



## Epistolary Form and the Displaced Global Subject in Recent Films by James Benning and Jem Cohen

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**Abstract.** This essay focuses on the epistolary enunciation of recent works by two contemporary American filmmakers, Jem Cohen and James Benning, arguing for the stakes of viewing their films through an epistolary lens rather than the lenses of literary forms like the essay and the diary more commonly deployed to describe films that hug the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Looking specifically at Cohen's *Chain* (2004) and *Counting* (2015) and Benning's *Stemple Pass* (2013) and his installation *Two Cabins* (2011), I show how it is the epistolary enunciation of Benning's and Cohen's recent work that allows them to properly explore and depict the displacement of late capitalism's subject in an increasingly globalized world. I go on to show that through epistolary enunciation both filmmakers also tap into American Transcendentalist and Pragmatist notions of individualism and selfhood that resist the homogenizing nature of late capitalism.

**Keywords:** epistolary cinema; essay Film; James Benning; Jem Cohen; globalization; late capitalism

### [es] La forma epistolar y el sujeto global desplazado en films recientes de James Benning y Jem Cohen

**Resumen.** Este artículo se centra en la enunciación epistolar de algunas obras recientes de dos cineastas estadounidenses contemporáneos, Jem Cohen y James Benning, argumentando el interés de visionar sus films a través de una lente epistolar en lugar de formas literarias como el ensayo y el diario, más comúnmente utilizadas para describir películas que abordan los límites entre ficción y no ficción. Analizando específicamente *Chain* (2004) y *Counting* (2015) de Cohen y *Stemple Pass* (2013) y la instalación *Two Cabins* (2011) de Benning, mostramos cómo la enunciación epistolar de la obra reciente de ambos cineastas les permite explorar y representar el desplazamiento del sujeto del capitalismo tardío en un mundo cada vez más globalizado. Analizamos igualmente cómo a través de la enunciación epistolar ambos cineastas se sirven de las nociones de individualismo e individualidad del trascendentalismo y el pragmatismo americanos, las cuales oponen resistencia a la naturaleza homogeneizante del capitalismo tardío

**Palabras clave:** cine epistolar; film-ensayo; James Benning; Jem Cohen; globalización; capitalismo tardío

### [fr] La forme épistolaire et le sujet global déplacé dans des films récents de James Banning et Jem Cohen

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**Résumé.** Cet article porte sur l'énonciation épistolaire de films récents de deux cinéastes américains contemporains, Jem Cohen et James Benning, en argumentant l'intérêt de visionner leurs films à travers une lentille épistolaire plutôt que des formes littéraires telles que l'essai et le journal, plus couramment utilisées pour décrire des films qui abordent les frontières entre fiction et non-fiction. En examinant spécifiquement *Chain* (2004) et *Counting* (2015) de Cohen et *Stemple Pass* (2013) et l'installation *Two Cabins* (2011) de Benning, on montre comment l'énonciation épistolaire du travail récent de ces cinéastes leur permet d'explorer et de peindre le déplacement du sujet du capitalisme tardif dans un monde de plus en plus globalisé. On analyse aussi comment, par le biais de l'énonciation épistolaire, les deux cinéastes se servent également des notions d'individualisme et d'individualité du transcendentalisme et du pragmatisme américains, lesquelles résistent à la nature homogénéisante du capitalisme tardif.

**Mots clé :** cinéma épistolaire ; film-essai ; James Benning ; Jem Cohen ; globalisation ; capitalisme tardif

**Summary.** 1. Introduction. 2. The epistolarity of certain essay films. 3. Dialectics. 4. Diaspora/Displacement. 5. Issues of time. 6. Epistolary cinema and the American intellectual tradition. 7. References.

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## 1. Introduction

What is the value of identifying certain essay films as *also* epistolary films? How does the designation of epistolary enunciation in films that have been otherwise understood through the lenses of other literary forms like the essay or the diary help to clarify what these films are doing, what they are about, and what concerns them? Finally, what aspects of epistolary enunciation can be singularly linked to a tradition of American thought? These questions are the basis for this essay where I contend that identifying the epistolary enunciation in contemporary examples of American experimental and independent cinema, rather than more narrowly categorizing these works as essays or other forms and genres of cinematic expression (e.g. diaries, slow cinema, documentaries, categories in which these films no doubt also participate) uniquely illuminates the thoughts they advance about the alienation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century subject dwelling in a world displaced by mechanisms of global capitalism.

This essay concentrates on the recent works of two very different examples of epistolary enunciation in contemporary American Cinema: James Benning and Jem Cohen. I focus on these two filmmakers for three major reasons. First, the films of each are somewhat representative of the impact on American cinema of Left Bank filmmakers like Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda, and Chris Marker (though Jem Cohen's work resonates far more with these figures than does Benning's), a number of whose films are importantly epistolary, even as they have been foundational for theories of the essay film. I think here of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) which, along with *Letter from Siberia* (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1958), forms a critical basis for Tim Corrigan's *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (2011) and is literally a film narrated by the letters of a fictional figure, Sandor Krasna. As Laura Rascaroli notes: "The letter is to be found at the heart of the tradition of essay filmmaking that may be said to begin with Chris Marker." (2017: 145). There is also Alain Resnais' *Hiro-*

