

Kevin B. Lee in Plain Text

Transformers: The Premake (Kevin B. Lee, 2014)



Kevin B. Lee is best known as a video essayist who is exploring a wide range of films through audiovisual analysis, as well as challenging the form of the video essay itself. From 2011 to early 2017, he worked at [Fandor \(https://www.fandor.com/\)](https://www.fandor.com/), making his own video essays as well as coordinating other video essayists' contributions, until [resigning \(https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/03/highlights-from-the-backdor-collection/\)](https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/03/highlights-from-the-backdor-collection/) in response to a controversial action of the company. For the past three months, he has been living in Berlin as the inaugural artist in residency of the Harun Farocki Institute, and took advantage of his newly found (again) freedom to do what interests him the most. His largest in-development project concerns the representation of terrorism in the realm of the audiovisual: together with French filmmaker and video-essayist [Chloé Galibert-Laîné \(https://www.fandor.com/keyframe/author/chloeg-623178\)](https://www.fandor.com/keyframe/author/chloeg-623178), Lee is trying to understand the effects and underlying intentions of ISIS-produced media, as well as to speculate on how it is refracted while being absorbed by European and US audiovisual culture. So far, in early February, they had a public work-in-progress [presentation \(https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/02/a-public-conversation-on-my-current-project-february-6-at-fu-berlin/\)](https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/02/a-public-conversation-on-my-current-project-february-6-at-fu-berlin/) at the Frei Universität Berlin, and the upcoming Essay Film Festival in London will be screening Galibert-Laîné's segment [My Crush Was a Superstar \(https://www.ica.art/whats-on/essay-film-festival-2017-critique-protest-activism-and-video-essay-lecture-performance\)](https://www.ica.art/whats-on/essay-film-festival-2017-critique-protest-activism-and-video-essay-lecture-performance). For his part, Lee considers this a continuation of sorts of his Hollywood and social media investigation on display in [Transformers: The Premake \(https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/03/video-essays-from-2014-finding-a-new-voice/\)](https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/03/video-essays-from-2014-finding-a-new-voice/), noting however that “the stakes are higher, or at least the material is more sensitive, and there are even more directions to go in.”

The interview below is a partial transcript of a two-hour Skype session, taken midway through his HaFI residency, which is now approaching its end. He looked back at his work of the past years, at what collaborating with other critics and video essayists has meant to him, what the shift in film culture in the past decade looks like from his perspective. and what new horizons

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where the issues our conversation touched on are discussed at greater length. After one decade of engaging with audiovisual culture in its own language, Lee's body of work is so wide and expansive that even cataloguing it takes teamwork.

IT: Your recent move to Europe has brought on many changes, including making fewer video essays and dropping your yearly 'Who Deserves To Win...' Oscars series

[\(https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/02/five-years-of-oscar-videos/\)](https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/02/five-years-of-oscar-videos/). **I was**

wondering whether there is a shift in your preoccupations that determines you to take your skills elsewhere.

KBL: I've actually been surprised by how many people have contacted me about the Oscar videos not being produced this year. It was something I've been doing for five years. This year, due to a lot of factors taking away my time and attention, I guess I've just decided that it ultimately wasn't worth my while, compared with other things I was involved with. Ultimately, I've lost a bit of interest in the Oscars themselves. The premise of the series was that you have this annual media spectacle that is presumably about honoring the best films, performances and contributions of the year – when actually it's a short term popularity and marketing contest. But I thought, why not try to take it seriously and use this platform to have a more earnest and serious conversation about what we want out of films and what constitutes quality? It was a way to create a space for thoughtfulness and true film criticism, as I believe in it, within this space. After I ended my relationship with Fandor, I no longer had a ready-to-go platform to produce these videos, and I didn't feel like shopping this series around, so I wondered if it's even worth it. Maybe it's just my general exhaustion with mainstream media culture, both in terms of movies and the Internet. Because of the recent experiences I've had and the types of video essays I had to make – with an overly commercial interest in mind –, I got a little burned out. Last year, I think I arrived at some conclusions, through these videos, about acting and filmmaking – and to be honest, I wasn't sure what more there was to say through a new set and with more effort in counting screen time. I read a press release the other day that some scholars in New York did a ten-year study of screen time and I was relieved that, OK, someone else did the work (*laughs*).

Do you feel there's a risk of losing subscribers in discontinuing this series?

