In Touch with the Film Object: Cinephilia, the Video Essay, and Chaos Cinema

By Matthias Stork

I saw my first video essay in the summer of 2009. It was not my first encounter with the essayistic form in cinema, however. Essay films (1) such as *La Jetée* (1962, dir. Chris Marker), *Die Macht der Gefühle* (1983, dir. Alexander Kluge), or *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1998, dir. Jean-Luc Godard), had captured my interest several years before. While their filmmaking aesthetic is highly unconventional, they display essential stylistic features that I would see resurface in the work of modern video essayists, the varied use of voice-over narration, the deliberate (a)synchronicity of sound and image, the astute mixture of different film scenes, film stocks, aspect ratios etc. The essay film represents the progenitor of the video essay which has emerged as a form of contemporary film criticism and scholarship. (2)

About three years ago, I chanced upon a video essay, or more accurately a series of video essays titled *The Substance of Style* (2009), produced by film and television critic Matt Zoller Seitz. I had followed the author's writings for quite some time and his presence on various internet venues had led me to the website of the *Museum of the Moving Image or Moving Image Source*. (3) As a Wes Anderson aficionado, possessed (or plagued) by an inflated sense of cinephilia, I invariably felt a sense of unhealthy superiority towards the critic and his work. I snobbishly assumed the essay to be a mere "mash-up", a promotional trailer show, a simplistic appropriation of beloved shots, compositions, and musical interludes from the director's distinctive canon – little did I know that the essay would address these issues head-on and completely dispel my initial doubts. As I was watching, I realized that the essay did not aim for sheer surface-level enjoyment. Rather, it carefully developed a clearly stated overarching thesis by synthesizing the critic's words with appropriate segments from the films, or, as I gathered later, re-presenting the films from a personal point-of-view, as a creative, performative act. I did not experience the presentation of a finalized argument, but the creation of the argument, in its very making, embracing, appropriating, and negotiating cinematic language, in relation to the written (and here also *spoken*) word. (4) It was a "mash-up", but one that transcended postmodern irony and hyper-consciousness, plumbing the depths of the filmic material at hand, and contributing to, rather than detracting from, its value. Matt Zoller Seitz, like many other video essayists, did not simply exploit the recognizability of a director's signature. He added his own signature, thereby enriching, not deforming or falsifying, his subject of examination.

And the effect was astonishing. I had seen mash-ups before. And while I find some of them well-crafted and entertaining, most of them lack a certain *uniqueness*, a recognizable stamp that I can attribute to the work's producer. In most cases, they simply recycle what I have already seen, without adding new information. The Wes Anderson video essay, on the other hand, re-uses scenes from the film to show me what I have not seen before, what is inherent in the film's texture, but not willfully displayed by the director, at least not overtly (some may disagree considering Anderson's highly formalized cinema but I hold that the video essay goes beyond simply identifying personalized shot structures; it reveals its historical and creative antecedents). It presented the film in a new way, allowing me to see it in a new way. To put it in Vivian Sobchack's terms, it put me in touch with the *film object*. ([5]) I could see and feel Anderson's films while, at the same time, learning more about them. Learning may not be the appropriate term, actually. The essay did not necessarily aim to educate me. Its aim is to engage me and the film in a critical discussion, to have me re-examine the film, through a new filmic experience, in a reciprocal cycle, governed by the author of the video essay. It achieves what an excellent lecture should do, compel the student to reflect on what was discussed, minutes, hours, days later.

At any rate, what was so striking about the essay was its ability to condense the distinctive style of Wes Anderson, not in a reductive or simply reproductive fashion, but in an analytic and poetic one, remixing scenes from the director's filmography, adding visual material from other films, incorporating rock and pop music, comic book panels, interviews, archival research, splitting the projection screen, injecting multiple screens into it, writing on them and talking over them; the video essay format revitalizes the medium of criticism as a performance. By means of voice-over commentary, editing, sound design, textual inserts, in short *bricolage*, Matt Zoller Seitz presents the work of Wes Anderson anew, afresh, pleasurably familiar yet invigoratingly different, appropriating and remediating the films' stylish appeal and the cinematic medium's form. The video essay format engenders a form of complex authorship blending the critic's sensibilities with those of the director in an unprecedented fashion. The filmmaker's work is radically re-"written", yet this act, which admittedly constitutes an aggressive, if reverent form of iconoclasm, is not destructive. Seitz' approach is openly productive encouraging a re-examination of Anderson, the artist, by virtue of his very own language.

