

A videographic future beyond film

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1. The video essay reframed in 21st century media history

I produced my first video essay 15 years ago, enabled by the circumstances of that moment: the unprecedented accessibility of digital tools for ripping, editing, and exporting film and media content; the rise of online video platforms for publishing user-generated content (most notably YouTube); and the heyday of elaborate and individuated practices of online film criticism fueled by the blogosphere before it was supplanted by social media in the 2010s. My first video essays were conceived rather myopically as a way to advance my career as a film critic by employing an innovative audiovisual approach. But video essays quickly found their way into other contexts adjacent to film criticism. Within academia it provided a novel method of practice-based film and media studies (under the legitimising neologism ‘videographic criticism and scholarship’)[1] that posed a monumental challenge to the centuries-old hegemony of academic texts. Conversely, the video essay has facilitated the operations of experimental cinema and video art amidst the larger trends of practice-based research and knowledge production that define the contemporary art-academia industrial complex.

But to delimit the significance of video essays to innovations within criticism, scholarship, and experimental art is to miss the degree to which they have disrupted each of them as part of a profound shift that marks the first phase of 21st century audiovisual culture. Something like a Trojan horse, the video essay offered a means to elucidate cinema culture to a greater number of people, but instead folded into a larger historical transformation of cinema within emergent – and dare I say, newly dominant — audiovisual contexts. Equipped with smartphones, laptops, and social media platforms, a genera-

tion has devised its own audiovisual forms and codes that function as everyday modes of media communication. This is the latest stage of what Jonathan Beller nearly 20 years ago termed ‘the cinematic mode of production’, in which ‘cinema and its succeeding, if still simultaneous formations, particularly television, video, computers and the internet, are deterritorialized factories in which spectators work, that is, in which they perform value-productive labor’.[2] Within this context, the video essay may have played a modest but distinctive part in the now constant production and circulation of audiovisual media, as a way to study and reflect upon existing film and media, and in doing so, pose the possibility of applying cinematic insights to making the movies of one’s own life.

I would not want to overstate the relevance of the video essay as a pedagogical tool for building audiovisual literacy when there is so much capacity for today’s media creator to learn, through their everyday media engagement, a quotidian, distributed, and osmotic practice of social filmmaking. For me, the video essay best retains its relevance by serving as a tool for critically questioning the present mediatic condition. Given the overwhelming hyperproduction and consumption of audiovisual media on a daily basis, such moments of critical pause are urgently necessary. At the same time, I pause from fully embracing this prognosis when I consider the degree to which the form itself is implicated and incorporated within the condition it proposes to critique.

2. Shifting purposes and presences

Over the course of the 2010s, video essays became a primary vehicle for online edutainment, particularly with the rise of explainer content – a mode of pedagogical viewing where didactic insights are delivered through appealing audiovisual rhetorical devices (graphics, editing) and interpersonal persuasion techniques, such as vlog-style on-camera direct address to the viewer. This format swiftly became applied towards a range of subjects extending well beyond film education and cinephilia to encompass science and technology, politics and culture, arts and humanities. With such a range of topics articulated as online videos, the tools and techniques of cinematic production were adapted to devise a new mode of everyday mediatic discourse. These videos showcase the preferred modes of expression of a generation for whom,

through their everyday engagement on social media and the internet, audiovisual forms of argumentation are as habituated as textual or oral rhetoric, what I have elsewhere termed ‘the new audiovisual vernaculars’.[3] It is worth evaluating a broad sample of video essays to assess the new affordances and problems of audiovisual rhetoric. To what extent do dazzling graphics, kinetic editing, and charismatic on-camera presence enhance or replace rigorous critical argumentation? These questions are useful for evaluating the video essay’s ability to fulfill the potential of cinema as a form that thinks.

At the same time, if one wishes to uphold this ideal of cinema as a form that thinks, one considers that thinking takes as many forms as there are peoples and cultures. In this light I have taken increasing interest in how essayistic audiovisual practices have evolved within and across different social and mediatic contexts. Within the YouTube sphere, it was just a decade ago when a majority of explainer video essays were produced by white male creators who were largely preoccupied with exalting a correspondingly white male canon of brand name auteurs: Tarantino, Scorsese, Kubrick, and so on. In these video essays, their male authors spoke from offscreen, adopting the classic ‘Voice of God’ mode of narrational authority, while espousing classical formalist film studies criteria as the basis for their argumentation. But by the middle of the 2010s this practice gave way to a different set of rhetorical tools, where videographic analysis combined with on-camera vlogging, sketch comedy, and a marked re-orientation of cinephilic enthusiasm for movies and pop culture along an axis of socio-political critique over auteur adulation.

It’s worth noting that two particularly popular and influential practitioners of this recent trend, Lindsay Ellis[4] and ContraPoints (Natalie Wynn),[5] are former academics who found a fulfilling application for their background in critical media studies only upon exiting academia. Do their trajectories – applying their academic training with self-devised idioms of audiovisual rhetoric that could resonate with a wider audience – speak to a possibility for the academic project to go beyond its institutional enclosures? Or does their success outside of academia point towards the need for reform within academia in order for it to fulfill its service mission among a wider and more diverse populace beyond the historically privileged? To the latter charge, it is heartening to read such texts as Susan Harewood’s *Seeking a Cure for Cinephilia*[6] and Lauren Berliner’s *Ruptures in the Racist Archive: What Video Essays Can Teach Us About Scholarly Practice*[7] as passionate calls for adopting the video essay as a means for reforming traditional film and media studies: not

only in terms of format, or subject, but perhaps most profoundly, as institutional self-critique.

