



Documentary Filmmaking Across the Analogue-Digital Divide: Reassessing Thom Andersen's Filmography

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Abstract

This paper examines Thom Andersen's nonfiction filmography as a lens through which to understand the broader evolution of documentary film practice from the late twentieth century into the digital era. Analysing Andersen's early works including *Red Hollywood* (1996/2014), *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003/2014), and *The Thoughts That Once We Had* (2015), this paper argues that Andersen's stylistic trajectory, from the classical documentary's rhetoric of clarity and evidentiary authority, to the subjective, reflexive essayism of his later works, indexes a fundamental shift in the material and technological conditions of nonfiction filmmaking. Drawing on theoretical debates, the paper situates Andersen's increasing reliance on montage, found footage, and digital databases within a changing media ecology shaped by online archives and accessible digital editing tools. Andersen's films, I argue, constitute a micro-history of documentary film's transition from celluloid to digital modes of production. In tracing this evolution, the paper positions Andersen's oeuvre as an exemplar of how contemporary essay film affords a rethinking of essential cinematic concepts, such as authorship, representation, and cinematic truth, within the evolving industrial and aesthetic paradigms.

Keywords: *documentary, fact, nonfiction, authorial agency, cinema, history*

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Andersen's Formal Evolution Across the Analogue-Digital Divide

Thom Andersen's filmography presents a set of challenges that stem primarily from debates surrounding the form his documentaries take. Confronting subjects as

politically divisive as the Hollywood blacklists, as theoretically foundational yet esoteric as Gilles Deleuze's cinema books, and as emotionally loaded as the character of Los Angeles city, Andersen makes critical formal choices to shape and articulate his views on contemporaneous political debates through the aesthetic medium of documentary filmmaking. Andersen's sensitivity to evolving formal and aesthetic choices in the documentary filmmaking practice, paradoxically, defines both the challenges and possibilities of cinema's potential to stake political claims and marshal evidence in support. Critics have observed that Andersen's work draws "strength from idiosyncrasy and ambiguity" (Barroso para 6) as is evident in *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, while at other moments it adheres to a classical documentary style structured around "clarity, simplicity, transparency" exemplified by *Red Hollywood* (Arthur 58). At the opposite end of the spectrum lies the overtly subjective, compilation-based essay film *The Thoughts That Once We Had*, which foregrounds rumination and philosophical engagement over exposition or expressivity. His reliance on extensive found-footage practices, most notably in *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, kept the film's legality uncertain for a decade, delaying its commercial release until 2013 (Andersen). Viewed within a broader historical frame, Andersen's oeuvre demonstrates an acute sensitivity to both the evolving conventions of nonfiction or documentary cinema and to the changing production cultures that shape the possibilities of documentary and essayistic film form. This paper argues that Andersen's work, while never relinquishing its profound subjectivity, remains deeply responsive to shifting technological conditions and genre conventions, and in so doing, traces the emerging contours of nonfiction cinema as it moves from the pre-digital era towards a fully digital ecology of archives and databases. To explore this evolution, this paper analyses three key works: *Red Hollywood*, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, and *The Thoughts That Once We Had*, mapping how Andersen negotiates the transition from traditional documentary to the essay film, or new documentary, and how technological affordances have made such hybridised forms both possible and stylistically necessary. One of the most distinctive features of Andersen's documentaries is his extensive use of pre-existing film material, an approach that places him firmly in the lineage of compilation and essayistic montage. *Red Hollywood*, for instance, features clips of varying lengths from roughly fifty different films associated with the blacklisted artists that are interspersed with interview clips of the key blacklisted figures, including Paul Jarrico, Ring Lardner, Jr., Alfred Levitt and Abraham Polonsky. The film retains a sense of authorial presence and editorial coherence through intertitles and a guiding voice-over, both of which frame the archival materials and control their interpretation. In this sense, this practice, though overtly political, is far removed from the lasting impact of Debordian aesthetic that informed

Agamben's later theorisation of the cinematic ethics of difference and repetition for which Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (1988-99) stands as the archetypal text. The opening intertitle, "The Truth/that's all we want..." (*Red Hollywood*) serves a dual function. It gestures towards Andersen's stated desire to pursue historical truth amidst a political controversy, while simultaneously contextualising the clip from Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) that follows, subtly situating cinema itself as a participant in the discursive struggle over the blacklist.

