
Some Reflections On My Video Essay Venture “Style in The Wire”

By Erlend Lavik

[Style in The Wire](#) from [Erlend Lavik](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Though I only published my first video essay, “Style in *The Wire*”, on April 4 2012, I have been interested in the format for some five years.

(1) Initially, I sought to explore, from a purely theoretical perspective, the potential of digital technology to enhance film and television criticism. In a series of polemical essays (written in Norwegian) I tried to give an idea of how the incorporation of sound and moving images could reinvigorate contemporary debates about audiovisual art.

This preoccupation springs from a belief that film criticism matters. It is not - or ought not be - some expendable enterprise on the periphery of film culture, a mere accessory to the core activities taking place on the inside. To be sure, film criticism would not exist without filmmaking, but what would “film” be without analytically, theoretically, and historically informed deliberation? While it would be an exaggeration to claim that individual critical contributions are essential, film criticism as a collective undertaking is not something we could just as well do without. From a bird’s-eye view, film criticism and film production are interdependent. Film culture requires a discursive infrastructure, and the makeup of this infrastructure affects our notions of what film - as popular entertainment and as art- is and can be. The medium’s aesthetic, social, and political significance is not given in advance, but at least partly shaped by what we collectively have to say about it. And it has seemed to me for a long time that our communal conversations about film could use a shot in the arm.

One problem is the gulf that has developed between journalistic and academic film criticism. The former lacks intellectual ambition (especially evident in a small country like Norway, where gifted and knowledgeable writers are at a premium, and film has never really been an integral part of the cultural heritage); the latter is frequently rather exclusionary. Certainly, scholarship requires specialization, and it is both inevitable and appropriate that many disciplinary concerns appear esoteric or immaterial to outsiders. But at the same time I think that, on the whole, film studies has become too hermetic and too often fails to engage a wider audience.

Personally, I also find that academic film criticism has gone a bit stale. To my mind the best analyses offer something that is both unexpected and plausible, yet all too rarely do I come across scholarly work that deftly steers a course between the Scylla and Charybdis of the obvious and the far-fetched. There is reason to believe that recourse to audiovisual quotations enables us to strike a better balance. On the one hand, it provides the means to study films and television series in greater detail and depth, increasing the chances of breaking past - or at least enlivening - commonplace observations. On the other, it might rein in excessively fanciful explorations, grounding them in the concreteness of the works under examination. Or even better: make them less fanciful by equipping critics with the tools to fashion more evidential, exacting, and accessible accounts.

In short, I believe that digital technologies and the Internet afford an opportunity to rejuvenate film criticism. Certainly, blogs represent a different kind of publication outlet. It allows film scholars to address a wider and more diverse audience than academic journals and books, and also to bypass the lengthy peer review process, making it possible to write about recent releases and take part in current debates, rather than merely commenting upon them after they have faded from public consciousness. It also offers new means of expression, such as hyperlinks and easy-to-use frame grabs, as well as freedom from editorial policies.

Still, it always seemed to me that it was the video essay that held the greatest promise. It is not just a way to dress up research and make it more available, valuable as that is; I believe it may also broaden, or at least reframe, intellectual inquiry. The means of expression available to us tend to act as a kind of prism that focuses our attention on some aspects of a film, but not others. Recourse to sound and moving images allows light to enter the object of study from a slightly different angle, thus bringing into view other avenues to explore. Seeking to disclose and describe the potential of digital film criticism led me to several fine video essays. Still, much as I admired many of the efforts, I usually found myself wanting more. The analyses often seemed somewhat sketchy, and would end just as they were getting really interesting. Of course, conventional wisdom has it that the overabundance of choice on the net triggers impatience, so everything should be broken down into easily consumable chunks. But the potential audience is so vast online that there tends to be a considerable niche market for just about anything.

I wanted more detail, more information, more ideas, or ideas that were more fully developed. I wanted something that was less like an abstract, and more like the audiovisual equivalent of a full-fledged academic article. Or perhaps a kind of short scholarly documentary. There are of course a number of documentary films about filmmaking - about genres

and styles, about individual filmmakers and films - that can draw on the same resources as the video essay. But they typically consist of interviews with experts and/or celebrities who each provide different perspectives on the same topic. This approach has its advantages, of course, but I also find that it tends to blunt the analytical edge. The documentarian is largely a mediator. His or her task is to obtain and talk to appropriate participants, then hopefully to piece together in the editing process a somewhat coherent argument from fragments of conversation, while also supplying suitable illustrations. The video essayist, by contrast, is the expert. Everything is conceived and executed by one person. Words and images spring from the same source, so the analysis is more organic, and the point of view more consistent. Whereas the argument, as well as the composition of the audiovisual material, has an unmistakably ad hoc character in documentary films about film, it is fully premeditated in the video essay. Documentaries come at the object of analysis more broadly, but tend to be more superficial; the video essay's pursuit of insight is - or can be - more single-minded and piercing.

