New York University College of Arts and Sciences
Fall 2019

First-Year Seminar: A Library for the Perplexed: Essayism and the Contemporary
FYSEM-UA 763

Instructor: Sara Nadal-Melsió
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Office Hours: Wednesday and Thursday 4-5 pm and by appointment

Course Description:

The essay has become the symptomatic genre for our times and its perplexities. It speaks of our need to make sense of the contemporary, and in this way, it derives its energy and momentum from the desire to understand rather than from the authority of knowledge. Thus, the power of the essay is an after-effect of a distinctive voice that persuades its reader to go along for an extremely peculiar ride that may very well end up nowhere. Idiosyncrasy, fragmentation, intuitive and unexpected connections, illuminations and dead ends are all part and parcel of the essay as a form that refuses to be pinned down (it is very much not the college essay we have all been taught to master). This course will not attempt to define what the essay is but explore essayism as a ‘literary drive,’ a compulsive need to engage with and take pleasure in the complexity of the world rather than explain it away. We will pay close attention to the ways in which the essayistic drive has entered other genres and media (such as the novel, cinema, and the visual arts). In the second part of the class we will focus on the current explosion of essay film and trace its connections to writing through the notion of the ‘camera-stylo’ (that is the camera as a pen).

Books at NYU Bookstore and also available in the Library:

Brian Dillon, Essayism: on form, feeling, and non-fiction

Valeria Luiselli, Tell me how it ends: an essay in forty questions
Minneapolis : Coffee House Press, 2017

Enrique Vila-Matas, Bartelby & Co
New York : New Directions, 2004

Nora M Alter; Timothy Corrigan, Essays on the Essay Film

(Total cost should be around $75, much less if you buy used copies)
**Grade Breakdown**

Participation (10%)
Group discussions and presentations (15%)
Response papers (20%)
Individual presentations (15%)
Paper abstract, outline, and first draft (this includes a mandatory one-on-one session with instructor) 25%
Final Paper (30%)

**Description of Assignments Attendance and Participation:**

Students are expected to attend to and participate actively in all classes. Unexcused absences and/or minimal engagement in class discussions will affect participation grade (3 unexcused absences will lower your grade by 10%).

Discussion Questions: each week one student will act as a discussion leader and will bring 3 questions to be explored in conjunction with the assigned readings for the week and send them to the instructor the night before for revision.

Response papers: each week students will write a 400-word response to that week’s reading assignment. Responses are due by midnight the day before class and should be submitted through NYUclasses.

Group discussion and presentations: instructor will divide the class into smaller ‘reading clubs’ by the third week of the semester. Each group will be responsible for reading and presenting on a text of their choosing (previous consultation with the instructor) that develops some of the topics covered in class. (15 to 20 min)

Individual presentation: each student will be expected to present a summary of an article discussing one of the texts studied in class. (You should familiarize yourself with JSTOR). The article may be used as initial research and exercise for final paper. 10-minute class presentations will be scheduled throughout the semester. Students will also present an abstract of their research paper to the class.

Final paper (12 pages): students will meet with the instructor to discuss an original idea for a research paper related to the topics discussed in the seminar. The project will be broken down in stages: abstract, outline, draft, and final version. Projects will be presented to the class for peer-review.

The Moses Center for Students with Disabilities Academic accommodations are available for students with physical or learning disabilities. For more information, you can contact the Moses
Center on the 2nd floor of 726 Broadway, via phone at 212-998-4980, or online (www.nyu.edu/csd). Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

**Session 1:**
Introduction to the class: goals and requirements.
The origins of the essay.
Michel de Montaigne, *Essays* (selections will be available through NYUClasses)

**Session 2:**
We will read 3 classic texts on the essay as form and through them we will develop a vocabulary to discuss the class materials. These are short but theoretically dense texts; you may have to read them more than once and continue to go back to them during the course of the semester.

Theodor Adorno, “On the Essay as Form”
Max Bense, “On the Essay and Its Prose”
Total pages: 60
Response paper 1

**Sessions 3 and 4**
We will spend these two sessions addressing the relationship of the essay to the contemporary and debating its current surge in popularity.