*shima mon amour* (1959), which Corrigan rightly cites as an “essayistic narrative” (2011: 87), but which is also literally between an *I* and a *you*, exemplifying what Janet G. Altman (1982: 117) has argued as one of three foundational characteristics of epistolary form.<sup>2</sup> Both Cohen’s and Benning’s works, through their formal aesthetics, especially their preference for the long-take and the ubiquity of voiceovers that resonate with the form of the letter and the diary, also recall Chantal Akerman’s epistolary films *News from Home* (1977), *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974) and *Les Rendez-vous d’Anna* (1978). As works by Akerman, Resnais, and Marker, which contain crucial gestures of epistolary enunciation have become centerpieces of theories of the essay film, I hope that introducing an epistolary lens to the work of Benning and Cohen as their inheritors will clarify the stakes of crystalizing the relationship between *epistolary* form and the broader concerns of earlier films like *Sans Soleil*, *Hiroshima mon amour*, and *News from Home*. Epistolary aspects of the essay film somewhat uniquely draw out themes of loneliness and disconnection on the one hand, and human connection found within cinema and its images on the other, that unite the films of Benning and Cohen with these earlier exemplars of the essay-epistle hybrid.

My second reason for turning to Benning and Cohen in the context of epistolary enunciation in contemporary American cinema is that their work does not contain explicit letters or epistles per se and thus their films open themselves to a more expansive and generative notion of *epistolary enunciation*. I will argue that their recent works do this by trafficking in and drawing upon three major aspects of epistolary form that often overlap with descriptions of the essay film. First, I will show Benning’s and Cohen’s films rely upon a dialectics and dialogue embodied in the epistolary binary between sender and receiver. Second, I will read their films in the context of diaspora and displacement as letters are often at the heart of what Corrigan has called “essayistic travel” (2011: 104-130), and as diaspora and the displacement of the subject undergird the relationships depicted in Benning’s and Cohen’s works. Finally, I will examine temporal dislocations or what Laura Rascaroli has referred to in the context of the essay film as “issues of time” (2017: 97) in these films, *issues* which are inherent to what Janet G. Altman has called the “present tense” (1982: 117) of epistolary form by which past and future are held in a constantly changing relationship to one another. Cohen and Benning engage these *issues of time* through the real-time duration of the long-take in coordination with the slippery temporality of the experiences related through voiceover narration in their films and, in the case of Cohen’s *Counting* (2015), through title cards that create a non-linear assembly of various durations of historical time (with titles that introduce an entire year, a span of two years, at one point a Brooklyn *afternoon*).

My third reason for turning to Benning and Cohen is that they are exemplary of how epistolary enunciation in cinema applies to an inherently *American* intellectual tradition defined by the outsider and the possibilities for alterity rife in the contingencies of the everyday. Both displacement and the changes in subjectivity at issue with letter writing’s temporality (i.e. a current *I* writing to a future *you*, both of whom will have changed between the time a letter was started and when it was finished and between the time it was sent and received) underscore the inevitability of sub-

<sup>2</sup> Altman cites as one of three primary characteristics of epistolary discourse, the “*Particularity of the I-You*, the *I* of epistolary discourse always having as an implicit or explicit partner a specific *you* who stands in unique relation to the *I*” (1982: 117).

jective change as a potential for difference and for action that takes place outside of conformist expectations. These changes in subjectivity create the oppositions to conformity and tradition which are at the heart of American Transcendentalist thinking; the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and the American Pragmatist philosophy based upon what Richard Rorty has described as the “Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found” (1989: 7). The frequent concerns of letter-writing with the quotidian or the everyday and the contingent meanings that can arise therein creates a resonance between the co-extension of form and content in epistolary films and their co-extension in Emerson’s and Thoreau’s works where the aphoristic sentence in the case of the former and the diary in the case of the latter function to articulate evolving meaning, truths that are perpetually made and re-made within the very means of expression rather than as a means to a final end or message. Similarly to, for instance, the four extreme static long-takes (approximately 30 minutes each) of his turn-key property in the Sierra Nevada mountains that comprise Benning’s *Stemple Pass* (2013), or Cohen’s static long-takes of anonymous urban streets and buildings in *Counting*, Emerson’s essays take up “materials strewn along the ground” (2000: 55), rather than searching for edification on the shelves of a library and Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) takes up the minutiae of his life in the woods, for instance the “boards,” “refuse shingles for roof and sides,” and “two second-hand windows with glass” (1985: 38), and what he paid for each in the construction of his cabin on Walden Pond. Through their embrace of contingency in their preference for the long-take, Benning’s and Cohen’s works invariably assert Richard Rorty’s Pragmatist notion of the importance of “contingency to selfhood”<sup>3</sup> (1989: 23-43) as the long-take’s generation of contingency resonates with how films like *Stemple Pass*, *Chain* (2004), and *Counting* imagine modes of individuality that can resist the homogenizing and hegemonizing forces of late capitalism.

## 2. The epistolarity of certain essay films

in this layman’s double for prayer that we call memory – Chris Marker  
(Epitaph from *Counting*).

In his director’s statement on *Counting*, Jem Cohen writes that it was *Skywriting*, the final chapter of *Counting* which he made in “reaction to the death of Chris Marker”, that had initiated the film. Appropriately for the epistolary nature of both *Sans Soleil* whose global images networked through a voiceover narrating letters that contain the philosophical musings about memory, time, and history, of a fictional character named Sandor Krasna, and *Counting* whose images and editing are everywhere evocative of Marker’s global film<sup>4</sup>, *Counting* concludes with an epitaph drawn from “one of [Marker’s] emails” to Cohen (2015). Characteristic of Sandor Krasna’s musings

<sup>3</sup> Identifying a “tension between an effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency and an effort to achieve universality by the transcendence of contingency,” Richard Rorty aligns his philosophy with “those who have tried to follow through on the Romantic poets by breaking with Plato and seeing freedom as the recognition of contingency” (Rorty, 1989: 25-26).

