

## Videographic Film Studies: From the “Unattainable Text” to Video Essays

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The aim of my research is to investigate how the digital turn is gradually reshaping film studies and film criticism. The consequences of digital technologies for the ontological definition of cinema and for the way in which audiences can nowadays watch and consume movies have already been widely studied and explored. In contrast, scholars and academics have only recently started to reflect on the implications of digital tools for film studies and criticism.

My research will focus in particular on audiovisual essays on film, a form of videographic film studies – a definition provided by Catherine Grant<sup>2</sup> – mostly known as video essay. The video essay is a montage of footage from existing films for the purposes of analysis and criticism, in order to develop an argument, to substantiate an analysis, to render in a “tangible” way an hypothesis, with the aid of a basic kind of prosumer editing tools, such as iMovie.

As videographic film studies are emergent forms rather than firmly established ones, it is extremely difficult to study video essays including them in a given theoretical frame. Consequently, it is my intention to individuate some crucial issues instead: if this practice is relatively new, it is indubitable that some preceding theories and reflections and some pre-existing practices have a significant influence.

In the first place, a key theoretical point of reference is the tradition of film analysis, especially some essays by Raymond Bellour.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on the material specificity of film, opposed to the usually written form of film analysis, on the one hand Bellour underlines how film scholars cannot really “quote” their object of study. On the other hand, he is one of the first theorists to prefigure the possibility of non-written form of film analyses.

Secondly, it could be fruitful to investigate the notion of *montage*. Starting

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Grant, “Déjà-Viewing? Videographic Experiments in Intertextual Film Studies,” in *Mediascape*, Winter 2013, [http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013\\_DejaViewing.html](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013_DejaViewing.html), last visit 1 April 2014.

<sup>3</sup> In particular *Le texte introuvable*, in Raymond Bellour, *L'analyse du Film*, Albatros, Paris 1979 (*Il testo introuvable*, in *L'analisi del film*, Kaplan, Torino 2005) and *L'analyse flambée* in Raymond Bellour, *L'entre-images: photo, cinéma, vidéo*, La Différence, Paris 2002 (*L'analisi infiammata*, in *Fra le immagini: fotografia, cinema, video*, Mondadori, Milano 2007).

from early aesthetic reflection on cinematic montage, through to contemporary remix practices, it is important to remark how montage is increasingly becoming in all respects a fundamental instrument for both creation and comprehension of our cultural artefacts.

Finally, the third issue to explore is *cinophilia*, especially through the recent reflections of Christian Keathley<sup>4</sup> – who proposes a history of cinophilia and also tries to reflect on the peculiar relationship between “cinephiliacs” and films –, and Laura Mulvey,<sup>5</sup> who presents a new conception of the spectatorial condition, especially in regard to technological innovation, such as the DVD.

The main focus of the research will then be an analysis of a corpus of audiovisual essays hosted in various websites. The fundamental online sources that I will consider for observation and investigation of video essays are: *Audiovisualcy*, a Vimeo forum founded and edited by Catherine Grant;<sup>6</sup> the criticism blog *Press Play*;<sup>7</sup> the blog *Keyframe*,<sup>8</sup> hosted on Fandor – a video on demand website, but with a more cinephilic rather than commercial inspiration –; Roger Ebert’s blog, now under the editorial direction of Matt Zoller Seitz;<sup>9</sup> and, finally, the website of the long-established British magazine *Sight and Sound*,<sup>10</sup> that has recently devoted his attention also to video essays.

As a first step, I propose to carry out an investigation of the formal and linguistic strategies implemented by audiovisual essays, in order to question the possibility of their specificity compared to written forms of criticism and analysis. Taking into account some recent observations about the style of audiovisual essays – the notion of a “spectrum” introduced by Christian Keathley<sup>11</sup> in order to distinguish between explanatory and poetical forms of audiovisual essays, and a taxonomy recently proposed by Catherine Grant<sup>12</sup> – I will focus on linguistic modes such as the use of voice-over, of written text like subtitles or intertitles, the presence of postproduction effects such as multiple screens or superimposition.

Additionally, after this observation of formal aspects of audiovisual essays, an in-depth analysis of their contents should be also conducted, with the aim of identifying the questions that this emerging form is raising. First of all, even

<sup>4</sup> Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History: Or, The Wind in the Trees*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Reaktion Books, London 2006.

<sup>6</sup> <http://vimeo.com/groups/audiovisualcy>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.fandor.com/keyframe>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.rogerebert.com>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine>.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Keathley, *La Caméra-Stylo: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia*, in Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (eds.), *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, Routledge, London 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Grant, *How Long is a Piece of String? On the Practice, Scope and Value of Videographic Film Studies and Criticism*, Presentation at the Audiovisual Essay Conference, Frankfurt Filmmuseum/Goethe University, 23-24 November 2013. Recording online: <http://filmstudiesforfree.podbean.com/2013/12/18/how-long-is-a-piece-of-string-on-the-practice-scope-and-value-of-videographic-film-studies-and-criticism-a-talk-by-catherine-grant>, last visit 1 April 2014.

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the use of the word “essay” with reference to this specific practice is certainly not neutral, but quite problematic: as many scholars have pointed out, the word “essay” seems more appropriate to designate the kind of work with explanatory intentions, rather than the more poetic ones. Moreover, it is also important to inquire about the relationship between videographic film studies and pre-existing written form of analysis and criticism. Audiovisual essays realised for critical purposes seem often more inclined to follow pre-established paths (auteur-driven reflections, prescriptive criticism...) and to adhere to an existing “canon” of privileged objects of study. On the contrary, some scholarly works have a tendency to break boundaries between video analysis and the work of art.

In regard to this last issue, it could be also important to observe which subjects are currently involved in the creation of audiovisual essays, and with what results. Videographic film studies is a field in which boundaries among categories such as film scholars, film critics, artists, amateurs, fans, tend to blur in many different ways, and it is also my objective to investigate this aspect. The audiovisual essay is still at its early stages, and its development is therefore unpredictable. Consequently, the aim of my study is to embrace this complexity raising questions rather than searching for a systematization that could reveal itself as transitory.