Film Studies with High Production Values: An Interview with Janet Bergstrom on Making and Teaching Audiovisual Essays

By Matthias Stork and Janet Bergstrom

Q: When and why did you decide to offer a seminar that focuses on the production of DVD essays?

Janet Bergstrom: I offered the first seminar of this kind in winter 2004, after I had made a visual essay myself, for Fox. The idea was to provide a workshop-seminar where students could take advantage of our recent ability to "quote" audio-visual media in (audio)visual essays they make themselves, research essays burned to DVD, and to discuss what was possible in that format compared to the advantages and disadvantages of print essays. Gaining the experience to do both changes the relationship to research as well as to writing. I had been given the opportunity to contribute to Fox's special edition DVD of Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927), a project coordinated by the head of their archive, Shawn Belston, not by the Home Entertainment division, as would usually have been the case. (1) Fox had not released a single silent film on DVD; they didn't think they would sell. However the studio wanted to create a prestige item in connection with the 75ᵗʰ anniversary of the Academy Awards, and *Sunrise* had won three Academy Awards the first year they were given out. Fox had recently carried out a high profile restoration of *Sunrise*, in partnership with the Academy Film Archive and the British Film Institute, (2) which was the cornerstone for the DVD. Shawn wanted to add historically important supplements. He happened to read an essay I had written about the production history of *4 Devils* and *City Girl*, the two films Murnau made for Fox after *Sunrise*, that I was circulating in manuscript before publication. (3) He got a copy from Berlin film archivist Martin Koerber, who was in LA for the Berlin Film Festival, which was coincidentally dedicating the next annual historical retrospective to Murnau.(4) Schawn emailed that he was planning a special *Sunrise* DVD and asked if I'd like to discuss contributing something on *4 Devils* – a film that is 100% "lost" as far as we know. I said: "Yes!"

I had no experience doing anything like a visual essay, and I had never made a film. I had in mind Yuri Tsivian's visual essay on *Ivan the Terrible* (Criterion 2001), which is probably still the best visual essay I have seen: original research, argument and visuals combined in an engaging, thought-provoking way. I was inspired by what he did, but I didn't want to

imitate that piece per se. I had a different kind of historical argument and different kinds of documentation. I had spent two years researching *4 Devils* and *City Girl*, starting from the Fox Archives at UCLA. I knew the documentation by heart; I literally had it memorized. I knew I could get cooperation from the Berlin Film Museum, from Fox, obviously, and from the Academy (the Margaret Herrick Library), all of which had wonderful materials.

I did NOT want to try to "recreate" Murnau's lost film. I was explicit because I had recently seen Rick Schmidlin's version of Todd Browning's 100% lost film *London after Midnight*, using production stills and the final cutting continuity from the MGM Collection at USC [University of Southern California]. (That film is in permanent rotation on TCM; I just noticed that a tantalizing few moments of Browning's film are now on YouTube.) The continuity has a numbered list of every shot in the film, with indications like "long shot" or "close-up", and includes the text of every intertitle. New, rather heavy music was added to help continuity and connote horror. But the lighting in the production stills was too bright and too far from what the film must have been like, and I was distracted by constant zooming movements or isolating faces to simulate close-ups and shot/reverse shots. I saw it at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, where it was much debated. I did not want to attempt that kind of recreation in the first place, and I knew I had access to unusual materials. I knew I could construct a collage. I could move fragments around in my image program to work out a structure — photographs, quotations from the different scripts, art director Robert Herlth's drawings, original programs, preview responses, many other elements from the time the film was made. I wanted to foreground the documents, which were all period-specific, to valorize them, unlike documentaries designed to make you forget them. I wanted viewers to feel like detectives, like I did, piecing together fragments in search of something. I also wanted to create an homage to Murnau. During production I remember a discussion about the lead-in titles in which I explain where Murnau was in his career when he made *4 Devils* and, briefly, what happened afterwards. I was asked: why are you talking about the rest of Murnau's career when this is about *4 Devils*? It was important to me to situate the film in that context. I wanted the film to stand on its own, and it has.

