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Critique, protest, activism, and the video essay

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This selection of video essays is curated for an issue of the journal NECSUS with the special section theme #True. This begs the question of how this word applies to the video essay, particularly those featured in this selection meant to represent possibilities for the video essay to function as social critique, protest, and activism. Video essays in past issues were also grouped under programmatic agendas chosen by their curators. The first two collections by Adrian Martin and Cristina Alvarez Lopez[1] respectively describe video essays as an art practice and as a promising method to understand genre filmmaking. Dana Linssen then explored the video essay's evolving relevance to film festivals,[2] and Catherine Grant considered the form in relation to performative research.[3] Each of these topics (with which my own work has engaged to varying degrees) reveal something 'true' about the video essay in terms of how they are or could be valued. Collectively they reflect the many possible avenues for video essays to pursue truth.

Faced with these and many other avenues to truth I ask myself why my interests are increasingly drawn to social critique, protest, and activism. One reason is that I find these concerns underrepresented among the video essays I encounter on popular video sharing platforms like YouTube and Vimeo. Video essays in these forums are overwhelmingly concerned with technical explanations or aesthetic appreciations of cinema.[4] Even the academic field displays a dearth of work particularly engaged in these interests. Looking at the dozen issues published to date of *[in]Transition*,[5] the most recognised academic journal for videographic film studies, I see little that fits this description. Perhaps it is no coincidence that two of my favorite video essays

published by the journal – ‘Fembot in a Red Dress’ by Allison de Fren[6] and ‘Screening Surveillance’ by Steve Anderson[7] – are two whose arguments could function as social critique. One could also make a case that Issue 3.3 with its exclusive emphasis on films from Latin America turns its act of curation into a statement of geopolitical refocusing.[8]

I hesitate to make my argument prescriptive, as I am loath to encourage the production of work that feels perfunctory, insincere, or opportunistic when engaging with issues that concern real lives and people. I would rather question my own sincerity by interrogating the nature of my own interest in the political, an interest which to some extent surprises myself given my background. I made my first video essays 10 years ago as part of my personal movie blog. It was a cinephile’s pastime, as apolitical as one could imagine. How does a cinephile become political?

One could make the case that the very act of creating video essays has sociopolitical ramifications – initiated at a historical period when it was first possible (due to technological advances in digital and social media) for people to access films in digital form, edit the footage, create new work, and upload the work for others to view. This shift of accessibility to media for personal self-expression was radical and has political implications irrespective of whether the media content itself is overtly political. This became apparent to me when YouTube shut down my account in 2009 due to crudely implemented third party copyright claims that did not take into consideration how my video essays operated under established Fair Use provisions.[9]

From that moment the act of making a video essay became something I took less for granted, with my attention redirected toward underlying economic and industrial factors that govern their fate. This shift of one’s field of vision, resulting in the ability to see anew, has always been the quality of the video essay I cherish most. These days I find this shift to be most powerful when it no longer occurs solely within the space of the screen but outside the space of the screen, back to the material world, to physical spaces, to the forces that govern and shape them, and to our own possibilities to act amidst these forces. We are no longer just eyes glued to a screen – we become minds and bodies reacquainted with our reality.

Over the years my cinephilia has sought more explicitly conscientious modes of social activist and political filmmaking and they remain some of my favorite works, even as I regard them with trepidation in pondering how my work could follow their lead. The best I can do is to make video essays about them. In early instances of these videos I did not even use my own

words, as evidenced in a tribute to the seminal agitprop documentary *The Hour of the Furnaces* (Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968), with narration written by Nicole Brenez.[10] Gradually I engaged these works more directly and they led to some of my most polemical pieces, like [this tribute to essay filmmaking](#),[11] and [another on radical filmmaking](#). [12] These works address the question of how a cinephile becomes political, specifically by describing how encounters with essay films and radical cinema triggered a shift in my vision.

