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The audiovisual essay as performative research

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By tentatively circumscribing one spectrum or continuum of the field for the purposes of this section – with digital, found footage collage at one end and the film/media essay at the other – we hope to orient the thoughts and works of our contributors and readers toward those audiovisual possibilities that actively produce *knowledge* and ideas via the multiple paths of performative, material research. [1]

Like the longer-established disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, in the relatively young academic fields of screen media studies and cultural studies it is generally the case that research findings are reported on or represented in conventionalised forms of scholarly writing. *Ekphrasis* still rules the visual arts academy (more or less).[2] But what happens when written scholarly utterances in our disciplines are used merely to supplement, comment on, or verbally summarise research performed in the same medium or mode as the subject of the research, that is – in the case of film, television, audiovisual artworks, or internet videos – *audiovisually*? Indeed, what if the creative production of audiovisual material centrally constitutes the research into audiovisuality?

Such questions are largely rhetorical ones for me these days, as a cinema studies scholar whose research and editorial work moved in a distinct, audiovisual direction seven years ago when I began to experiment with making or curating creative forms of digital remix (or 'video essays') in order to analyse films and their affects.[3] I gradually became aware that this shift did not simply mean taking up a more engaging medium in which to 'showcase' my previously produced critical work.[4] It also entailed the embracing of a new research paradigm in which to *perform* it, one that Aus-

tralian scholar Brad Haseman (following philosopher J.L. Austin) has indeed called 'performative', as opposed to 'quantitative' or 'qualitative':

> in this third category of research – alongside quantitative (symbolic numbers) and qualitative (symbolic words) – the symbolic data, which may include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code, all work performatively. [5]

In other words, they work as utterances that accomplish, by their very enunciation, an action that generates effects.[6]

These are exciting times then, in the critical humanities, as we add more – and, in certain ways and for certain purposes, more *effective* and *affective* – methodological strings to our bow. But as Barbara Bolt, another Australian artist-scholar, has written, following Haseman, the problem for the 'performative' (or creative) academic researcher can lie in recognising and mapping the effects or 'transformations' that have occurred in their practice-research:

> [s]ometimes the transformations may seem to be so inchoate that it is impossible to recognize them, let alone map their effects. At other times the impact of the work of art may take time to 'show itself', or else the researcher may be too much in the process and hence finds it impossible to assess just what has been done. [7]

She adds that as far as an academic context is concerned it 'is clear that if a performative paradigm is viable it has to be able to do the work expected of a research paradigm, it has to be able to define its terms, refine its protocols and procedures and be able to withstand scrutiny'.[8] Bolt has been one of a number of university-based arts practitioners, along with Haseman and others, who have made great progress in these international labours of disciplinary definition and refinement. Yet much of this work to date has indeed emerged principally from creative arts, film, or design practice endeavours rather than from critical studies. I would note that those of us involved in the latter – in academic media and film *studies* – are at a much earlier stage of experimentation and the integration of creative and practice-based methods in our scholarly infrastructure. We certainly have a great deal to learn – and indeed are learning it directly – from our creative practice colleagues.[9] Yet, I also believe that, precisely because of our abundant experiences of (and training in) constative or descriptive discourses,[10] and of verbal analysis and justifications generally, critical media studies scholars are attuned for the development of and (where necessary)

argument for the effects and conclusions of research performed creatively and audiovisually.

For my selection of three audiovisual essays as guest curator I looked for examples of performative research in this form issuing from film and media studies academics who had produced substantial written work in the areas related to the subjects of their video works. I was especially keen to find productions that did not try to 'translate' any earlier, written research, but instead explored and worked through their related research enquiries *anew* – audiovisually as well as 'essayistically'. These two adverbs, for me as for the founders of the audiovisual essay section at NECSUS, Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, together describe approaches which are often 'surprising, inventive, and boundary-breaking', whose forms may be arrived at tentatively, experimentally, in the first-person, 'within the editing process itself',[11] and often involve (re)mixing their 'material in ways that combine art and research'.[12] Each of the works I have chosen were produced by established and always innovative and creative academics: Ian Garwood, Domietta Torlasco, and Will Brooker (working with video editor Rebecca Hughes). Each audiovisual essay has also been the subject of a reflective written statement, produced by its author(s), that we have published alongside the videos. My remarks on the curated works below then confine themselves to considering their performative aspects as research, and to discussing some of their commonalities and differences in this regard.