The key word here is discourse, an engagement with what is on-screen that transcends the realm of purely visual reception. Seitz' video essay reframes the auteur's canon in order to, for the Wes Anderson fan, de-familiarize and, for the uninitiated, personalize the viewing experience, thereby inviting both groups to partake in a discourse that opens the

films to a projection of multiple personal impressions. I thus see the video essayist as a media-literate Michel de Montaigne crossed with the cinephiliac DNA of a Quentin Tarantino or a Jean-Luc Godard, and equipped with an updated technological interface modeled on Alexandre Astruc's *caméra-stylo*. The video essay critique becomes a personal expression of sense-making which is, ultimately, more than just comprehensible, logical for the reader/viewer; its *design* is utterly tangible. The video essay is able to translate, into concrete 21st century language, that of digital units, the affect of film. Critics with an exceptional grasp of language know how to convey the power of the movies to their readers – and there is nothing more satisfying, for a cinephile, than to replay a film in one's mind, guided by the rich prose of a competent critic, to relive a phenomenological experience, after the fact.

But this approach, though undeniably poetic and accomplished, also operates on a certain vagueness, a lack of explicitness. Sequences, scenes, moments are filtered through the memory of the observer, the post-experiential process of a photo-camera (i.e. stills), and the abstraction of language. The moving image is resurrected, restored, and, thereby, reconfigured, removed from its formal framework, not necessarily neutralized, but certainly transformed, detached from its immediacy, realized as a (memory) fragment. The video essay, by contrast, retains the motion of film, its existence in the moment of time; it does not simply reproduce or recount the film, it cites it, as a quotation, and it uses it, as a building stone. By consequence, the film's form and affective quality are maintained, albeit in a different context. Watching a video essay, to me, then is equal to returning to the theater, seeing the film again, only this time with the benefit of additional information, information – a true barrage of additional texts in fact – that is designed to be put into conversation with what is onscreen. This dialogue between the film, its potential cinematic inter-texts, the author, the recipient, and numerous other para-texts, constitutes a complex hermeneutic network of consistently shifting spheres of information. The result is not one essential meaning but a multitude of interpretative frameworks.

Matt Zoller Seitz's video essay series on Wes Anderson, in my view, crystallizes the defining traits of the emerging form of the video essay as performative criticism, leaning more towards the explanatory than the poetical register, but without neglecting the latter. I found myself watching it over and over again, in tandem with Anderson's films. The video essay returns the process of analysis to the "work of cinephilia, of love of the cinema", ([6]) for the critic and her reader/viewer alike.

In order to satisfy my cinephiliac desires I searched the web for more video essays. The *Moving Image Source* website, on closer inspection,

proved to be a valuable source for these. ([7](#)) But my fascination with the new form led me further into the intricate structure of the web. I distinctly remember my ecstatic enthusiasm upon the uncovering of *Shooting Down Pictures*, Kevin B. Lee's unparalleled collection of film critiques, in written and audiovisual form, the latter ones being especially memorable, particularly the exceptional analysis of the opening sequence from Matthieu Kassovitz' masterpiece *La Haine* (1995), ([8](#)) more a commentary than an essay but so meticulously timed and astutely argued that it reconfigured the impressions I had gained when I first watched the film. Other notable essays include his dissection of the horror aesthetic in *Evil Dead II* (1987, dir. Sam Raimi) ([9](#)) and the fly-on-the-wall collaboration with Matt Zoller Seitz on Clint Eastwood's magnum opus *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), ([10](#)) which the latter would later develop into a magnificent two-part video essay on the revenge motif in Eastwood's films, titled *Kingdom of the Blind* (2009). ([11](#))