In some sense, I feel like that has already happened when all my videos were taken down – that really disrupted whatever base I thought I had. It made me wonder what kind of activity really has a lasting value or presence. I had to re-upload all these videos and, in the process, they were back to zero view counts, for videos that had hundreds of thousands of views. What to make of that? How many people are going to watch the Oscar videos of 2012 or 2013? It destabilized my belief – or really, just brought to the surface questions about lasting value, especially since I did three hundred of these video essays. It feels temporary and transient to shape out to subscribers, view counts and this whole value system. It's not something I feel naturally inclined to pursue.

Could video essays have a larger appeal or accessibility than regular reviews? Is it easier for people to watch them if they want to dig into a film later, after the buzz surrounding its release has died down?

Mm, I don't think so. It doesn't matter whether it's a video or a written text. Any content has less of a shelf life than it used to and it's bound to be buried or forgotten much faster, just because there's exponentially more content being created every second. Everyone is creating something to catch other people's attention. Realizing this was accelerated by making video essays specifically for Facebook.

Getting more people to notice is also getting more people who care less.

Yeah, exactly. On social media, it's all ephemeral. The way you engage with audiovisual content on social media is different from even five or ten years ago, when you would watch something on your desktop with a more open state of mind. Now, it's something that flashes on your phone and you can swipe it off after a few seconds. Even if you watch it all the way through, there is ~~going to be something else that enters your feed~~. The whole media equation has been

were getting eight million views. By the metrics I was given, they were supposed to be my greatest successes because they were the most viewed things that I had ever made, but then the whole idea of views became questionable. It only takes three seconds on Facebook to count as a view – and then, getting past the quantitative measurements, what is it actually doing for the viewer? Does it leave a lasting impression? Then, when the videos disappeared, it was another form of that kind of effacement. On the Internet there is less space for deeper engagement and it's becoming more of a space for reaction and amnesia. In terms of what that means for our culture and civilization, I find it rather concerning.

Do you think there is something than content creators can do, even with the current work-life balance that most people struggle with, to get their attention back?

Hmm. That's a huge question to approach. The way media production is incentivized, it has to be easily consumable and affordable – minimum effort and engagement required, just to produce a statistic. There is not enough justification, monetarily, to invest in something more substantive than that.

How would you change the guidelines for that if you had no editorial constraints?

The thing I enjoyed most about being an editor at Fandor, working with a pool of contributors that lasted for about two years – and it was fun while it lasted –, was really getting their take on things, the exchanges and the conversations I've had with them, giving them feedback on how to make their work more interesting as far as I was concerned. This is very much a form still in the process of discovering itself and I hope it will always be that way. I'm always interested in looking for something new. Even the Facebook turn, I initially treated as an opportunity (<https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/03/video-essays-from-2016-emerging-from-screens-big-and-small/>) – it was a way to find innovation or at least solve the problem of how to make a video that works on Facebook. People like Filmscalpel, Jake Swinney or Leigh Singer were intrigued by this question as well. It was good for three or four months, but then it got tedious and formulaic.

I also meant to ask how platform-dependent your video essays are, and whether you see it as an opportunity or an obstacle that you made some of them specifically for Fandor.

On the whole, I'm super-grateful to have an opportunity that nobody else had, to make a video per week and be paid for it. I don't think that anyone else had that opportunity. I went through different phases, sometimes I made a video just to get through the assignment, other times I found a lot of inspiration in it. There's no question that I grew from the experience. For the first five years, I could do whatever I wanted, and if anything, I didn't take advantage of that enough. I was told "You need to be making videos of the films on Fandor" vs. "You need to be making videos about whatever will get people to come to Fandor," and those were not necessarily the same thing. Doing that '1,000 Greatest Films' (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=shooting+down+pictures+alsolikelife) project just meant engaging with movies that people didn't care about. I was always proudest where I can take a film that nobody had heard about and making people care. Then, I felt like I earned it, rather than just exploiting what people already cared about. If you give that opportunity I had at Fandor to twelve different people, they are probably each going to end up with different results. I did what I did, I'm still in the process of making sense of it and accepting what I got out of it. But now, [with the Harun Farocki Institute grant,] I'm really in a position to do whatever I want and it's really a surprise to myself that I don't think of bigger things to work on. When you're a filmmaker, you always have 5-10 ideas that you're working on at the same time and trying to build momentum around things. I've had *Transformers* as this passion project that I was able to do at school, but the rest of the time I just engage with what's being put in front of me. The best justification I can make for that is that, according to Manny Farber's classic distinction between 'white elephant art' and 'termite art', I guess, at the end of the day, I'm a termite. I'm more into the act of engaging with the material than conceiving of the material.