After the opening credits, the film explicitly identifies itself as a compilation film, distancing itself from the politics of martyrdom often attached to the Hollywood Ten. Andersen weaves the actual newsreel footage, John Howard Lawson's testimony before the congressional committee, and scenes from *Big Jim McLain* (1952), thereby juxtaposing cultural production, political performance, and ideological representation. By introducing Ayn Rand early in the film, her words voiced over *Song of Russia* (1943), and subsequently cutting to Jarrico's own commentary on Rand and the committee hearings, Andersen establishes a dialogic structure. This mode of alternating assertion and counter-assertion positions *Red Hollywood* as an essayistic investigation: it proposes a thesis, stages points of contention, and pursues a historically significant line of inquiry through montage rather than linear narration.

Andersen makes this methodological stance explicit at the outset through an intertitle: "This is a compilation film about the filmwork created by the victims of the Hollywood Blacklist,, an effort to isolate their contribution to the Hollywood cinema. It is not about their politics or their martyrdom." This declaration serves as both a disclaimer and a formal political manifesto. Andersen frames this project neither as a sentimental retelling of the sufferings of the Hollywood Blacklist nor as a political expose, but as a record of their cinematic labour as it, paradoxically, appears within Hollywood's own representational machinery. By foregrounding "filmwork" rather than political biography, Andersen positions the compilation form as a critical tool capable of re-reading Hollywood from within its archives. The disavowal of the political nature of his method in turning to the films themselves, rather than to the rhetoric surrounding the blacklist he reframes authorship, agency, and aesthetic influence in a way that only montage can achieve. In celebrating montage, however, Andersen does remark on the possibilities of a formal device perfected by the Russian formalists of an earlier period whose editing, as a vessel of their political message, remains a lasting gift to the American cinema. This self-reflexive statement thus anticipates the broader essayistic shift in Andersen's later work in which formal choices become inseparable from the interpretive claims he advances. Having articulated its method

in such unequivocal terms, the film proceeds to enact this principle through a carefully orchestrated interplay of archival footage, fictional cinema, and testimonial commentary.

In this way, Andersen establishes the tone and structure of a work that operates in the manner of an essay: it announces a thesis, introduces points of contention, allows arguments and counterarguments to emerge through juxtaposition, and gradually builds a historically grounded analysis through cinematic means. Whereas *Red Hollywood* adopts a posture of analytical distance, at least rhetorically, Andersen's later films embrace an increasingly explicit subjective articulation. In *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, for instance, he reminds viewers repeatedly that they are encountering a profoundly personal reading of a metropolis he once navigated as a taxi driver and for which he retains deep affection. The film alternates between urban historiography, cinephilic critique, and auteurist inflexion, openly acknowledging the impossibility of a neutral position. Likewise, *The Thoughts That Once We Had* declares itself a personal essay on Deleuze's cinema philosophy, dispensing entirely with voiceover in favour of intertitles that render thought itself as a form of montage. Seen across this trajectory, Andersen's documentary career charts a movement from the appearance of objectivity in *Red Hollywood* to the avowed subjectivity of his later works. This shift, I argue, is symptomatic not only of Andersen's own evolving preoccupations but of broader transformations in nonfiction film form. The emergence of the essayistic "new documentary", alongside shifts in technological availability and digital production, provided Andersen with both the means and the conceptual latitude to reconsider how nonfiction could think, argue, and construct historical meaning.