In the meantime, this potential continues to be realized more rapidly outside of academia through the widespread creation, experimentation, and exchange of media content within mainstream platforms, especially during societal and cultural moments that necessitate critical response. Last year I curated the 'Black Lives Matter Video Essay Playlist'[8] with Cyndii Wilde Harris and Will DiGravio as a way to take measure of the presence and roles of videographic media in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement. Through this project we traced a stunning array of videographic practice not only in familiar formats such as YouTube, scholarly video essays, and video art, but in emerging microformats such as TikTok and Twitter, where critical thought could be expressed within mere seconds.

The immediacy and resourcefulness of these videographic works spoke to an urgency for the video essay to summon its critical powers in order to meaningfully occupy the space of the present. This resonates with what I find most exciting for the ongoing development of the video essay: to be no longer fixated on the space within the screen, but rather on how the space of the screen provides a window into and through the world itself, the world in which the screen is contained, the world that screens can no longer be used to ignore.

3. Critical limits of the future media environment

This tension between screens in the world or in place of the world reached its apex during COVID, and the video essay accumulated an accompanying set of tensions in turn. Video essays on YouTube have become ever longer, with works by ContraPoints approaching the length of feature films.[9] This is partly attributable to YouTube monetisation algorithms favoring viewing time over view counts, reportedly as a measure of 'time well spent', although it also allows for more ad breaks to be inserted inside the video. My students tell me that when they watch a video essay on YouTube they are not necessarily *watching* it, but have it on in the background while they are multitasking. Some say that they are soothed by the parasocial presence of a smart person, and their rooms are filled with the sound of intelligent monologues delivered by a personality they find appealing. Informational and social

needs are simultaneously fulfilled. Or is it in this case that the informational is more of an ambient anodyne aesthetic instead of a critical awakening?

There are instances where this always-on, always-informing parasocial virtual environment has taken revelatory qualities. Zia Anger's livestreams of her feature-length performance work *My First Film* turned the work of film analysis into a riveting interactive experience with live text chatting, file sharing, and other forms of eliciting audience response.[10] Watching it live on my laptop, I felt something strangely akin to the experience of cinema — if one defines cinema as a recorded reality that achieves a larger than life intensity. If live-streaming and its relatives — TikTok, gaming, VR, the metaverse — are paving the way towards an all-encompassing, always-on future where post-cinema meets Total Cinema, a work like *My First Film* also proposes the possibility of videographic criticism to occupy critically aware and questioning positions within these ever-consuming environments. The future of the video essay may not be defined so much as a media format, but as a mode of mediatic being, a critically heightened occupation of media space. Such an occupation may find its fullest potential in the form of mutual presence: a way of spending time together more attentively and thoughtfully through the space of the screen, amidst so many misbegotten notions of time well spent.

It would be inspiring enough to end on this note, but to hope for the perseverance of criticality within these hyper-enveloping environments may still not be enough. On the matter of environments, I will end with a plot twist worthy of a Netflix episode.

In *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* Sean Cubbitt diagnoses the imminent catastrophe brought about by mediatic hyper-production and -consumption: 'To communicate with one another, we also inadvertently communicate our dismissive relation to the humans and natural environments, who pay the terrible price for its efficiency, even for its poetry.' In 2020 Laura Marks ran a provisional analysis of how the COVID-fueled streaming frenzy around the Netflix series *Tiger King* equaled one year of CO2 emissions from 75,000 passenger cars, which would require nearly 6 million trees to be planted in order to offset the carbon.[11] One could apply Marks' analysis to consider the hidden cost of video essays, accounting for not only what benefit they have for our minds, but also the material effect they may have on the world that we live in; a material effect that, ironically, is not so easy to visualise.

If the justification for having video essays is their ability to help us see more clearly, then, at the far end of its initial application as a better way to study things on screen, perhaps it can now help make visible what cannot be seen otherwise.

Author

Kevin B. Lee is a filmmaker and critic who has made over 360 video essays exploring film and media. His award-winning “Transformers: The Premake” was named one of the best documentaries of 2014 by Sight & Sound Magazine. In 2017 he was the first Artist in Residence of the Harun Farocki Institute in Berlin, where he researched ISIS propaganda videos. Previously he taught film and media studies at universities such as School of the Art Institute of Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago, and Goethe Universität Frankfurt. Currently he is Professor of Crossmedia Publishing at Merz Akademie in Stuttgart.

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References

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Notes

- [1] <https://sites.middlebury.edu/videoworkshop/what-is-videographic-criticism>
- [2] Beller 2002, p. 61.
- [3] <http://www.thecine-files.com/new-audiovisual-vernaculars-of-scholarship>

- [4] <https://www.youtube.com/c/LindsayEllisVids>
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