

From Text to Audio-Visual:

How might academics establish a framework for critical analysis using audio-visual essays?

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Abstract

The audio-visual essay is a particular form of videographic research that has become popular among scholars and amateur critics in the field of film criticism. Where the written word has sufficed for much of the last century when it came to film criticism as a profession, the audio-visual essay, over the last few years, has enabled many respond to film with films of their own.

The potential for film scholars and critics to treat a film within the same audio-visual mode has been the primary motivation of this research, leading to the audio-visual essay.

However, the most important question seemed to be: As a form of essay, what framework could be proposed to make such a method of film criticism useful to scholars in an academic context? What is the difference to the traditional written form and how can both be complementary to one another?

This study will compare conventional essay elements: titles, subheadings and figures, images and tables, as well as citations and references with elements in audio-visual essays. This is being undertaken order to understand where the audio-visual essay is informed by conventional essay structure, but also where the audio-visual essay separates itself structurally from text-based criticism. Ultimately, the study hopes to present a clear framework for academics in film and media studies to teach to students interested in audio-visual essay film criticism as an alternative to conventional written form.

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Introduction

The audio-visual essay can be defined as “essentially a short analytical film about films or film culture, and over the course of the last decade it has become a term that serves as a general metonym for video criticism about the cinematic arts and, to a lesser extent, television.” (McWhirter, 2015)

Academics and scholars of film criticism and culture have taken to this form as a way to engage in film criticism, or as a study of the form itself, which was previously confined to the pages of books, newspaper articles, and all manner of text-based media. Film criticism had, until relatively recently, long relied on the written word to capture the nuances of the media it treated.

Using a list of four elements on the writing of film analysis - Semiotic, Narrative Structure, Contextual, and Mise-en-scene analysis – this research observes, in part, how essayists practicing film criticism on *YouTube* as ‘vocational practitioners,’ adhere to these elements in their work. In thinking about the notion that film scholars in the digital age are now able to respond to images, with their own images, rather than words alone directly informs the core of this research (The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.).

The audio-visual essay offers film scholars a way to engage in traditional forms of film analysis in the same mode as the filmic texts they treat.

This research will address the differences between the audio-visual essay in contrast to the written form, by comparing its methods with traditional essay structures, and disciplines of film analysis, and testing them through the development of video essays. The intention is to propose a framework for producing video essays whilst highlighting the principles of the proposed framework as an academically valid method of engaging in film analysis, and criticism.

Literature Review

Conversations around audio-visual essays, particularly in the realm of videographic criticism are certainly abundant, as with discussions around film criticism in digital mediums (see: Appendix – A). With essayists practicing on web platforms like *YouTube*, and *Vimeo*, there exists a plethora of people who are engaging in the research of audio-visual essays, and people who are actively practicing them. This literature review will look at what is being said in regard to the potential of audio-visual essays in film criticism, but also how it might be possible to discern a framework for scholars to follow in the development of their own audio-visual essays.

In *New Vocabularies in Semiotic Film Theory* (Stam, Burgoyne, Flitterman-Lewis, 1992), the writers state that film criticism in its written form suffered from an inability to totally reflect the audio-visual text. Christian Keathley, writing in *La Camera Stylo*, paraphrases Jean Luc-Godard, “film scholars can now answer images, not only with words, but other images.” (Keathley, 2011). The ability for those who participate in the practice of making audio-visual essays to access digital copies of films and remix them represented an opportunity to maximise film criticism’s mandate to mediate the experience between the consumer and film culture itself.

Keathley also suggests that a space emerges, a common place for the sharing of ideas in which academics and non-academics, professionals and amateurs alike, can engage in this discourse, where such a discourse can be sophisticated enough to meaningfully discuss film, but not so jargon heavy so as to completely alienate those who do not have a background in film criticism. He saw this space as an intellectual compromise between these two groups, within a digital space with wide access to historical documentation and copies of film.

Although essayists can, and do, add a level of performativity to their audio-visual works, the need for the essayist to actually engage in meaningful research when talking about a particular topic on *Youtube* is an important distinction to make between them and the less critical, if entertainment-focused style of commentary. At least in this instance, an effort is being made to apply a conventional framework to their video in order to advance their argument. In other words, they seek to contribute a kind of knowledge, in at the very least, appreciating film as art.

Catherine Grant argues in favour of the potential for the audio-visual essay in the field of academic media studies as being within a different research methodology to either qualitative, or quantitative research. Specifically, as forms of research, where the written form is still very much king, she argues for the written form as supplementary to a performed audio-visual research work. By suggesting that where media studies in academia is concerned, the audio-visual essay, in being able to present research in a multimodal fashion, could offer a new way of conducting research. (Grant, 2016)

She outlines a methodology as performative research; research that is performed instead of simply reported on. She immediately makes a distinction between this and qualitative and

quantitative research. By quoting another scholar, Brad Haseman who said that as distinct from the symbolic words and numbers of the qualitative and quantitative methodologies respectively, symbolic data - by using “material forms of practice” (as in, the physical production of an artefact, made up of various images, sounds and video, and music) - all work together in a performative manner. (Haseman, 2006)

She is quick to balance this with a reference to another scholar, Barbara Bolt, who commented that if such a paradigm is to represent a viable model, then it must be able to do the work expected of other research paradigms. Bolt asserts that it must be able to define itself, its terms and procedures, and hold against scrutiny. (Bolt, 2008)