Ian Garwood's brilliantly playful *and* serious audiovisual essay *The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism* situates itself primarily in the genre of the 'video essay' – those creative, critical digital remixes circulating online which are composed of footage from the audiovisual works they treat. Although, like the other two videos, *The Place of Voiceover...* also incorporates some original footage. It is a far more substantial work than many online video essays, one which Garwood intended in part (as his closing video credits help to assert) as an experiment in the making of an 'autonomous and explanatorily argumentative research video'.[13] But it also specifically articulates its meta-critical research project by using some of the practices and aesthetics of *desktop documentary* (among other online video forms).[14] This particularly performative variety of D.I.Y. digital filmmaking uses screen capture technology to treat the computer interface (its screen space, internal windows, and microphone) as a camera lens, audio recording device, *and* (audiovisual) canvas. Garwood skillfully and engagingly employs the technique as part of his unfolding

study, *in media res*, of the use (and non-use) of voiceover in online video: recording and representing his time-based research actions of video and audio replay, audiovisual layering, comparing, scanning and pausing, typing lists, making annotations, and producing graphic presentations of his quantitative and qualitative findings. The work makes its viewers *read* as well as watch and listen to what it shows us via its mosaic screens and heavily layered audio track.[15] Garwood uses both the medium he is studying (online film-critical videos) as well as a representation of his research interface with that medium as the combinative matter and materiality of his audiovisual essay in a wide and complex range of evidential, argumentative, but also evocative and affecting ways.

This is not the full extent of this video's performativity. As Kevin B. Lee – one of the most accomplished online video essayists to use this production mode to date – has noted, desktop documentaries seek both to depict and question the ways in which we explore the world through the computer screen.[16] Garwood is using the form to question the way our experience of the online film-critical world is organised, too, as well as to challenge the stark gender lines that he encounters through his digital exploration of it. This, for me, is the most potent aspect of his video's performative research project. It is also one in which, I believe, Garwood succeeds in repurposing his earlier research into the materiality, sensuality, and affect of voiceover conveyed in his book chapter 'Sighs and Sounds: The Materiality of the Voiceover',[17] as well as his practical experience of using his voice to narrate his earlier academic video essay *How Little We Know: An Essay Film about Hoagy Carmichael*.[18] Not only does his latest audiovisual essay quantitatively and qualitatively conclude that the vast legions of male online video essayists are far more likely to use their voices to narrate their works than their already far smaller number of female counterparts, but his thoughtful aesthetics offer up an affectively gendered experience of this numerical dwarfing, or auditory drowning out. Even more powerfully, perhaps, Garwood dramatises and performs the recognition and 'reversal' of his own place in this unequal audiovisual economy. Among other methods of self-silencing, he strategically (and humorously) enacts his own relative sonic erasure as a male voiceover artist, by muting and then replacing much of his spoken performance in the video with that of an artificial female voice generated by an automated text-to-speech reader, producing a vocal track that he then synchronises, at moments, to his moving lips, in an uncanny acoustic masquerade.[19]

Domietta Torlasco's rigorously shot and fascinatingly edited video essay _House Arrest_ is a different kind of research work, in most respects at least. Less linear in its use of a multiple screen aesthetic, more concise and less busy as an audiovisual experience than either of the other works, it nonetheless shares a documentary intentionality with them as a key part of its 'art-work'. As with _The Place of Voiceover_..., part of the performativity of _House Arrest_ resides in its onscreen acts of creative, critical writing, which, in turn, invite acts of creative, critical reading. As the work begins, the screen on the right presents us with footage of an unknown but presumably real-world 'domiciliary' setting (its precise location is revealed to us only in the closing credits). Typed captions appear at varying speeds throughout the work, always on the left, until just before a climactic moment in the film. The captions label ('haus 1'), describe or enumerate ('shot length 18"'), comment ('this place doesn't photograph like the scene of a crime'), and question ('what do you see?'). But they also function elliptically, provoking further, unnoted questions or reflections. Who exactly is writing ('they're not mine')? Who and what are these 'surveillance' records for ('addressee unknown')?