Documentary, New Documentary and Essay Film

The term "documentary" has traditionally carried the expectation of an "artistic representation of actuality" (qtd. in Aufderheide 4). Patricia Aufderheide explains that audiences have long associated documentary with a claim to general reality, noting how Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), initially launched as a documentary, offered "a savage indictment of General Motors for precipitating the decline of the steel town of Flint, Michigan, and a masterpiece of black humour" (4). When journalist Harlan Jacobson accused Moore of misrepresenting the chronology of certain events, Moore famously responded that his film was not a documentary at all but a work of fiction. The controversy exemplifies the tension surrounding documentary's truth-claims and highlights the fragility of its representational contract of the real, or put another way, its avowed claim of "documenting" as such.

Bill Nichols elaborates this tension in *Introduction to Documentary*, emphasising that the genre relies on the powerful impression of authenticity. He observes that this impression derives historically from the photographic basis of cinema: even the poorest image retains the appearance of movement, which remains “indistinguishable from actual movement” (xiv). For Nichols, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction rests less on ontology than on intent, since documentaries function as social representations and are consumed as such (3). Yet this representational logic becomes unstable as soon as authorial intervention enters the frame. The director’s presence, Nichols argues, inevitably “fictionalises” the documentary, and even the awareness of being filmed may cause subjects to modify their behaviour, thereby importing an element of performance into what purports to be an unmediated record. It is precisely this instability that Stella Bruzzi confronts in *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. Bruzzi challenges the Bazinian belief that cinema can transparently record reality, juxtaposing it with Jean Baudrillard’s claim that reality has itself become an image. Rather than attempting to resolve this epistemological tension, Bruzzi argues that contemporary documentaries must acknowledge and inhabit it. According to her, modern audiences are fully cognisant of the representational challenges inherent in documentary, and thus the form’s value lies not in its ability to guarantee truth but in its willingness to reveal the negotiation between reality, image, interpretation, and bias. As she writes, “Documentary is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential...between the pursuit of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim” (6–7). The divide between fact and fiction, she notes, is a relatively recent ideological formation, amplified by the commercial success of documentaries since the 1990s.

Drawing upon Errol Morris’s reflections, Bruzzi underscores that documentary truth is not guaranteed by any style or representational strategy. Morris argues that there is “no reason why documentaries can’t be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn’t guaranteed by style or expression. It isn’t guaranteed by anything” (Bruzzi 8–9). From this perspective, Bruzzi defines the new documentary as *performative*: a mode that foregrounds its own formal strategies, acknowledges its mediation, and understands truth as something produced in the moment of filming rather than retrieved from an external reality. Her conclusion is stark: “All documentaries, including observational ones, are performative” (222). Esther Leslie arrives at a complementary insight into *Art Documentary and the Essay Film*. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s reflections in “Paris, the City in the Mirror”, she observes that the camera captures both the intentional and accidental traces of reality, those “meant to be seen and those that simply are” (7). Montage becomes the means by which order is imposed upon these fragments, allowing

contradictions and historical residues to acquire meaning. Leslie identifies Esfir Shub as foundational to this practice. Trained as an editor, Shub pioneered compilation films in which the director's presence appeared muted; the argumentative force of montage was unmistakable. Her "cinema of fact" allowed archival elements to "speak for themselves", yet her editorial decisions involving juxtaposition, rhythm, and intertitles together constructed a discernible interpretive framework (13). Leslie notes that by transforming compilation into an essay, Shub accessed a mode of truth distinct from Bruzzi's performativity but no less potent. Her refusal to stage scenarios and her insistence on archival authenticity were conditioned by her historical moment, yet they reveal a politics of authorship fundamentally different from contemporary practices. Her objection to casting an actor to portray Lenin, arguing that archival footage could accomplish what impersonation could not, illustrates her conviction that "the artistic documentary can stage the unstaged" (13). Leslie's conclusion is unequivocal: even fiction films are documents, capable of yielding truth when properly reframed. "The document can supersede all," she writes. "Even the fiction film...is a document of something, and if its factographical powers are unleashed in the interests of the larger history...then it will produce an authentic cinema" (14).