Grant goes on to describe three works produced by academics seeking to take advantage of this performative research for different purposes, differing in both production and focus, and in the ‘expression’ of their performativity, in other words the manner of their performativity. (Grant, 2016)

Looking at academics Ian Garwood, Domietta Torlasco, and Will Brooker, she illustrates the ways in which each has taken to the medium in which their “production of audiovisual material centrally constitutes [the] research into audiovisuality” (Grant, 2016). Garwood’s essay looking at the role of the voiceover in audiovisual, film and television criticism presents an insightful take on when voiceover is most used, showing examples - not just telling about voiceover - of its role in the audio-visual essay. The essay also comments on the findings of his research regarding a gender divide when it comes to those most likely to incorporate voiceover into their work. He expresses this by providing a female voiceover on top of him essentially speaking to the camera, and in that way conveying his findings. Torlasco, and Brooker offer works that are, as Grant describes them more experimental in their research within the audio-visual form. Torlasco uses a multi-screen aesthetic (video in one, and text in the other), to encourage a critical reading of the footage; the text she provides is presented without context, thus undermining the ease of the viewer to immediately place the footage. Brooker’s research contributes to this idea of audiovisuality - a kind of method-filmmaking - an artefact which he adds to and constructs over time as his practice research into David Bowie develops, through method-acting, and a mixing of various audiovisual material – much of which was his own. His approach to the form provides an insight into the journey of the researcher that is shown through his essay just as much as the research he engages in.

Grant concludes by saying that the selections she references in the article do convey meanings that can be expressed in a written form, but that their “self-contained performative acts...do not merely come back to a ‘constative or descriptive discourse,’” they perform (Grant, 2016). She asserts that their utterances, in not merely being constative, or descriptive, but through the researcher’s engagement with their research, enunciated audiovisually, are by design performative. In that they can be supported by written exegeses, and can contribute to original knowledge as written research does, that contribution made audiovisually is something generated uniquely by that particular performative work.

In returning to Barbara Bolt, she outlines a need to properly define the terms of a performative paradigm, that doesn’t simply conflate a ‘performance’, with ‘performativity.’ She raises a

point that in order to stand alongside (but as distinct from) qualitative and quantitative research paradigms it must be able to hold to the same scrutiny as other forms of research.

She argues that as a research paradigm it cannot operate according to the same procedures as those to which a scientific paradigm adheres; “assessment of the validity of research lies in replication of the same.” (Bolt, 2008), adding that a performative paradigm would instead operate as repetition with difference.

The audio-visual essay could be said to find its place initially within its own replication of the conventions of the traditional written essay. For example, the use of headings and subheadings, quotes and citations in written form research essays, are also common in many audio-visual essays on *YouTube*.

Although essayists on *YouTube* don't always use subheadings to separate different ideas within their essays, those who do will either use title cards or simply apply text over the video to present the idea, or talking point, to be discussed. As Harris Brewis, does in his most recent video, entitled, ‘*Weighing The Value of the Director's Cuts*’ (Brewis, Strucci, 2019), or in his ‘*The Power of VHS*’ (Brewis, Strucci, 2019). Subheadings in these videos take the form of titles, or statements indicating what the next section of the essay is.

Natalie Wynn, whose videos center mainly around socio-political issues pertaining to transgender people, and politics generally, has sometimes switched between black and white title cards and text over the background of her set. An example of the latter would be in her video, ‘The West,’ (Wynn, 2018).

Figures, in a written essay can be used to illustrate, in an accompanying fashion, part of an argument the essayist is making. It visually reinforces and supports what is being said in the work. An audio-visual essay would use images (either text images – still, or moving) or video clips to serve a similar function. This is somewhat separate from simply providing a quote from a scholar or academic on a particular subject, as in Lindsay Ellis, in ‘*Marxism!*’ quoting Theodore Adorno, with a long string of text on screen in quotations, accompanied by a full reference to the text. (Ellis, 2017).

Rather, these ‘figures’ in audio-visual essays are items which could be graphs or segments of an article, or web-based blog that the essayist would either reference directly with voiceover or which would simply accompany their voiceover, illustrating a larger point, as with ‘*Weighing the Value of the Director's Cuts*’ using images of articles and webpages to illustrate different points throughout the essay

Where this replication of the same – as compared with the written form - differs in thinking about the use of citations and quotes is the way in which these quotes are presented. They can sometimes be fairly long quotes, in ‘*Marxism!*’ Ellis uses a quote by Adorno that is long enough to require it to scroll up the screen. However, there is often enough space on the screen for the essayist to include the full quote. In this form, a citation simply isn't needed because it does not take up too much space on the page or screen. It also does not slow down the pace of the work. Although on occasion, some essayists will still include a list of sources in the description box of their videos.

The content of the essays will often include some, if not all, of these in various forms. Mostly, this might seem to come down to that particular essayist's style, or choice for any particular video.

Though this does represent the need for a structure, or general framework which one could follow, in returning to the structures and frameworks of written essays, having one for audio-visual essays would be ideal. In fact, it might be better to view what is being proposed within this research as a framework, given that not everything used in audio-visual essays generally needs to be in every audio-visual essay specifically, but there are some that most certainly do.

The rest then, could arguably come down to creative decisions that the essayist will use, as and when they need to for their essay.

