Audiovisual essays
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Learning from popular genres – with help from the audiovisual essay

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It is sometimes observed that the burgeoning form of the audiovisual essay (of the analytic kind that has been featured in recent issues of NECSUS) is good for close, detailed work on individual films, television episodes, or digital art works, but less suitable for the type of broader contextual, historical, or industrial investigations that frequently characterise the screen studies field today. While not necessarily agreeing with that summation, we do feel that once audiovisual essays broach these wider contexts they inevitably cross over into a much vaster field: documentary. Indeed, experiments in the audiovisual essay (which frequently return us to the theory and practice of montage in its most essential and dynamic form) have much to teach makers of documentary. That, however, is a debate for another time and place.

In this issue the audiovisual essays we have assembled point to another kind of expansion beyond the analytic focus on a single film. Audiovisual essays can raise issues and explore methods of screen *genre* analysis that the often clunky form of the linear, written treatise (proposing a generic model and then trudging through dozens or hundreds of examples) cannot easily achieve. Our specific focus here is on aspects of *popular* genres. One of the chosen audiovisual essays looks at the mechanics, or poetics, of a typical genre scene; the other inspects the often undervalued and under-researched realm of performance through the example of a highly-skilled

star. Both of these pieces evoke massive transformations and exchanges going on in screen production across the globe during the 1960s – with a particular emphasis on the simultaneously global and local roles played by popular European cinema in that period

Henrike Lindenberger's *Construction of a Heist* (2014) is a comparative study of *Topkapi* (Jules Dassin, 1964) and *Mission: Impossible* (Brian De Palma, 1996). These two films can serve to represent a very particular sub-genre of action in popular cinema: the heist movie. The heist movie has always carried a distinctly European flavour wherever and however it is financed, produced, and distributed. *Topkapi* is an American production set mainly in Turkey with an international cast; it heralded a particular form of transnational production flowering during the 1960s. This is a typical heist movie, in that a group of thieves plan to steal a dagger with emeralds; the entire film builds to the central action located in the Topkapi Museum of Istanbul.*Mission: Impossible* is a blockbuster Hollywood production, also with an international cast, set in both Europe and the United States. It tends more toward the espionage thriller genre, with a plot that involves a classified list containing information about the real identity of secret agents. A heist scene (set in the CIA headquarters) forms a central set-piece within it.[1]

Lindenberger's audiovisual essay focuses on the construction and development of these two heist scenes, as well as on the way that the films build toward these central sequences. The main concept of *Construction of a Heist* involves what we could call *adaptation*. The audiovisual essayist here departs from a dialogue passage in *Topkapi* where a character explains the three cardinal rules of a good robbery. First, Lindenberger turns, transforms, or adapts the three rules of a good robbery into the three rules followed by the directors to create successful heist scenes. Then she takes these three rules and transforms them into the three parts of her audiovisual essay. Thus, she has taken the dialogue that refers to the diegesis of one of the films and transformed it into a generative principle – one that provides her with an analytical idea about how two filmmakers approach the same kind of scene, but also one that offers her a structural device for her own audiovisual essay.

The first cardinal rule of a good robbery is, according to this analytic schema, 'plan meticulously'. In terms of filmmaking this rule translates as 'prepare the audience'. The first section of the audiovisual essay is therefore devoted to the recruitment of the crew, the introduction of the plan, and the explanation of its obstacles and difficulties. The second cardinal rule is 'execute cleanly', which translates as 'calculate some time for orien-

tation'. This section deals with the preparation, the rehearsal, and timing of the different activities involved in the heist. The third rule, 'don't get caught before or during (or after)', becomes 'maintain suspense before or during'; this last section focuses on a step-by-step development of the actual heist scenes in both films.

Of course, these three general rules apply not only to these two films but to most heist movies built around one very long and elaborate central operation. By doing a comparative study Lindenberger is searching for the connections between these two films, but she is also deconstructing the robbery in order to isolate its generic traces and patterns. Here we can see how the audiovisual essay has the potential to move from analysis of individual film texts to a broader generic analysis – but via close comparison between two movies, rather than a vast synoptic sweep through dozens of possible titles.

The audiovisual essayist here establishes relations between the films, but also between the films and her own audiovisual essay. This happens because she is constantly playing with their intermeshed narrative, stylistic, and semantic systems. For instance, she finds powerful links between the different technologies used in each movie. *Mission: Impossible* presents modern technology: computers, electronic codes and information, devices. *Topkapi* presents mechanical instruments that are less sophisticated as tools. This piece shows the contrast between these technologies, also creating very precise connections between them that are based on their function.