At the same time, narratology reminds us that Shub's aspiration to authorial invisibility is ultimately illusory. Roland Barthes argues that narrative cannot exist without mediation; authorial presence inheres in selection, ordering, and framing. Even found footage cannot dissolve the imprint of the compiler. What Shub achieved, however, is central to the development of the film essay: she demonstrated that montage could generate argument, recontextualise history, and make visible ideological structures undergirding a work of art. In the contemporary context, compilation practices have been radically transformed by digital technologies and online databases, platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube, and inexpensive editing tools, which have enabled the proliferation of the essay film. Thom Andersen stands among the foremost of its practitioners, extending Shub's method into a digital ecology that allows unprecedented access to the moving-image archive (45). In this sense, Andersen stands at the intersections of divergent yet overlapping registers of film practice that have staged a vigorous dialectic of fact and illusion. Andersen's oeuvre, I argue, benefits from the technological and formal affordances of both practices and provides evidence of how the hybrid form of his work is informed by such divergent ideological positions.

Nora Alter, in *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction*, describes the essay film as a labile, hybrid form situated between fiction, documentary, and art cinema: "a genre of nonfiction filmmaking that is neither purely fiction nor documentary...but incorporates aspects of all

of these modes” (4). Scholars agree that the essay film has literary antecedents and is rooted in personal, reflective, and self-conscious modes of address. Positioned at the “intersection of personal, subjective rumination, and social history” (Paul 58), the essay film takes the complexities of mediation, embracing fragmentation, reflexivity, and discursive wandering as part of its aesthetic. As Alter, David Montero, Elizabeth Papazian, and Laura Rascaroli argue, the essay film is inseparable from the modes of production that sustain it. Noël Burch, Andersen’s collaborator on *Red Hollywood*, famously considered Georges Franju’s *Blood of the Beasts* (1949) the first essay film because of “its formal hybridity, its provocative combination of thesis and antithesis, fact and fiction, and subjective and objective commentary” (Alter 92).

While the essay film has been central to European cinema since the mid-twentieth century, it achieved wider recognition in the United States only in the 1990s. Alter attributes this to institutional biases within American film culture, where nonfiction, art film, and avant-garde practice were historically segregated, epitomised by MoMA’s genre distinctions (197). It was only with the emergence of video and, later, digital media that the essay film found its ideal technological conditions, enabling hybrid forms that collapse the boundaries between documentary, criticism, and personal reflection.

In privileging thought over reportage, the essay film accepts, and indeed foregrounds, the complexities of mediation. Unlike classical documentaries, essay films rarely centre public figures or discrete events; instead, they fracture temporal and spatial unities, employ collage and found footage, and cultivate a mode of address that is exploratory rather than declarative (Arthur 9). This approach problematises traditional assumptions about voice, authority, and authenticity. The essay film’s dialectic between subjective reflection and material reality, its embrace of multiplicity rather than singular truth, is precisely what aligns it with the new documentary. By refusing the façade of objectivity, the essay film offers an alternative epistemology: one that can be opaque, challenging, or esoteric, yet capable of revealing new modes of understanding familiar problems. In this sense, as Alter and Rascaroli contend, the essay film represents a philosophical turn in the visual arts. Its logic may operate across an infinite constellation of relationships, but its motivation remains resolutely personal. In what follows, I will analyse three of Andersen’s most celebrated works as case studies to help explain my contention.

Red Hollywood: Classical Documentary with Compilational Tendencies

Red Hollywood offers a visual realisation of Thom Andersen's 1985 essay of the same title and adopts a quasi-investigative approach to what Andersen in *Red Hollywood* describes as "the subtle and insidious political purge that destroyed the influence of the left in American politics and American culture". The film is constructed according to the principles of classical documentary: the directors do not appear on screen, the voiceover is delivered by actors rather than by Andersen himself, and the narrative unfolds through a combination of interviews, archival footage, and intertitles. Although the film attempts to distance itself from the overtly political dimensions of the blacklist controversy, indeed, it explicitly frames its project as a survey of the Hollywood Ten's "filmwork" rather than their politics; it nonetheless positions itself in dialogue with Billy Wilder's oft-cited quip dismissing the artistic value of the blacklisted writers. Organised into seven thematic chapters, each composed of clips of varying lengths, the film sets out to counter Wilder by presenting an aesthetic analysis of the blacklisted artists' contributions.