<sup>4</sup> See for example this review in the German film journal, *Kino-Zeit*, <https://www.kino-zeit.de/film-kritiken-trailer/counting>, where Lucas Barwenczik notes that *Sans Soleil* “keeps ringing in *Counting*.”

in *Sans Soleil*, at one point Krasna tells the unnamed woman narrating his letters and, through her, the audience that “I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining [...] we write our memories like we write history.” Indeed, *Sans Soleil* figures presence by way of absence, memory as the lining of forgetting, engaging an ethics which resists both the totalizing tendencies of narrative film’s closures and documentary film’s claims of objectivity. It does this through aspects that Corrigan suggests as inherent to the form of the essay film as it replaces epistemological claims aimed at the location and presentation of “strict knowledge” with an *ars combinatoria* that instead practices an imaginative configuration, an epistemological *arrangement*, acting as the product of a “self suspended in the experience of thinking through the core of life” (2011: 22). Clearly, the liminal or *touching* nature of what Krasna describes is embedded in the extent to which epistolary form embodies a desire to remember, to document, to “write history”, and the inevitability of those desires everywhere touching upon “forgetting” and loss, as epistolarity involves transmissions over time and between inevitably changing subjective positions. As Krasna’s letters take us across continents in what Corrigan has called “rapid and unexpected global movements” (2011: 176), so too does Cohen’s film: its editing makes the world seem small by rapidly transitioning through distant spaces – New York City, Moscow, Istanbul, London, New Jersey – and times – 2012-2014, afternoon, October 2012. These shots constitute *arrangements* yes, but, importantly, they are also *transmissions*; for instance, we see images of signs with Cyrillic letters in what we learn to be “Afternoon Light in Brooklyn”, which connect in our minds with images containing Cyrillic advertisements in what we learn to be Moscow. Like *Sans Soleil*, *Counting* is not simply an *arrangement* of images and places, but a film offering epistolary transmissions, connections and even disconnections between them. In *Counting*, Cohen references how *Sans Soleil*’s editing generates a wonder and surprise that *different* places and people could be connected in the ways it proposes, utilizing the same mechanisms of transmission to reveal the unsurprising nature of the homogeneity of urban spaces in a world flattened by the tentacles of global capitalism.

Cohen’s *Counting* is also indebted (whether consciously or not) to Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home*, a film similarly comprised of static long-takes of an urban environment, as Akerman’s camera looks onto her new home of New York City through the camera as a window, from the stand-point of an outsider. Similar to Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* whose narrator underscores remembering as the “lining” of forgetting, Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* layers the words of Akerman’s mother’s letters, written to her from Akerman’s home in her past over images of the place of her new home, New York City, in her present, thus engaging in a similar act of remembering *as a lining of forgetting*, the fragments of a world left behind by Akerman evident in the un-pictured spaces that subtend her mother’s words. *Sans Soleil* and *News from Home* are films which function in apparent agreement with Trinh Minh-ha’s important argument for why documentary form should work to relinquish claims to totalizing meaning and knowledge, the “idealist mystification that ‘truth’ can be captured by the camera or that the conditions of a film’s production can of itself reflect the conditions of its production” (1993: 105, 107). Importantly, it is the aspects of their *epistolary* form which allows these films to resist what Minh-ha describes as “totalized meaning” (1993: 107). Their epistolary fragmentation (what Corrigan would call their essayistic *ars combinatoria*) evokes the transmission of

letters between a sender and receiver that transgresses the realms of the self and the same (the territory of the essay which revolves around the “provisional self” (Corrigan, 2011: 17) in order to glimpse and accept another without reducing it to terms of its own. Fundamental to Cohen’s and Benning’s works is an *epistolary* form found within the films of their predecessors (Marker and Akerman) that allows their films to escape Minh-ha’s *totalized meaning* by making space for the alterity of another through the three main systems of epistolary de-linkages: within the contingencies of the everyday and the long-take, the aporias or *linings* (*Sans Soleil*) found in gaps between sound and image and the retrieval of otherwise *missable* details of the world (Cavell, 1996: 238) and through the *unexpected* nature of *global movements* that connect images found in their films.

As an example of this alterity of meaning, Benning’s and Cohen’s employment of the static long-take embraces contingency as a matter of form as the duration of the long-take subjects a shot to the unplanned and as the static long-take mimics the photographic still. As a point that introduces contingency to the continuum of the film strip – as Mary Ann Doane (2002: 31) has argued –, the photograph is emblematic of the alterity the epistolary permits the other. That is, the contingent nature of the photographic in each of these films is representative of the resistance of the other to the cognitive appropriation of the self, what Emmanuel Levinas imagined as an ethics of encounter that resists the ontological with a mode of critique that calls into question the “exercise of the same” (Levinas, 1961: 43, 124). As the photographic selects a moment and image from a continuum of time, an event from history, an object from a room, a street corner from a cityscape, it exercises a similar relationship to the everyday as that of the epistle, a relationship resonant with the lists of the 11<sup>th</sup> century Japanese princess mentioned in Marker’s *Sans Soleil*, lists capable of “quickening the heart.” This contingency of choice regarding the everyday is as apparent to *Sans Soleil*’s *random* images as it is to what Cohen chooses to train his camera on in the myriad cities that comprise *Counting* or the angle of view Benning has chosen for all four static extreme long-takes of his turn-key property and cabin fashioned after Henry David Thoreau’s and the Unabomber’s that comprise *Stemple Pass*. The contingent rather than causal nature of the photograph, the list, and the contents and future of the epistolary letter (in *News from Home*, Akerman’s mother constantly doubts whether her letters or the forty dollars she often encloses with them has been or will be received), make the photographic image in its resistance to film’s duration suggestive for grasping the ethics of open-endedness and open-mindedness of these films. Many of the images of *Counting* appear static only to have movement within the frame remind us that we are watching a film and the stillness of the four shots in *Stemple Pass* are interrupted only by the changing sky, the wind blowing through the leaves and the sounds of nature we hear through and in-between the voice narrating Kaszynski’s journals. In these ways, Benning and Cohen intentionally exploit the static image and the long-take to cultivate the unexpected. Benning’s and Cohen’s fondness for the long-take, following Akerman’s films, allows the contingency implied by the photograph’s excision from time to stand within a shot that contains no climax, no ostensible *point*, and often bears no causal or explanatory relationship to the shot that precedes or succeeds it (Image 1). The real time of a space selected from vast, sometimes crowded and sometimes desolate urban spaces in *Counting* and *News from Home*, suggests the radical fact that any-moment-whatsoever within the shot may be leant significance by the viewer or the voiceover just as Akerman’s and