Brian Dillon, *Essayism: on form, feeling, and non-fiction* (NYU Bookstore and BOBST)
Total: 172 pages, 85 per session
Response paper 2

**Session 5**
We will address the Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli’s inquiry into the fates of immigrant children. We will pay attention to her transformation of immigration intake forms into an essayistic reflection.

Valeria Luiselli, *Tell me how it ends: an essay in forty questions* (electronic copies available at BOBST)
Total pages: 128 (large font with a lot of spacing…it’s more like 80 pages)
Response paper 3

**Session 6**
We will discuss the Agnés Varda’s appropriation of the term ‘gleaners’ to describe her practice as film essayist and center on the role of personal experience in her work.
Agnés Varda, *The Gleaners and I* (Available through Kanopy)

Timothy Corrigan, “On the History of the Essay Film: from Vertov to Varda”

Total pages: 30 (This is a light week and you should use to get ahead on the Vila-Matas)

Response paper 4

**Session 7**
We will devote the session to one of the most influential film essayist sof the 20th century, Chris Marker, and discuss his impact on literature and the visual arts. We will also pay attention to the transmission of Marker’s legacy and view some clips of *The Otolith Group’s* productions in class.

Chris Marker, *Letter from Siberia* (NYU Library and streaming platforms)  
(recommended, La Jetée)

Hans Richter, “The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary Film”  
André Bazin, “Bazin on Marker”  
Alexander Astruc, “The Future of Cinema”

Total pages: 50  
**Abstracts and preliminary bibliography due. Online submission.**

**Session 8**
We will continue our analysis of the film-essay through the analysis of Harum Farocki 1989 film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*. The filmmaker has stated “One must be as wary of images as of words. Images and words are woven into discourses, networks of meanings. My path is to go in search of a buried meaning, to clear the debris that clog the images.” We will follow his cue into an exploration of the hidden meanings of the word-image.

Farum Farocki, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (NYU Library and streaming platforms)

Nora M. Alter, “The Political Im/Perceptible in the Essay Film”  
Paul Arthur, “Essay Questions”  
Harum Farocki and Christa Blümlinger, “The ABC’s of the Film Essay”  
Raymond Bellour, “The Cinema and the Essay as a Way of Thinking”

Number of pages: 80  
Response paper 5

**Session 9**
Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas, the most widely translated author in the country, has a distinctly essayistic style that blends fact and fiction in way reminiscent of the essay-film. The
novel we will read could be described as an essay on writers that decided not to write wrapped inside a fiction.

Enrique Vila-Matas, *Bartelby & Co* (Bookstore and library)
Number of pages: 178

**Paper outline due. Online submission.**

**Session 10**
We will continue to discuss Vila-Matas text but we will add 2 critical takes on the contemporary role of the essay.

Thomas Elsaesser, “The Essay Film: From Film Festival Favorite to Commodity Form”

Number of pages: 40
Response paper 6

**Session 11**
Although there’s been an extraordinary raise in the popularity of the essay in Spain, few of the most interesting examples have been translated. We will read an as yet unpublished translation of a critically acclaimed and widely read Catalan philosopher and writer, Marina Garcés that directly addressed the role of education in social change.

Marina Garcés, *Nova Il.Lustració Radical (A New Radical Enlightenment)* (NYUClasses)

Number of pages: 80

**First draft due. Online submission.**

**Session 12**
Paper discussions and group critiques.
The instructor will return first drafts in class. There will be an in-class writing workshop. Bring your computers.

**Session 13**
We will now return to the relationship of the filmic essay to the written word through Isaac Julien’s 2019 film *Lessons of the Hour*, a poetic meditation on the life and times of Frederick Douglass that proposes a contemplative journey into Douglass's zeitgeist and its relationship to contemporaneity (his and ours). The film includes excerpts of Douglass' s “Lessons of the Hour,” “What to the Slave Is the 4th of July?” and “Lecture on Pictures,” some of Douglass most important speeches/essays. In addition, we will read Julien’s own account of his process as both a reader and filmmaker.

Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour* (video essay)
“From *Ten Thousands Waves* to *Lina Bo Bardi, via Kapital*”

**Session 14**

Conclusions

Final research paper presentations.

Each student must write a review of the presentations while in class. The instructor will edit them and distribute them to each presenter by the end of the week.

**Final paper due. Online submission.**