Andersen and Noël Burch pursue this refutation by foregrounding the expressive and stylistic qualities of the Hollywood Ten's work rather than rehearsing the familiar narrative of political persecution. Abraham Polonsky, in his first on-screen appearance, articulates the film's premise succinctly: the aim of the blacklisted writers was not the production of propaganda but the articulation of a philosophical attitude towards life and society. Their wartime films, Abraham Polonsky insists in the film, were aligned with the broader political necessities of the period rather than with partisan ideological messaging. In highlighting this point, *Red Hollywood* takes unmistakable aim at Wilder's dismissive claim, demonstrating through montage that the blacklisted artists possessed considerable talent and exerted significant influence on Hollywood cinema. The film's compilation strategy thereby becomes an argument in itself: by letting the films speak through juxtaposition, Andersen and Burch reveal both aesthetic patterns and ideological nuances that would be invisible in a purely discursive mode of analysis.

The structuring of the documentary into seven thematic chapters reinforces its commitment to clarity and accessibility. The voiceover provides the principal thread of argument, while the interviews introduce first-hand testimony from the Hollywood Ten, lending the film a sense of historical immediacy. Yet, as the accompanying booklet *The Essays*—published nearly twenty years later—makes clear, Andersen's own thinking on the subject had continued to evolve. In these later essays, he is notably more candid and politically explicit than in the film. This contrast is instructive. It suggests that *Red Hollywood*, though built from montage, remains firmly rooted in the classical documentary mode, while Andersen's later work gravitates towards the essayistic openness and reflexivity

that characterise *Los Angeles Plays Itself* and *The Thoughts That Once We Had*. In retrospect, *Red Hollywood* appears as a transitional work: it employs compilation, but it does not yet surrender to the subjective, exploratory logic of the film essay.

Formally, *Red Hollywood* betrays a degree of anxiety about its identity. Shot in the early 1990s, the film adheres closely to what Paul Arthur calls the documentary ethos of “clarity, simplicity, transparency”, qualities designed to foreground information and argument rather than authorial presence. The decision to keep the Hollywood Ten visible throughout reinforces the film’s polemical purpose: to demonstrate, concretely and repeatedly, the artistic calibre of the blacklisted group. In this sense, the documentary sets out a clear thesis and organises its material in a manner that enables viewers to follow its claims with ease. Yet within this clarity lie subtle indications of the direction Andersen’s later films would take. The heavy reliance on montage, the implicit critique of Hollywood historiography, and the recontextualisation of existing films all anticipate the essayistic strategies he will later embrace more fully. The compilation method itself dominates nearly three-quarters of the documentary’s runtime. Integrating excerpts from fifty films required not only extensive familiarity with the archive but also a high degree of editorial precision. Nevertheless, Andersen and Burch retain the three classic tropes of traditional documentary, namely interviews, intertitles, and voiceover, to ensure that the argumentative spine remains intact. These tools anchor the film firmly within the documentary tradition and prevent it from drifting into the subjective or ruminative register that defines Andersen’s later work. The result is a film that communicates its argument with lucidity and conviction, but without the exploratory openness that characterises the essay film. In this respect, *Red Hollywood* exemplifies the compromises and creative tensions inherent in documentary practice at the moment just before the full emergence of digital-era essayism.