Cohen's cameras have plucked from the city and lent significance to what seems to be any view whatsoever (Image 2).



Image 1. The second of four static extreme long-takes. *Stemple Pass* (James Benning, 2013). Source: Screenshot.



Image 2. *Counting* (Jem Cohen, 2015). Source: Screenshot.

The letter's interest in the everyday can help locate the other within the same as, for example, Akerman's mother is prompted by missing her daughter to write about things which seem quite ordinary and which become significant in light of her daughter's absence. Instead of degrading the other's strangeness into terms comprehensible by the same, this act of lending significance to the insignificant, noticing

the *missable* gives representation to the other through a process of defamiliarization, resisting the other's incorporation into a known or predictable narrative. Finding within the ordinary the extraordinary, the contingent moment or object within a linear or determined history, helps give representation to what Levinas called "existents" (1961: 23, 42-45), *someones* over the impersonal nature of Being, the priority of Heideggerian ontology. In the world of the letter, objects are inflected with otherness as they are articulated by the self for another, the letter is thus able to recognize the strange in the known, possibilities for difference within the context of the same. Stanley Cavell found that film itself provided a means of locating the unknown or the unseen within the visible, as film gives representation to Cavell's *missable*, drawing our attention to everyday objects and details that may be visible but which we might never *see*. Cavell writes of this experience watching *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), that certain viewing angles that seemed *missable* struck him in ways that they wouldn't outside of a film, that they persisted in his memory and in this sense gained renewed significance (1996: 238). The process by which the known, the everyday, may be reviewed, is inherent to the epistolary's special relationship to the events of the everyday as they take on a renewed significance in the face of an other whose absence prompts the revisiting of details that would otherwise go unnoticed or unthought about. This activity of revisiting the everyday resonates with the *missable* nature of the images Cohen's camera retrieves from busy urban environments for the sake of his spectator (or for the sake of his future self). What Cavell notes about the inherent ontology of film, to make present the *missable*, is similar to what takes place within the epistolary in which the world is made present to an other whose absence prompts a refiguring of the ordinary.

### 3. Dialectics

The dialectic is one of three components of the essay film frequently taxonomized and discussed by major theorists that is also fundamental to the binary structure of the epistle. Dialectics in the form of the diptych and the dialogue are essential to Jem Cohen's *Chain* and James Benning's *Stemple Pass* and *Two Cabins* (2011). *Stemple Pass* and Benning's related installation project, *Two Cabins*, put into conversation the cabins and diaries of Henry David Thoreau (*Walden*, 1854) and of Ted Kazcynski, in what might be described as an epistolary exchange interested in issues spanning American identity, morality, celebrity, and ecology and environmentalism. Jem Cohen's *Chain* assumes a similarly diptych structure in order to get at issues of 21<sup>st</sup> century American identity in the age of the transnational corporation, featuring hotel chains and strip malls of small town and urban America, as it follows the experiences of two female characters who navigate their lives through them. I would like to latch on here to a critical component of Tim Corrigan's theory of the essay film's "intersecting activity of personal expression, public experience, and the process of thinking" (2011: 14). *Chain* engages in a dialectics of the personal and public Corrigan suggests here as its characters navigate personal spaces and moments through not only public but transnational spaces. At various points, the homeless female subject in *Chain* who wanders through malls and stores by day and escapes to an abandoned house in which she squats by night, engages in an epistolary address to and through the camera: "It's good for you that I live here, I don't have



to bum rides from you anymore.” (Image 3). We never learn who the *you* is in this address. About the camera she found (or perhaps stole), she says: “I started playing around with it, filming myself like it was for my half-sister, Tina, back home.” and later: “I never did like writing, dear diary and shit, so I have this.” Thus, the subject’s addresses are to the camera, to us, and she suggests they are synonymous with writing. This epistolary exchange (as she asserts an *I* and a *you*), and the exchange implicit between this subject and the world of the Japanese businesswoman whose adventures travelling through hotel rooms and up-scale malls comprise a second story intercut with this one, echo the transactional exchanges that everywhere surround these female subjects but in which they do not participate.