House Arrest is equally if not more propulsive in its careful framing of spaces for sustained contemplation and interrogation. Its form teaches us to be vigilant, to scan, to search, to ponder, and also to sense our way within, across and between the split-screens and combinative sequencings of original material and film quotations. Ironically, given its documentary subject, Torlasco's video offers an experience of what might compel us and what we might resist in intimate as well as public places, organised as it is around the potential freedom to look and listen, to question and _free-associate_ in the most constrained, codified, and surveilled of historically-loaded locations. A performative work of time-based political art as much as audiovisual phenomenological research, it accrues yet more complex semantic layers when our experience of it is motivated trans-textually by Torlasco's published works of film theory. _House Arrest_ recalled for me the chapter titled 'Against House Arrest' in her book _The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film_.[20] This chapter (in part, on a two-channel found-footage work by Italian artist Monica Bonvicini) opens with an epigraph drawn from Jacques Derrida's _Archive Fever_: '[i]t is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place'.[21] Torlasco's exploration of Derrida's consideration of the ways and circumstances in which we could 'archive _otherwise_' seems to me to be performed less directly but very powerfully in her video

essay, virtually blown open with its climactic cinematic reference, part of an exacting mobilisation throughout her research of 'a network of intertextual references that challenge the unity and self-presence of the viewing subject'.[22]

Will Brooker's highly innovative and moving hour-long essay film *Being Bowie*, edited by Rebecca Hughes, presents itself as a documentary about, or as a documentation of,[23] an extended multimedia research project. It situates itself, broadly, in the genre of academic research films that, as Matthew Reisz puts it, 'track the journeys taken by the researchers themselves'.[24] But it is hard to imagine a more committed or, indeed, more unswervingly performative instance of self-reflexive practice-research than this. In 2014, as Brooker informs us in his film, driven in part by the loss of one of his musical heroes (Lou Reed, who died in October 2013), he decided to celebrate another – David Bowie, still alive at that point – by writing a scholarly book about him.[25] To inform his research, in May 2015, Brooker began a year-long phenomenological process of (re-)enactment, involving fairly continuous cosplay and *tribute act-ing*, through which he attempted to enter Bowie's 'cultural framework; to experience some of what he experienced, to engage with his influences and see if it gave [...] insight into his creative output at various times'. A similarly experimental (if not quite as extreme) 'mimetic [mode] of fan production'[26] had characterised many of Brooker's earlier interactions with Bowie's personas, as well as some of his previous creative critical and autobiographical work,[27] and the scholar clearly drew on an existing graphic archive, including some of his Bowie-related collage art, as he began his immersive research.

Like other videos I have selected here, *Being Bowie* experiments with a mosaic aesthetic. Indeed, the film's mosaic elements audiovisually perform the argument verbalised in Brooker's book on Bowie, that for him the performer is a 'mosaic figure'.[28] He uses complex multiscreen and collage techniques to present

> a diverse variety of forms: scanned photographs, phone videos, stop-motion animation, simulated cine film, vintage Super-8, professional gig footage, remixed video, broadcast media, time-lapse photography, vintage VHS, extensive digital manipulation, and a complex, layered soundtrack. It is a collage of styles, intended as a kind of scrapbook which evokes Bowie's history and my own and the way they intersect and overlap. [29]

As Brooker also notes in his written statement about *Being Bowie*, the documentary 'was assembled as the project took place'.[30] This production

circumstance makes the film's rigorous and devoted recreation and mimicry of Bowie's own audiovisual media appearances, practices, and aesthetics (very few actual images of or by Bowie appear) close to virtuosic.[31] Indeed, the video's *method-filmmaking* (even more than Brooker's 'method-acting')[32] is one of the most potent and effective aspects of the audiovisual research process, and one through which its formal project of research documentation begins to transform into something more essayistic and experimental.

The ongoing diary-film/video-diary mode of continuous assembly also meant that, when Bowie unexpectedly died in January 2016, the project had to document the one event that Brooker's celebration-preservation of his idol had hoped to ward off, the one he could not perform in time for Lou Reed either. It is the auto-ethnographic turn performed in the wake of Bowie's death in Part Two of *Being Bowie* (as well as in its Overture, added at the end of the filmmaking process) that produces one of its most significant contributions to star and fandom studies: the affective enactment (before our very eyes and ears) of a painful rupture in its fan-star identificatory dynamics and its 'insertion fantasy'.[33] With this aspect of its research contribution alone it adds to some other very poignant and troubled but highly valuable meta-critical reflections on scholar-fandom and auto-ethnographic methodologies, like Su Holmes' on Karen Carpenter and Lena Zavaroni, and Sean Redmond's on Ian Curtis. With Sarah Ralph, they write,

> in swivelling the spotlight onto ourselves, we are aware that autoethnography 'intentionally presents a vulnerable subject' […]. Part of this vulnerability is allowing stories of the self to [be] made available for the reader to make of them what they will, in terms of interpretation, judgement or significance. [34]