I have made four commercial projects so far. At the very beginning, I always know the first shot and the last shot, and whether it is a moving image or a still image. Although I didn't plan it deliberately, the four visual essays have a similar structure. There is a turning point about halfway through when the direction changes. In the *4 Devils* piece, although I state in the titles — which I read, to double the effect I hope — that I am not pretending to present a recreation of this "lost film", during

the first half it can seem like I am telling the story of the movie, through my voice-over and various kinds of documents. At a certain point, I think when I am talking about the circus background of the film and the actors training with trapeze artist Alfredo Codona, I move toward more of the production history, how there were several versions of the film, and how Murnau left Fox before the part-talking version was shot. I was very lucky to be working with Fox and in particular with Schawn. He took the project to CCI, a boutique post-production house where I worked with an excellent graphic designer, sound engineer and editors as well as Schawn, who saw the production through. The production values had to be up to Fox's standards. When your budget goes down, you have all kinds of problems. It is not easy to gather together people who can work at the level of quality that I want at a relatively low cost.

"Murnau's *4 Devils*: Traces of a Lost Film" turned out to be 40 minutes long; it is on every version of the *Sunrise* DVD internationally. To my surprise, it was very successful on its own. It benefitted from wonderful promotion. It was screened — as a film — as part of the Berlin Film Festival's 2003 Murnau retrospective, in partnership with the Berlin Film Museum/Deutsche Kinemathek, which housed important Murnau documents they had allowed us to use. They really wanted something on *4 Devils*. Murnau experts and archivists and all kinds of curators and programmers came to the screening. I didn't know how they would react, but the reception was warm and lively. They asked great questions. I talked for another 40 minutes after the screening. It was wonderful. Then I was invited to present the film at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York by Peter Scarlet, director of the festival, who was in the audience. He had no idea that what he had just seen was made for a DVD. The Bologna film festival, Cinema Ritrovato, was the most nerve-wracking screening, with all the silent film experts in the room. Fortunately, it went well and it was energizing because of all the questions afterwards. Every time I was asked to present it somewhere, in maybe ten cities, I got very different questions, always thought-provoking. That gave me a lot of confidence in the idea that you can get people interested, that you can — and I believe that you have to — build an audience.

An analogous situation for audience-building arises with an archival restoration of a film that is incomplete, usually because one reel or more has been lost to deterioration. Given the vast numbers of films that need to be preserved, some archivists believe they should pass over incomplete films because they won't be able to screen them, audiences won't accept them. But there are interesting examples of restorations of silent films in which gaps have been filled one way or another and screened with success. The first one I saw was Borzage's *The River* (made for Fox around the time of *4 Devils*, by the way), restored by Hervé Dumont and the Cinémathèque Suisse and shown in Pordenone. More recently, Jim

Hahn created a fascinating restoration of the Academy Award-winning film *Sorrell and Son* (1927) at the Academy Film Archive. It had been a "lost film" for a long time. When it was found, it was "incomplete" because of deterioration. Jim Hahn wrote about these issues and the choices he made in restoring the film for an issue of *Film History* that I edited, devoted to the year 1927. (5) I agree with him that such films require an informed in-person presentation, and that this practice — restoration and special programming — should be actively encouraged. There is an audience! This was not a visual essay, of course, but similar conceptual problems need to be resolved: you are working with something that is incomplete and you try to piece it together in a way that will appeal to an audience, get them to pay attention, become absorbed and enjoy learning.

Q: Did the seminar develop and evolve over time considering technological changes, student input, or new teaching concepts?

JB: The first time I offered this class, the students were asked to collaborate on a single "Virtual DVD". It was a PhD film analysis/methodology seminar with five students. We had no technology at all aside from a DVD player and a tape recorder. We didn't have access to computer facilities or software or a tech assistant. The basic requirements were these: the students needed to agree on a film they wanted to work on together that was available on DVD, for which there was no voice-over commentary and for which they could find significant primary documentation, most likely at the Academy Library. Exactly as in the seminar today, they would gain experience learning how to do research, how to use primary documentation, experience how one thing can lead to another and how exciting that gets. It is always important to have a constraint. In that case the constraint was to create a voice-over commentary in sync – time-coded – with the film. Just try it if you think that's easy! There are points in the film where you have a lot to say, but the scene has changed, it's gone.