The homeless woman narrates her days hanging around the mall without buying anything: “I found a broken cell phone and I pretend to talk on it [...] since then mall security pretty much leaves me alone.” A suspicious subject for not engaging in commercial exchange, she makes herself invisible once again by engaging in an image of mediated social exchange by appearing to talk on the phone. Similarly, the Japanese business woman is meant to have a productive meeting with “the company” who has flown her to the various empty rooms full of cubicles and the hotel rooms in which she stays, but this meeting never transpires (Image 4). Both characters inhabit spaces that are supposed to be only moved *through*, while they each hold out on engaging in the exchange and commerce that defines these spaces and life in a world of contemporary global capitalism.

The diptych structure of Cohen’s film resonates with the very mechanisms of capitalist exchange it criticizes as the film’s editing engages in a constant alternation between the two stories. However, while the film’s formal epistolary dialectics mimic capitalist exchanges, these predictable back-and-forths are ironically contested by the individuality asserted through other epistolary exchanges; between the homeless American subject and her camera, and between the stream-of-consciousness-like voiceovers of the Japanese business woman and the dreary images of the spaces she visits. Through their epistle-like narratives, individuality asserts itself in the face of the bleakly homogenous character of the transnational *chains* referred to in Cohen’s title which have reduced the *unexpected* nature of the global movements evoked by Marker’s *Sans Soleil* to the expected, the same. Each scene of the Japanese businesswoman’s life takes us to a hypothetically different city that looks no different from the last and the mall inhabited by the homeless woman of the other story could be in almost any first world city or suburb, the generic storefronts and architecture comprising it lacking any specific identifier of place. As with the homeless woman’s narrative, malls feature heavily in the Japanese business woman’s world and are transglobally linked through their homogeneity. At one point she observes, “I make reports for the company about [...] the theme park business. I have been to California, to Minneapolis and to Edmonton, Canada, where the theme park is combined with the largest shopping mall on the planet.” Cohen’s focus on malls from all over the world that all look the same conveys the flattening effect of globalization.



Images 3 and 4. *Chain* (Jem Cohen, 2004). Source: Screenshot.

The dialectic nature of what I have claimed is the epistolary basis of Cohen's *Chain* offers its subjects a way out of losing their identities and individualities to the dictates of their global capitalist surroundings, activating the "remaking of the self" Corrigan sees as inherent to the essay film (2011: 17). Cohen also uses the binary nature of the epistolary's dialectics as a metaphor for the compulsions of capitalist exchanges, for commerce itself, and thus the exchange-based nature of epistolary form allows *Chain* to break with the inevitability insinuated by its title (prognosticating a chain reaction, one thing following from another, things inextricably tied to one an-

other), as it is better able through its dialectic form to illuminate the exchange-based nature of capitalism as a source for the loss of individualism. Dialectics also play an important role in Thoreau's *Walden* as that text performs a dialogue between Thoreau and himself and Thoreau and the world (including his readers) which, similarly to how Corrigan has described the processes of the essay film's thinking, betrays "a self suspended in the experience of thinking through the core of life" (2011: 22). The epistolary diptych Benning stages between Thoreau's cabin and diaries and the Unabomber's (in *Two Cabins*) is rooted in the dialectic thinking advanced by Thoreau's writing, where he advocates for the same individualism and resistance to structures of economic and social conformity that Cohen uses epistolary dialectics to resist in *Chain*. The epistolary dialectics of these films illuminate their concerns with aspects of alienation, dislocation, non-identity, and homelessness inherent to modern subjectivity while also tying them to an American intellectual tradition concerned with the impact on the individual of 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialism, a previous moment in the history of global capitalism.

Epistolary form calls attention to the roles of sender, message, and receiver, delineating the binary composition of dialectics (senders, receivers) but also in-betweens (the message(s) sent and received). These *in-betweens* are what Corrigan (2011: 22-23) and Rascaroli (2017: 47) use various theorists to develop as third terms essential to what they argue to be the essay's provisional, probing, undefined, and emergent qualities. These in-betweens as they develop discursively within the epistolary form of the films I have examined provide an alternative, a stop-gap, to the very nature of exchange. As Cohen shows us, these in-betweens when viewed as part and parcel to the exchanges that structure epistolary and commerce, provide important spaces of resistance to the homogenizing threats to selfhood based in the compulsions of economy and society. In *Stemple Pass*, as a voice narrates Ted Kaczynski's journalistic musings about his own interruptions to the industrial activities encroaching on his home in the woods (as when he puts sugar in the gas tank of a truck carrying a mining tool), the epistolary enunciation of the voiceover reading from Kaczynski's diaries serves as a metaphor for the exchanges that drive commerce while locating therein the ironic place where selfhood can arise from a moment of contingency, throwing a wrench in the gears of capitalism's chains.

Rascaroli deploys Deleuze's notion of the interstice to articulate how the essay film broaches the unthought, and what lay in-between the world (2017: 48). Both Rascaroli and Corrigan lean on Adorno's notions of discontinuity and juxtaposition (Rascaroli, 2017: 7) in the essay, a form which Corrigan describes as "conflict brought to a standstill," appealing as well to the figure of the "force field" (2011: 23) used by Adorno to describe the essayistic and the similar figure of Benjamin's constellation (Corrigan, 2011: 22; Benjamin, 1977: 34). All of these features and figures (discontinuity, juxtaposition, conflict, force field, constellation, combination) imply binaries that give way, over the course of the essay film to new relationships between them, thus the binary undergirds the dominant theoretical approaches to the essay film and the resultant third term to the binary (the interstice or the in between) asserts itself as an emergent, evolving and never defined set of relations, encounters held open in the case of Benning's and Cohen's subjects for self-creation and assertion achieved, as Rorty puts it, "by the recognition of contingency" (1989: 25).