All three of the audiovisual essays I have selected and discussed work in a number of ways as standalone forms of research expression. They convey meanings that can be summarised in writing; indeed, some of these are partly conveyed *in* writing in the films, as I have noted. But their self-contained performative acts (to rework Derrida) do not merely come back 'to a constative or descriptive discourse'; they perform, they accomplish, they do what they say they do.[35] Yes, they can communicate with, take up their place in, and make a direct and original research contribution to bodies of work that do not take audiovisual forms. In this respect, they are not only multimodal artefacts but also transmedia ones. Yes, their accompanying written statements, or exegeses, certainly help to situate them, and pos-

sibly make them more *legible*, in these wider research threads and traditions. But these separate sets of words do not, indeed *cannot* replace or stand in for a key part of the 'original knowledge' that the audiovisual essays themselves generate, because the latter is *performative*, an integral part of 'the force and effect of a creative production'.[36]

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Notes

[1] I will go on to focus on highly *academic* forms of the audiovisual essay. But the scope of my curatorial choices still corresponds closely to the one set out in this statement written to mark the launch of the Audiovisual Essay section in *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* by its first curators Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin (2014).

[2] For a discussion of *ekphrasis* in the context of audiovisual research, see Grant 2016.

[3] An example of my audiovisual essay work has been published by *NECSUS*: Grant 2015.

[4] I did, however, start out by thinking that this would be the case, as I set out in one of my reflections on my early attempts at practice-research: Grant 2014.

[5] Haseman 2006.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Bolt 2009.

[8] Ibid.

[9] For example, even before I began to make films as research, I was very influenced by work on practice as research carried out by Baz Kershaw, Angela Piccini, and Caroline Rye as part of the PARIP project in the early 2000s. See Piccini 2002.

[10] As Bolt has written (2009), in J.L. Austin's early work on language he distinguished performative utterances from constative utterances: '[t]he constative utterance is concerned to establish a correspondence between statements or utterances and the "facts" being described or modeled. The performative utterance, on the other hand, does not describe anything. It does things in the world. Performatives are never just reportage, but the utterance or production invokes a causal link between the utterance and things that happen in the world. In their capacity to be both actions and generate consequences, performative utterances enact real effects in the world.'

[11] Álvarez López & Martin 2014.

[12] Reisz 2016.

[13] Van den Berg & Kiss 2016.

[14] See Lee 2014, 2015.

[15] One of Garwood's well-targeted and 'performative' jokes singles out the critique of the video-essay voiceover's tautological tendency of unnecessarily reading out loud text we can read on-screen. See also Dias Branco 2008 and Rosenbaum 2010 for useful discussions of 'mosaic screens' and the media hybridity of multiple screen aesthetics.

[16] Lee 2015. See also Lee's 2014 desktop documentary work *Transformers: The Premake.*

[17] Garwood 2013.

[18] Garwood 2014.

[19] Garwood uses the Zabaware Text-to-Speech Reader, 'an application that uses a speech synthesizer to read documents and more out loud'. Available at https://www.zabaware.com/reader/.

Elsewhere in the video we may notice other uncanny digital transformations of the female voice which heighten their strangeness in the online sphere. I was struck by the passages of layered female voiceover voices, and the 'whispering' musical soundtrack used at points in the work, which both curiously recall the strange internet phenomenon of Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) videos with their whispering women. See Dang 2016.

[20] Torlasco 2013.

[21] Derrida 1996, p. 2.

[22] Torlasco 2013, p. 40.

[23] See Piccini 2002 for some early discussion of the role of performance documentation in the context of practice-based research.

[24] Reisz 2016.

[25] Brooker 2017.

[26] Hills 2010.

[27] Brooker 2013.

[28] Brooker in Brooker & Hughes 2016.

[29] Brooker & Hughes 2016.

[30] Brooker & Hughes 2016.

[31] The film's music video triptychs stand out for me in this regard.

[32] Brooker himself refers to 'method acting' as one of his procedures in a stage performance documented in *Being Bowie* (18:30).

[33] I use Kristina Busse's term 'insertion fantasy' a little loosely here. *Being Bowie* is a kind of 'fan fiction', involving varieties of (both) 'insertion' and 'observer' fantasies. See Busse 2006, p. 256.

[34] Holmes & Ralph & Redmond 2015, p. 115 (citing Holman Jones *et al*. 2013, p. 24). Sarah Ralph's contribution to this work is equally valuable, just less focused on painful fan-star relations.

[35] Derrida 1986, p. 8.

[36] Bolt 2009.