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The Video Essay

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presented in the first half of the book: problems of ethnicity, visual arts, translation, the sacred and the secular, the sublime and the ordinary. The lead essay, a review of three books by Jerome McGann, supports and clarifies Bernstein's own position, expressed in foregoing and following essays. Bernstein discusses McGann's view on the poem as a social act always immersed in human life: "a *poem* is a social event—a work of literature—embedded in a dynamic, multilayered historical and ideological context." By contrast, the *text* is, like a musical score, a flat linguistic set of signs and directions, a "document" but not itself a work of art.

This leads me to ponder what this book has to offer fans of the essay genre. Bernstein's voice is strong, serious, and playful, despite his disavowal

of the reality of voice, and his essays flesh out conventional forms or often playfully refuse to play by the rules of form ("Fraud's Phantoms," "Fulcrum Interview," "Poetry Bailout," "Recantorium"). Though these essays and the ideas presented are not new, the mainstream of the essay genre is a match for the poetry world mainstream. Let me seed some of Bernstein's notions from poem to essay: an essay is a social act and event. An essay is always embedded in a social context. There is no idealized self as voice expressing through language; rather, the writing emerges from a social role and meets the reader in a social role. The stream of sound is the essay, not the words on the page. The work of art is the language brought to life by the reader; it is not the artifact composed into a flat dead text. The essay is

the living performance co-created by the text and the reader. I think here of Thelonious Monk's directive for listening that I like to tell my students regarding both learning anything and reading poems: "I lay it down, but you got to pick it up."

Rosemary Winslow is a poet and professor of literature and rhetoric at Catholic University of America. In addition to Green Bodies, a collection of poetry, she has published poetry in The Southern Review, Innisfree, and elsewhere, as well as numerous essays on poetics, prosody, metrics, and related concepts.

The Video Essay

Ned Stuckey-French

In the winter of 1992, Phillip Lopate published a groundbreaking piece in the *Threepenny Review* titled "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film." Lopate's attempt to define the essay elevated the form's words over its images. This centaur might be a hybrid, but it should "represent a single voice," possess a "strong, personal point of view," and be "eloquent, well-written and interesting."

Lopate acknowledged the limitations of his approach and reminded readers he was a literary essayist and "not a film theorist," but his admissions did not stop film critics such as Paul Arthur, Laura Rascaroli, and Timothy Corrigan from criticizing Lopate's criteria as subjective and logocentric. Arthur pointed out, for instance, that because "film operates simultaneously on multiple discursive levels—image, speech, titles, music—the literary essay's single determining voice is dispersed into cinema's multi-channel stew."

Lopate also fretted about how few essay-films there were. The form's rarity, he argued, resulted from film's collaborative nature and high production costs, and the medium's resistance to "verbal largesse" and tendency to catch and preserve unplanned images. These factors, he said, pulled the final cut away from the filmmaker's singular, essayistic vision.

Of course, since 1992, when Lopate wrote, we've experienced a digital revolution. Lopate's essay-film is no longer rare, nor is it always as "literary" or word-centered as he thought it should be. Small, inexpensive video cameras, free editing software, and the Internet have made it easy to make and distribute videos. As John Bresland, one of a number of fine young video-essayists experimenting with this new technology, puts it, "Today, to make a small-scale personal film, you can shoot the thing on an inexpensive digital camera and upload it to any number of free video sharing sites.... You can shoot and edit video, compelling video, on a cell phone." Essay-films have become video essays, and they're everywhere. Facebook posts link to them. Online magazines devote special issues and regular sections to them. They've begun to appear in both literature and essay-writing classes. At universities such as Ohio State, Kentucky, Denver, and Florida State (where I teach), students are creating video essays in new, interdisciplinary programs that bring together editing, writing, rhetoric, and digital and media studies. High school students include video essays in their college applications.

These popular, easy-to-use technologies allow millions of people, including many who consider themselves essayists first, to bypass production teams and wrestle individually with the problems Lopate raised. The results are exciting, but they are

not usually feature-length films, though filmmakers that Lopate discussed such as Michael Moore and Ross McElwee have continued to produce important and longer work.

