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KIM MUNRO
RMIT University

The essay film as address: The epistle as relational act

ABSTRACT

The epistle has long associations with the essay film not only through the notable filmmakers who have used the form, but also in how it addresses an audience. This tendency reflects the lineage of the development of the Montaignian literary essay from private letter to public audience. In this article I explore the use of the epistolary address, both formally within the text, and as part of the filmmaking process in the construction of a subjectivity that is always relational and contingent. Framed by a number of essayistic works that make use of the epistle – the filmed correspondences of José Luis Guerin, Jonas Mekas, Fernando Eimbcke and So Yong Kim (2009–11), Chantal Akerman's News from Home (1977) and Ross McElwee's The Photographic Memory (2012) – this article discusses the process of making my film, Closer Than They Appear (Munro, 2016). I also draw on theories of epistolary transcendence of time and space (Naficy) and collective subjectivity (Braidotti). Through these films I propose the letter film to be a transformative process that shifts the filmmaker's subjectivity towards a more collective and relational position through the act of address.

KEYWORDS

letter
essay film
relational
subjectivity
documentary
voice
correspondence
polyvocality

INTRODUCTION

On the subject of letter writing [...] I would have preferred to adopt this form to publish my sallies, if I had someone to talk to [...] a certain relationship to lead me on, sustain me, and raise me up. For to talk to the

winds, as others do, is beyond me [...] I would have been more attentive and confident, with a strong friend to address, than I am now, when I consider the various tastes of a whole public.

(Montaigne in Montaigne and Frame 1957: 225)

It is well known that Montaigne's life was plagued with death, with five of his children dying in infancy, the sudden death of his brother and the protracted death of his father. In 1563, his dearest friend, Étienne de la Boétie, died, a tragedy that profoundly affected Montaigne and acted as a catalyst for his future work. According to Lawrence D. Kritzman (2009: 115), after the death of his beloved confidant, Montaigne began to engage with the text in a way that was dialogical. Kritzman claims that the loss of the interlocutor's gaze resulted in the subsequent loss of the author's identity. Although Montaigne had produced some writing during their friendship, it was their relationship and conversations that had provided grist for his reflections. Sarah Bakewell proposes that after la Boétie's death, Montaigne's dear flawed friend became an idealized entity or muse, functioning as 'less of a person than a sort of philosophical technique' (2010: 108). The spectre of an absent other underscores Montaigne's work of *The Essays* and is also a tendency of the essay film.

The epistolary form has long been associated with the essay film, most prominently known through such key works as Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (1957) and *Sans Soleil* (1983) or Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977). As a cinematic device, to write a letter is to speak to the audience through an imagined embodied interlocutor. To write a letter is to traverse the space between the I and the You. The epistle also allows the filmmaker to perform their authorial subjectivity as a relational entity, always shifting, depending on who it comes in contact with and the context in which it is seen. The epistolary address brings the listener into an immediate relationship with the filmmaker with its intimate proximity.

In 2012 when I began making my film *Closer Than They Appear* (2016), I also struggled to 'speak to the wind'. Like Montaigne, I needed to imagine an embodied audience to help shape my own voice through an address to an other. My conjuring of an audience took the form of multiple potential spectators rather than a unified interlocutor. So rather than speaking to one person, I realized that I was speaking to many, and that what I might say – the tone, the substance and the materials – would vary substantially depending on our relationship, closeness and distance. In the process of making this film, I approximated multiple forms of speaking and imagined addresses in what would become an assemblage film around the broad anchoring theme of relationships. To speak to an actual audience through an imagined presence is a way to transcend the space and distance of the position of the subject. Imagining an other also means configuring a speaking subject that is always contingent and in flux.

In this essay I discuss the voice of epistolary address in a number of canonical essay films and in my own film, *Closer Than They Appear*. In the first case, I focus on how through the use of the epistle, the filmmaker is able to construct a relational subjectivity through a voice that is constantly formulated and contingent on who it is addressing. In *Closer Than They Appear*, I propose that through my approach to multiple addressees, rather than the voice of the essay film being singular and unified, my subjectivity becomes what Rosi Braidotti refers to as a 'collective assemblage' (2011). This is exemplified through what I would call a relational approach that each of the

chapters within this film enacts. Within the framework of the larger film, each of these chapters functions as a separate address to an imagined other using a variety of styles, approaches and materials. Each of these addresses approximates a different approach to an authorial voice that is dependent on the specific addressee and material used. Using my own film as the primary example and Montaigne as a guide, this essay makes a larger case for the relational and contingent voice of the epistolary film.

