Text vs. Context: Understanding the Video Essay Landscape

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The emergence (and subsequent rapid proliferation) of the video essay has left both film critics and scholars not only grappling with how best to participate in the move towards the audiovisual, but also how to discuss and analyse the form in its own right. Criticism is necessary for any form, especially one still establishing itself, but what is becoming increasingly perceptible in many recent pieces is a failure to keep up with the video essay's rapidly changing landscape. This is primarily because critiques of the video essay are often lacking institutional context, resorting instead to auteurist modes of analysis first developed in (non-audiovisual) cinema studies. This discursive flaw both illuminates the current shifts in the video essay landscape and also leads me to contend that working towards an institutional analysis will open up insight regarding the versatile capacity of the video essay.

There are two particular aspects of the video essay that are troubling analysis. The first is the way video essays dissolve the boundaries between criticism, scholarship and unfiltered subjectivity. In disrupting easy distinctions between discursive modes, the video essay can act as interpretive evaluation,

pedagogical tool or cinephiliac testimony (and these are not mutually exclusive). The second quality concerns the digital landscape in which the video essay was borne and thrives. The predominantly digital space in which video essays are published risks offering an illusion of homogeneity. Historically, these two issues are related: the Internet has made the boundary between criticism and scholarship more nebulous, acting as a bridge between the two camps of critical discourse. The video essay, then, introduces another complicated layer to this relationship.

Thus, actual categorisation of the video essay becomes a complex task. Conor Bateman suggests that there are "11 Ways of Making a Video Essay," interestingly designating "supplement to the academic form" as one possibility, whilst also acknowledging works that subvert traditional scholarly expectations. Thomas van den Berg and Miklós Kiss set out to propose a formal blueprint for audiovisual scholarship, and their monograph identifies six types of video essay. Another common taxonomy is Christian Keathley's proposed opposition between the explanatory and the poetic form, a dichotomy of which he invites both scholarly and critical discourse to engage with.[1] Despite this contention of correct categorisation, video essays continue to flourish by criss-crossing categories and consistently pushing beyond rigid classification. As academic and video essayist Ian Garwood reminds us, "audiovisual film studies has come into being as the result of a number of hybrid influences, and hybridity can still be a valuable concept." Accordingly, video essays become particularly productive in providing an inter-play between and by way of different modes of discourse.

However – I argue that, due to the current state of the Internet landscape, it is not the formal particulars of video essays that need categorizing now, but rather the platforms on which they are published. It is vital to take into account that digital space is not in

fact uniform, but imbued with specific industrial and institutional conditions. If video essays are now to be found in the classroom, at film festivals, on social media and in academic publications, then it is crucial to develop a mode of analysis that does not take these contexts for granted. It is becoming an increasingly redundant critique to level that a video essay does not accomplish the full potential of the form if that potential is becoming increasingly plural, unfolding in different directions.

As with some video essay publications, this direction is industrial. Several outlets have capitalised on the video essay's ability to draw an audience, deliberately commissioning and featuring video essays based on their potential to go "viral." This has had an impact on creators, having to subsequently create video essays specifically geared to capture a broad audience on social media or to promote a certain aspect of cinema culture. This phenomenon is fairly new, and I have noticed that much criticism, rather than tackling these new preconditions directly, has instead mimicked the way in which cinema studies bypassed dealing with the complications industrial conditions imposed on creative art, by way of auteur theory.

A recent example is provided in an otherwise insightful article by Adrian Martin and Cristina Álvarez López in the Sydney Review of Books. The article intends to identify problematic tendencies in how video essays "audiovisualise" their theses, but an oversight becomes perceptible in their selection of case studies. A video essay of my own was featured, and I do not write in order to respond to their criticism (although my argument would inform a defense) but rather to question the framing of the examples in the article. With no mention of the particular context of each video's production and publication, the reader is to assume that they share a common institutional framework. This is false: some videos within the article were commissioned pieces, produced for

Fandor Keyframe under a set of regulations and with the aim of social media publication, whilst others were produced in a scholarly context and published with accompanying text. With such differing contexts, it becomes illogical to state that certain videos take the form "along a regressive path," when it is clear that each video does not necessarily belong on the same path, and the implication that there should be a uniform path seems artistically and discursively limiting. The lack of acknowledgement of institutional frameworks obscures the strength of Martin and López's critique, and further reveals the widening of the video essay landscape. In lieu of contextualization, this article follows a familiar pattern of positioning the video essayist as auteur, implying sole creative freedom.

The video essay is no stranger to the the auteur. The majority of (popular) video essays thrive on perpetuating the concept of auteurship. Like this, this or this. Yet it is apparent that video essayists are often portrayed as auteurs in their own right, which carries implications regarding sole creative ownership and autonomy. For example, the video essays published under the "Every Frame a Painting" YouTube channel are far more likely to be attributed to Tony Zhou than the channel itself. Admittedly, Zhou does state his name in most of his voiceovers, consciously branding the videos. However, the allure of painting Zhou as a solitary creative figure is betrayed by the consistent erasure of his collaborators – see for example the lack of mention of co-writer and co-creator of the channel, Taylor Ramos. As in this article from Filmmaker Magazine.

My own practice as a video essayist has been coloured by differing institutional contexts, having created videos in undergraduate and postgraduate academia, for Fandor Keyframe (before and after their social-media-first strategy) and in collaboration. To take the example of my Andrea Arnold video essay criticised in the

aforementioned Sydney Review of Books article – the commissioning of this essay by Fandor Keyframe coincided with a greater drive towards Facebook content. As such, I took the decision not to use voiceover, but rather on-screen text. The video also necessarily became shorter, causing a formal conflict which Bateman cogently observed in his article concerning video essays in the age of social media. Regarding the video he noted, "the restriction of duration runs counter to the contemplative nature of much of Arnold's filmmaking." This experience contrasted with academia, wherein I've made 10-minute videos with extensive voiceover, and even in my experience in collaboration, wherein I've occupied less of an editing role, working beside a video essayist with a practitioner background. Whilst every one of these situations involved constraints and determinants, what is crucial is that each offered *different* parameters. Context influenced form, every time.

I do not disagree that video essayists merit the artistic connotations of auteurship, but perpetuating the notion risks erasing collaborative efforts and takes for granted the creative considerations, and in some cases restrictions, of differing institutional contexts. Uniform critique results in a reductive analysis of the form. The question should not be how each video achieves the potentials of the form, but how they demonstrate that the form itself is ever dividing along different lines, different audiences and different possibilities. With platforms now monetizing, and more and more video essays geared towards social media platforms, it is now vital to consider how industrial factors will impact video essays themselves. Criticism and analysis of video essays needs now to go beyond positioning essayists as auteurs and presupposing institutional context. Doing so will demonstrate a grasp on the shifting landscape, allow for nuance between and through the lines of academia and scholarship and fully understand the uniqueness of the form in terms of creative

and collaborative factors. In considering the video essay's multitude of contexts, I believe we will open up discussion and knowledge regarding the form's multitude of potentialities.