However, in returning to Barbara Bolt describing a performative work as “repetition with difference” consideration about how the audio-visual essay repeats some, if not many, of the same methods as a written essay - while also employing those methods in differing ways - leads to the research question that is currently is being posed:

How might academics establish a framework for critical analysis using audio-visual essays?

Methodology

The methodology that has informed this research has always been a mixed approach research project. Firstly, there was the Grounded Theory, textual analysis approach that enabled the forthcoming research to be very flexible and allow for a broad focus that could be brought in over time. In the early stages of the research, this approach proved to be the most ideal given the kind of theoretical reading, as well as practical learning that had to be done in order to have the basic skills to make the video essays.

It's difficult to engage in practice-based research, that is in one aspect reading theory, and in another key aspect, necessarily producing an artefact, without there being a mixed approach to accommodate them both.

But as the research developed, and continued to focus inward, becoming clearer, another methodology soon revealed itself. As mentioned in the literature review, the idea of 'Performative Research' (Grant, 2015) as a way of thinking about the place of the audio-visual essay offered a distinctive way to look at this research in particular.

As the focus of the research became more about the form of the audio-visual (video) essay itself, rather than the textual analysis of film using an audio-visual format, what followed was a need to think about the audio-visual essay in terms of a kind of practice-based research that wasn't necessarily simply constative, or descriptive; one that could be thought of as similar, but different from text film analysis. Again, as quoted in the literature review "repetition with a difference." (Bolt, 2008).

Although Bolt discusses the idea of a performative paradigm in the context of the creative arts, Grant takes that and argues for the performativity of the audio-visual essay more in the area of academic research. In this way, although the potential for academic research to perform its findings – supplemented with an exegesis – still seems to relate more to the creative arts, this kind of research methodology seems entirely suited to research that shall ultimately take the form of an audio-visual piece, that possesses a creative element, and is more than simply a speech.

I have chosen these methodologies because they lend themselves effortlessly to a practice research that works toward a creative production like a video essay. It allowed me to form and crystallise my research as it progressed leading to a project that proved versatile and effective.

Methods

As this research project continues to grow and refine, it becomes clear that if it is to propose a framework, or a structure for the audio-visual essay, methods for the development of such an essay need to be outlined.

While audio-visual essays on *YouTube* can sometimes be variable in how they present their work, there are still common elements that are adhered to. This is important, as while one might not necessarily want, or be able to, make fully normative claims solely about what audio-visual essays should have, it is nonetheless necessary to outline some points as fundamental to an audio-visual essay.

There should be a basic structure or framework one might use to build on. Again, as it might be preferable to view this structurally as “repetition with difference.” (Bolt, 2008). There will always be an element or more that is not crucial to an audio-visual essay, but that may be useful.

In order to adequately produce a work that reflects this research, it is necessary here to outline a set of methods that will be followed in the production of an audio-visual essay. The results of this will be discussed later in the exegesis.

Structure and Content

As described in the literature review, the audio-visual essays observed on *YouTube* do seem to adhere to some traditional conventions in text-based essays, for example:

Title, headings, subheadings

While this isn't strictly followed in all audio-visual essays on *YouTube*, it is arguably an important inclusion. As clearly heading a section with a title that encapsulates what the following section is going to entail signals what the viewer should expect to hear about. On top of breaking up other related but distinct areas of thought or argument in an essay, subheadings in the form of title cards, or text on the screen supplemented with voiceover or a break in the audio to signify a change, should be a worthy inclusion.

Visuals

As with the use of figures or graphs, particularly in the area of film criticism (as it's easiest to think of it in this way), the appropriate remixing of clips from a film being treated in the essay, along with relevant images and screenshots from online publications, are all examples of visual elements that can be used to reinforce an argument being made. Rather than simply explaining a point, or arguing it, one can use these to show it. Show as you tell.

Content

This point more concerns the manner in which the information in the essay is conveyed. Long, drawn out paragraphs are much easier to commit to the page than it is to remember them when shooting the audio-visual essay. As one is speaking, as if to other people, rather than writing long thought out and complex sentences, the ability to be concise and, where possible, 'show as you tell,' would be ideal, as it would mean taking advantage of another opportunity to visually reinforce a point. This method lends itself to a more conversational tone, while essays can sound 'scripted', it is perhaps easier to rehearse a script that contains short and concise paragraphs than overly complex ideas in long streams of consciousness.

Audio

This can be used in a number of different ways. Firstly, there's voiceover. While those who make audio-visual essays, on *YouTube* in particular, will often follow their own style - some preferring to use voiceover exclusively - it is perhaps not as ideal to rely too heavily on it. As it may be most useful in instances where the visuals being shown are images, quotes, or clips, voiceover may be required to explain their relevance and illustrate how they are being used.

Additionally, the inclusion of music can be necessary too. While it can be useful to have moments of silence, with nothing but a clip, or the essayist speaking to the camera. The inclusion of a musical piece, typically the choice of the essayist, provides another element to the audio-visual essay. In the realm of *YouTube* in particular, how music is sourced and used varies, as copyright concerns can still apply.

YouTube does offer licence-free music for use in videos uploaded to the site, alternatively it is possible to source licenced music from websites like epicmicsound.com, where a subscription is paid and in turn music that is taken from that site can be used under the associated account. As concerns the production of the essays for this project, both will be used.