We did a couple of preliminary exercises unrelated to the final project that I still use, for instance: choose a three minute clip from a film of your choice, write a voice-over and read it in class as your clip is playing. I love that exercise. You can never imagine which films people will be drawn to. It's a very good learning exercise for rhythm and timing. Being required to read your text in front of others, even if it is not recorded, means that you will hear yourself in a different way. One person typically talks much too fast to try to cram the text into three minutes, another is sparing with commentary, willing to have a few moments of silence here and there. That takes more courage. It's the greatest departure from the written essay that students are used to, moving in the direction of audio-visual thinking. The exercise also brings up the choice of clips. Will the clip have

dialogue? If so, does the dialogue need to be understood, or, how much of it? Will it interfere with the voiceover? You benefit from seeing how others meet the challenges.

We discussed research techniques and the film for the final project. One of the two Hitchcock films they were most interested in was eliminated because they could not find primary documentation. They agreed on the second version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), and, over time, they decided they would interweave their voiceovers throughout the course of the film. Each one had a different methodological perspective. One was especially interested in gender relations, another in post-colonialism, considering that the film was shot in North Africa, another in theories of the voice, especially the mother's voice, which was crucial to the plot of this version of the film. The students timed their commentaries and practiced in advance. When we had our Premiere Potluck party, which is still the format for the final seminar meeting, we were in my living room. I turned on the DVD player and the film never stopped. The students took turns reading their commentaries, and I recorded the audio with a tape recorder. It was a live voiceover commentary. That was the low-tech, low-res way to do it. They did not learn how to edit a visual essay on a computer and burn it to DVD, but they did learn how to do the same kind of research, how to work with constraints of time, and how to engage an audience. They performed their research. It was fun, and I think everyone learned a lot.

When writing a research paper for a conference or for print publication, it is not typical to learn the art of engaging an audience. With a visual essay or a voiceover commentary you NEED to engage your audience. No one has to tell you that. You realize it. Then the question becomes, how best to do it? Going through the experience of creating a DVD commentary or a visual essay makes you a better writer and presenter in any other medium or venue, in my opinion.

My first visual essay or DVD essay seminar, properly speaking, was made possible because I had a wonderful tech assistant named Nima Rasfar, who, alas, left us after several years to become a lawyer. If you have only eleven weeks, like my classes, and if you are asking students to carry out original research as well as learn how to use the most basic functions of the essential software to make their projects — in our case, working with PCs, that means scanning, Photoshop (image manipulation), Premiere (editing) and Encore (DVD authoring or construction/burning) — you need to build a tech assistant into the equation from the outset. The course should be equally possible for beginners who need a lot of assistance and for people who have some experience editing. Every time I have offered the course, I have at least one self-identified technophobe — even now when everyone says that students have been editing since

grade school.

Nima and I worked together to create a handbook of how-to techniques, using a handful of examples from Tsivian's *Ivan the Terrible* essay, which everyone had seen. Nima became very good at empowering students to learn more image enhancement and editing themselves, at their own speed, or in other words to graduate from asking him to do something for them that he knew they were capable of doing themselves. He researched trouble-shooting on-line, given that new technical glitches would arise since the software was continually changing and students wanted to combine clips from American and international DVDs and/or VHS tapes or laserdiscs. Such problems typically were not visible until after a sequence had been compressed, burned to DVD and played back on a DVD player — like wavy lines in photographs or a font breaking up or sound dropping out here or there for no apparent reason. Back then, it also took forever to render a timeline. Nima wrote in the handbook that when you render the timeline, you can take a nap or go eat dinner. We started with equipment that was slow and software that was not user-friendly as it has become today since software companies decided to go prosumer. And this year, thanks to Dean Teri Schwartz, we have powerful computers, up-to-date software and a larger space. Students in the past three classes have also been able to work with a wonderfully helpful professional sound engineer, Mike Simpson, who records their narration in the Department's sound studio. He ordinarily works with the production students. After the screenings at the Premiere Potluck party, which is typically when the students have the most brilliant insights into their work and the process is still vivid in their mind, I ask them what gave them the most trouble, what they would do differently the next time, how the sequence of the course might be improved. Every time, the students told me that they wanted more burn exercises, that they learned the most from them.