There is an important basis for the perpetual (re)-discovery inherent to the dialectics of the epistolary's third terms, and for the location within dialectics of both

a threat to individualism and its redemption in American Transcendentalist thought. About Thoreau's *Walden*, Cavell writes:

We know the specific day, the specific year on which all the ancestors of New England took up their abode in the woods. That moment of origin is the national event re-enacted in the events of *Walden*, in order this time to do it right, or to prove that it is impossible [...] any American is apt to respond to that event in one way or another to the knowledge that America exists only in its discovery and its discovery was always an accident. (1992: 8)

The dialectics here between a discovery and founding in the past of a country which defines itself through the very notions of freedom that must resist the confines of its founding, suggest a compulsion to undermine the definitive nature of American discovery with the liberating reassurance that its discovery was “always an accident” (Cavell, 1992: 8). Thus, for Cavell, *Walden* explores the paradox of America's desire to at once preserve the contingencies of its own discovery as a metaphor for the freedom of the individual and to maintain its own history, a defined identity. It is no wonder that the mood Cavell describes as predominant in *Walden* is “at once of absolute hope and yet of absolute defeat, his own and his nation's” (1992: 9). This binary between hope and defeat, the individual and the nation is one that I've argued is evident in the binary that fundamentally subtends *Chain's* dialectics. It exists between the first figure of dialectics, the enchaining jail of commerce that defines society and the individual in the age of late capitalism on the one hand – Thoreau's “absolute defeat” – and the second figure of dialectics, *Chain's* epistolary structures, which permit the emergence of individuality – Thoreau's “absolute hope” – (Cavell, 1992: 9). Between these two dialectics *Chain* imagines subjects who resist the exchanges of commerce to engage instead in exchanges that produce their own unique thoughts, defining their selfhood against forces that threaten to erase it.

#### 4. Diaspora/Displacement

The epistolary has always been a preeminent quality of essay films that involve travel. The prominence of explicit letters (rather than epistolary enunciation) in these films is unsurprising given that the epistolary explicitly invokes overcoming geographic distance and thus resonates with experiences of diaspora, displacement, and travel. As Hamid Naficy has argued: “Exile and epistolarity are constitutively linked because both are driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss and by the desire to bridge multiple gaps” (2001: 101). Though Naficy is particularly interested in mapping the relationship between epistolarity and national exile, I would like to apply his notion of exile more broadly to the displacements experienced by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century subject described in Benning's and Cohen's films. Epistolary enunciation is essential for understanding the myriad forms of displacement central to the existential questions of early 21<sup>st</sup> century subjectivity that course through Benning's and Cohen's films where subjects are adrift and unmoored, homeless on account of being exiled from heterogenous, private spaces, and unique identities to the homogenous, public and generic identities that characterize the world of late capitalist globalization as with the spaces pictured in *Chain* and *Counting*. Homelessness or

acts of homing on account of being exiled from a connection to the natural world (as in *Chain*, but also in *Stemple Pass* and Benning's California Trilogy), or on account of being exiled from either a sense of community or a sense of individuality, are qualities that emerge through epistolary forms in these films. The epistolary address of the homeless subject who squats in an abandoned house in *Chain* to the camera underscores her solitude as she invokes remembrances of those she left behind when she ran away from home (her mother, her step-sister, the *you* who used to give her rides). Alternately, Benning's transformation of Ted Kascynski's journals into voice-over addresses to the audience document his preferred isolation from society and the extent to which it is the encroachments of modern industries and technologies (from mining to motorcycles) that displace him from his home. Early in *Stemple Pass*, the *I* of these addresses bemoans that: "It seems like there's no place in the world where one can be alone", underscoring the threats he perceives not only to his environment but to his desire to be alone, on his own.

Cohen's montage often functions as a synonym for the networked reality of a digital world and as a network that alienates the unique identity of any given cultural place or people, making those places and identities the same through edits that join for instance Istanbul to New York City and Moscow in *Counting*. These edits also bring those distant places together into a visual conversation. In this sense, Cohen's edits perform the dialectic role of the cut as suture (bringing together while holding apart), highlighting the irrational interval Deleuze theorized key to describing what Rascaroli calls "essayistic thinking at the junction of images," the "unthought" that emerges between two shots (2017: 47). Like Cohen's films, James Benning's recent films reflect the displacements of subjectivity, identity, and space, inherent to the late capitalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century *and* the possibilities of developing new human connections in a more networked world. Benning's *Stemple Pass*, for example, both bemoans the displacements of modern industry upon nature *and* joins two temporally and geographically distant historical subjects, Henry David Thoreau and the Unabomber, exploring what unites these figures that American history has relegated to opposing moral sides, and what similarly divides both of them from a capitalist society they cannot abide. Suggesting a connection between the Unabomber's writings and Thoreau's philosophy allows the Unabomber's words some ironic form of redemption, a connection to a morally acceptable historical figure that saves their important commentaries on environmentalism, criticisms of the encroachments of society upon the individual and industry upon nature, from becoming eclipsed by the infamy of their author. Early on in *Stemple Pass*, the Unabomber's words express his wish to "confess some of the misdeeds I've committed in the last two years," and go on to describe increasingly malicious and deadly pranks he commits in order to resist being displaced from his cabin in the woods. He speaks of actions comprising as much an environmentalist as a misanthropic mission: "there's a small functioning mine a few miles from my cabin [...] they had a large diesel engine attached to a truck, apparently for drilling large holes in rocks [...] I put a small quantity of sugar in the engine and in the gas tank of the truck. Sugar in the gas tank is supposed to severely damage the cylinders and act as an abrasive". The act of *confessing* these deeds in a journal, presumes an epistolary other, perhaps a future reader, perhaps his own conscience. Here, Kaczynski is clearly illuminating the environmental nuisance of the destruction wrought by mining and showing off the cunning nature of the prank he uses to resist it, an assertion of an individualist spirit. In another anecdote