Research

This would be a given, but it's worth mentioning nonetheless, as a fundamental component of any essay is that one researches the topic, but also the needs of their own essay. This could also be considered the planning stage, as it would be important to visualise the 'set' of your essay before you shoot: What will you include in the frame? How will you show it? If it is a film being treated in the essay, will clips be included? How will they be used? The more planning that goes into the audio-visual essay beforehand that accounts for the various needs of each individual production, the less work needs to be done in the edit.

It is important to note here that with *YouTube* specifically, the 'Fair Use' of copyrighted material does offer essayists working within film criticism room to use it. However, *YouTube* itself stresses that this does not prevent copyright claims from being made. It does however, provide that creator with a defence, if their use of that material can be considered 'Fair Use.' Which, provided the content is being used for entertainment, educational, or research purposes, is more likely to be looked at favourably, as opposed to just posting a video of the film itself. A common rule of thumb often observed by essayists is: no longer than 30 seconds of unedited footage, 10% of a film, and nothing taken that could be considered the "heart" of the film. It is understandably vague, and necessarily so when protecting the rights of all involved. In the case of these essays, it is highly unlikely that any single instance of material used would need to be longer than 30 seconds in a single stretch.

Beyond this, it is difficult to conceive of any further requirements that an audio-visual essay would need. These are the elements one would expect to find in a written essay; they are simply the elements that must exist for the audio-visual essay to do the work such a scholar would need. The particular manner and execution of these methods, broadly, is and should be up to the essayist in response to the needs of any particular essay. Although, all of these elements should exist within the essay in some form.

As argued earlier, when thinking about titles, and headings, although this isn't always followed among essayists on *YouTube* all of the time, the benefit to using it outweighs any reason for not doing so. Additionally, a reference list in the description of any video would be beneficial to any viewer who might wish to follow the sources an essayist might use for a particular video. Given that even with the ability to have the full reference with any given quote in the same place, it can be inconvenient to have to search through the entire video, or pause it to write down the entire reference just to check it.

These are the methods that will be followed in production of the essays for this research.

Discussion

Analysis: Ready Player One Audio-Visual Essay

Titles, Headings, Subheadings



Figure 1: Topic Subheading, *Ready Player One* essay



Figure 2: Titlecard - Finish, *Ready Player One* essay

Through the development of the *Ready Player One* essay, subheadings and titles were used to visually provide a distinction between different sections in the essay. It also provided a way to pause in the audio. This function of pausing, something arguably atypical in an audio-visual product, serves to signal a change that would bring attention to the subheading and the change from one point in the essay to another.

Figure 1, and Figure 2, are different ways that a ‘titlecard’ format could be used to display headings, subheadings, and the like. Although in this instance, their use and their display was largely a last-minute attempt at an artistic expression of this principle, it nonetheless exemplifies the options that are available. In other words, do-it-yourself images can still offer some kind of a visual bent.

The ability to clearly segment parts of the essay arguably makes the whole essay easier to follow. Often longer essays suffer from the challenge they present to the viewer to recall their specific points; they tend to provide more of a broad overview of the subject matter.

From experience, while the inclusion of a title would be a given, its place in the essay can either go at the very beginning or at the end of the introduction.

Subheadings themselves arguably should be included, especially in longer form essays. Although an argument can be made to split one essay into parts, this decision should be made according to the needs of the individual essay and the relative skill level of the essayist. Longer

essays will require more time and skill than shorter essays to make with quality. So, firstly, shorter essays should be the focus of newer essayists rather than prioritising lengthy think-pieces.

Writing (Script)

The way a video essay is written is perhaps an obvious but important factor to consider. Although it is possible to write the audio-visual essay like any script, if the skill level of the essayist is a concern, then the script should be short. Remembering the words can be difficult to rehearse if the paragraphs are too long or too wordy.

With essays that use technical or academic language, this is going to be difficult – practicing one’s lines may be the only remedy for this issue. Otherwise, making the lines clear and concise, the language and wording meaningful and exact, will save time in the shoot. Especially if employing the help of others to use the camera and recording equipment.

In creating the *Ready Player One* essay, remembering long paragraphs with very limited experience proved to be a considerable challenge during the shoot. Arguably, shorter paragraphs and more concise language would have made this part of the process easier.

Images



Figure 3: Movie Banner, with added Text, Ready Player One essay

Images, and where applicable, figures and tables are an important way to provide additional information to a subject and the treatment of a film. What these images are is of course going to differ between essays, but they can take the form of screenshots of articles that can be referred to through voiceover.

With the *Ready Player One* essay, images served sometimes to provide additional information, but also to fill the space between edited clips from the film and segments with myself in front of the camera, as with Figure 3. The latter point, ideally, should not be the reason an image is used. Naturally, everything that is used within the essay should be used with the specific intention to advance the argument of the essay, rather than for any aesthetic or vanity reasons.

In this essay, such combinations of images and text were used this way due to unforeseen time constraints and a lack of footage including myself in front of the camera. Images used in

this essay included miscellaneous graphics relating to the philosophical ideas discussed in the essay which pertained to semiotics, as well as images from the film and promotional material for the film. While, this surely helped keep the focus on the ideas and the film themselves, their need to serve as filler-content meant that they would be less impactful than if they were to be used more sparsely or carefully.