It is very important to me that these exercises are burned to DVD rather than being designed for the Internet. I don't care if DVDs are supposedly disappearing. If they are, another format will appear. If you prepare something for a high resolution DVD, of course you can also put it on the Internet, but the reverse isn't necessarily true. For me it is very important to have high production values. I saw my visual essay on *4 Devils* projected at the LA County Museum on a gigantic screen, looking like a film should. Less expensive or caring productions often regard DVD bonus materials, as they are unfortunately called, as cheap, quick extras that don't need the same quality considerations as the feature, especially for editing, sound and compression. Designing for the web means making a work that is "light", that loads quickly; in principle, the image will remain small enough to look good without the same level of high definition. I want students to come away from that class with a DVD in hand to give to their parents and friends. You want to know what I am

doing in school? Here, it only takes 15 minutes to watch it on your DVD player or computer, at your leisure. One of our students needed special access to an archive in Tokyo for dissertation research. Her DVD essay proved to be an excellent demonstration of the seriousness of her research and showed why she needed images from original paper copies of magazines from the 20s. You cannot explain that very effectively, but people are convinced when they see the images. There is a tremendous difference between a color scan of an original document and a black-and-white xerox, or worse, a copy of an image taken from microfilm. I try to get everybody to be period-specific. That's what original research makes you want to do.

I see more and more visual essays appearing. I go out of my way to see those that come out on DVDs in the US, the UK, France, Germany, sometimes elsewhere. I realize now that only specialists can perceive which parts of your visual essay represent original scholarship. I believe in public education, whether it's on television, the Internet or a DVD. I think there is a big audience and it can become bigger. I come out of the 70s, where the idea of building an audience was everywhere. I always include things that specialists appreciate, regardless of whether anyone else will realize it. When a specialist asks me how I knew about a particular magazine or an unusual document I included, I try to explain the chain of circumstances that led me from one thing to another. In the most recent DVD essay I made, "*Underworld*: How It Came to Be", for Criterion's 2010 Sternberg boxed set, I wanted to show Paramount's ambivalence toward both Sternberg and this first big production of his for the studio. *Underworld* turned out to be a huge success and launched his career as one of their top directors. I was going to the Academy Library day after day to research the Paramount files and to find visuals; three or four specialized librarians were helping me. I kept asking if they could think of anything else they had from Paramount from the spring of 1927. Lo and behold, they had one issue of a luxury booklet that Paramount had made for their national sales convention to lure the first-run exhibitors into renting their films for the coming season. There turned out to be a lot in it that was relevant to Sternberg, some of it unknown to me before then. Of course, viewing my film, only a specialist would realize how rare those images were and how much knowledge was necessary to interpret their significance. I was gratified by Leonard Maltin's generous review, where he drew attention to an ad from the *New York Times* I included (an easy-to-find PDF download, by the way), showing that, just as Sternberg and many others had repeated, *Underworld* had indeed made a theater stay open all night because of public demand. Documents like that make history come alive in the vernacular of the day (language and the graphics) in the series of ads that Paramount ran.

I think it's essential that you create visual essays and publish print essays

pretty much concurrently. There are things you can do in print that you cannot do in a visual essay because you do not have enough time and you cannot annotate in the same way.

Q: What is the overarching purpose of your seminar? Do you have specific goals that you intend to achieve each year?

JB: The seminar has a dual purpose. On the one hand, the seminar is research-oriented. Students need to do original research and are encouraged to go to special collections in the libraries of Los Angeles. LA has so many underexplored special collections, with more added all the time, it's endless. People think they know the classics, there's nothing left to be said! There are so many things we don't know about the classics, much less films that haven't received much if any attention. On the other hand, the course is designed to give students basic training, not expertise, but something usable, in the programs I mentioned. The research dimension is critical. It includes formulating a research hypothesis for a visual essay that can be accomplished within a 15-20 minute format. Then we have a number of exercises designed to be small and incremental, building skills and practice. Students gain confidence that they can accomplish more than they thought they could or wanted to, culminating in the final project which is a standalone 15-20 minute visual essay, burned to DVD, with minimally a rudimentary menu that works and will play. If students want to, they can work with the technician the way you would work with an editor professionally, where you tell the editor what you want and the editor does it for you. But the learning curve is very fast. The students feel excited when they learn things and then can practice and experiment on their own or in pairs or whatever works for them.

My other goal extends beyond the course per se. Afterwards, a good number of Teaching Assistants have designed short demonstrations for their discussion sections, such as, this a tracking shot, this is a close-up, look at the rear-projection in these shots. Their students will ask, did you do that? And they can say, yes I did that for you. Many of our students have presented their visual essays at academic conferences. Likewise, they are asked how they created their work because it looks so professional. This kind of audio-visual presentation of research is obviously appealing at a conference.