ABOUT THE FILM

Closer Than They Appear is a 40-minute film, shot and edited over a period of four years (2012–16). Actually, it is more accurate to say that I am constantly re-visiting this film within the context of my own contingencies and from my present position, which is never fixed and never stable. *Closer Than They Appear* is constructed of seventeen chapters or vignettes, each focusing on a different concept of, or site for, the theme of 'relationship'. These chapters focus on various forms of relationships, whether, that is, relationships with humans, places or to one's self. They also deploy a broader gaze upon cohabitation, myths of romantic love and the preservation of and meditation on objects of memories. Each chapter has its own stylistic treatment and approach to the filmic material using personal and public archives, music, interviews, still images and various film and video stocks. The tone also varies for each chapter, resulting in a kind of polyvocality emanating from the shifting forms and positions of address. In the spirit of the letter and the essayistic travelogue, this film also traverses a range of geographical locations, including Australia, Japan, Korea, Croatia, France and the United Kingdom.

THE VOICE OF EPISTOLARY FILM

Rather than an omniscient narrator who is positioned as the bearer of a singular knowledge, the voice of the essay film presents a subjective position that undermines its own authority. Much like the original tenets of Montaigne's literary essay, the voice of the essay is unsure and unstable, interrogating instead the construction of knowledge and claiming to be only an expert in what it knows through its own experience. Furthermore, the essayistic voice forms a self-critical reflection on the documentary tradition, which has often concerned itself with questions of knowledge; what Bill Nichols calls a 'discourse of sobriety' (2010: 250). Laura Rascaroli suggests the conflicting definitions of voice within the discourse around the essay film are an enduring insistence of the authorial position, albeit subjective (2009: 37). Rascaroli also claims that although essay films may demonstrate their 'authoritarianism' due to the singular unified voice and dominance of authorial perspective (2009: 39), they may also adopt various tones. This proposes a more complex and fluid speaking subject than the traditional voice of documentary.

The development of Montaigne's shifting essayistic voice can be considered as a response to events in his life. After the loss of his dear friend Étienne de la Boétie, and with the absence of his confidant and interlocutor, Montaigne began the process of transformation in his writing. In a letter penned to his father, Montaigne describes the painful event and the lucidity of ideas and emotion that seemed to have overtaken la Boétie with his imminent death. Montaigne had set himself the task to translate la Boétie's brief writings to preserve his friend's legacy. Professing that his friend had such a great ability to express ideas through dialogue, his chosen form of

communication, Montaigne acknowledged the difficulty in translating these ideas into anything publishable. Montaigne also began the task of transforming the now absent dialogue that he shared with la Boétie into written form. This absence underlies Montaigne's constant reformulation of his voice in seeking an addressee. Even ten years after la Boétie's death, in his chapter 'Of friendship', Montaigne reiterates the ongoing loss that he feels:

Since the day I lost him, I only drag on a weary life. And the very pleasures that come my way, instead of consoling me, redouble my grief for his loss [...] I was already so formed and accustomed to being a second self everywhere that only half of me seems to be alive now.

(Montaigne and Frame 1957: 174)

The conjuring of an interlocutor through an address recalls Montaigne's original impetus to write to an imagined other. Through the epistle, the writer then shapes the address towards a specific reader or audience. Through its address, either within the diegesis or through speaking to an audience, the epistolary film, just like the written letter, similarly reconfigures the filmmaker's subjective position. Each time the filmmaker writes, it is with another in mind, thereby affecting both what is said and how it is said. Also, each time, the speaking subject is responding to multiple contingent and contextual affects. Brenda Hollweg claims that the essay film is inherently an address with the spectator situated as the 'essayist-enunciator's imagined, imaginary or ideal "other"' (2014: 168). As a fixed artefact, an essay film becomes relational through the way it generates meaning in the viewer. Bruno Latour suggests that relationality enables one to see more 'revealing patterns' by understanding connections and relationships 'between unstable and shifting frames of reference' rather than through the prism of 'fixed frameworks' (2005: 24). In an exploration of the filmmaking process, rather than the closed text of the film itself, relationality manifests in how the address might be constantly negotiated dependent on the imagined addressee, which may be multiple and shifting.