Guided by the SDP website and its many links, I embarked upon a journey of discovery, wonder, and inspiration. And the more video essays I encountered along the way – Jim Emerson's wonderful end-of-the-year recaps ([12](#)) and his piece on the hat in the Coen brothers' *Miller's Crossing* (1990), ([13](#)) Steven Boone's imaginative fake trailers, ([14](#)) and Steven Santos' impeccably edited arguments ([15](#)) to name just a few – the more I learned that the form's ultimate forte is its ability to train the eye, to cultivate film literacy and the tangibility of the *film object*, most explicitly conveyed in Catherine Grant's thought-provoking and beautiful meditation *Touching the Film Object?* (2011) ([16](#)) and its poetic companion piece *imPersona* (2012). ([17](#)) This particular essay also bridges the gap between criticism and scholarship, incorporating substantial critical sources to buttress the video essay's texture. Similar paradigms of critical scholarship in video essays include Benjamin Sampson's powerful examination of the Steven Spielberg/Stanley Kubrick project *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), ([18](#)) Brian Hu's stylish analysis of the employment of pop music in the films of Wong Kar-Wai, ([19](#)) and other laudable works that were produced in UCLA Professor Janet Bergstrom's seminar on DVD essays and thereafter published in the university's film and digital media journal *Mediascape*. ([20](#)) These student essays exhibited a logic, breadth of scholarly sources, and technological polish that I had not encountered before. As a graduate student in Germany, I was profoundly impressed by the sheer amount of archival and bibliographic information these essays boasted. Previously, I had only seen similar exercises on the supplemental features of DVD sets from the *Criterion* collection which include numerous essayistic works from scholars and critics alike, most notably Janet Bergstrom's painstakingly researched history on Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927), Tag Gallagher's critical look at compassion in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), and Casper Tybjerg's work on Carl Theodor Dryer's *Vampyr* (1932).

All of these audiovisual essays form a rich tapestry of creative criticism and scholarship. And although they are scattered across the entire virtual space of the internet and niche DVD markets, it is possible to identify distinct spaces where essay work in cinema is cultivated and promoted. The most prominent examples are the *indiewire* blog *Press Play*, ([21](#)) Janet Bergstrom's DVD seminar at UCLA, Christian Keathley's course on video essays at Middlebury College, the *Mediascape* website, ([22](#)) and, most recently, the *Motion Studies* project at the Bauhaus-University at Weimar, organized by Kevin B. Lee and Volker Pantenburg, ([23](#)) as well as the video essay workshop at the 2012 *Society for Film and Media Studies* conference in Boston, MA, spearheaded by Christian Keathley with Catherine Grant (and publicized on her excellent blog *Film Studies for Free* ([24](#)) which features a multitude of organized links on the video essay, along with her Vimeo site *Audiovisualcy*. ([25](#)) I can only echo the general tenor that the audiovisual essay constitutes the future or perhaps most contemporary and appropriate) form of media criticism and scholarship.

It did not take long for me to yield to an increasing desire to transition from the reception of video essays to their actual production. While it is true that digital editing software, rip programs, and simple audio recording devices have undergone a period of democratization and are readily available and, for the most part, easy to use, it is still a challenge to master the technology and shift from a linguistic register to cinematic signs. A video essay is not simply the process of overlaying audio on video. It requires the critic not only to think about a film's aesthetic but to make use of the very language that produces it. My initial efforts were rough, edits that were off four or five frames, a voice-over that sounded hollow and feeble, and far too long and florid. But I played with the form, assigned myself simple, short exercises to familiarize myself with the seemingly innumerable potentialities of modern computer technology. It felt like physiotherapy, trying to learn how to walk again, *baby steps*. I was writing my thesis at the time, an analysis of the role of film in English Foreign Language education in Germany. Over a period of about a year, I produced a two-hour video – composed of about 70 short vignettes – providing an overview of film language. It was my attempt to complement my written work with actual film scenes, and my personal commentary. Another project derived from my thesis work, an examination of the potential to study Michael Byram's concept of *Intercultural Communicative Competence* ([26](#)) in the film *Everything is Illuminated* (2005) and how this work with the film object lends itself for in-class exercises. I realized that my attempts benefitted from a clear focus, an overarching point that I could, repeatedly, reference and develop as the moving images appeared on the screen. The educational impetus behind my work informed its overall mode of presentation which is to be situated (mostly) in the explanatory mode, rather than the poetical.