Lopate (like most of the critics who have discussed the essay-film) did not address the question of length head-on. He wrote admiringly of the work of Chris Marker, for instance, but when he did, he did not talk about the question of length, even though Marker's work would seem to raise it. Lopate referred to the "essayistic tendency" in Marker's films *Sans Soleil* (1983) and *Grin Without the Cat* (1977), but did not mention the fact that the former is a hundred minutes long, the latter four hours. Video-essays today are more likely to be six minutes long, a length more in keeping with the print essay's tradition of brevity. Just as the Top 40 format of AM radio militated toward the two-minute single, so has YouTube led to the proliferation of the short video.

Essay-films have become video essays, and they're everywhere.

Though video essays are available on YouTube, they are often collected first on the websites of video essayists or online magazines. If you are new to the form, a good place to start is the piece by John Bresland that I quoted above. Titled "On the Origin of the Video Essay," it introduced a suite of six video essays that Bresland curated for the spring 2010 issue of *Blackbird* magazine. In addition to Bresland's "Mangoes," a meditation on gender and fatherhood, the group includes pieces that use documentary montage, animation, metaphoric mashups, and other special effects. All six pieces are excellent, but I found "Zadine," a collaboration by poet Claudia Rankine and her husband, photographer John Lucas, the most arresting. It also challenges some of Lopate's preconceptions about singular voice and where such a voice comes from. In "Zadine," Rankine reads a lyrical pastiche of passages about race from works such as Shakespeare's *Othello* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), but she makes them very much her own in the way that David Shields has argued essayists must. Her prose-poem provides a voiceover to a slow motion replay of a moment in the overtime of the 2006 World Cup final when the great Algerian-born French soccer player Zinedine Zidane head-butted the Italian Marco Materazzi. As the video crawls like a five-minute replay of the 486 frames of the Zapruder film, Rankine punctuates her text with the racist taunts of Zidane that Materazzi is alleged to have made: "Big Algerian shit! Dirty terrorist!"

Lopate worried that collaboration worked against the expression of the individual voice essential to the essay-film, but he was thinking of film crews, editors, soundmen, and production assistants. The video essay, on the other hand, seems to be friendly to collaboration, especially in pairs. Bresland's *Blackbird* suite also includes a piece by collaborators Jessica Bardsley and Penny Lane. Bresland and his wife, the noted essayist Eula Biss, have also begun to collaborate on video essays (see their "Ode to Every Thing" at Bresland's website), as have the married poets Robyn Schiff and Nick Twemlow, whose moving piece "Radon" appeared in a more recent issue of *Blackbird*.

Another magazine that features video essays is *Ninth Letter*. A collaboration of the Creative Writing Program and the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois, *Ninth Letter* focuses on innovative design and, as its name suggests, first-person narratives. Each online issue of the magazine features a video artist, including Bresland (twice), and in issue 20, Marilyn Freeman, whose video essay "Baptism" appeared in the *Blackbird* suite. The piece by Freeman featured in *Ninth Letter* is called "Reverence." It makes beautiful use of silence and repetition in its audio text, and equally beautiful use of depth of field to explore a field of marsh grass like the one her audio describes. As Freeman explains in an interview that accompanies the piece in *Ninth Letter*, "Reverence" is one in a series she calls *CinemaDivina* that she "created to help foster contemplation, reflection, and inspiration."

Ninth Letter has also posted the work of avant-garde artists such as Brian Oliu and Ander Monson, who represent the first generation to grow up digital. Oliu's essays reflect the influence, visually and verbally, of 8-bit video games, rap music, and the work of his mentors, cutting edge essayists like Lia Purpura, Kate Bernheimer, and Michael Martone. Oliu's "siren(1).exe," a kind of verbal video game, appeared first in *Ninth Letter* 6.1, but then migrated to YouTube as a video essay.

