THE VIDEO ESSAY AS ART: 11 WAYS OF MAKING A VIDEO ESSAY
By Conor Bateman

Editor’s note: This is the first entry in a series of articles investigating the current and evolving state of the video essay form.

When you think of the video essay, you might imagine someone expressing their love of a movie over a selection of clips, a compilation of a famous director’s signature shots, or a voice that says: “Hi, my name is Tony.” But these are just a few of a remarkable variety of approaches to making videos exploring film and media, a diversity of forms that is continually evolving and expanding. Here’s an attempt to account for some of the more recognizable modes of video essay, with key examples for each.

**Supercut.** A collection of images or sounds arranged under a category (i.e. Jacob T. Swinney’s wonderful *The Dutch Angle*) or used to break down a film to a set of elements (i.e. Zackery Ramos-Taylor’s recent *Hearing Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and Joel Bocko’s *The Colors of Daisies*). The supercut is usually very short and lacks text so as to maximize its impact on a visual level. This brevity of form emphasizes a central concept more than a narrative argument. If a supercut has an argument to make, it is typically in the order in which items are sequenced.

**Personal Review.** This broad category of video essay hinges on a strongly personalized account of a film. Scout Tafoya’s recurring series *The Unloved* is a prominent example of this, wherein he makes the claim that each film he focuses on is underappreciated and then asserts their qualities through visual analysis. The best of these, in my opinion, is his video on Michael Mann’s *Public Enemies*.

**Vlog.** While similar to the personal review, the vlog differs strongly in mode of presentation. There is a greater focus on direct address of the viewers, and on delivering opinion rather than analysis. They’re often played up for comedic entertainment value and feature a lot of voiceover or footage of the editor themselves. Chez Lindsay’s video on Joel Schumacher’s *The Phantom of the Opera* is a sprawling, informative, funny journey through theater and cinema history that in many respects encompasses elements of the video essay but first and foremost is grounded in a personal perspective. Outside of film, the work Jon Bois does at *SB Nation* in his series *Pretty Good* would also fall under this category (his latest, on character types in *24*, is very much worth the watch). The popular YouTube series CinemaSins would also fall under this category, which relies more on personal nit-picking than film analysis.

**Scene Breakdown.** A visually-driven close reading of a scene (or many scenes in one film) that leans heavily on explaining film form and technique. Tony Zhou is especially skilled at this, and his scene breakdowns often come nestled in a video about many scenes, like his look at *ensemble staging* in Bong Joon-ho’s *Memories of Murder* or the approach to staging a fight scene in his video *Jackie Chan—How to Do Action Comedy*.

**Shot Analysis.** A cousin of the supercut and scene breakdown, though more analytical in nature than the former, the shot analysis dissects a shot or a repeated type of shot. Josh Forrest’s engaging video on the *insert shot* in David Fincher’s *Zodiac* is not shot analysis in and of itself; it’s more of a supercut. David Chen’s *Edgar Wright and the Art of Close-Ups*, on the other hand, is definitely a shot analysis, turning its compilation structure into a video essay by virtue of its director’s commentary track (which we might call the DVD-era ancestor of the video essay):

**Structural Analysis.** To paraphrase Kurt Vonnegut, these videos look at a film’s story shape, seeking to uncover hidden meaning or a subtextual emphasis by viewing the film as a collection of scenes rather than necessarily a plot or narrative. Kevin B. Lee’s *Between the Lines: THE DAY HE ARRIVES* is one of the best videos in this field, comparing repeated scenes in Hong Sang-soo’s film to reveal the film’s playful interpretation of time passing. One of my video essays for Fandor last year, *Containing the Madness: George A. Romero’s THE CRAZIES*, was an attempt to engage with this mode of video essay:

**Side-by-side Analysis.** Not a supercut, not yet a shot analysis. The side-by-side is a fascinating form of the video essay pushed by essayists like Cristina Álvarez Lopez, Catherine Grant (*All That Pastiche Allows*) and, in recent months, Davide Rapp, which finds meaning through visual comparison of two or more film clips in real-time. In *What is Neorealism?*, kogonada brilliantly employs the side-by-side comparison to reflect on the ideological and creative differences between Vittorio de Sica and David O. Selznick in the cutting of the same picture.