Q: Do you have a standard of quality that your students have to meet with their essays? What do the essays have to display in order to qualify as 'good'? How can you evaluate and grade creative work?

JB: I always take into consideration how hard the student is trying, as I do

in all my seminars. If I think the student is doing his or her best, that's what's important. And they have to meet the deadline; it's essential. A production deadline is different than other deadlines. When we have the Premiere potluck, and everyone gets to see how their neighbor's project turned out, usually a few glitches turn up; some minor fixes should be made. Maybe the sound level is off somewhere or an image is unstable. That could be fixed in the next few days, ideally. Usually the timeline needs one more detailed check to be perfect and one more burn. Some students do that. There is so much discussion all the way through the class, and I give so much feedback about the research dimension from the beginning, including when I think that someone's thesis is not yet viable in view of the documentation, that I am confident that things will turn out in an interesting way that benefits all concerned. Grades are not very important to me.

Q: What do you see as the benefits of a DVD essay in a predominantly text-driven academic environment? Can the audiovisual form become an established source of film scholarship?

JB: Every time I have seen someone present an audiovisual essay, the audience has been impressed. It is interesting to see what people can do now with a combination of PowerPoint and DVD clips. But I have witnessed so many PowerPoint disasters, especially if they incorporate clips. I like to burn a DVD, with a backup just in case. I think this is the way to go and it looks more professional. I have created a number of lecture DVDs for myself where I want to show something similar to a visual essay but speak "live". I assemble my assets (as they are called in editing lingo) and burn them to DVD, whether they are documents, images or clips. I build in a chapter point at every single new element. And I have a print-out of all my images to keep track of where I am. If I am running behind, I can easily skip ahead by hitting the space bar on my computer or the chapter advance on a DVD player's remote control. It's easy to do this kind of assembly yourself. It's obvious to the audience that it's not a PowerPoint, so people come up afterwards and ask how I did it and if I did it myself. Whether it's a DVD visual essay or a live lecture DVD, I can see that nobody gets bored, everyone looks attentive. I have been at conferences where half the people in the room look like they are falling asleep when panelists are reading papers.

To get back to your question, will visual essays become a more acceptable research form? I think yes because more and more researchers will want to do them. And whether they put them online for free or whether they put them on a commercial project, like a DVD, or whether they manage to get them on television, you get an audience. You get people's attention and then people can learn in a different way. There

are people who are very interested in stylistic analysis and comparisons. Visual essays are perfect and can be convincing in a way that print essays cannot be. But other approaches, besides historical studies or stylistic studies, can also be very effective. For instance Michael Potterton's essay for our class could be described as a theoretically-driven stylistic essay on a particular use of sound in *The Birds*. So much has been written about that film, it is not easy to say something new and provocative, especially about the use of sound. But he did and his argument is convincing because it is an audiovisual essay. He could, and should, publish an article in print as well, but it would not have the same impact because he would not be able to demonstrate sound. What I aspire to, and what I wish American publishers would aspire to, is to publish a book with a DVD in it so that you could go back and forth between them. This is being done more and more in Europe. American publishers have been resistant. The reason I keep hearing is that this was tried with CD-ROM and it failed. CD-ROM was a long time ago.

That said, within the academy, there is little support for faculty advancement for doing this kind of work. Even if colleagues take the time to look at it, it is difficult to evaluate where the original research comes in unless they are specialists in the subject.

Q: What are some of the past projects students explored in your seminar? Do any of them come to mind?

JB: Please see the appendix to this interview. The titles alone are fascinating, so many different interests. And they give you ideas.

Q: In terms of the institutionalization of visual essays, do you think that they should become a long-form format, similar to a documentary, or is there room for shorter, experimental pieces?

JB: Any length. The important thing is that the subject fits the length you choose and can be achieved in view of your technical constraints. If you have a subject that takes two minutes, why not? We can only talk about that casually now because the means of production have become so easy to access and inexpensive. When we started, it was not easy. We have more and more delivery platforms as well. Our projects are now made in HD, working with the highest resolution elements we can get; they should look very good projected on a large theater screen. But if you want to, you can down-res and show your work on a telephone.