You talked on the HaFI residency blog (<https://residency.harun-farocki->

collaborators at Fandor?

In a sense, there wasn't any difference, because the key thing was the newness. For the established critics, a lot of them had never worked with video before, even if their careers were spent studying and writing about moving images. They were text-based practitioners that happened to write about moving images. For them, it was a new opportunity to have their criticism in video format and then put on YouTube for other people to engage with. I think that's how I was able to get so many of them to work with me – I didn't have such a track record at the time, I had only been making video essays for less than a year. For me, it was a tremendous learning experience, working with them and seeing how their insights might be presented in video format. Comparing the way Matt Zoller Seitz talks about a movie and how Richard Brody talks about a film, you could come up with a different approach based on the way they're looking at it. To me, what is most special and valuable about video essays is that they're as much a reflection of the viewer as they are about the thing being viewed. There were similar principles in place with working at Fandor. It was always most rewarding working with someone who had a distinctive way of looking at film and that distinctiveness would be the defining characteristic of the video. It becomes a mode of social interaction, a way for people to communicate their ideas and their way of looking to each other. That's a principle I'm very much holding on to the best I can, and it's quite obvious to me that a lot of factors in play in contemporary culture are inhibiting or damaging that kind of wholesomeness or genuineness of communication.

Do you think there's an autobiographical component to your work as a video essayist?

I think that's what I'm in the process of evaluating. Re-uploading all my videos on Vimeo, I reflect on where I was when I made them. I'm trying to add notes or, at the minimum, just a date and the context when they were produced. I'm also writing more, in the form of yearly overview, [on the Harun Farocki Institute blog \(https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/\)](https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/), and it is unfolding as a year by year assessment of what making these videos meant to me in the last decade.

You've had this alternative career as a video-essayist while attending festivals, by short-circuiting the norm established for the festival critics of watching films and writing about them afterwards. With the Critics' Choice and, later, the Jackie video at the Rotterdam festival, you were there to present your work rather than report on the event.

I guess it's a way of transitioning, or reinterpreting the role of a critic as an artist or a filmmaker. With the Berlin festival, I've had such a weird relationship, because I went there as a Talent in the filmmakers' workshop and ended up writing a report for Senses of Cinema. The next time was in 2009, when I was friends with Danny Kasman of The Auteurs [now MUBI] and Andrew Grant needed someone to share an apartment with – so I thought, that's a good excuse to go to Berlin! I went and saw about 30 films and reviewed them for MUBI, which stimulated me to come back next year. Then Rotterdam made sense because it was the week before, so I could attend both in one trip. I don't take for granted the longevity as a festival critic, the assumption that I'll be there every year. With Berlin, [I've been there for nine years \(https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/02/letter-to-a-young-critic-who-watched-40-films-at-berlinale/\)](https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/02/letter-to-a-young-critic-who-watched-40-films-at-berlinale/), and I still feel outside of it, not as integrated as other critics.

You mentioned on other occasions that you'd want to switch to filmmaking. What do you think is missing in video essays, especially after [all the ways you've tried to expand the form \(https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/03/video-essays-from-2015-struggling-with-the-screen/\)](https://residency.harun-farocki-institut.org/2017/03/video-essays-from-2015-struggling-with-the-screen/), that would be there in filmmaking?

I guess video essays are like short stories, and for once I'd like to try to write a novel. I'm not sure that whatever I'd do would be a 'normal' feature film. I might end up with something that is more suitable for a gallery than a movie theatre. At this point, it's just about exploring the subject matter as genuinely as I can. I'm still getting at the heart of what fascinates me about this and I have to place it in the concrete, to make something that can be felt as much as it can be thought. It could even be a narrative film!

Do you think that the same problem, regarding the over-abundance of content, that affects you as a video essayist, wouldn't affect you as a filmmaker?

Of course it would! Historically speaking, I think filmmakers have less impact that they used to. Sundance itself makes less of a dent than five-ten years ago. The place of movies in the cultural landscape has moved away from the center. On a pragmatic, business basis, it's foolish to make a film for theatrical distribution, because there are so many things working against you. People don't even watch DVDs anymore; the most profitable thing is doing something for Netflix or Amazon that they will promote. It comes down to user reviews and social media to generate interest around it. You don't need critics anymore because you don't need to know if anything is worth your money – if you subscribe, then you're already there, you're already in the movie theater! I've read in the news today that Scorsese's and De Niro's new film is going to go straight to Netflix. For whatever reason, it makes more sense to have it go directly to Netflix than to release it in the movie theatres. What does that tell you?