SENT LETTERS: THE ESSAYISTIC ADDRESS THROUGH CORRESPONDENCE AND DISTANCE

The letter transcends distance, whether it be by choice or by imposition. In consideration of the contemporary mass global movement of people, the concept of 'exile' has become a term of both literal and metaphoric meaning. According to Hamid Naficy, '[T]oday it is possible to be exiled in place, that is, to be at home and to long for other places and other times' (1999: 3). A person in exile is one who desires to be elsewhere or with another. The use of the epistle can bridge this time, space and absence, but the letter in a film with its multiple 'modes of address and the juxtaposition of direct, indirect and free indirect discourses' is more varied and complex (Naficy 2001: 104). In her study of the epistle in literature, Janet Altman highlights the paradox of the letter as a kind of 'a self-contained artistic unity' while also being part of a larger work of correspondence (1982: 245). Each letter might represent a fragment in the larger discursive construction and development of the epistolary relationship. When viewed as a larger project, the shifting nature of subjectivity is exemplified. The units or chapters in *Closer Than They Appear* also function as self-contained vignettes, which, in their amassed form, create an assemblage of subjective positions. However, if we accept that one's

subjective position is always configured in relation to 'something', either a person, a place, the filmic material or even to one's own past or future self, then one is always in a kind of correspondence beyond the singular confines of one's self. However, an externalized other can truly catalyse a dialogue with one's self.

Let me whisper in your ear. It's just the two of us. Come on, you can tell me. Or rather, it's okay, I can tell you. The confession. After all, I'm writing about myself, and my subject is really important, right?

(Lazar et al. 2015: 8)

As David Lazar reflects in his playful adaption of Montaigne's address to the reader, the imagining of an exterior addressee pulls the audience into an intimate relationship with the writer or the speaker.

In *Closer Than They Appear*, the first act in imagining an audience was to create a series of cine-letters for a specific audience. I began to make films for people I had not seen for some time and whom I wanted to share something of my life with. This was an exercise in correspondence and one in creating a self-narrative. I was also reaching back into my past to pull it into the present. Kafka suggests, 'Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one's own ghost, which is secretly evolving within the letter which one is writing' (2013: 229). The making of these *cine-letters* also evolved from the more functional and referential to including an interplay between myself, the content and the addressee. In each of these film letters, I varied the mode and style of address. Some contained voice-over and some had text on-screen. These methods approximated varying degrees of closeness and distance. I made four of these letters, each addressed to someone in another country, and sent them by post.

The use of letters in the process of developing my essayistic voice in *Closer Than They Appear* illuminates what Janet Altman refers to as a switching between the binaries of the *here and there* and the *now and then*, although with an insistence of the present (1982: 244). As a filmmaker who is writing and working from the geographical fringe of the south-east coast of Australia, the binaries of *here and there* are also quite manifest. McKenzie Wark writes about the antipodean perspective that is always looking outwards towards a greater cultural or political influence, and always positioned according to their distance; 'We are no-one, whoever we are, always oscillating in *antipodality*, with elsewheres' (2007: 18, original emphasis). Wark expands on Montaigne's question of 'What do I know?' adding 'from where I am interpolated?' (2007: 19). For Wark, location and cultural positioning are always in play in how we navigate our experience. The ontological position of being at a distance is also brought to bear on constructions of subjectivity. This untethered and contingent quality is akin to the act of writing a letter. The speaker comes into being not only through the act of speaking but also through the imagined addressee and mode of address. Although the writing of letters might function as a device to be able to speak to an embodied recipient, there is also an expectation. The writing of letters is never one-sided; 'There is an affective demand: of love, of friendship, of recognition, of existing for the other party, of keeping in touch, of planning a future. An intersubjective exchange, of whichever kind is rarely egalitarian in its reciprocity' (Bergala 2011: 259). Through writing a letter, the other is immediately implicated in a dialogic relationship, irrespective of the extent to which the communication is reciprocated.

The film letters that I sent in the early stages of making *Closer Than They Appear* enabled me to construct multiple subjective addresses to specific audiences. In one of these letters I sent (to whom I will just refer to as H.), I reflect on the Markeresque trope of cats, near and far. Glitchy footage of the old cat that lived next door frames a visit that I take to the cat island in Japan. The journey is thwarted due to a lack of planning and I find myself in a small fishing town on the east coast. This letter then becomes a meditation on the haiku poet Basho, who was struck by the beauty of this small town and penned a haiku, which only repeated the town's name in response. The visuals undercut the proclaimed beauty with the drizzling rain, ravages of the tsunami and the concrete poles fashioned to look like wooden logs. As a homage to Marker's *Sans Soleil*, and in making the best of a bad situation, I train my camera on the *maneki-neko* (beckoning cats). I find a pair of cats in a shop window who perform as a couple with their out-of-sync arms. The subtext of the letter speaks of failure, but like Montaigne, transforms this personal experience into something public.