Text: Quotations, Use and Placement

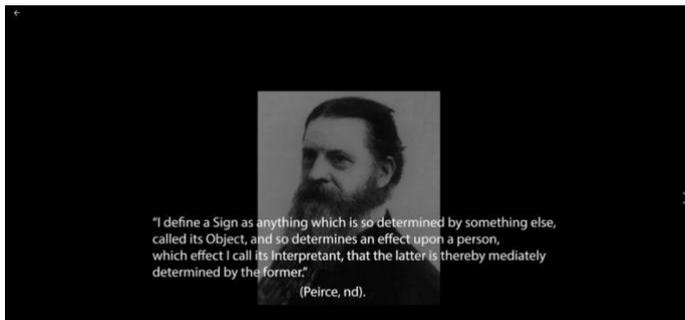


Figure 4: *Quote With Opaque Image of Peirce. Citation Included, Ready Player One essay*

Figure 4 offers an example of what including a quote with a citation can look like. It is a choice, to go with the full reference instead of just the citation. One should always bear in mind with the length of a quote, not to be overwhelming. Much like the length of remixed footage, use only what is needed to make the point. It helps to have some kind of visual accompaniment where appropriate.

Often text placed over the image would serve to try to bring more direct meaning to the image, as was the case in this essay it tries to do the work of the voiceover. It could be argued that an image has the greatest impact when accompanied with text that explains its relevance. If text that is not a reference or a citation is to be used alongside an image, it should not be present alongside the audio, otherwise the text should reinforce the audio. Adding text to an image alongside audio in this essay, can mean that the viewer has to read and hear two different messages simultaneously, which can be confusing and ultimately detrimental to whatever point is being made at the time. Additionally, text that is present on the screen over an image should be short and concise; if it takes up too much space on the screen it can stifle the pace of the audio-visual essay and make any image used seem noisy.

Where this would be different is where a quote is used, or the text otherwise *is* the image. Over a black or otherwise opaque screen, quote text can be a useful way to convey the words of experts or relevant individuals. Accompanying quotes can be the full reference, or the citation. Many essayists will favour placing the full reference rather than the citation as it is possible to take up that space without the screen becoming noisy.

It is recommended that a list of sources / references should accompany the video in any available description box. The reason for this is that while adding the full reference to a quote in an audio-visual essay would make pointing to it at least somewhat easier, having to go back through the video to find the exact point where the quote and reference are used would be a frustrating exercise. So, including them both in the video and its description box would make it easier for someone wishing to check those sources to do so.

Remixed Clips and Copyright

Achieving a balance between the use of clips from *Ready Player One* and footage of me speaking to the camera proved an interesting challenge. This would likely be the primary concern of the essayist in planning and executing their audio-visual essays. Depending on the platform the video is bound for, and fair use laws in one's own country, what and how much of a film is used, and how that usage is regarded in a legal context, can and should inform an essay.

While no amount of copyrighted material necessarily protects anyone from having the video taken down or the essayist challenged in court, fair use does provide a means for a more favourable view of the use of that material in an essay. This is going to be highly relevant to any student making videographic film criticism, but as there are no specific rules for usage, often one will follow general rules of thumb that may nonetheless be useful in determining how much of any one segment of film is needed to make a point.

For the purposes of this essay, no one clip of unedited footage from the film is longer than thirty seconds. This is arguably a point that would allow an essayist to be more critical of footage from the film that is used. An argument made, supplemented with a clear and concise clip from the film would be preferable to one that drones on. It is unlikely that one is going to encounter too many situations where longer clips are needed, without being able to break them up with an image or a return to the essayist speaking.

When it came to the *Ready Player One* essay, I (the essayist) was only on camera for a relatively small portion of the essay overall. Unforeseen time constraints ended up informing certain creative decisions; ideally more footage of me in front of the camera would have been better. There are two reasons for this:

1. As the essay relied on footage from the film, and footage used to supplement the discussion of semiotics in the essay, having more of me present would have made every element within the essay more impactful, rather than relying on extra footage and images to fill space for the audio.
2. While it is entirely possible, and reasonable, to make an audio-visual essay without having the essayist shown within the essay itself, it does make the planning and execution of the essay more difficult and time consuming. However, as my own skill level was low (this being my first audio-visual essay) having less footage of me ultimately made the process much more difficult and meant more work in the edit. If one is inexperienced and working to a deadline, this is not ideal. Better planning in the early stages would ensure that this is less likely to happen, or at the very least alternative solutions are available beforehand.

Ultimately, whether an essayist uses themselves in front of the camera or not can be a creative choice. However daunting it may seem, being present in the essay where possible does make it easier in terms of splitting up the content of the essay as well as serving to create a better connection between the researcher with their research. Rather than simply being behind the screen, actively participating in the making of the essay resulting from research lends itself to the performativity that Catherine Grant and Barbara Bolt have commented on. As with an audio-visual essay, it can be harder for an essayist to be removed from their research than with the written form, it also presents an opportunity to provide more visually and creatively than relying on film footage alone.

Although it was not used, showing the footage through a monitor or blue screen within the frame offers a second way to show clips from the film while being actively present to discuss it. Using this alongside remixed clips and voiceover in an essay gives the essayist options. It shows versatility and can avoid monotony, and can arguably be preferable in some situations to using too much voiceover in the edit.

