the digital age and in front of a computer to generate a reflection through the manipulation of images of which they do not need to claim authorship but rather the work made from them.

Regarding the formal aspect, this implies that the enunciation in the first person progresses from the (self-)portrait to the diary, the autobiography, the autofiction and the dialogue, and the audiovisual thinking processes are realised mainly through its *mise-en-scène*, the crucial presence of their voices, moving through the different materials used, and juxtaposition, with a significant absence of rhetorical elements—black image, crossfades and superimpositions, repetitions, slowdowns, temporal alternations, etc.—that only appear when the authors place themselves in the position of the essayist–editor. It is essential to point out that these exceptions are also linked to the practice of militant cinema until women filmmakers accede to the essayist's position in contemporary essay films. Concerning the thematic aspect of the analysis shows how the films mostly revolve around gender topics, which also trace a path that goes from gaze to alterity, intersubjectivity and sisterhood. Women's gaze enables the reflection on feminine alterities in order to confront them—before a non-feminist alterity and regarding maternal alterity—or to identify with them—regarding the oppressive patriarchy in general and motherhood in particular, as well as the invisibilisation of women. This acknowledgement

of female alterities leads to the construction of intersubjective spaces for reflection that become artistic practices of sisterhood—between filmmaker and actress, and filmmaker and writer. Therefore, the audiovisual thinking processes of women’s essay films in Francophone Europe reflect on the essential relationships among female authorship, self-representation and intersubjectivity in a progressive evolution from the filmmaker who creates the images to the essayist who manipulates them.

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