Although a comparatively one-sided and unrequited version, my cine-letter experiment was in part inspired by the video letter exchange project *Todas las Cartas* or *The Complete Letters: Filmed Correspondences* (2011–12). Facilitated by the Contemporary Cultural Centre Barcelona (CCCB), six pairs of filmmakers sharing an aesthetic, a pre-existing connection or a desire to work together (Loxham 2013: 296), correspond to each other for a period of time by sending video letters of varying length and content. These film letters are intimate, public and heterogeneous. The filmmakers write from or are situated at the margins either culturally or geographically. According to Josep Ramoneda, this way of filmmaking 'is a commitment [...] a return to its origins, to the craft phase of his learning [...] a very personal exercise' (2011: 255). In these small essayistic exchanges, there is the act of listening and response; a dialogue. The filmmakers also construct subjective responses in accordance with time, distance and the evolution of the developing exchange. In many of these films, personal archives, images and video footage are used to reframe the original experience into something to be presented publically. This project is situated in the tradition of creative correspondence projects, originating with the shared concept of audience; intimate and public at the same time.



Figure 1: *Closer Than They Appear* (2016), Kim Munro. Film still. Out of sync maneki-neko in Matsushima, Japan.

In the short exchanges between Fernando Eimbcke and So Yong Kim, a note or tone is picked up and the response becomes part of the correspondence. This is a shared authorship of collaborative essaying: 'A desire for an interlocutor, to find a point of convergence built from repetition and from diversity too' (Balló 2011: 257). In these moments there is a tangible sense of searching and a desire to expand beyond one's practice to the other. In his second film-letter, Eimbcke transforms familial, intimate grief into a public one as he meditates on the memory of his father's descent into illness, triggered by finding an old photograph of him. The image track consists of a series of still images from his family's personal archive; his father looking fit and young and surrounded by his family. Over the images is the voice of his mother recalling the illness. Her face is never seen, except on the family photographs, creating a spatial and temporal dislocation. As a response to this film, Kim replies with a shot of her husband's hands, as he talks about the death of his father. In the final part of this short letter, their daughter enters the frame. This gestures towards an exit point, a kind of carrying on of life through a transformation.

In his exchange with Jonas Mekas - perhaps one of the most poignant moments of *Todas las Cartas* - José Luis Guerín uses his response as a way to frame, reuse and transform passing moments and experiences that he captured while travelling to international film festivals. One such moment that he recorded was in Lisbon, where he met the young Slovenian film critic Nika Bohinc. He is taken by her enthusiasm for cinema; he is filming her in the boat on the harbour, later interrupting an interview that she is conducting with him in order to turn the camera back on her; hence, a dialogue between filmmaker and film critic is created through the filmmaking process. Guerín revisits this footage and incorporates it into his cine-letter for Mekas. He narrates the moment of his first meeting with Bohinc and reflects on the murder of her and her boyfriend the following year in the Philippines. Marsh writes that through Guerín's use of this material, 'we experience a sense of uncanniness produced of the experience of seeing their meeting reproduced in a sense resurrected from beyond the grave' (2013: 38). In the process of correspondence, Guerín has transformed this footage to give it another life.

LETTERS, ABSENCE AND DISCORD

The use of the epistolary address in the essay film speaks of presence and absence. As Hamid Naficy writes, 'by addressing someone in the epistle, the illusion of presence is created that hovers in the text's interstices' (2001: 5).



Figure 2: Fernando Eimbcke: *Correspondence to So Yong Kim*, film still, 2011.



Figure 3: So Yong Kim: *Correspondence to Fernando Eimbcke*, film still 2011.