In that spirit I submit four examples of works as further proposals for what this shifting of vision might look like. The contributors responsible for these works are of diverse backgrounds operating both within and outside of the academic environment. What space a work occupies is a question that seems to occupy me, both in terms of what context (academic, commercial, artistic) it operates and also in how it connects the space of the screen to spaces in reality. All of these works point to a non-diegetic realm beyond the screen that beckons our minds and bodies to re-occupy. Still, I would be the first to admit that these works do not fulfill the classic definitions of the words ‘protest’ or ‘activism’ as much as ‘critique’. If anything their relationships to protest and social activism amount to critique – critique of white supremacist political movements in ‘Snake Oil in N—town’; of education programming against sex trafficking in ‘Problems with the Gendered P.O.V. Shot in Lilya 4-Ever’; and of ISIS recruitment media in ‘My Crush Was a Superstar’. Perhaps this is symptomatic of the essayistic mode that the act of thinking and evaluating perpetually supercedes the act of doing. Critique finds its place when protest and activism backfire or fall short of their aims, are directed against one’s values or very existence. If the video essay’s most natural role is to critique it may do so as a means of pointing a way toward more fulfilling acts of protest and activism.

The ongoing project of [Anti-Banality Union](#) matches this description. In their own words they seek ‘to understand whether or not Hollywood could be mobilized towards revolutionary ends, that is, against itself.’[13] Their previous feature-length works compile countless clips from Hollywood films to reveal recurring formal tropes articulating the ideological anxieties of our time. *Unclear Holocaust* (2011) assembled dozens of depictions of New York being destroyed into ‘one relentless orgy of representational genocide’.[14] *Police Mortality* (2012) is a 120-film mash-up of police violence depicted on screen.[15] *State of Emergence*, screened theatrically in 2014 and released online in 2017, is a remix of zombie movies that reveals the anti-social, anti-

humanist mania that drives them. In these films protagonists battle dehumanised humans in a perpetually defensive, survivalist mode that may mask genocidal impulses that are subsequently projected onto the spectator. As the opening title asserts:

In survival, each man is the enemy of every other. Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead.

State of Emergence dutifully follows the narrative structure of its subjects: an opening sequence depicting social tranquility swiftly gives way to ominous overtones of danger erupting into full blown apocalyptic mass hysteria. The middle sections reveal less expository motifs such as scientists from several films grappling for explanations, or people indulging in shopping and shooting sprees across newly vacated cityscapes. What emerges is a picture of the zombie movie as a programmed social ritual that passes through various phases of imagining humankind's destruction of itself. Subsequent questions are raised: if the zombie movie as mass entertainment is giving audiences what they want, is what we want indeed to envision mass genocide? If a critique of this form is meant to point a way toward overcoming it and the societal values it articulates, what might that new way look like? And for all the effective critique on display in this work what does it mean that some of its most effective moments actually tap into the same gleeful destruction indulged in by its source material, and at times doing an even better job of turning mayhem into entertainment?

A more explicitly verbalised but no less ambivalent critique is found in Steven Boone's 'Snake Oil in N—town' (note that the gesture to redact the last word is my own; I respect the author's pointed utterance of the word while withdrawing from doing so myself). This video revisits the Roger Corman B-movie *The Intruder* (1962) to make unspoken but clearly insinuated connections with the unfolding of the rise to power of Donald Trump nearly 45 years later. The film's protagonist (played by a strikingly villainous pre-*Star Trek* William Shatner) exploits the racist sentiments of an electorate to become their leader. Boone argues that the film is 'less about race than about the limited shelf life of power', describing how populism is exploited by 'a psychopath willing to say anything to advance his cause, which is only to please and sate himself at the expense of others'.

Boone's narration is full of piercing observations of the film's depiction of white power exerting itself in the face of racial equality. For all the force and eloquence of Boone's critique he gestures toward the extent to which it

is contained by forces bigger than him, including the film. Throughout the video the film footage is framed by an image of black skin – as if the film is branded upon a black body. It suggests an ambivalent relationship between a production about race and the terms of who gets to talk. In one of the video's most suggestive moments, as he laments 'the souls of white folk...', he lets out a sigh, expressing an elusive sentiment situated somewhere between head-shaking helplessness and mild contempt. The sight also reflects a complicated relationship with the film itself, a representative work issued by filmmakers possessed with the entitlement and wherewithal to produce complex critiques of social injustice that seem to speak on one's behalf – save for the fact that it is they who get to do the speaking.