he “confesses,” “after the roaring-by motorcycles spoiled a hike for me, I put a wire across a trail where cycle tracks were visible at about neck-height,” thus documenting his misgivings about both his environment and his solitude being interrupted and what we take to be the nascence of his murderous proclivities. By focusing all of our visual attention on four shots of a cabin in a pristine natural environment and using Thoreau as a diptych foil (much of the Unabomber’s description of his cabin and his daily work seem lifted from *Walden*), Benning’s film is able to break down the duality between black and white, good and evil, using a dialectics that gets at something more subtle and complex: that a morally reprehensible person can have worthy thoughts to which we *should* tune our attention rather than dismiss out of hand. Conversely for the case of Thoreau, the comparison with the Unabomber helps illuminate the real misanthropic elements of Thoreau’s work, elements we tend to look past in our commitment to him as a virtuous figure definitive of America. The truth Benning insinuates is the irony that within the Unabomber’s and Thoreau’s acts of misanthropy are the aversive self and individualism upon which America has historically prided itself.

Environmental displacement and diaspora are not only central to *Stemple Pass* but also to Benning’s earlier California Trilogy – *El Valley Centro* (2000), *Los*, and *Sogobi* (2001) – which also comments on the environmental consequences of late capitalism as industry displaces nature and gobbles up its finite resources. Benning’s static long-takes invariably frame sites where California’s natural rugged beauty runs up against wind farms and the grotesque images of factory farming in *El Valley Centro*, while *Los* presents various images of Los Angeles that remind the audience of its impossible foundation in a desert as images of trickling waterways remind us of an impending water crisis (Image 5). In Cohen’s *Chain*, the architectures of strip malls and the planning of hotels everywhere beat back at a natural environment of green grass and fields, something captured by Cohen’s cinematography as his camera so often frames a strip mall from the vantage point of a field whose green grass lay in the foreground, reminding us of what cement and concrete suburban jungles have replaced (Image 6).

Both *Chain* and *Stemple Pass* thus juxtapose the encroachments of modern industry on the environment with societal encroachments on the idiosyncrasies of individuals. These are ways of life held out for as much by Cohen’s homeless subject who refuses to participate in the commerce of commercial spaces as much as she *pretends* to talk to someone on the phone, and the Japanese businesswoman who is less lonely than *alone*, as it is by the Unabomber in Benning’s film who curses the “cocksucker who moved in next door” and notes that: “it wouldn’t be so bad if I found the fellow’s personality congenial but, in fact, I dislike the jerk.” The intent aloneness (rather than loneliness) of Kaczynski’s letters and Benning’s comparison of them to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* suggest, along with *Chain*, that alienation may be the pharmakon of late capitalism; both its inevitable poison, and perhaps also an antidote that locates through the subject’s isolation a means of non-conformity capable of resisting the hegemonizing tendencies of transnational/global industry and the ways of life it dictates.



Image 5. *Los* (James Benning, 2001). Source: Screenshot.



Image 6. *Chain* (Jem Cohen, 2004). Source: Screenshot.

## 5. Issues of time

Rascaroli explains with regard to structurally diptych films: “the time of the making of the films, the time of the gap between them, and the time of their viewing – are key to the experience and the meaning of the diptych” (2017: 97) are essential to the diptych nature of Cohen’s *Chain* and Benning’s *Two Cabins* and *Stemple Pass*. The

temporal displacements Rascaroli suggests resonate with how Cohen and Benning are able to articulate concerns with the alienation and displacements of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century subject described above; not only are the subjects of *Chain* and *Stemple Pass* experiencing physical displacement, but their status of displacement and alienation from their selves is reinforced through their subjective changes over the duration of the film and the moments of their experiences related to the audience. For example, Kascynski's journal entries collectively map gradual displacements in his character as his pranks that threaten to annoy their targets eventually become bombs that threaten to kill them. Similarly, in *Chain*, we witness through the homeless woman's conversations with the camera a transformation of her place in the world as she eventually gets two jobs and towards the end of the film tells the camera and us through a voiceover: "But everything's changed so much I don't even have time anymore to do stuff like that, walking around, fooling with the camera." The epigraph by Franz Kafka with which Janet G. Altman begins her book on epistolary form suggests some of the implications of issues with time: "The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced – from a purely theoretical point of view – a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with spectres, not only the spectre of the addressee, but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing" (1982: 2). Kafka's description unites the temporal displacements of letter-writing with displacements in the very subjects occupying the positions of sender and addressee, linking the progressive verbs describing the process of writing – what *evolves underneath one's own hand* – with the spectral selves of sender and receiver, specters produced by temporal lags and their acknowledgements. The displacements of temporality inherent to epistolary are also intimately connected to the displacements of travel. Naficy has described the effects of these displacements in a way that can be applied more broadly to the epistolary's relationship to travel and to uniting however tenuously distant geographic places: "Whatever form the epistle takes [...] it becomes in the words of Linda Kauffman, 'a metonymic and a metaphoric displacement of desire' (1986: 83) – the desire to be with an other and to reimagine an elsewhere and other times" (Naficy, 2001: 101).