The previous section addressed the film letter as an act of correspondence; however, the essay film might also make use of a written letter within the diegesis of the film. These letters might form part of the formal structure of the film, as in the case of Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* and *Sans Soleil*. They might also come into play through a process of gleaning and re-appropriating existing material. In *Closer Than They Appear*, I apply montage techniques with a retroactive gaze upon my personal archival material. This revisiting of material exemplifies an essayistic method; new approaches and works can be made by re-editing and re-contextualizing material in order to create a more reflective approach to both material and its purpose (Hughes 2012: 7). This can traverse both the time and the space of the original moment that it was recorded or found. This essayistic (or *bricoleur*) approach to montage allows for a relational response to the materiality through the 'coming-together of the ingredients' (Massumi 2002: 225). This facilitates the formation of dynamic relationships.

Letters from the past can reveal much about ourselves not only through their content but also via the reasons why we keep them. Like photographs, the preservation of these artefacts can act as a prompt or suggestion for a memory. As I was making *Closer Than They Appear*, I came across a number of letters, cards and small notes that I had saved. Some of these were from my grandmother. Functioning as a kind of talisman to transcend the here and the now, these letters catalysed an investigation into the past. My grandmother had lost the use of her arm due to lymph cancer in her 40s, and so they were typed and signed with her non-dominant hand. Among the recounting of prosaic details of the people who lived in her small town in rural Australia was a gothic description of foxes sucking the blood from the necks of the chickens and the line: 'It's been so long since I saw you, I'm not sure I would recognise you'.

As part of my filmmaking process, letters like these have functioned as a prompt for a journey. In the film chapter titled 'Return to the family empire', an elderly woman reads my grandmother's letter over a series of scenes shot in the early morning light: the house where my grandmother had lived, the empty roads and the dry Australian pastoral scenes. Through a conspicuous lack of people, together with the heightened colours and distorted diegetic sounds, I wanted to create a distancing effect. As the voice reads, 'I really hope to see you soon', there is a dissonance of image and sound that corresponds with the temporal space between the event of the letter and my return 25 years later. I also add my own voice, the subjective 'I', as a way of foregrounding my own subjectivity and adding narrative signposting. This results in an interplay and correspondence between voices.

The disparity between letters sent and those received in response forms the central premise of Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977). The filmmaker reads letters from her mother over the long takes of the streets and subways of New York City; creating a discordant relationship between text and image. Philip Lopate champions the text in the essay film, claiming that it must have a 'singular unified voice' (1992: 19). However, the displaced subjectivity in essay films such as *News from Home* questions this assumption. In Akerman's film, the shots are held for slightly longer than is comfortable for the viewer and the framing creates a distance between the viewer's position and the observations of life as it is happening. Akerman does not appear in the images, and neither do we see any domestic spaces that she might inhabit nor other referential sites that give subjective clues. As a viewer, we have no sense of Akerman's engagement with this temporarily adopted city. As the film progresses, the

letters become more desperate, showing signs that the relationship is becoming more strained: 'Dearest child, I'm surprised I haven't heard from you' or 'Finally a sign of life from you after two weeks of silence'. Akerman uses this device to speak of the growing separation between mother and daughter. Adriana Cerne writes; 'The 'I' that constantly moves in variables of the mother and daughter is also our 'I/eye' that is forever burdened with both loss and excess' (2002: 238). Through this assaying of subjective positions of mother and daughter, the viewer's identification is always relational and in flux.

As a viewer identifying with Akerman's mother in Belgium, we feel an intersubjective relationship of increasing tension as we await the next letter's arrival to break the interminable isolation of this formal space. According to Naficy, 'letters not only link people, but also remind them of their separation [...] fetishistically, both disavowing and acknowledging the trauma of displacement' (2001: 106). The letters come at indeterminable periods through the film, much like the mother's experience of receiving them. We do not know when to expect another delivery. The daughter is drifting and the mother's bereft feelings are displayed through the language that she uses, at first coaxing her daughter to write more, then becoming passive-aggressive: 'I don't expect I'll see you back anytime soon'. The daughter's absence is a continual wound for her mother and she attempts to distribute the pain of estrangement among the family, imploring her to contact them. The letters from the mother, despite the pleas, fail in their functional imperative to transcend the distance between mother and daughter. The film's closure is ambiguous. With no epistolary sign-off, it ends with the final shot from a ferry with the New York skyline disappearing into the horizon. This leaves the relationship between mother and daughter unresolved, translating this dynamic into a space in which the viewer occupies with the subjectivity of the film.

FROM LETTER TO ESSAY

In his discussion on Montaigne's trajectory from writing letters to essays, the genealogy from 'letter to essay' is depicted by the transition from 'letter as point of departure' to 'essay as point of arrival' (Rigolot 1983: 159). According



Figure 4: Closer Than They Appear (2016), Kim Munro. Film still. The landscape of my childhood.