Using one's own footage also provides an opportunity to experiment further with the form, by adding visual references to the subject, or topic, of the essay. Although they were partially hidden throughout the essay, small figurines from the film were present to symbolise the significance of pop-culture in *Ready Player One*. In this instance, ideally having had more of them in a garish and overbearing manner would have exaggerated and reinforced that point. But nonetheless, its potential, and actual use serves as an example of the kind of visual and symbolic layering that can be employed by an essayist.

Audio, and Editing

In terms of audio, the use of voiceover is something that every essayist should consider. The primary issue with the *Ready Player One* essay was that due to a lack of footage, a full voiceover of the script had to be done separately, and edited as necessary. Much like most, if not all, elements in an audio-visual essay, the use of voiceover should be made with specific purpose. It should be meaningful in how and where it is used, rather than simply being used for the sake of it. But it also ultimately depends on whether the essayist intends to be present in the essay. Because the essayist may decide not to be present in the essay, it is dependant on their choices.

Voiceover does present interesting challenges in the edit, but if properly planned in advance this challenge can be mitigated. Nevertheless, syncing voiceover with clips, images and even footage obtained oneself can be difficult.

Recording audio without a studio can easily result in some echoing, popping, or otherwise metallic sounds present within the essay. Being able to DIY this particular concern is a skill in itself. However, as it concerns the *Ready Player One* essay, the voiceover was obtained using a cardioid USB microphone with a pop-filter. If an essayist is forced to contend with echo and background noise, it is possible to mitigate this through editing but may not fully remove it. If

one is not operating within a sound-proof area, being able to mitigate echo and metallic noises as much as possible by isolating them with editing software is going to be a useful tool.

Doing this makes the voiceover less jarring to listen to, and makes the sound of the essay overall much easier.

In the editing process, this alone proved to be the most time consuming and skill intensive element of the essay. Putting it together, and editing it is a difficult but essential task. Myriad editing software exists, but many of the free options often come with a lot of preparation work required. This would still be a challenge with more well-known and expensive software, but may not necessarily have the same features. Many tutorials exist for different needs, however, the usefulness of each tutorial is highly variable and may not necessarily make this process easier.

Beyond these concerns, the writing, shooting, and editing elements are fundamental and inevitable parts of the process. However the manner in which the visuals, and the audio, not merely their inclusion but the way that they are used in the essay are essential but also variable. While they should be present in audio-visual essays as a standard framework, as experienced both in the *Ready Player One* essay, and in observing other essayists throughout the year, the way in which these elements can be employed can vary according to the creative choices of the essayist and the needs of the essay itself.

So, while there are certainly elements that should be present, the essayist can be flexible in how they choose to present them.

Performative Research, and Performance

This is arguably the key distinction between a written essay and an audio-visual one. Catherine Grant concludes that all the audio-visual essays she has discussed “do not merely come back to a constative or descriptive discourse,” (Grant 2016) they perform the research that informs the audio-visual essays. Every decision going into the production of an audio-visual essay following from research for the *Ready Player One* essay, from writing, to clips from the film and every other principle of the framework proposed here were informed by these concerns.

Each decision had to be motivated not necessarily by what principles would be included, but by how each principle would be used in the audio-visual essay. They were creative decisions informed by the need to translate the research into an analysis for the audio-visual medium. This included considerations such as: how best to translate said research into a short script; how to present that research audio-visually, in terms of clips from the film; how it could be presented by myself on camera; and where and when to use narration or even what music is appropriate and when.

While the audio-visual essay does take from the conventional written form of film analysis, there is a point at which the audio-visual essay departs because the framework of the audio-visual essay can be applied differently depending on how the essayist chooses to make use of them.

As the *Ready Player One* essay was a contextual analysis using semiotic film theory, both to explain semiotics and also to show how it can be applied to a film, decisions had to be made to present that information in a way that wouldn't come across as alienating.

For example, it would be difficult to get past much of the technical language found in semiotics, not to mention the possibly vague and general nature of the topic. Where possible, explanations of semiotics were accompanied with remixed clips of various kinds of signs: text, neon, symbolic. Rather than relying on abstract verbal descriptions alone, visual reinforcement in the form of those clips provided a way to use the audio-visual medium to its fullest.

The research also informed which segments from the film would be necessary as it explored where and how signs are used in *Ready Player One*. A film entirely about pop-cultural signifiers, would be filled with them. But then these signs also need to be tied together in this analysis, for which this particular audio-visual essay, while still a semiotic analysis, necessarily becomes a narrative and contextual analysis.

The performativity that the research takes on through the audio-visual essay makes it possible to express that research in ways that don't just describe or assert an argument, but show and visually prove that research. In reference to the performativity of audio-visual essays, Grant asserts, "they perform, they accomplish, they do what they say they do." (Grant 2016) In other words, the audio-visual essay is more than just a performance. Yes, they perform but their performativity lies, arguably, in their ability to express research as part of a creative production because the essayist must decide, how that research is going to be expressed. The researcher, now essayist must actively participate in producing the audio-visual essay they will ultimately perform, requiring creative decisions to determine how best to perform that research through an audio-visual analysis.

When thinking about the *Ready Player One* essay, it did not simply try to provide a semiotic analysis, but show through images, text and the very kind of symbolism described with voice-over. It did not just verbally assert an argument about semiotics, but through clips from the film and elsewhere, attempted to visually show this argument. Its performativity is that it can be both of these, but also quite different in its execution.

