Video Essays in the Cinema History Classroom

By Kelli Marshall

Anyone familiar with my [blog](#) and/or [Twitter feed](#) knows I am constantly on the lookout for ways to enhance the university classroom experience. Specifically, I seek ideas and assignments that speak to the time and to my students' skills and interests. For example, in the early 2000s, I offered my Shakespeare students any one of the following for their final project: write a traditional research paper (safe choice), analyze a Shakespeare film (slightly more daring), draw up lesson plans on one of Shakespeare's plays (for education majors), stage a theatrical performance (for theatre buffs), or create a Shakespeare-related website (for the adventurous student/techie). Regarding the latter, one must remember that when this project was offered over a decade ago, websites were relatively new and mostly static. Moreover, software like Dreamweaver and Microsoft FrontPage were the norm, not the easier-to-navigate (and free) [WordPress](#) and [Weebly](#). As a result, those students—those few, those happy few—who opted for the Shakespeare-related website project were embarking on something unusual and challenging.

More recently, I've integrated into my college courses other forms of technology that mirror my students' expertise and interests. Students in my *Seinfeld* and *Film Noir* classes, for example, responded weekly on our class blog to news articles, quotes, scenes, and videos related to the subject matter at hand. As well, in larger courses like *Introduction to Film* (120+ students), I've introduced Twitter. While [students did not always appreciate](#) this microblogging network (e.g., *Ugh, another social network to keep up with?! Twitter has no place in the college classroom!*), I was particularly pleased with the amount of learning that often took place, not to mention the way students noticeably honed their debating skills and learned to pare down their (often wordy) thoughts to the bare minimum of 140 characters or fewer.

It should come as no surprise, then, that I've also recently featured in the classroom another trendy form of new media: the video essay. Broadly, according to John Bresland the purpose of a video essay echoes that of a traditional one: "a means for writers to figure something out" ([Video Essay Suite](#)). But unlike the written essay, all that "figuring out," of course, takes place onscreen. More specifically, [Eric Faden](#) writes that video essays or, as he puts it, *media stylos*

- are designed initially to move across a series of potential platforms from classroom to conference presentation to web streaming
- do not abandon the tools and techniques of oral or alphabetic culture; they simply can use them in new ways
- move scholarship beyond just creating knowledge and take on an aesthetic, poetic function
- should evoke the same pleasure, mystery, allure, and seduction as the very movies that initiated our scholarly inquiry
- should consider formal issues in addition to content (i.e., the creator must consider ideas of image, voice, pacing, text, sound, music, montage, rhythm, etc. In effect, s/he has to deal with the very same problems that his/her subjects deal with)

It is Faden's bullet points that I ultimately used as a guide for my students' video-essay projects.

Last year, my *Cinema History* course, an intensive (six hours per week) study of film from the late 1800s to the 1990s, required students to create a video-essay project and accompanying in-class viewing/presentation. The description and steps were straightforward:

> Historical in nature and requiring some library research, this multi-step group and individual project takes the form of a video essay. Specifically, the group will organize, investigate, and present to the class a film(s), director, movement, technological innovation, etc. according to its place within a historical context and in light of historical developments. Additionally, each student will submit a short written account of the video essay and his/her contribution to it as well as a written evaluation of the group.

To maintain some structure and unity throughout the semester, I required that each video essay be based on and serve as a visual extension of a required reading from the syllabus. Thus, via a wiki, students would place themselves into groups of no more than three by selecting the reading that presumably most interested them (unsurprisingly, the essay "Sex and Sensation," interpreted below in video-essay form, was the first to go). Moreover, the students were to keep in mind Faden's "rules" as well as these, which I put in place on our course website. The video essay should

> 1) contain a clearly defined thesis

> 2) include some form of narration (e.g., voiceovers, intertitles, subtitles)

3) support the thesis with clips and/or still images from/of the films, directors, subjects, etc. under discussion

4) include a bibliographic title card citing at least THREE secondary sources to support your project (your course textbook may serve as one of those sources)

5) boast a catchy title that reiterates the thesis

6) last no longer than 5 minutes

When I created this project and subsequently introduced it to my group of unsuspecting students, most of whom were film majors, I wasn't too worried about the specifics — whether they'd include appropriate narration, a Works Cited section, or high-quality film clips — rather, my primary concern was this: would I, someone who has dabbled in video editing/montage for family events and conference presentations but who has never made a formal video-essay, have to teach them how to do so?