Figure 5: News From Home, Chantal Akerman (1977). Film still.

to Rigolot, death marked a beginning and this death brought about the act of writing the letter. The letter that Montaigne wrote was symbolic in that it possessed the writer from the beginning and sustained itself in displacement throughout his writings (Rigolot 1983: 149–51).

Like with Montaigne, the shift from a private event to public output can function as a transformative device for loss and grief in the essay film too. It also presupposes how the filmmaker's identity is constructed through the act of speaking to an audience who is absent and yet imagined. The letter is an opportunity for imagined dialogue and for representing the discursive construction of the subject as it transforms through loss. The letter examines the narratives of self, friendship and belonging that emerge in the absence of an embodied interlocutor through correspondence, imagination and projection. The process of writing can also manifest as a sense of closure, marking the end of the writing process and the beginning of the reader (Altman 1992: 244–45).

In his first-person films, Ross McElwee performs the transformation of material and the subsequent transformation of self. Seemingly constructed from the archives of his life, it is as if each chapter in McElwee's episodic autobiography is filled with significant and serendipitous events, an attempt to make sense of the world through filmmaking. Vocalizing is integral to McElwee as he narrates the struggles and conflicts within his family, recycling elements of the past through recontextualizing archival footage with the perspective of time and distance. McElwee's *The Photographic Memory* (2012) continues his work of exploring family and personal narratives within a broader social and cultural context. It is also an attempt to transgress the distance that has developed between father and son, an ode to lost youth and a lamentation on the loss of analogue filming techniques. The film begins with the consideration of a photograph of an ex-lover, taken some 40 years before, while he was living on the Brittany Coast in France. Like other McElwee films, this photograph acts as the set-up or a prompt to begin the film.

Using present-day footage, including filming and interviewing his son, and archival footage of when he was young, McElwee meditates on his relationship with his son who has since become unfamiliar to him, enmeshed in a

web of networked realities, digital technologies, alcohol drinking and dangerous skiing. Lopate writes of McElwee's impulse to film as an attempt in both 'staving off loss and arresting death' (2005). By filming, he is attempting to preserve life as it is or perhaps was. It is largely the difficulties that he feels with his son that point to McElwee's more intense discomfort with change. When he returns to where he used to live – in St. Quay, France – nothing is as he remembered, least of all the woman whose photograph he carries in his wallet.

In his filmmaking, McElwee constantly shifts his focus of enquiry between what he is filming and a reflective interior monologue. Through the camera pointed outwards, McElwee communicates his subjective experiences and anxieties. This is manifested in *The Photographic Memory*, which functions as a letter to his son, overtly acknowledged before the closing credits when the text appears onscreen: 'For my son Adrian'. Scott MacDonald contrasts two resounding images from the film: an early shot of McElwee's image superimposed on Adrian through a reflection on a glass window and the final shot of the merging of shadows as they '[s]truggle to retrieve what they can from their shared, lost past and working creatively together to move their lives forward' (MacDonald 2013: 237). This speaks of the transformative process in the father-son relationship throughout the film.

While the epistle can function as a way to transcend time and space, it can also be prompted by the need to overcome the threat of erasure and the 'desire to transgress and remove the threat' (Naficy 1995: 61). The use of letters in *Closer Than They Appear* functions as a way to reframe and re-examine material, reconsider the subject of relationships and transform this material into something public. In the process of making *Closer Than They Appear*, I incorporated multiple approaches into the epistle to transcend and transgress the binary of myself and other in moving towards a collective subjectivity. This moved my focus from an intimate dialogue to a more public address: a genealogy or transformation from private to public through different ways of thinking through the letter form.

In the penultimate chapter of my film, I visit a flea market on the outskirts of Zagreb, where all kinds of personal artefacts are being sold. These include stacks of letters, postcards and photos, along with the other usual second-hand goods. Contrasted with this sequence is a visit to the Museum of Broken Relationships, also in Zagreb. This museum displays the vestiges of break-ups, unrequited passions and long dead loves with donated objects and accompanying stories. Many of these objects are in fact letters that have been preserved and are now transformed and presented to the public as symbols of pain, relief, disappointment or growth. In his transformation through writing, Kritzman suggests that Montaigne uses the 'writerly act of the essayist to triumph over the nothingness of death through the narcissistic illusion of giving life to art' (2009: 121). With this, Montaigne's letters represent something of the sense of loss, whereas the essay is the gift to a public reader.

