

Essayism and Contemporary Film Narrative

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The essay, the essayistic, and essayism represent three related modes that, at their core, test and explore subjectivity as it encounters a public life and subsequently generates and monitors the possibilities of thought and thinking. The first is a semi-generic product, the second an intervention, and the third a kind of knowledge. The relation of each to other practices, such as narrative, is largely a question of ratios: as assimilative, as inflective, or as disruptive. My title obviously draws on the third mode, and aims to describe and argue a way in which the heritage and distinctions of the essay take a different form than those described more essentially by the essay film. Here, essayism becomes more and more frequently a disruptive force and presence within the presiding shape of a film narrative, a disruption that questions, at its heart, the limits and possibilities of film narrative itself. Specifically and too schematically, essayism questions the interiority of film narrative 1) through the disintegration of narrative agency as a singular and coherent figure, 2) through the exploration of the margins of temporality and history (as a realism) in a movement into unsheltered and “improbable” places, and 3) through the questioning of the knowledges that have conventionally sustained narrative. My two examples will be Terrence Malick’s *Tree of Life* and Lech Majewski’s *The Mill and the Cross*, both released in 2011, both engaged with and questioning--not coincidentally I think--a dominant Judeo-

Christian narrative as the foundation of knowledge, and both operating on the edges of conventional narrative form.