I need to talk about the significance of cooperation with librarians, especially those in charge of special collections. If documents have been xeroxed from special collections, and your understanding with the library is that they may not be reproduced without permission, then they cannot

be put it online (or reproduced in print form) without an agreement from the library without jeopardizing your relationship with the library. This has nothing to do with worrying about being sued for copyright infringement. It is crucial to maintain a professional relationship of trust with the libraries you work with, if you want to continue to work there. You need the librarians to want to help you. The integrity of your project goes hand in hand with research integrity. If you are using unique visuals that are protected, you need to ask permission. It may well be possible to obtain permission if you explain that you want to publish a visual essay containing scans of specific documents in an academic online context, comparable to an academic print journal, say for instance, in our Department's online journal [Mediascape](). You would have to ask whether this would be allowable; it might not be, in which case a substitution would need to be made. To take the Hitchcock example, because the Hitchcock collection at the Academy is protected by an agreement with the Hitchcock estate, then if you could enlist the help of the librarian you worked with, it is possible that the Hitchcock estate would allow that particular use. The DVD of your visual essay is probably your best argument. You would provide both the library and the Hitchcock estate with a copy (with the stamped copyright provision visible on the documents). If they like it, which they probably would since it is clearly serious, innovative research and it doesn't take long to view it, they might agree. You need to get advice at the library and then follow the steps carefully, including publication of permissions in your credits if you gain authorization.

Q: Audiovisual essays have emerged as a new form of film criticism and commentary on the Internet. They are a widespread phenomenon, with a plethora of different iterations and approaches. How do you personally define the DVD or visual essay in your seminar? What are its defining characteristics?

JB: I try to show examples that I have been struck by myself in some way, that find ways to show a clear, logical argument appropriate to the subject at hand. Actually, I continually ask myself a somewhat different question, which is relevant to the screening tonight of Chris Marker's film on Tarkovsky. Most of Marker's films that I have been able to see I could call visual essays. He calls them essay films; I think everyone does. But they can also be called documentaries, maybe personal documentaries. He does what Thom Andersen does. There is an argument. That is what I require. The visual essay needs to have a thesis, a structure, original research; using audiovisual tools, it should become an audiovisual work that will be absorbing and that you can learn from, with pleasure.

Q: As a renowned archival scholar of early cinema, how do you perceive the increasing digitization of primary documents?

JB: I love it. I just contributed $200, via Domitor, to the project David Pierce is spearheading, the [Media History Digital Archive](#) that digitized the *Film Daily and Photoplay*, among many other wonders, particularly from the 20s. There are other sites as well — this is a movement that will continue. The documents are free, full-text searchable, downloadble as PDFs or in other formats, and appear as perfect color facsimiles, high-quality scans from paper copies of the originals, not microfilm. The most important French site, which is much larger, is called [Gallica](#), from the Bibliothèque de France .The Gallica scans of periodicals I have seen were made from microfilm, like the journals available through Proquest here, but they are likewise free, full-text searchable and (mostly) downloadable. Huge numbers of books and journals of all kinds can be searched at the same time. As a research tool it is fabulous, as long as the paper originals have been preserved; paper copies might be located later for images that ought to be photographed. You can use digitized image data for visual essays.

Q: Which role does the Internet play in your seminar? How do you ensure a productive use of its sources?

JB: I cannot ensure anything! The digitization of documents I just mentioned speeds up research and can also stimulate research by offering documentation that may have been unknown. But some students just do not get interested in documents or maybe they haven't yet figured out how or what kind of documentation can add dimension to their thinking and their projects. They may already be good at film analysis and want to create visual essays that allow them to do that in an audio-visual medium. I prefer that students learn how to explore possible sources of documentation, whether on the Internet or elsewhere — ordinarily it is a combination — to foreground HOW you know about something beyond the films themselves. But I come out of textual analysis and I am very interested in people who are really good at demonstrating comparisons and showing why they are important. It is not so obvious how to do that well. Whether the moving image materials, in particular, come from the Internet or whether they come from a higher-resolution source has to do with quality. There are lazy ways to do things, or that you do when you are out of time, or when you can't find a better source — but a better source might become available later. Maybe the aspect ratio is off and maybe the resolution isn't as good. At least it's something. I call that a placeholder. I don't forget about them, I try my best to get a high-res copy with the correct aspect ratio. I'm a purist. We still have "old technology" operative in the Digital Lab, for instance a Laserdisc player and a multi-standard VHS player. We can capture, transcode and use images from those formats that cannot be found on DVD. Jason Gendler, who is currently writing his dissertation, created an excellent visual essay devoted to a mise-en-scene and thematic analysis of three films by