It was shortly after I had finished my thesis and final exams that I conceived of *Chaos Cinema*. I had always felt the desire to go to film school in the United States, for various reasons, the most crucial ones being my passion for the English language and American film scholarship, criticism, and, obviously, film history. Several thousand miles removed from the actual discourse, the internet became my trans-cultural space to engage with and learn from unofficial and professional cinephiles across the pond. I extensively read David Bordwell's magisterial blog *Observations on Film Art* ([27](#)) and Jim Emerson's *Scanners*, ([28](#)) amongst others, to stay up-to-date on discussions in contemporary film culture. The debate on the shaky-cam action style, jittery compositions, and an overall (dis)interest in modern hyper-kineticism that dominated the tenor of both of these blogs and many other sites after the release of *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) was not lost on me and as an action fan, I developed an obsessive relationship to the topic. After a long time of devouring the readily available online content, I realized that while the discourse had produced several well-written accounts on the excessive style of action, it was not as well illustrated as it could (and should) be. Still images and colorful language could not adequately communicate the florid set pieces of a Michael Bay, a Tony Scott, or a Neveldine/Taylor (although Matt Zoller Seitz' *Salon* article on Michael Bay may prove me wrong!) ([29](#)) The sensory firestorm of these directors' films could only partially be expressed in written form. A video essay could better demonstrate the ferocity of the material at hand, and exemplify the difference between an analysis after-the-fact, after the film that is, and one that occurs right in the moment, as part of the film experience.

Of course, at that point, it never occurred to me that I should be the one to produce this video essay. I was merely hoping that a fully-fledged expert, preferably from the cycle of established video essayists that I was familiar with and whose work I liked, would confront the topic head-on. My wish, in fact, was for Matt Zoller Seitz to tackle the issue. I thought that it would lend itself to his style, his inventive prose and creative editing. If I remember correctly, it was this wish that prompted me to try my hand at a *pitch* video essay, designed to convince him to give the topic an audiovisual treatment. As it turns out, the pitch turned into a 13-minute essay, carefully researched, yet sloppily put together, and when I sent it to Matt, he said that we would like to run it on *Press Play*, in a revised version. The following weeks were marked by numerous grueling tasks, revisions, and disasters as I grappled with the unknown challenges of a video essay production which, as it turned out, was a true crucible for a fledgling foreign language learner, cinephile, and about-to-be film student. Seemingly inconsequential differences in audio had to be rectified, cuts had to be rendered seamless, lost files had to be compiled again, over and over. It was a tumultuous time in my life. I had to edit the essay in three different countries, basically on the run, while preparing

for graduate school, i.e. moving to another country, several thousand miles away. I recorded the voice-over track, did not like it, discarded it, acquired new recording equipment, recorded it again, used it in relation to the image tracks, re-considered the overall structure of the essay, re-wrote the voice-over, sent emails to my editor, waited for responses, rendered parts of the essay, uploaded it, worked on other parts, re-rendered the previous ones, all the time with the 'deadline clock' ticking in the background.

Chaos Cinema Part 1 from Matthias Stork on Vimeo.

I was (and still am!) a novice, not a seasoned practitioner, and I was thrown into the water, head-first. As I labored meticulously to refine and expand the essay, the project gradually transformed into one of such magnitude (not only in relation to the size of the timeline) that I often doubted whether I could actually finish it. The mentorship (and friendship) of Matt Zoller Seitz in this time cannot be overstated. A rigorous editor, he trained my eyes and ears to pick out minute details in films (even more minute than a full-fledged cinephile could – and would – recognize), taught me how to write more casually, more colloquially, which was and continues to be one of the greatest challenges I face as a foreign language speaker of English (along with the feeling of self-consciousness and uncertainty). Matt's advice and expertise substantially shaped my work. Ken Cancelosi and Steven Santos were equally instrumental in the creation of the essay. It was Ken who inspired me to broaden the essay's focus and explore musicals in addition to action, dialogue, and horror. And Steven's pointers on editing helped me immensely in constructing the dense texture of Chaos Cinema. All of them are pros, experts in their field, and my own fledgling work must not be aligned with their own. All of them, I am sure, could still find many improper technical aspects in the essays, worthy of critique. I do not count myself among the group of established video essayists mentioned above. I am still a student of the form, interested in its production, reception, and theorization. And I feel continuously invigorated by the work of critics and scholars, motivated to pursue this path further, to get to know the form better, as it develops, through analysis and hands-on production.