On a narrative level, Lindenberger is interested in the relations between the micro-incidents and micro-movements that push forward the action of both films. She is also extremely attentive to formal and semantic aspects such as: space, geometry, and architecture; body gestures, composition and *mise en scène*, the position and movement of actors and camera; the function or meaning of certain elements, such as the drop of sweat in *Mission: Impossible* and the dagger in *Topkapi* (both threatening to fall and trigger alarms); the knife in *Mission: Impossible* and the bird in *Topkapi* (these two elements will leave traces, therefore proving that a robbery has been committed).

The way in which *Construction of a Heist* deals with rhythm and suspense is particularly notable. The author is not only looking at how the films work with these qualities but also incorporates them into her own piece, shaping the three sections of her work according to the principles of rhythm and suspense.

The first section, devoted to the presentation of the crew and plan, is

filled with a great deal of talk and information. She works with this idea of info-excess by speeding up the sound and using rapid montage (which is how heist films often present such expository information). The second section, dealing with the preparation of the heist, is completely built upon the idea of precision (time and rhythm). This section is not only filled with clocks and watches, but Lindenberger has also looped a phrase of music as her rhythmic soundtrack. She works dynamically with a multi-screen technique, image-panels appearing and disappearing in time with the musical rhythm. The third section, devoted to the execution of the plan, is the most suspenseful, presenting a step-by-step, dilated depiction of the heist. Here, Lindenberger moves from double to single screen in order to accentuate the tension, creating fictional shot/reverse shot exchanges between both films, or making the action advance by fusing both movies.

The audiovisual essay is a form of creative analysis; it allows its practitioners to not only analyse a film but also to create something new. Moreover, it allows us to do both things at the same time. This is the potential of the form – these two poles (analysis and creation) communicating and interacting with each other. We see this potential in both Lindenberger's piece and in the second entry for this NECSUS issue.

Pasquale Iannone's *Comedy Vitti Style* (2015) is a more self-explanatory work (the maker himself provides further detail in his note accompanying the video). It addresses the preconception that many screen-literate viewers outside Italy (and even some within that culture) bring to the career and persona of the celebrated actor Monica Vitti – that she is, above all, a serious, dramatic actor, indelibly associated with the sensibility of her ex-partner Michelangelo Antonioni (and other auteurs, including Miklós Jancsó, Joseph Losey, and Luis Buñuel). However, some members of the 'local' audience may identify her much more readily for her marvellous and prodigious work within the realm of popular Italian comedy formats (in film, theatre, and television). Herein is the link we, as curators, see between Lindenberger's work and Iannone's: two 'moments' of popular, European film culture – a particular sub-genre in one case, the comedic work of a performer in the other; both tend to go undervalued within the film studies canon because they lack a certain kind of *gravitas*, and because (certainly in the example of Italian comedy) they fall out of conventional transnational circuits of distribution, exhibition, and critical writing that have long determined what will appear in arthouse cinemas, festivals, and other screening events. However, there are many signs that scholarship is changing its habits, such as these two audiovisual essays.

A written text could assert and argue these points by setting up contexts and describing examples. However, when it comes to the case study of Vitti, Iannone's audiovisual montage takes us right to the physical, gestural heart of her screen work as evidence for its claim that she was truly a figure of multiple facets, who bridged many genres and forms of national and international cinema. For example, Iannone selects fragments that underline issues of cross-cultural language and communication, showing how the supposedly 'universal language' of mime (in a Chaplinesque mode) collides with many gags and routines in these Italian films about the failure (or difficulty) of speaking across language barriers, as well as many 'situational' variations of culturally dense acts of silence, speech, talking, and listening. Iannone also explores (as in his other audiovisual works) the complex codes and associations of Italian popular music as channelled and reworked by such prolific composers for cinema as Armando Trovajoli. *Comedy Vitti Style* even includes a documentary device (the judicious use of an interview extract on the soundtrack) in a way that opens this analytic panorama of one actor's dynamic performance style, hinting at some of the broader industrial and historical currents of the changing screen culture in which Monica Vitti participated.

Note

1. A notable exception to this general tendency is David Bordwell's blog essay 'Visual Storytelling: Is That All?', which concentrates on the same sequence of Mission: Impossible (http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/12/07/visual-storytelling-is-that-all/ [accessed on 22 October 2015])