Johnnie To. While he was at it, he created an a-v demonstration of differences in aspect ratios of the same film on VHS, Laserdisc and DVD that showed image information being cut off or distorted sometimes; he burned it to DVD for us, like the exercises everyone was doing in class. He showed why you should worry about aspect ratio. I was impressed by a passage in Pedro Costa's documentary on Straub and Huillet (*Où gît votre sourire enfoui?*, 2001) while they were re-editing their film *Sicilia!* (I believe it was Costa who said after the screening that the Straubs always edit their films three times.) He was filming them sitting at their editing table in near-darkness. At one point, we see the editing screen with them as Danièle Huillet says to Straub something like: "Look — that's the frame when the air is leaving [the actor's] chest, we need to cut just after that, with his breathing." That's the kind of attention to detail, and the time and concentration it takes, to do things well.

Q: Are you familiar with any online, web-based video essays? How do they align with or differ from the essays that are produced in your class?

JB: I watched your essays on *Chaos Cinema*! ([6](#)) Like the essays created in my classes, you put forward a clear argument, using strong examples. You mount a polemic about the kinds of films all around us that I never see. One of the nice things about the visual essay is that you can afford to spend fifteen minutes or half an hour watching something you don't know anything about. Your essays were captivating, they drew me in. I don't spend time on the web looking for visual essays or sampling blogs, but I happened to see a short visual essay by Kristin Thompson the other night on YouTube. She always does good work, and it makes sense for her and for David Bordwell to put more of their work online in this format, given their love of stylistic analysis. They are already posting many of their print publications on their website for download. Doubtless there are lots of interesting visual essays online that I don't know about (whatever they might be called), just as there are lots of hand-done music video "commentaries". There are lo-res ways to do that that do not require learning the higher end software we use in class or learning how to output to DVD without losing quality. I want the students in my classes to think of their work as stand-alone high-resolution audio-visual essays that can be projected theatrically and that are meant to last, comparable to a printed research essay in that respect. That's where original scholarship comes in, in-depth analysis thought through for an audio-visual medium that has become amazingly accessible. You can almost feel that passion for research, even though non-specialists won't know exactly how original the work is. Our visual essays should be engrossing for everyone.

Endnotes:

([1](#)) Schawn is currently Senior Vice President, Library and Technical Services at Fox Filmed Entertainment.

([2](#)) See Rachel K. Bosley, 'A New Dawn for *Sunrise*,' *American Cinematographer* (June 2003).

([3](#)) Subsequently published as "Murnau, Movietone and Mussolini" in *Film History* 17: 2-3 (fall
2005), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/film_history/toc/fih17.2.html .

([4](#)) Martin Koerber is currently head of the film archive at the Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin.

([5](#)) James Hahn, "Sorrel and Son: Difficult Viewing", Film History 17: 2-3 (fall 2005).

([6](#)) Online at:
http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/video_essay_matthias_stork_calls_out_the_chaos_cinema. Also see Stork's [essay](#) – on making *Chaos Cinema*, and on audiovisual essays generally – published in this issue of *Frames*.

Appendix: A Comprehensive List of Visual Essay Projects Created in Janet Bergstrom's UCLA Seminar

Note: Group projects were created in FTV273 (yearly, winter 2004-winter 2009); individual projects were created in FTV 298A (beginning spring 2005), which obtained its own course number as FTV205 (winter 2007-present)

Winter 2004, FTV 273

Emily Carman, Chiara Ferrari, Rebecca Prime – "From William Wyler's Eternal City to Federico Fellini's Cinematic City: The Image of Rome during the Miracle Years"

Ali Hoffman, Paul Malcolm, Victoria Meng, Sachiko Mizuno – "The Worlds of *Lilith*"

Winter 2005, FTV 273

Josh Amberg and Ross Melnick – "Echoes of a Duel" [on "Duel in the Sun"]

Colin Gunckel, Sudeep Sharma, Eric Vanstrom – "This Is the City," [on Dragnet]

Eric Mack, Candace Moore, Laurel Westrup – "Detours from the Text: Adaptations of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*"

