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The audiovisual essay as art practice

Cristina Álvarez López & Adrian Martin

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At a recent one-day conference at the University Of East Anglia (19 May 2015) devoted to the audiovisual essay in the contexts of university teaching, research, and research-led teaching, the final paper by art historian Nick Warr was provocatively titled ‘The Elephant in the Room: The Critical Relationship Between Video Art and the Video Essay’. The two of us (as co-presenters of the opening keynote at the event) were expecting to hear that what is touted today as the innovative practice of the audiovisual essay has all been done before by video artists from at least the 1960s onwards – perhaps with special reference to Britain’s own Scratch Video movement, a political revamping of experimental cinema’s found footage tradition for the postmodern 1980s.

As it turned out, Warr’s chosen ‘elephant’ was really the presence of the filmic medium within the art gallery space, and the various, sometimes fraught, negotiations between film and art that have been playing out for at least the past three decades. The provocation that we imagined is nonetheless worth taking up in this second instalment of the audiovisual essay section in NECSUS. As we argued in our [introduction in the Autumn 2014 issue](#), there are many possible forms along the continuum between ‘explanatory’ and ‘poetic’ audiovisual essays. What we have curated this time around tends more to the ‘art’ than the ‘essay’ side of the form, and they also aim to provide the beginning of a historical perspective on the multiple developments in this area that bear upon present-day practice.

Catherine Grant is already well-recognised as a pioneer and trailblazer in contemporary audiovisual essay production; she is frequently invited around the world to introduce, discuss, and exemplify this area of work. Grant’s position in the field and her attitude toward it are unique, because

she begins, unashamedly, as a scholar deeply schooled and invested in many kinds of contemporary theory. Yet her prolific experiments in the field – which she is keen to present as playful and open to constant revision – have increasingly led her to a place that seems very close to (if not identical with) ‘pure’ artistic creation. That is to say, the work she makes is by and large its own justification; although it draws from and engages with scholarly contexts, it is not anxious about ‘certifying’ itself as the type of academic work that can be cleanly ‘rated’ within the protocols of the modern university institution.

For Grant, ‘essay’ means ‘experiment’ – as in the laboratory-like assembly of film/media samples, music, and text in various formats (graphic as well as spoken). Her experiments frequently take a very contemporary artistic form: the *dispositif*, a game-structure in which parameters are set and then patiently carried out, with the results to be studied and sometimes tinkered with and taken further, perhaps in a future audiovisual piece. Therefore, for example, Grant will set herself the task of collecting all the cuts or lap-dissolves in a given film, and then juxtaposing that with a musical track and/or a textual commentary. For her, the results of such audiovisual experiments have the proven potential to generate new knowledge in our screen studies field – with the proviso that the real challenge today is less to translate this knowledge back into the conventionally ‘acceptable’ verbal or literary metalanguage of description and theory than to value our discoveries in the very terms of, and on the same level as, the aesthetic and sensory properties of rhythm, colour, texture, affect, and so on. This is a claim – again, a provocative one – that she explores in the detailed statement accompanying her new piece *Carnal Locomotive*.

Historical perspective is provided by the second selection for this issue, Philip Brophy’s *Club Video*. This piece began life in 1985 as a video installation arranged across two freestanding monitors and an autonomous stereophonic or quadraphonic sound playback. In this context, the precise fusion of image with music was open to chance fluctuations and surprises. At that time, Brophy produced his work under the collective moniker of → ↑ → (pronounced, approximately, Tsk Tsk Tsk), a multimedia ensemble. More recently, Brophy, as part of his long career as a solo artist, reassembled *Club Video* into a split-screen DVD with a synchronised soundtrack for theatrical screening. The resulting formation is spectacular in a cinematic way – as a prime example of split-screen juxtaposition – rather than the originally immersive or environmental spectacle of the installation set-up.

Yet ‘cinema’ in *Club Video* comes in a deliberately degraded, fragmen-

ted, and recycled form – with an in-built, cheeky reference to the type of ‘wallpaper video’ projections that were ubiquitously popular in the background of noisy nightclubs in the 1980s, in a mass-media-mad transformation of the type of ‘light and sound’ projections that had been pioneered (sometimes by moonlighting avant-garde artists) for rock concerts since the 1960s. Brophy, pillaging VHS tapes (many recorded from Australian television in the early 1980s) of variable technical quality, distills several canonical Hollywood films (including *Stagecoach* [John Ford, 1939], *Touch of Evil* [Orson Welles, 1958], and *Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960]) into their generic and cinematic essence: gestures, movements, types. There is almost a pedagogical slant to it, forecasting one current development in the audiovisual essay: there is at least a semester’s worth of material in its survey of standard, popular American genres (western, musical, gangster, horror, et al.). Narrative is broken down into its identifiable tropes and myth makes way for ideological exposé – along the lines of the 1970s textual film theory that Brophy was steeped in, and which he reformulated anew in the context of his now classic 1987 edited and self-published volume *Stuffing: Film: Genre*. Cinema – even as apprehended with a cinephile’s passion – is no longer pure or pristine in *Club Video*; it is derived from television, goes through a video edit, and ends up in a digitised dance.

The musical score for *Club Video*, composed and assembled by Brophy, is as much a collage as the filmic images (the sources of all samples are listed in the end credits, which reward close study). It, too, provides (as Brophy’s sound work frequently does) an expert ‘scansion’ of tropes and types in 1980s dance music: the beats, glissandos, breaks, and flutters which evoke a particular social world while subtly ‘mutating’ the sonic effect of them all arranged together.

Carnal Locomotive and *Club Video*, far apart in time and different in so many ways as exemplars of ‘the audiovisual essay as art’, are alike at least in this: they are built on driving rhythm, pulse, mounting and decreasing intensity, and the particular type of highly-articulated spectacle that pushes us to re-view and re-experience typical moments or configurations in cinema that we may well have seen and consumed a thousand times before.