Summary

This creative freedom in being able to choose how research can be presented through audio-visual essays seems just as necessary to the development of audio-visual essays as any other principle of the framework proposed in this research. The performativity of the audio-visual essay, in film analysis in particular, as well as in the creative and cultural industries in general offers a contribution to knowledge that is at least distinct from the written form in its performance and creative participation of the researcher.

Thinking of film and media studies academics, being able to present film analysis and research as an audio-visual essay could be an ideal option. Being able to research a topic or a subject to then apply to the analysis of a piece of media or film would provide academics and students alike with an alternative way to engage with that analysis that does not necessarily need to

replace the written word altogether. An accompanying exegesis can serve to ground the audio-visual essay with a more concise summary as a supporting document to the performed research.

However, in performing research that is wholly theirs, the essayist could adopt a framework as applied research. In that case, the audio-visual essay presents an opportunity to conduct research on a subject and creatively apply it using a framework as guidelines.

What resulted from the *Ready Player One* essay is that while the actual execution suffered somewhat from a consequence of completing some aspects out of order; (some clips and images were sourced in the editing stage, for example), the principles of the framework could still be followed and applied to develop an audio-visual essay.

Still, Brad Haseman, makes the point that research that is practice-led is fundamental to performative research. In providing a distinction between it as a research paradigm and qualitative and quantitative research he says that performative research is, “expressed in nonnumeric data, but in forms of symbolic data other than words in discursive text. These include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code.” (Haseman, 2006)

This distinction seems fairly represented in the argument made above. In thinking about the ways in which the principles of the framework proposed here, research that can be considered performative is made up of different kinds of symbolic data; moving and still images as well as music, and sound; audio-visual presentation of research.

An audio-visual essay in its parts is precisely this; a collection of symbolic moving and still images – with text – sound, and music, that is arranged through a creative production to present research. It is not merely a performance, but the practice-led all-important end to which that research is directed.

Ultimately, this also both points to its distinction as an alternative way to provide film or media analysis, and it reinforces the argument for performativity as a valid form of research methodology. This lends itself to not merely those academics and students practicing within film and media studies, but to the humanities and cultural studies more broadly where research can be expressed as a personal application through the audio-visual essay.

Conclusion

The most significant distinction between the written essay and the audio-visual essay, in any context but specifically in film and media analysis, is the performative principle of the latter. Additionally, while the framework of audio-visual essays in general can be informed by elements common in written essays, the creative production of the audio-visual can lead to essayists applying their research differently by engaging with creative decisions that will determine how those principles covered in the method and discussion are used within the audio-visual medium.

Academics using audio-visual essays might employ this framework as a form of applied research given that an analysis of media, and of film, would involve research using the principles outlined with this framework to apply it into a medium that reflects the media being treated.

In returning to the question of this research, how might academics establish a framework for critical analysis using audio-visual essays? I sum up the answer above as this: In establishing, and proposing such a framework, the audio-visual form offers considerable freedom and versatility in the presentation and performance of a practice-led research project. Academics can apply these principles in varying ways, as producing in this form is also in effect a creative production. The audio-visual form offers much in terms of potential to academics and students alike.

This, perhaps, points to where this research could go next: beyond merely proposing a framework, more granular research into its potential applications would support ascertainment of its viability in various disciplines like film and media studies and also within academia more broadly.

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Appendix - A

Broad Context: Film Criticism in the Digital Age

In order to understand the landscape of film commentary on YouTube, it is perhaps useful to understand what is being said on the subject of film commentary more broadly. *Film Criticism in the Digital Age*, also published in 2015, is an anthology work broadly concerned with the issues the various contributors note within each chapter. Mattias Frey, in his chapter on ‘The New Democracy?’ a piece on the state, nature, and discourses around film criticism in the realm of IMDb, Twitter, and Rotten Tomatoes. Looking at RT in terms of arguments made around the democratisation of film criticism, and the availability, and access that such a platform provides. He observes this in context with the general history of film criticism.

While he concludes that there is some level of democratisation in the sense of a kind of “training” as he puts it, in there being a lower barrier to entry, making it easier for a broader public to become film critics. He notes throughout his article, that the utopian notions of democratisation within this supposed era of digital change, the “profession” in a sense, still ultimately has to maintain a fairly strict top-down hierarchy; the fundamental dynamic between the critic, and the reader. Which means that there must always be a distinction between the more official (or as described throughout the text) “professional” critic, and the occasional Rotten Tomatoes contributor. Adding that these notions in themselves do not constitute a new phenomenon, they are in fact present in times of change like this. He points to the advent of digital film in the 90’s, leading to a saturation of amateur filmmakers, the same discourse around democratisation happened then as well.

But that ultimately, while a minimal amount of this democratisation is certainly present, it, and access to the practice, do not necessarily define, or properly reflect the change that is seen. That while the changes have the initial appearance and potential of leading to a more utopian, egalitarian, form. It must replicate the same relations and hierarchies that existed in its previous mediums, and as such are less about innovation, than, re-invention.

Other writers, such as Armond White, and Nick James point to concerns around the weakening of the extant print-based institutions, the impact of the internet’s amateur bloggers, on the profession of the critic, their livelihoods and their roles, both institutional, and social, referring mostly to the dynamic between themselves and their readers as informed authoritative critics, and those readers looking for a reasoned evaluation of film. They talk broadly about the immediacy with which a blogger might turn out a think piece on a film, but also talking about that blogger in a sea of bloggers.