Chaos Cinema Part 2 from Matthias Stork on Vimeo.

In determining specific aspects of the video essay form, it is helpful to re-trace the production process of *Chaos Cinema*. As I mentioned above, the initial idea was borne out of a belief that the essay could enrich the contemporary discourse on the methodology of scene construction in

action cinema by providing concrete audiovisual *evidence* or, to put it more mildly, *reference points* for in-depth analysis. Its value would derive from its formal specificity, an audiovisual precision that distinguishes it from written reviews and articles. Many complaints (or eulogies, for that matter) directed towards sloppy, incoherent action scenes presupposed a general, quite vague concept of film style, an assumption that films play out in exactly the same manner, for each individual viewer. This postulate affords writers the shorthand of monosyllabic appraisals, particularly pervasive in – but not limited to – internet discussion forums. Critiques of the new action model remained overly general, divorced from the actual issue. There were, of course, notable exceptions on the web, particularly the superb studies conducted by Jim Emerson ([30](#)) and David Bordwell ([31](#)) (and writers like Lisa Purse, ([32](#)) Geoff King, ([33](#)) and Yvonne Tasker ([34](#)) who published exceptional books on action cinema must not be overlooked). Nevertheless, the tenor, to me, seemed removed from the heart of the subject matter, i.e. explicit examples, compiled from specific films. The challenge that I faced was to determine which films would lend themselves to an integration in the video essay, how I should assemble them, and how I could integrate voice-over into them, considering their rapid, aggressive nature. My goal was to construct a video that would operate on the basis of a cumulative effect, a montage-style succession of *chaotic* scenes, drawn from the work of notable and, most importantly, recognizable stylists. The rationale was to replicate the density of iconic modern action set pieces and capture, even exaggerate, their overwhelming effects, while, at the same time, attempting to provide as much explicit commentary as possible, that is, achieve a synchronicity of image and voice-over and conduct a clear analytical study, not just a rehash of existing opinions, superficially imposed on a series of action scenes. In this regard, the video essay is a work of pastiche, governed by a distinct thesis. I also attempted to contrast contemporary action with previous, more balanced iterations in the genre, from films that did not require a lot of explanation via voice-over, films that *worked* purely because of their iconicism and pop-culture status: *Bullit* (1968) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), for example, to name just a few. Another form of rhetoric that I employed was the use of textual inserts and the manipulation of the image track, as in the segment that focuses on sound, when the car chase in *Quantum of Solace* (2008) is presented without a visual reference. *Chaos Cinema*, in this regard, was conceived not merely as a critical commentary of modern action, but a self-conscious entry in the genre as well.

The discourse that developed around the first two parts of Chaos Cinema was reassuring, educational, and terrifying. Whether it was the topic at hand, the provocative language of the essay, the panoramic action scenery it projects, or a confluence of many intangible factors, Chaos Cinema became a widely seen video essay (Kevin Lee in fact described it

as the first *blockbuster* of the form). At this point, the series has generated over 90.000 plays on Vimeo, a testament to the video essay form's popular appeal. Film fans, cinephiles, and critics responded to it, newspaper articles were printed (*The Week & The New York Times*), solidifying the form's critical viability. As a result, I found myself in a position that required me to offer additional remarks upon my work, to engage in extra-textual discourse. ([35](#)) The digital form of the video essay encourages the interaction between author and audience members, most of whom are passionate cinephiles. It is inherently designed to promote the exchange of ideas and the video essay cannot be separated from the responses it generates. It does not exist in a hermetically sealed authorial environment. Rather, it functions as a vehicle for the articulation of multiple readings and meanings which, sometimes, can be unbelievably passionate, as in the case of *Chaos Cinema*. I took every comment seriously, no matter how derisive or offensive. I am of the opinion that I can glean a valuable lesson from every type of criticism, be it constructive or deconstructive. It was still, quite frankly, rather difficult to come to terms with the heightened emotionalism (or should I say 'vitriol') that several commentators exhibited. Some responses seemed entirely motivated by a palpable antagonism against the creator. Finding common ground or at least a basis for a respectful discussion proved laborious, but it was not impossible. The experience demonstrated that video essays have a quality that supersedes that of the written word; which can capture the interest not only of cinephiles but perhaps of casual film-goers/internet users as well. In a culture progressively informed by the digital interface of multiple moving images and screens, the video essay may be the most intimate form of critical communication, a strong complement to traditional language at the very least. *Chaos Cinema* elicited numerous judiciously argued written responses. I found all of them quite enlightening and I credit them with helping me to flesh out my views on contemporary American action cinema. In the essay's third part, which came into being during my first quarter as a graduate student at UCLA, I address some of these arguments, modifying my own thesis through acknowledgment and criticism of their positions (I also used the third part to re-iterate, or perhaps re-state more clearly my thesis which had been reconfigured, interpreted, and falsified after the first two parts had been published). Feedback from cinematographer John Bailey, ([36](#)) editor Walter Murch, critics Steven Boone ([37](#)) and Jim Emerson, ([38](#)) film professors Steven Shaviro ([39](#)) and Janet Bergstrom as well as graduate school colleagues equally revealed points that I could reconsider or develop further, which eventually led to a paper on *Chaos Cinema* which I presented at *Society for Cinema and Media Studies* conference in Boston. The video essay thus does not invalidate the traditional form of criticism. It enhances and complements it.

