The Video Essay: Bringing Sexy Back to Formalism

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Let me begin with two vignettes from March of 2014. The first is set at the annual Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Conference. I'm standing in front of a workshop entitled "Visualizing Media Studies: The Expansion of Scholarly Publishing Into Video Essays," awkwardly reading my prepared notes on evaluating video essays as the room begins to fill. By the end of my brief presentation, late arrivals had begun sitting on the floor. Others poked their heads past the door and simply turned around when they saw how crowded the room was. At the end of the workshop, we launch *[in]Transition* - the first peer-reviewed academic journal devoted to the format - co-presented by *Cinema Journal* and *MediaCommons*. The enthusiasm and investment of our colleagues was inspiring, exciting, and humbling.

Our second vignette takes place in the aftermath of our workshop. I'm meeting with an editor at a major university press about my book on the stylistic relationship between American comic books and blockbuster films. I've been advised by the editor of the series I've submitted the manuscript to try to make my project sound "sexy." I can immediately tell that my pitch is not going to fly. He expresses some concern over the amount of images in my manuscript (over 70) and the wider appeal of formal analysis. I try to address his concerns by using my video essay on the formal tropes of *Scott Pilgrim* (which was viewed by over 13,000 people) as an example that such a subject has a significant appeal. Before the conference is over, I receive a rejection e-mail; the press is looking for a project that has a larger cultural studies focus.

Allow me to distill a couple tropes that I hope I have sufficiently embedded in these scenes. First, there is a palpable curiosity and excitement on behalf of Cinema and Media Studies scholars - junior to senior scholars - to explore new media as an outlet for scholarship. Finally, we have the hardware and software tools that can make bring cinema that Raymond Bellour describes as being unattainable within our reach. For Bellour, prose is incapable of capturing all of the modes of cinematic expression. While a scholar can attempt to bridge that gap by pairing stills and prose, the marriage often leads to prose that is excessively long, stale, complex, and redundant. In short, visual and formal analyses tends to be exactly what the editor thought it was; the opposite of sexy.

Yet, the visual video essay format addresses both the prejudice rightfully expressed by this editor and by Bellour when he begs the question as to if the filmic text should even be approached through writing. In fact, a solution Bellour posits is analyze film through film. With the rise of powerful and economically feasible computer hardware, professional grade video editing software that is relatively user friendly, and lightning fast broadband internet connections that can successfully distribute and exhibit such scholarship, we now have the means to Timberlake formal analysis and bring sexyback.

Moreover, there are pedagogical rewards to the video essay format. First, we have access to a powerful tool to facilitate the advancement of visual literacy. Imagine that you are in front of your Introduction to Media Studies course and you need to try to teach classical continuity editing. You no longer need to slip into the temporal sinkhole

of cueing up various DVDs; you no longer need to acknowledge your poor skills as a dry erase board artist. The text is attainable, you have the means to provide a true quotation. The second pedagogical reward should be obvious, as the format provides a great venue for a course assignment (if not an entire class) that can bridge theory and practice. Take the same example from above except you put it on the students to come in with examples and decide to begin the semester with a couple class periods that provide a rudimentary primer of HandBrake, MPEG Streamclip, and iMovie. As an instructor, you are providing a taste of the "practical skills" that some institutions have been pushing for while simultaneously hitting the marks that we value in a liberal arts education.

We are beginning to establish the institutional infrastructure necessary to validate this work with the peer-review structures we are constructing for *[in]Transition*. The larger problem, in my opinion, is the need to create a pedagogical environment to support such work. Quite simply (and this also in the midst of a rush of job postings for "theory and practice" positions), most scholars I have encountered are extremely ambivalent or proclaim premature defeat when it comes to exploring the video essay format. This is not a personal indictment; I am merely acknowledging how much further the professional infrastructure supporting video essays needs to develop in order to further the format.