Eroding the social relevance, and size of print-based columnists and their columns, rendering their profession somewhat obsolete. Informed by this saturation of “internetters” (White, 2015) the existing professional critic is no longer needed, their training, expertise, and socially and institutionally constructed authority under threat by those who could pirate entire copies of film and offer an opinion.

White, and James, also noted, quite importantly, one thing they saw as a distinction between critics who evaluate film as an art, made up of politics, and meaning, among other facets important to the appreciation of film as cultural artefacts. They point to bloggers, and critics

who seem more concerned with just talking about movies as fun, or with a somewhat anti-intellectual slant, to quote White:

“Recently, professional critics have felt a backlash from the internet frenzy... This backlash follows a perfect storm of anti-intellectual prejudice; movies are considered fun that needn't be taken seriously. Movies contain ideas better left unexamined.”

(White, 2015)

To a point this could be considered accurate, there are a number of channels on YouTube, whose most widely consumed content are videos that make light of a film rather than discuss or theorise about it. As in the case of Screen Junkies, Honest Trailers series, it provides a comedic voice over in the form of a trailer that aims to satirise rather than discuss any particular film. Cinema Sins, again arguably most known for their “Everything Wrong With...” videos offer videos that point out every conceivable thing wrong with a particular film, and these are not designed ever to really interrogate those flaws. Merely to identify them, as “gotchas”.

It is even possible to view an Honest Trailer on the subject of a film, on YouTube, while in a tile next to the video is an option to purchase the movie being satirised. Which in itself is a perfect illustration of the issue these writers saw with this form of commentary being more as a promotional tool for a film, or even simply entertainment itself, than an evaluative criticism of film. Rather than engaging with film as a legitimate cultural artefact, worthy of discourse, they see these forms of commentary as almost overlapping the older tradition of film review.

Armond White argues, in his article about What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Film, that from the likes of Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris, film criticism, and the function of the critic, was best a mediation between the consumer and film culture. But has instead become a marketing tool, and a way to reinforce the commodification and profitability of film. He makes a distinction between Pauline Kael, and Roger Ebert, the latter having contributed to a “normalisation” or a change in how the average joe, sees film discourse. Making it appear as though any particular person could, just do it, rather than it being something to strive toward.

He refers to others who commented on Ebert, in his way of reducing film discourse to a mere, like or dislike binary, in moving away from any discussion of a films attempts at political or moral issues. Just a thumbs up, or down, nothing more.

Film commentary is easy if all one has to do is reduce the film to “good” or “bad”.

He goes on to talk about the “internetters” who seized an opportunity with the advent of new technologies to themselves just become critics, he notes a confusion of this opportunity in the eyes of such individuals as mistaking it for democratisation. Film discourse, becoming less about discourse and more of an unthinking reductive binary.

Ultimately, he sees the role of the critic as being to help enlighten the reader, and contribute to film culture. But that due to the advent of new technologies and a changing of the perception of film discourse on the part of different critics and a saturation of internet bloggers copying this form of “conversation” as more of a misnomer for the actual absence of it. Noting at the same time, the danger to film criticism in the form of publishers wishing to prioritise the industry (money), over the art form, as also contributing to what in one sense is a very real perception problem for film criticism.

Nick James diverges in that he concerns himself more with the very need for the critic, in an age where anyone on the internet with access to a connection, a platform, and a vast wealth of historical information to potentially inform their review of a film, would an established critic even need to be paid for their work. He defines a critic as someone who writes about film for a living, and focuses in on film criticism in the United Kingdom. As the entire industry (if one wants to group: film critics, the platform – print or web - within which their work is placed, and the publishers themselves). Shifts from newspapers to the web as established publishers seek to follow the growth in ad revenue on the internet further exacerbating the fall in revenue for resistant print-based publishers.

The “status of the professional film reviewer” (James, 2015) has he puts it, is threatened, at least in part, by the access afforded to new amateur critics. He notes that such bloggers are less constrained by the politics of their particular institution, or the editorial tampering of their publisher, and even the length of their work can be decisions made entirely free of such concerns.

He, in a similar vein to White, notes marketing as undermining the profession of the critic. With more adherence paid to PR material than any meaningful discussion of film, or at least as much. Film review, then becoming more about the promotion of a film than an insightful critique of it. But this was still just one issue.

He goes on to note the history of the relationship between the amateur and professional critic in the literary arena from several centuries ago until relatively recently, noting the need for the critic, as literacy increased and the reading public grew, to distinguish themselves as experts apart from everyone else.

He adds:

“Criticisms fundamental weakness is arguably the dichotomy between the claim of special expertise – as an outsider – and the wish to speak as a legitimising part of the community.”

He does seem to see this as also being the same territorial space that is negotiated by professional and amateur critics in this day and age. As he ends by saying that he isn't calling for a kind of critical purity against the rise of the amateur blogger. But rather that the advent of internet-based amateur critics do enjoy certain creative licenses that established and institutionally bound professionals do not. Suggesting, it seems, that as long as the amateur blogger has access to new films to review, then the need for the critic is not wholly lost. Especially as even with the changing of the times, print-based critics are not entirely without work.