Side-by-sides with voiceover narration are relatively rare. Álvarez, Grant and Rapp tend to let viewers interpret the footage on their own. Rapp’s series of videos under the *Seeing Double* and *Seeing Triple* moniker place sequences from films and their various remakes side-by-side and implicitly address not only specific but generational aesthetic and narrative priorities. A particularly illuminating video in this collection is his look at Michael Haneke’s two versions of *Funny Games*. 
Recut. The line between video essay and video art is blurred when we look at the imaginative re-purposing of texts. FilmScapel’s 12 Silent Men is a good example of this, which was shared as a video essay despite being very similar in form to Vicki Bennett’s work of video art, 4:33: The Movie. Davide Rapp’s enchanting SECRET GATEWAYS (below), where he maps the space of a house in a Buster Keaton film and then moves his virtual camera between each of these rooms, is a more visually-focused re-purposing. I’d count my video essay, The Secret Video Essays of Jenni Olson, as also being a part of this form. It’s worth noting that an imaginative recut does not need to be visual, it can also be conceptual, as in Jeremy Ratzlaff’s Paul Thomas Anderson: A Chronological Timeline. This recut concept also extends to re-purposed marketing materials or film trailers, as seen in The Maze of Susan Lowell by Cristina Alvarez Lopez and Adrian Martin, which suggests an alternate cut of The Big Combo with Susan as the protagonist. The very popular YouTube series Honest Trailers would also fall into the category of the recut, as they mimic and parody film trailer form, though their comedic narration-as-criticism does blur the line even more.

Subject Essay. These videos typically tell a story to explore a filmmaker’s (or actor’s, cinematographer’s, etc.) body of work, an era of filmmaking or a recurring motif in a lot of films, incorporating elements of scene, shot and thematic analysis. For the most part, the better videos in this field seek to educate or inform the viewer about a relatively unknown body of work or period of time. In this vein they teeter on the edge of conventional documentary cinema, like Kevin B. Lee’s Bruce Lee, Before and After the Dragon, and are reminiscent of some of the essay films of Mark Rappaport (whose body of work in and of itself defies easy genre labels). An unconventional example of this, and one of the best video essays of 2015, is Tony Zhou’s Vancouver Never Plays Itself. Another unconventional example, and one which straddles the modes of supercut and shot analysis, is Richi Kaneria’s brilliant Why Props Matter.

Academic Supplement. When Kevin B. Lee made his refractive video essay What Makes a Video Essay Great? back in 2014, he used an excerpt from Thomas van den Berg’s Reliable Unreliability vs Unreliable Reliability or, Perceptual Subversions of the Continuity Editing System, a chiefly academic piece of video criticism that runs for over half an hour, features lecture-like narration and is grounded in academic and theoretical concepts of cinema. While this video does stand on its own as analysis, when I say “supplement” I mean that it is supplemental to the academic form. Some of the video works from David Bordwell, which he has termed “video lectures,” are examples of this form, in spite of what they have in common with shot analysis and filmic survey (in particular, his Constructive Editing in Robert Bresson’s Pickpocket). Catherine Grant, another academic working in the realm of video essays, has managed to often subvert this expectation that academics making video essays will make supplementary works, turning in some wonderfully imaginative and non-academic videos like her brilliant UN/CONTAINED.

Desktop Video. A recent mode of video arguably born from the metatextual work of Harun Farocki (Interface in particular), this seeks to present an argument about film within the confines of a computer screen. It’s worth noting that while the visual experience is tethered to a screen, like the recent horror flick Unfriended, it’s often not actually a real-time one-take desktop journey. The defining film in this field (arguably moving beyond the video essay label to become an experimental documentary in its own right) is Kevin B. Lee’s Transformers: The Premake.

As you can see from the various definitions above, the problem with all of these videos standing under the umbrella category of the “video essay” is that they’re all trying to do different things and aiming for different audiences. Because of this, when any two practitioners talk about what they like in video essays, they may be talking about very different things, not just in terms of content but in what they think the purposes of these videos are. Earlier this month Filmmaker Magazine posted a series of responses to the question “What is a Video Essay?” and answers ranged from a tool to stimulate better film viewing to a new form of essay filmmaking; and from a means of expressing cinephilic obsession to a means of critiquing that same obsession.

On the other hand, what’s certain is that these videos, in their multitude of forms, have become very popular online over the last few years. There are many communities forming in the world of video essays, not just within publishing sites like the one you’re visiting now, but also in the “schools” of approaches taken by like-minded video makers. The mostly straightforward film-analysis approach is a favorite among very popular YouTubers. The academic-minded teaching aide is championed by the online journal [in]Transition. The personal love letter to cinema arises in supercuts and most single-film videos. The miniature essay film floats in and out of categorization, making it one of the most interesting forms of video essay.

Here at Keyframe (https://www.fandor.com/keyframe/) I’ll be writing about various approaches to the video essay, looking at a wide variety of videos and video essayists and speaking to curators and editors to try to understand just how we got to where we are now. I’ll explore questions such as: why do some supercuts work better than others; when and when not to use voiceover and much more. Join us, won’t you?