In 2009 and 2010 I wrote a couple of pieces on *The Wire*, and after narrowing the scope of inquiry I had some leftover material. Initially the plan was to expand it into a new article, but the topic - the series' visual symbolism - turned out to be awkward to deal with in writing, so I decided this was a good time to try my hand at a video essay. That some sections of the voiceover were originally part of a traditional academic article is one reason I think of "Style in *The Wire*" as a piece of scholarship in its own right, rather than simply as communication of research - though it is that too, of course.

Another reason I wanted to make a video essay was that I was hired as a postdoctoral researcher on an interdisciplinary project on copyright called [Of Authorship and Originality](#). I had heard about the travails of Kevin B. Lee, whose entire archive of essays was deleted by YouTube in 2009 because they were alleged to infringe (<http://www.heranet.info/oor/index>) on the owners' intellectual property. I figured that working on a video essay would be of relevance to the new project, while at the same time allowing me to pursue scholarly interests that were already up and running.

So I rewatched the whole series in the spring of 2010 and - with the different format in mind - came to notice new features of the show that were now possible to integrate into the analysis. I extracted all the clips that I reckoned would go into the essay, and wrote a 15-page manuscript for the voiceover. The question I have been asked most frequently since the essay was published is how long it took to create. I am afraid I cannot give a very exact answer. As other projects took priority, I had to abandon the video essay for long periods of time. Also, I had no experience with

editing software, so I had to learn everything from scratch. I tried iMovie, but found it a bit too basic for my purposes. Finally, in February 2012, I bought Final Cut Pro X, and for some two months I worked intensively to put everything together, learning as I went (a big thank you goes out to all the people who have uploaded instruction videos on YouTube). At times it was frustrating and quite time-consuming, but I found comfort in the fact that it is basically a one-time investment. I am sure the next video essay will take considerably less time to create. I can honestly say that no one should be put off by the technological challenge.

When it came time to publish the video essay, I explored various options. Ideally, I would have liked to submit it to an academic open access journal. Unfortunately, there are not many such outlets that publish audiovisual work. [Audiovisual Thinking](#) is the only one I know of that is peer reviewed, but they do not accept submissions of more than seven minutes in length or over 50 MB (my video is 36 minutes and 3,87 GB). Hopefully this will change in the future.

However, I was familiar with the superb efforts of Catherine Grant to collect and comment on open access scholarship on moving images on [Film Studies For Free](#), as well as the group forum she curates on Vimeo called [Audiovisualcy](#), which is explicitly dedicated to video essays. I knew she has a considerable following, so there was a good chance the essay would reach at least a few film academics and aficionados if she would promote it. Thankfully she did, and I was very happy with the response. After the first five days the essay had received almost 3000 page loads and been played 257 times - a wider audience, I suspect, than any of my academic articles has had. The next day it was mentioned on [Slate](#) and the numbers skyrocketed. Soon other major media outlets picked it up, like [The Washington Post](#), [A.V. Club](#), and the popular blog [kottke.org](#) (which has generated more hits for the essay than any other site). A very busy week followed. I was first interviewed by a couple of university periodicals, then by the main regional paper, an interview subsequently reproduced in the largest newspaper in Norway. I was invited to speak on national radio, to give a talk at a conference, and I was interviewed by [Co.Create](#). Since then I have also been asked to create a shorter version for high school students, and to talk about the video essay format at other universities looking to integrate it into research and teaching activities. Most pleasing of all, however, were the hundreds of emails I received from all over the world. Many of them were from fans of *The Wire*, from students, or other academics, and I even got one from a Los Angeles-based author and television scriptwriter.

At the time of writing, some six weeks after "Style in *The Wire*" was published, the statistics show 472,065 loads and 56,637 plays. Of course, we regularly hear about videos that get millions of hits on YouTube. But

keep in mind that this essay is not really addressed to a general audience, but primarily to people who have seen *The Wire*. Also, it lasts for more than 36 minutes and is, after all, a piece of scholarship (it does not announce itself as such, of course, and it has crossed my mind that it might have helped its circulation on the internet that it is not branded as “research”). Readership figures for academic articles in scientific journals are hard to come by, but are likely very low. An [essay](#) from 2009 suggested that monographs in the humanities, even at the most prestigious publishing houses, usually sell between 275 and 600 copies, and many of those are library orders. In academic terms, then, “Style in *The Wire*” is something of a blockbuster – and not once, I am happy to say, have I come across the dreaded acronym, [TLDW](#)! I do not expect to ever make another video essay that will be as widely seen as this one, but I will definitely continue to explore the format, both theoretically and practically.

Endnotes:

(1) Editorial note: please also see Erlend Lavik’s peer-reviewed essay in this issue of *Frames*, [‘The Video Essay: The Future of Academic Film and Television Criticism?’](#).

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