Los Angeles Plays Itself: The Emergence of the Essayistic Voice

Los Angeles Plays Itself marks a decisive departure from the classical documentary strategies that shape *Red Hollywood*. Released seven years later, the film announces its shift in tone and method from the outset. It opens characteristically with a scene from an older film, accompanied by the narrator’s claim: “This is the city, Los Angeles, California. They make movies here. I live here. Sometimes that gives me the right to criticise the way movies depict my city” (Andersen). The tension encoded in the opposition between “they” and “I” permeates the entire film. Andersen, who largely effaced his authorial presence in *Red Hollywood*, here adopts a confident, unapologetically personal voice. Nothing in the film

attempts to mask the fact that this is a subjective reading of a city known as much through fiction as through lived experience. In foregrounding his own position, Andersen signals a movement towards the essayistic mode: one in which argument is inseparable from the filmmaker's sensibility, biography, and intellectual preoccupations. The voiceover becomes the primary site of self-reflexivity, revealing Andersen's long-standing concern with spectatorship and the interpretive possibilities of montage. At one point, he urges the viewer to resist the automatisms of film-watching: "Our involuntary attention must come to the fore. But what if we watch with our voluntary attention, instead of letting the movies direct us? If we can appreciate documentaries for their dramatic qualities, perhaps we can appreciate fiction films for their documentary revelations" (Andersen). This statement crystallises the film's methodological proposition: that fiction films inadvertently document the material city, even when they seek to obscure or mythologise it. Andersen's call to reorient spectatorial attention resonates with the theoretical positions of Alter, Leslie, Bruzzi, and Arthur, all of whom challenge received boundaries between documentary truth and fiction's imaginative labour. In advocating for a critical form of looking, Andersen is not only justifying his use of compilation but also providing a theoretical manifesto for a new documentary logic grounded in cinephilic historiography.

Where *Red Hollywood* placed fictional films and archival interviews into dialogue as evidence of competing historical narratives, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* seeks truth not through argumentative exposition but through the friction between fiction and the real, the image and the world it refracts. Andersen situates Los Angeles as a city whose existence is perpetually mediated by cinema, a material place rendered hyper-visible yet misunderstood through its representations. In this respect, the film occupies a conceptual space between Bazinian realism and Baudrillardian simulation: it refuses both the transparency of the image and the nihilism of the simulacrum. Rather, Andersen treats the city as an unstable palimpsest where architectural, cinematic, and cultural histories overlap. The essay film's hallmark, through foregrounding of philosophical rumination, appears here as a mode of film historiography rooted in time and place. From the politics of naming the city "L.A." to meditations on race, class, housing, and urban development, Andersen uses montage to generate thought, offering a cumulative portrait assembled through the shifting perspectives of hundreds of films. Across this shift from *Red Hollywood*, the most significant transformation is the emergence of a personal, critical voice no longer buffered by the façade of objectivity. For Andersen, fiction becomes the only pathway to fact: the voiceover moves from one excerpt to another, each clip providing yet another angle on the city's material reality as refracted through cinematic production. In this method, the essay film

becomes the ideal form of documentary filmmaking that welcomes contradiction, embraces partiality, and acknowledges the impossibility of a stable, unmediated truth. *Los Angeles Plays Itself* thereby stands as Andersen's first fully realised essayistic work, signalling much more than a merely stylistic evolution culminating in a conceptual reorientation of nonfiction cinema toward reflective, self-conscious, and philosophically grounded modes of inquiry.