Kiera Sandusky produced 'Problems with the Gendered POV Shot in *Lilya 4-Ever*' in Form and Meaning, an undergraduate course I taught at the School of the Art Institute in Fall 2016. The inclusion of this work here is a conscious acknowledgment of the evolving role of the video essay in educational settings. Not only is it a powerful method to teach film studies but the resulting works produced by students are often formidable enough to challenge longstanding hierarchies of knowledge production between students and teachers. With alacrity students acquire and master editing and video essay production skills as tools for film analysis, scholarship, and critique. My own teaching experience taught me that regarding my students in a collaborative mode allows them to take on greater self-investment in their learning endeavors.

Sandusky's video essay details the unexpected outcomes when Lukas Moodysson's anti-sex trafficking drama *Lilya 4-Ever* (2002) was implemented as a social educational tool in Swedish middle schools, an initiative that can be construed as progressive social activism occurring from within established institutions. Sandusky's account of the stark contrast of responses between certain female and male student viewers provides an illuminating critique of the hazards of such well-meaning initiatives. She connects these responses to a specific aesthetic strategy adopted by the film to instill a strong reaction from the audience. This aesthetic itself amounts to an activist gesture to the extent that it intends to instill social awareness and reform. Sandusky critiques the blind spots of both the film's activist aesthetic and the educational system's activist implementation of the film by pointing out the contradictory responses of its target audience, revealing the complex gender dynamics of spectatorship that complicate activist efforts.

A similarly complex account of gendered spectatorship of activist media is depicted in Chloé Galibert-Lainé's 'My Crush Was a Superstar'. It is admittedly dangerous to apply the activist label to the subject of Galibert-Lainé's video: content produced by ISIS. Doing so ushers in an occasion to reflect on the definition of the term and what it means when a constituency's self-defined activism poses a threat to others as militant extremism. Galibert-Lainé devises a novel approach to engaging with this sensationalised material by piecing together traces of the life of an ISIS recruit as she finds them online. By linking together these pieces of media the video reveals not only the enigmatic journey of a militant but also the ways in which traces of him circulate and are received by different audiences, feeding into an affective economy of online media, fueled by cycles of attraction, reaction, and surmise.

It is a cycle in which Galibert-Lainé consciously implicates herself through her account of her investigation, if only to better assess the nature of her engagement: what it is she wants from this media, or what this media wants from her. These are questions I also ask of myself as I collaborate with Galibert-Lainé on this ongoing project which presently takes the form of video correspondences between us, as exemplified in 'My Crush Was a Superstar'. To what extent then can this active, participatory mode of critique be described as a mode of activism? Is it activism in the sense of acting out an ideal mode of participation – one that strives to embody a more conscientious engagement with the world, which, in our hyper-connected, hyper-accelerated media cycles, seems more pertinent than ever? Perhaps the best way to find out is simply to do it.

Author

Kevin B. Lee is a filmmaker and critic who has made over 350 video essays exploring film and media. His award-winning *Transformers: The Premake* was named one of the best documentaries of 2014 by *Sight & Sound* and played in several festivals including the Berlin Critics Week. In 2017 he is the first Artist in Residence of the Harun Farocki Institute in Berlin. He was named one of the Chicago New City Film 50 in 2013, 2014, and 2016. He initiated the Young Critics Programs at the 2015 Hawaii International Film Festival and the 2016 Cairo International Film Festival. Lee is former Chief Video Essayist at Fandor, was supervising producer at Roger Ebert Presents *At the Movies*, and has written for *The New York Times*, *Sight & Sound*, *Slate*, and *Indiewire*. He teaches

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Notes

- [1] Álvarez López & Martin 2015a, 2015b.
- [2] Linssen 2016.
- [3] Grant 2016.
- [4] For a taxonomy of online video essays that reflects the prevailing apolitical preoccupations of the form see Bateman 2016.
- [5] *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*
- [6] de Fren 2016.
- [7] Anderson 2015.
- [8] Talbott & Poppe 2016.
- [9] This incident is detailed in Seitz 2009.
- [10] Lee 2012, adapted from Brenez 2012.
- [11] Lee 2013a.
- [12] Lee 2013b.
- [13] Shanahan 2013.
- [14] Anti-Banality Union 2011.
- [15] Anti-Banality Union 2013.