As a result, I awaited, was available for, and encouraged questions, emails, tweets, and Facebook posts from students on the ins and outs of the project. But, aside from a couple of queries that I'd already addressed underneath the video-essay description—is there ripping software for Windows, and how much do I have to pay for MPEG Streamclip?—the questions never came. Instead, the students, in their groups of two or three, tackled the clip-gathering, title cards, voiceover narration, image insertion, and editing transitions themselves. Perhaps most Millennials around the world, if pressed, would be able to do the same?

In virtually any university classroom, student work oscillates from exceptional to shoddy and all the averageness that lies between. This scale certainly held true with my cinema history students' video essays. While some of the projects appeared hasty—e.g., omitting a clear thesis, clocking in at a wimpy 02:30 minutes, excluding a title page/card—several, like the two embedded below, fulfilled my expectations.

In the first, "Sex and Sensation: How Hollywood Popped Its Cherry," the students (non-film majors taking the course as an elective, by the way) begin with a catchy title accompanied by some conventional "porn groove" as a way to engage their audience. Then, not regurgitating but applying ideas from their selected essay—Linda Williams's "Sex and Sensation" (*Oxford History of World Cinema*)—the students introduce clips of *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) to explain the pressure 1960s Hollywood faced from the growing youth audience to

feature more onscreen sex and violence. After this, via voiceover narration and a combination of still and moving images, the students move deftly into Williams's thesis and then offer a historical recap of this notable transition in the film industry as well as what it meant and what it means today. While there are a couple of volume problems, inferior-quality videos, and the clip of *And God Created Woman* (Roger Vadim, 1956) runs a bit too long (in my opinion), overall, this video essay achieves virtually everything on both Faden's and my lists above. It is humorous, appealing, organized, and informative.

The second student video essay embedded here considers the Italian Neorealist movement and is based on Morando Morandini's essay "Italy From Fascism to Neo-Realism" (also from the *Oxford History of World Cinema*). Unlike the "fun" one above, this video essay, which examines filmmakers' cinematic reactions to their poverty-stricken, war-torn country, necessarily exudes a more somber tone. Here, the two students begin mostly with still images of Italy under Fascist rule, using steady voiceover narration and nondiegetic music to infuse the solemn mood. Then, a simple title card with red, white, and green lettering (representing Italy's flag) nicely marks the shift from the pre-war discussion of Mussolini to the post-war directors of Italian Neorealism. Next, although the despairing images from *Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) and *Germany Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1947) are before us, the speed and cadence of the voiceover picks up, now making the (same) underscoring seem slightly more romantic; thus, viewers are offered a somewhat more promising end to the story. Again, there are some poor quality clips here and I'm not sure the section on *Bitter Rice* (Giuseppe De Santis, 1949) is explained thoroughly; but overall, like the one above, this video essay certainly satisfied the assignment's requirements.

To date, some of the finest examples of video essays may be seen on the online videographic forum [Audiovisualcy](#), the Museum of the Moving Image's site [*Moving Image Source*](#), and *Indiewire's* blog [*Press Play*](#). Further, some scholars like [Catherine Grant](#), [Erlend Lavik](#), and [John Walter](#) create video essays themselves as well as [devote entire posts to](#) and oversee conference presentations on this new essay form. The same goes for online journals such as *Transformative Works and Cultures* ([vol. 9 especially](#)), which explore not only video essays, but also related endeavors like vidding, remixes, and mash-ups. Consequently, in our current tech-obsessed, file-and-image-sharing, digital humanities culture—in which even the [University of Pennsylvania offers directions](#) on making a mash-up video and [Tufts University encourages](#) video-essay applications—the video essay isn't likely to vanish anytime soon. So why

not allow and persuade our students to get involved with and help to enhance this inherently modern genre?

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