Writing about film can be a deceptive practice in that it shifts attention away from the object at hand. This is a provocative statement, and it may just be borne out of my own experience, but an engagement with a film via a written text is difficult and requires patience, practice, and diligence; for the unseasoned, it is tempting to analyze a film from memory or notes, based on only one viewing, rather than applying the framework directly to the film scenes by watching a DVD or seeing a film several times in theaters; even critics seem to fall victim to this phenomenon, though there are professionals who can re-play an entire film upon only one viewing, and produce extremely detailed and sharp reviews. Video essay work, by contrast, always puts you in direct contact with the film, thereby transcending the boundaries of language, drawing on a universally established, relatable cinematic design.

The video essay has established itself as a serious form of criticism and scholarship. But it remains in its nascent stage. It constitutes a critical and scholarly framework in search of its aesthetic form. Hence, the study of the video essay poses a variety of questions. Most of them are of aesthetic and thematic nature. Should the video essay adopt a long-form structure or is it more viable (and perhaps topical and timely) in a short-form template. Should it feature narration or should it work with existing images and sounds? Should it freely mix time, space, and cultural specificity or be more precise, restrained, controlled? Should it function as an alternative form of film reviewing or venture beyond the text and its audience, into other realms of analysis? Should it provide evidence, historical fact or raise controversial issues? And, should it simply focus on film? Or are other forms of visual media equally relevant to its evolution? Such questions run the risk of formalizing the video essay, by virtue of a prescriptive form. It is worthwhile to ponder these questions but they should not be utilized as the essential criterion for the video essay form's assessment. The form has not yet reached a phase of stability. It has yet to enter its classical stage. What we are currently experiencing, both in analogue and digital form, is the birth of, not a new avant-garde, but perhaps of a new age of film culture, an age in which the recipients (or consumers) of art are able to communicate with the producers, by means of the same language. A new discourse is emerging, full of potential, which is currently being explored by a group of indefatigable cinephiliac pioneers through sheer experimentation. They do not only use the video essay as a vehicle for sharing their thoughts and insights. They use it as a new form of performative analysis. ([40](#))

Christian Keathley is a film scholar whose research on video essays seeks to grasp this development. In his essay "*La Caméra-Stylo*: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia", he differentiates between analytical and poetic

video essays, in an attempt to categorize the video essay. (41) This initial binary allows for further sub-categorizations, and a consideration of a middle ground (under which I would subsume *Chaos Cinema*). Keathley is rigorous in his analysis of the video essay. He proposes a structural framework that enables observers to chart and understand the rapid development of this form. It will be interesting to see how its institutionalization will contribute to its aesthetic, whether it will become standardized or not. Video essay research can keep track of such developments. To be comprehensive, it has to combine theoretical and aesthetic questions with inquiries into film industrial and reception practices. It has to consider the intra- as well as extra-textual dimensions of the form. Only then can it begin to move into the realm of comprehension, and learning.