I guess the underlying thematic connecting several of my questions was whether you're trying, through criticism/video essays/filmmaking, to get people to be more aware of how images can manipulate them.

Sure. It's useful to become aware of all the ways in which something can be disrupted. On the other hand, that requires more work on the part of the viewer, and who wants to do that work? At the end of the day, I guess people want to believe in something, and it's easier to hold on to what they want to believe in than to turn their backs on it because they're told that it's false. So that's the struggle. It comes down to figuring out how to tell a story to appeal to people even more than what captivates them falsely. Kodwo Eshun, of the Otolith Group, one of the really good essay filmmakers around, talks about how we're always under the spell of black magic, the dark arts of the media and technology, and we have to figure out how to come up with a counter-spell that is as powerful as the ones that are put on us. Video essays, for the people that appreciate them, have done that, they can take us outside of the film and allow us to look at it more critically. But of course, a lot of video essays just put us back into the spell, they reinforce what people already love about movies. They don't give a new way in. These fantasies will keep repeating whatever form you take.

Maybe it's more difficult to go on believing with all the recent political/global events, though. Content creators and history could be conspiring to make people more aware!

It's like being in a nightmare where you feel really alive but at the same time, you're not sure if you're awake or if this is all real. What does it mean to be in a state of surreality that still makes you feel very alive – which I guess watching a movie is like? What agency do you have?

Do you think video essays can carry a debate? Normally I'd be skeptical, but I keep seeing examples. Apart from your 'What Makes a Video Essay Great?' essay-in-dialogue, there was recently an exchange over film music: Tony Zhou's [The Marvel Symphonic Universe](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcXsH88XIKM) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcXsH88XIKM>) recently had an answer in Dan Golding's [A Theory of Film Music](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcXsH88XIKM) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcXsH88XIKM>).

I think that's already happening with the Patreon contingent, who are basically making films for each other. I'm not sure if a debate today can be as substantial as it was in the days of Pauline Kael & Andrew Sarris, because people tend to turn it into something more superficial.

I meant that, with video essays, at least in appearance it seems like you're talking directly to the image, so there's no point in someone else turning that around.

But there's a strong video response culture on YouTube. And now Vimeo has this option of video review. So the mechanisms are in place. I think the Tony Zhou/Dan Golding example was really promising, because it was a very thoughtful, two-sided way of looking at a topic. Not only that, but they are two people from different backgrounds. I don't think Tony is that much of an expert on music, but he's perceptive and he worked with someone who did have a background in music to devise it, whereas Dan is a composer and scholar in music. Dan was the one who

representative of the crisis of the academic community with regard to their relationship with video essays. They are also using them as vehicles for disseminating information and insights about film and media to a large population – an audience that either can't or doesn't go to school to learn about it –, and by that, the whole system of experts and qualifications has been circumvented. And so, somebody like Dan Golding has to figure out how to turn all of his expertise and years of studying and work into a viral video for it to have as much impact as Tony Zhou's. I feel like the whole equation of culture has been rewritten because of this.

Otherwise, I'm impressed with the way a number of academics have answered this challenge. They're picking up video essays as a way of developing and extending their scholarship and using it to connect to people outside academia.

From your experience, how much of the total video essay output is available online? I had the impression that pretty much everything is out there, but looking for many specific clips, I couldn't find them – or not anymore.

Right. What happened to me last month puts it all in a new light. [Things are disappearing all the time \(http://fourthreefilm.com/2017/02/publish-and-perish-video-essays-in-the-age-of-social-media/\)](http://fourthreefilm.com/2017/02/publish-and-perish-video-essays-in-the-age-of-social-media/) and you don't notice. It's a hard question to answer because you never know what you don't know.

The same applies to non-US and non-English language video essays. It seems the largest part of video essays are made in English, but that could be misleading.

These things exist, for sure. I guess there's less potential for crossover, it's not the same as a foreign film being a hit. The way the Internet works, it's way more of a pull towards normativity of language access. They want to do the least amount of work to be able to experience something, and so English becomes the default, and that's hard to overcome.

Is video-essay-making a separate skill? I'm wondering if someone working in this form can circumvent the more traditional formation as a writer and still develop a way to second-guess their impressions.

Yeah, that definitely happened to me when I was starting out. With the Oscar videos, I was working on the Best Actress video and I was convinced Julianne Moore was the best, but then, when I studied the footage, I noticed everything Rosamund Pike was doing. It becomes a question of your willingness to explore and to invest time and attention in these things and be open to discovery. For me, that has always been important.

OVER DE AUTEUR

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