The relationship between the possibility of spectral or alternative selves which Kafka's remarks suggest to be somewhat inherent to epistolary form and the desire that Naficy discusses here, help to illuminate how films like Benning's and Cohen's lean upon epistolary enunciation to imagine selfhood and contingency in the face of the universal dictates of globalized late capitalism. The possibility for what Cavell has called an "aversive self" (1991: 36-37), cultivated by Emerson and Thoreau, and a self that escapes the pressures of conformity at a contemporary moment when the structures of a global society are increasingly homogenous and homogenizing, is thus related to the epistolary's central in-betweens as Kafka's description suggests what identities for sender and receiver develop in-between moments of transcription and transmission. The possibilities for alternatives to life in the present that resonate through the desire Naficy describes and are implied by the myriad subjective positions the epistolary illuminates through the temporality of its form, exemplifies the basic conflict at work in Transcendentalist thought between conformity and individualism. Cavell argues of Thoreau's prose in *Walden* that: "It must live, if it can, pressed between history and heaven" (1992: 8-9), quoting Thoreau on "improving the nick of time [...] to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and



the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line” (1985: 19). What Cavell describes as the power of “*Walden’s* dialectic” (1992 :7) suggests the power to “reimagine an elsewhere and other times” (Naficy, 2001: 101) inherent to the very contingency of the present moment, that inscribed in the process of writing is an othering of the self and a suspension between past and future that provides a space of infinite possibility for the emergence of someone and something radically different from what history and society dictate.

## 6. Epistolary cinema and the American intellectual tradition

I have argued throughout this essay that conceiving of works like Benning’s and Cohen’s as epistolary in nature helps locate their participation in an American intellectual tradition defined by Transcendentalism and Pragmatism, a tradition that courses through how both filmmakers approach the particularities of contemporary global subjectivity. The influence of such a tradition (which, following Thoreau’s and Emerson’s non-conformist messages might better be conceived of as an antitradition) is particularly evident in *Stemple Pass* and *Two Cabins*, and their comparisons between the cabins, journals and philosophies of Henry David Thoreau and Ted Kasczynski. What Cavell has described as “the general relation [Thoreau] perceives as ‘being next to’” (1992: 104) is critical for Cavell’s notion of an *aversive self* who is able to constantly step outside of a given context to assess its limitations and to found alternative thoughts and ways of being in the world. This *being next to* is inherent to the epistolary structures of the films I’ve examined where binaries and dialectics have represented both the dangers and oppressions of commerce’s exchanges and the conflict between nature and industry, and have also helped locate individualism and difference to oppose otherwise homogenizing structures and systems of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. Thus, through *Counting*, *Chain*, and *Stemple Pass* course a Transcendentalist tendency of being beside oneself, being outside of society, a skeptic to both tradition and tuition, replacing each, dialectically, with individualism and intuition. This is something we see as much in the outsider status of Cohen’s camera in *Counting*, which occupies predominantly exterior spaces through static long-takes that embody the sense of someone looking *onto* a place rather than occupying it, as we do in Benning’s commitment to societal outcasts and outsiders exemplified by his putting in parallel the lives of Thoreau and the Unabomber. This *being next to* or being outside, evokes fundamental qualities of epistolary form; both the binary positions of sender and receiver, and the instigation of the epistolary to both transcend or overcome distance and to mine distance as a space of thought.

The embrace of contingency embedded in the long-takes employed by both Cohen and Benning is essential for thinking of their work in relation to Transcendentalist thought where contingency is everywhere evident in Thoreau’s and Emerson’s embrace of the everyday and the renewed encounters to be located therein, what Emerson refers to as “the materials strewn along the ground” (2000: 55) and in the particularities of Thoreau’s attendance to the minutiae of his life on Walden Pond. The possibilities for change and otherness are located not out there, somewhere in the future – what Rorty would call “a truth that is found” – but right *here* – “a truth that is made” (Rorty, 1989: 7) – in Cohen’s and Benning’s shared attention to what other cinemas might deem insignificant or *missable*. This is evident the everyday details of urban

life upon which Cohen's camera dwells in *Counting* and *Chain* and the details of the Unabomber's life in the woods, the specifics enumerated through the voiceover of what he has eaten, how much ammunition he's spent, the materials he's used on the cabin, lists and descriptions that recall *Walden's* lists. Locating contingent possibilities for radical difference in the everyday is inherent to the tendency of epistolary form to take-up the everyday but contingency also resides in the interstitial nature of the exchange of letters, the temporal aporia that function as spaces where the previously unthought or undiscovered might occur. The epistolary's dependency upon an always-evolving *process* of thought transmitted over the course of writing a letter and the inevitable changes inscribed in the temporality of its transmission from sender to receiver, works against both Minh-ha's *totalized quest for meaning* and the notion of a *truth that is found* which American Pragmatism (the inheritor of Transcendentalism's wayward impulses) emphatically replaced with a *truth that is made*, a truth that is constantly (re)founded in every step of the path. Key to this "finding as founding" as Stanley Cavell (1991: xviii) described Emerson's philosophy, was the very form of Emerson's aphoristic essays as much as the form of Thoreau's diaries which both afforded the liberating encounter with a phrase or a word that could stand on its own, where meaning could truly be found in the very *means* of the work, and thinking could take place as an evolving process over the course of reading or listening rather than being found at the end. It is no wonder then that form is similarly so integral to suspending the spectator and filmmaker within processes of thought when it comes to the epistolary film. The binary, dialectic, and aporetic form of the epistolary signals what a number of essay films do through their very means. Benning's and Cohen's films particularly put forth through their binaries aporias emblematic of both the loss and alienation of the self in the contemporary world *and* the figure of self-as-other that bespeaks the independence of an outsider's disruptive perspective.

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