The educational sphere of video essays is of particular interest to me. How does the form inform our view of the object it engages with, be it film, television or other audiovisual media? At UCLA, noted film scholar and video essayist Janet Bergstrom (42) offers an annual DVD seminar in the Cinema and Media Studies department. It is a research-based class that asks students to either turn an existing research paper into a video essay or conceive of a new research project. The challenge here is to work with scholarly references and filmic material and integrate them in a cogent and engaging way. The seminar originated in 2004 and initially focused on group projects. In 2005, a course that emphasized individual projects as added which eventually evolved into the seminar's current form. I attended the class this year and found it extremely inspiring and elucidating. Professor Bergstrom grants students a lot of liberty in their approach towards their video essays. She explains, slowly and repeatedly, how to use editing software (Adobe Premiere), how to incorporate research into the structure of the essay, how to construct an audiovisual, rather than a written argument, and, most importantly, how to make it memorable. Students watch other video essays, produced by former students, scholars, and critics, and thus gain exposure to a variety of different rhetorical models. They review each other's work, make suggestions on how to improve and revise it, figure out which audiences their essays should be geared towards. They work on their projects together, in a highly productive and creative environment. The class, in many ways, reflects my experiences with video essays and crystallizes what I appreciate most about them; the promotion of a substantial media literacy, the formation, rather the activation, of a technical and aesthetic vocabulary that enables students to pursue their interests into the form, to continue their work on their own, and together, in collaboration (a practice that may become the norm as video essays become institutionalized as a pillar of modern film criticism; division of labor in regards to compilation of materials, editing, writing, narration may be required in order to facilitate a more timely output and more transparent

exposure of the form). Professor Bergstrom places emphasis on both the practical as well as the theoretical dimensions of the video essay. The technological considerations are consistently put in relation to the underlying logic of the overarching argument. The video essay, in this context, becomes an object of study and creative agency, a vehicle to expand the traditional process of discussing and writing about a film. At the end of the intense ten-week seminar stands a work that may still be rough around the edges, in terms of form, research, and argument logic. It is a work in progress, to be refined and polished over time. But it is nevertheless a high-quality work, a foundation for further research and study. Its main appeal, though, is that it does not only allow you and your audience to reflect upon cinema. It *literally* puts both of you in touch with it.

Endnotes:

(1) For a comprehensive study of the essay film, see Corrigan, Timothy, *The Essay Film. From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

(2) Christian Keathley presents a remarkable panoramic view of contemporary video essay culture in his article "La caméra-stylo: notes on video criticism and cinephilia" (in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, eds. Clayton, Alex & Andrew Klaven (London and New York: Routledge, 2011)). He differentiates between explanatory and poetical video essays. In the former "[i]mages and sounds – even when carefully and creatively manipulated in support of an argument – are subordinated to explanatory language." The latter mode resists "a commitment to the explanatory mode, allowing it t surface only intermittently, and they employ language sparingly, and even then as only one, unprivileged account." (181). The poetical register, I would argue, draws strong parallels with the essay film.

(3) *Museum of the Moving Image*, http://www.movingimagesource.us/.

(4) It is important to note that the video essay requires more of the critic than just expertise in writing, film history, and editing technology. In the video essay, the critic has to literalize her voice, to move from writing on the page to writing on the screen, and to speaking to what is onscreen and to whomever is in front of the screen. The voice-over needs to be given more attention in further studies of video criticism.

(5) Sobchack, Vivian, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992).

(6) Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 144.

(7) Matt Zoller Seitz has produced a myriad of video essay series for *Moving Image Source*, by himself and in collaboration with fellow critics, including Kevin B. Lee, Aaron Aradillas, and Ken Cancelosi. While the entire corpus is commendable, there are specific series that emphasize the critical scope and aesthetic capabilities of the video essay:

Aradillas, Aaron & Matt Zoller Seitz, "5 on 24" (five-part series on the TV show 24), May 18,
2010,
http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/5-on-24-pt-1-ticking-20100518
.

Aradillas, Aaron & Matt Zoller Seitz, "Razzle Dazzle", (five-part series on fame and the movies), June 29,
2010, http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/razzle-dazzle-pt-1-the-pitch-20100629.

Bramble, Serena & Matt Zoller Seitz, "All Things Shining" (five-part

series on the cinema of Terrence Malick), May 10, 2011, http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/all-things-shining-pt-3-20110513.

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