One of the final sequences in *Closer Than They Appear* is also set in the Museum of Broken Relationships. Here, images of donated objects with a voice-over of their corresponding personal anecdotes of 'broken relationships' are intercut with interviews with the two museum directors. The use of my first-person narration is progressively dismantled over the period of *Closer Than They Appear* and in this last section I give almost complete narration to the voices of others. Braidotti uses the analogy in her writing of being conversant in multiple styles and addresses as a way of diminishing the ego-centric position of the writer. She claims, 'Letting the voices of others echo through



Figure 6: *The Photographic Memory*, Ross McElwee (2012). Film still.

my text, is therefore a way of actualising the non-centrality of the “I” to the project of thinking, while attaching it/her to a collective project and political moment’ (Braidotti 2011: 67). Through slowly receding my own narration and prominent subject position, *Closer Than They Appear* becomes less of a personal exploration than a collective project.

CONCLUSION

I have dedicated it to the private convenience of relatives and friends so that when they have lost me (and soon they must) they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of me more complete and alive.

(Montaigne in Montaigne and Frame 1957: 2)



Figure 7: *Closer Than They Appear* (2016), Kim Munro. Film still. Letters for sale at a flea market in Zagreb.

The essay film is itself a slippery term, subject to contested attempts to define it, and heterogeneous by nature. The essay may be protean and the epistle exhibits similar qualities. The letter has many forms and functions that, as Altman claims, make it difficult to provide a concise taxonomy of how they are used and what they mean, and often the functions may be contradictory (1992: 185). Through the implied presence of an other, the letter may be used to create intimacy both with the recipient and with the reader or the audience. The consideration of an other is evident from Montaigne's dedication to the reader in the beginning of *The Complete Essays* (Montaigne and Frame 1957). This prologue signals a shared endeavour in construction of meaning. The letter can also be used to imply distance and dissonance through the refusal or inability to reply. Like the essay film, the epistle provides an opportunity for self-inscription and develops a relational position through this transforming subject position.

This essay has discussed the essay film through acts of relational address. Through an epistolary process in *Closer Than They Appear*, I have constructed a film with multiple fragments, reflecting a prismatic approach to a theme. While I have included participation from traditional documentary subjects, my subjective position is also constructed through rendering my address to the audience with various approaches to style, subject matter, participation and material.

Finally, *Closer Than They Appear* can also be imagined as a dialogue with the films that I have discussed here, both in relation to the dominant voice and a departure from it. As I finished my film, I had transformed the literal act of writing letters for an individual into a series of chapters in a film that might each represent a facet of a different construction of subjectivity. In this way the epistle can function as a filmic device to transform and transcend its own boundaries. Like in Montaigne's dedication to his readers, this might also be an attempt to suspend the erasure of the self through a public contrivance. While only parts of *Closer Than They Appear* retain the traces of the letter form, the process of writing, making, finding and sending various kinds of letters enabled me to develop and structure the final film. As a relational practice, my filmmaking practice, like the essay form, occupies an unstable position while transcending distance, loss and absence.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Kim Munro is a documentary maker, academic and Ph.D. candidate at RMIT University, Melbourne. Her documentary interests focus on hybrid and essay forms, practice-led research, participatory filmmaking and listening. Kim is a co-founder of Docuverse, which runs regular events and symposiums around expanded documentary.

Contact: RMIT University, 124 La Trobe St, Melbourne VIC 3000, Australia.

E-mail: kim.munro@rmit.edu.au

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Journal of Scandinavian Cinema (JSCA) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal devoted to all aspects of film culture in Scandinavia (including Finland and Iceland). The journal aims to become an indispensable contributor to the growth of knowledge about Scandinavian film-making and to provide a stimulating platform for discussions on Scandinavian cinema and its cultural background.

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The editors welcome full-length articles (5,000–8,000 words), as well as shorter items such as interviews, conference reports and commented archival documents. Scholars in film studies, Scandinavian studies, and related areas are invited to contribute articles that reflect their research and teaching interests: articles which will inspire the exchange of ideas and expertise across nations and disciplines.

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Editors

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Lund University
Anders.Marklund@litt.lu.se

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University of Copenhagen
casper@hum.ku.dk

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NTNU, Trondheim
gunnar.iversen@hf.ntnu.no

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