The Thoughts That Once We Had: Pure Essayism and Digital Montage

It is in *The Thoughts That Once We Had* that Andersen embraces the essay film in its purest and most uncompromising form. Taking its title from a Christina Rossetti poem, the film announces from the outset that it belongs to a tradition of reflective, lyrical inquiry rather than journalistic documentation. Its subject matter is the monumental Deleuzian philosophy of cinema, a notoriously abstract pair of books, yet Andersen attempts way more than an expository account in offering a deeply personal meditation on the experience of thinking with images. In contrast to *Red Hollywood* and *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, the film dispenses entirely with voiceover; the only textual guidance comes from intermittent intertitles, many of them verbatim quotations from Deleuze. The remaining structure consists of a densely layered montage drawn from a vast range of international films. Unlike the previous works, *The Thoughts That Once We Had* offers no citations identifying the clips' titles or dates. Its meaning arises instead from the movement between images: the associative, affective, and conceptual resonances that emerge in juxtaposition. This approach recalls Alexandre Astruc's famous proclamation in "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Style" that cinema could become a medium for philosophy itself, capable of articulating a modern *Discours de la Méthode* that "only the cinema could express satisfactorily" (qtd. in Graham 15). Andersen takes this provocation seriously, constructing a film in which thought is neither illustrated nor narrated but enacted through montage. Andersen's fascination with the essay form has been evident throughout his career, but *The Thoughts That Once We Had* represents its fullest articulation. The restrained objectivity he attempted in *Red Hollywood* has by this point dissolved entirely, replaced by a palimpsestic and overtly subjective mode of composition. The film embraces its database-like quality, revealing rather than concealing the logic of compilation. Yet at the same time, Andersen complicates the notion of authorship: by relinquishing voiceover and direct commentary, he restricts his authorial activity to the editorial process alone. This paradox, an auteurist film constructed almost entirely from other people's images, raises fundamental questions about originality, authenticity, and the status of the archive in contemporary nonfiction cinema. If

the film is “his”, it is so not because he speaks but because he arranges, enacting a kind of curatorial authorship made possible by the digital age. The ambiguity surrounding whose film it ultimately is, since the authorship can be attributed to Andersen, Deleuze, or the countless filmmakers excerpted within without any clear attribution, captures the tension that defines the modern essay film: a form grounded simultaneously in subjective vision and in the shared cultural memory of the moving image.

Taken together, Andersen’s three nonfiction films chart a clear trajectory from evidentiary analysis towards a mode of cinematic thinking grounded in subjectivity, montage, and philosophical reflection. *Red Hollywood* retains the rhetorical clarity of the classical documentary even as it experiments with compilation; *Los Angeles Plays Itself* advances this method into a fully articulated essayistic critique of representation, space, and spectatorship; and *The Thoughts That Once We Had* completes the evolution by relinquishing expository voice altogether in favour of a Deleuzian poetics of association. Across these works, Andersen progressively redefines what nonfiction cinema can do: no longer a transparent window onto history, it becomes a reflective, self-conscious negotiation between image and idea, archive and argument. This shift, I argue, is not merely stylistic but symptomatic of broader transformations in the cultural, technological, and theoretical conditions of filmmaking at the turn of the digital age. The conclusion, therefore, turns to these larger implications, asking what Andersen’s work reveals about the changing ontology of the documentary, the rise of the essay film, and the future of nonfiction in a media landscape increasingly structured by databases, digital archives, and modes of spectatorship premised on recontextualisation and recombination.

Conclusion

Thom Andersen’s nonfiction films offer a revealing micro-history of documentary’s transformation from the late twentieth century into the digital age. Across *Red Hollywood*, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, and *The Thoughts That Once We Had*, Andersen continually rethinks the relationship between image and reality, moving from the evidentiary clarity of classical documentary toward the philosophical openness of the essay film. *Red Hollywood* retains the structural logic of traditional nonfiction even as it uses compilation to revise a historical narrative; *Los Angeles Plays Itself* advances this strategy into a fully-fledged critique of representation and spectatorship; and *The Thoughts That Once We Had* completes the shift by relinquishing expository voice in favour of a Deleuzian processual poetics of thought. This trajectory reflects broader changes in the material conditions of filmmaking in recent memory. Digital editing, accessible archives, and the proliferation of online databases have

made compilation both feasible and conceptually central. Andersen's later films foreground these conditions, revealing the constructedness of the archive and the interpretive agency of the editor. In doing so, they exemplify a contemporary nonfiction cinema that no longer strives for unmediated truth but embraces the productive tension between fiction and fact, representation and interpretation. At stake in Andersen's evolution is a redefinition of documentary itself. His work demonstrates that nonfiction need not rely on the rhetoric of objectivity; instead, it can function as a reflective, critical, and philosophically engaged mode of inquiry. Andersen's films thus serve as a model for understanding how documentary and essay film converge in the digital age, affording valuable insights into how cinema can think with images, and how such thinking reshapes our understanding of filmic truth.

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