Spring 2005, FTV 298A

Rowena Aquino – "Koreeda's Persistence of Memory"

Brian Hu – "Pop Music and Wong Kar Wai" [published in [MEDIASCAPE](#), Winter 2011]

Paul Malcolm – "Machine Dreams: The Optical Printer in Classical Hollywood and Beyond"

Loran Marsan – "Oppressions of Life: Intentions of Imitations"

Sachiko Mizuno – "Navigated by Desires, Searching for the Modern: Tokyo Cinema Culture and City Films from 1924 to 1939"

Thomas Nemeth – "Thinking Back on the Forgotten Drac: Contrasting the Two Versions of 1931's Dracula"

Rebecca Prime – "Strangers on the Prowl…Hollywood's Exiles in Europe"

Savitri Young – "It Can't Be Helped: Narrative Space in the Films of Yasujiro Ozu"

Noah Zweig – "Aki Kaurismaki: Activist and Archivist"

Winter 2006, FTV 273

Jaimie Baron, Andrey Gordienko, Mirasol Riojas – "Shirley Clarke: Dancer in the Cinema"

Michael Clarke, Felicia Henderson – "Reading Through: Blaxploitation and Female Representation"

Spring 2006, FTV 298A

Jonathan Cohn – "Let My Zombies Go!: Creating the Zombie within a Colonial Framework"

Jason Gendler – "Johnnie To: Master of the Implicit"

Andy Woods – "Goin' Down the Road: A Close Look at Nicholas Ray and *They Live by Night*"

Winter 2007, FTV 205

Adam Fish – "World of Wonder: An Unauthorized Documentary of a Production Company" [published in MEDIASCAPE, Spring 2008]

Clifford Hilo – "Technology and the Accident: From *Modern Times* to *24*"

Drew Morton – "Comics to Film (and Halfway Back Again)"

Jason Skonieczny – "Faces and Crowd in Josef Von Sternberg"

David O'Grady – "The Worlds of Wes Anderson"

Spring 2007, FTV 273

Rowena Aquino, Daniel Steinhart – "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Violence in Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns"

John Bridge, Jason Skonieczny – "Desert of the Real"

Erin Hill, Brian Hu – "HBO's Cinematized Television" [published in MEDIASCAPE, Fall 2009]

Mary Samuelson, Andy Woods – "William Wyler and World War II"

Spring 2008, FTV 273

Jonathan Cohn, Jason Gendler, Harrison Gish – "A Black Hole in Hollywood History"

Manohla Dargis, Dawn Fratini, Jennifer Moorman – "*Caged Heat* and the Women-in-Prison Film"

Fall 2008, FTV 205

Chris Carloy – "The Photoplay Studies: Morality, Money and Art Appreciation"

Bryan Hartzheim – "Tsuruko Aoki: Wife, Lover, Transcultural Star"

Arminder Randhawa – "Yaari: Changes in Gender Representations and Interactions in Hindi Cinema in the 1970s"

Ben Sampson – "Layers of Paradox in *F for Fake*" [published at MEDIASCAPE, Fall 2009]

Samantha Sheppard – "Coding the Mulatta: The Case of Peola, Pinky, and Sarah Jane"

Ben Sher – "Fragments of Truth: Memory, History, and the Making of *The Children's Hour*"

Mila Zuo – "Chinese Street Angels: A look at the cinematic embodiment of the Chinese Prostitute in 1930s cinema"

Winter 2009, FTV 273

Clifford Hilo, Maya Montañez Smukler, Julia Wright – "White House, Black President" [published at MEDIASCAPE, Fall 2009]

Drew Morton, David O'Grady, Jennifer Porst – "Towards a New Genre of Video Game Play" [published at MEDIASCAPE, Fall 2009]

Winter 2012, FTV 205

Clifford Galiher – "The Three Fates of *The Maltese Falcon*" [forthcoming at MEDIASCAPE, Fall 2012]

Michael Potterton – "Off-Screen Mise en Scene: Audio-Visual Suspension in *The Birds*"

Alexandra Schroeder – "What Happens When You Sleep? Multiple Layers of Voyeurism in the *Paranormal Activity* Trilogy" [forthcoming at MEDIASCAPE, Fall 2012]

Matthias Stork – "Transmedia Synergies: Remediating Films and Video Games" [forthcoming at MEDIASCAPE, Fall 2012]

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