One of Monson's essays, "Solipsism," moved in the opposite direction, going from cyberspace to print. He published it first at his website *Other Electricities*. Then, with the editorial help of Wendy Sumner-Winter, the piece appeared in the print journal *Pinch*, after which it was anthologized in *The Best American Essays 2008*. It can now be found in Monson's astounding collection *Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir* (2010; see "Stringing Us Along," page 12), which is accompanied by its own website. Monson's essay "I Have Been Thinking of Snow" took the more

————— *Stuckey-French continued on next page*

traditional route, moving from his book *Neck Deep and Other Predicaments* (2007) to a YouTube version that makes haunting use of images of several Braille books about snow that Monson obtained through inter-library loan.

In 1993, as a high school senior, Monson got caught hacking into the files of a credit card company. He was expelled from school and his acceptance to Rice University was withdrawn, but he did not go to jail because he didn't use the information. He now has degrees from Knox College, Iowa State, and the University of Alabama, and teaches at the University of Arizona. As he explained to the *New York Times*, "Most stuff I do comes out of this basic desire to play, to hack, to open things up, whether it's language or new technologies, or the ways in which they intersect."

This, of course, might be the motto of most of the people experimenting with the video essay right now, for just as video has already taken the form beyond Lopate's centaur, the essay-film, so have new media begun to move the video essay out of the little magazines into other less "literary" venues. Some of this work might seem especially mainstream and commercial. Ron Charles posts hilarious video book reviews at the website of the *Washington Post* that many viewers might consider to be video essays. Some book trailers might also qualify as video essays. *Publisher's Weekly* described as "stunning" the trailer Tucker Capps produced from Sarabande Books to promote Ryan Van Meter's collection of essays, *If You Knew Then What I Know Now* (2011), which is equally stunning.

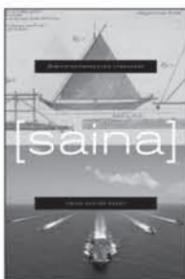
Some of the new video essays will appear on blogs. Bill Roorbach is running an ongoing video memoir, "I Used to Play in Bands," at *Bill and Dave's Cocktail Hour*, the site he shares with David Gessner. Dinty Moore's *Brevity Blog* has been an important resource for those of us interested in online essay experiments, and among the most innovative and interesting is Moore's own "Mr. Plimpton's Revenge," which uses Google Maps as its platform.

Undoubtedly, video essays will make increased use of computer-generated imagery and animation. A notable example is Josh Raskin and Jerry Levitan's "I Met the Walrus" (2007), their Academy Award-nominated, Essay Prize-winning, *Yellow Submarine*-style recreation of an interview the fourteen-year-old Levitan did with John Lennon in 1969. Working with familiar animated images will mean taking on Disney and copyright law, as Eric Faden has made clear in his hilarious video essay "A Fair(y) Use Tale," made up entirely of snippets of Disney films. Fans of this kind of work also are waiting to see what Alison Bechdel will do next. Bechdel, creator of the *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic strip and the graphic memoir *Fun Home* (2006), has begun to post fascinating videos on her blog that describe her creative process. Her multimedia talk at the 2008 NonfictionNow Conference is already legendary, and all who witnessed it hope that a version of it will soon be posted on the Internet.

Contemporary essayists and appreciators of the form owe a lot to Phillip Lopate. His 1997 anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* did so much to introduce many of us to the essay's print tradition, and "In Search of the Centaur" began a discussion about the film-essay, but as this small sampling should make clear, the video essay has only begun to add to the essay's tradition.

Ned Stuckey-French is co-editor (with Carl Klaus) of Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time (2012). His essays have appeared in magazines such as In These Times, Missouri Review, culturefront, Pinch, Guernica, and middlebrow.

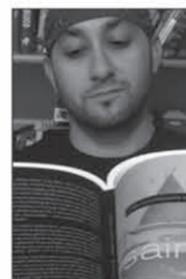
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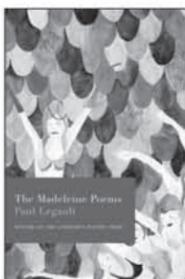
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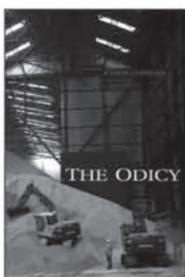
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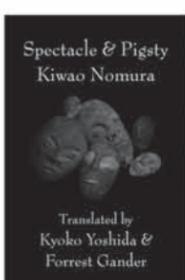


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