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New ways of seeing (and hearing): The audiovisual essay and television

Catherine Grant & Jaap Kooijman

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In recent years, videographic criticism in the form of remix-based audiovisual essays has gained momentum in Media and Screen Studies, with courses and workshops at universities, presentations at international conferences, and publication opportunities in academic journals such as *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies*, *The Cine-Files*, *16:9, Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, *Tecmerin*, and NECSUS. While excited by this development, we cannot help but notice that relatively few audiovisual essays deal with television or use televisual images and sounds as source material for study. In the 2017 retrospective issue of *[in]Transition*, looking back at the first twelve issues published since 2014, Jason Mittell points out that only two of the 58 featured audiovisual essays focus on television: Nick Warr’s ‘Honolulu Mon Amour’ and Lori Morimoto’s ‘Hannibal: A fanvid’, both published in 2016. Also NECSUS, which has incorporated an audiovisual essay section since its Autumn 2014 issue, has featured only one contemporary audiovisual essay that can be considered televisual: Juan Daniel F. Molero’s ‘re-making’, aptly referring to John Berger’s iconic television series *Ways of Seeing* (BBC, 1972). As Mittell rightly wonders: ‘[g]iven that contemporary television is often described as more robust, innovative, acclaimed, and culturally important than contemporary cinema, and television studies is more widespread and accepted than ever, why have we not seen examples of a distinctly televisual model of videographic criticism?’[1]

Perhaps the historical status of much broadcast television as a far more everyday – or (to nod to Raymond Williams) *ordinary* – object has meant that it has not attracted as much of the attention as cinematic objects of those

drawn to videographic approaches, which involve the often deeply contemplative and at times blatantly fetishistic re-use of audiovisual material. In that case, Mittell's call for 'videographic telephilia' is apposite and timely. However, there are additional reasons why television may be, as yet, a less frequent focus for videographic study. As Volker Pantenburg points out in his curated audiovisual essay section in the Autumn 2017 issue of NECSUS:

[t]he absence of television history from the debates around the video essay does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest. It rather results from the invisibility and difficulties of access to the treasures in the television archives. [2]

Access to contemporary television is also often difficult, mostly limited to random online availability or to DVD boxsets. Moreover, the shift away from physical media to audiovisual streaming, and in particular to streaming-only releases, creates new technical (and sometimes legal) challenges in relation to capturing the televisual material to use for audiovisual studies. The Digital Rights Management software employed by streaming platforms makes it hard to obtain high-quality captures of sources, even as Fair Use and Fair Dealing exceptions should continue to allow for critical and research re-uses of them. Television in videographic criticism is rendered more complicated, then, not only by the size and the nature of the televisual object, but also by issues of access and the ability to capture its image and sound.

Rather than contemplating why television seems absent from videographic criticism, we might also be inspired by both historical and contemporary examples of art and remix culture that have used the televisual image – works by artists such as Harun Farocki, Björn Melhus, and Candice Breitz (just to name a few), as well as videos like 'Homophobic Friends' by Tijana Mamula (2011) and 'Mad Men: Set Me Free' by Elisa Kreisinger (2012). Inspiring examples of audiovisual essays on television include Erlend Lavik's 'Style in *The Wire*' (2012, and which has recently exceeded 96,500 views), Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin's 'Short-Circuit: A *'Twin Peaks'* System' (2015), and Andreas Halskov's 'Echoes of the Past: Popular Music and Nostalgia in Modern Television Drama' (2018).

To add to these examples and to promote videographic criticism of television, we have selected four recent audiovisual essay works that each, in their own way, use televisual images and sound to reflect upon television as a medium. The first is Jason Mittell's 'How Black Lives Matter in *The Wire*: A Video Essay', which connects the 'real-life' news coverage of police violence against African-American citizens to the absence of such explicit violence in

the fictional series *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008). Using voiceover, Mittell explores what this discrepancy means not only for his own investment in the series, but also for the role of fictional television in the politics of representation. The video cleverly mimics the aesthetics of the series, particularly in its one-minute ‘opening sequence’, which makes the contrast between fictional and real life even more striking. Originally uploaded to Vimeo in 2018, ‘How Black Lives Matter in *The Wire*’ was critically recognised by being listed three times on ‘The best video essays of 2018’ list of *Sight & Sound* magazine. We are delighted now to publish Mittell’s audiovisual essay in a scholarly context, in NECSUS, with an accompanying author’s statement.

Next, we present a triptych of videos made by Catherine Grant and Janet McCabe (‘Flow/Cut’, ‘Body/Matters’, and ‘Law/Fear’), comparative works that study the graphic figuration of three moments of heightened tension in the first or pilot episodes of season one of the Scandinavian noir crime television series *Bron/Broen* (SVT1/DR1, 2012-2015), and two of its most successful transnational remakes, *The Tunnel/Tunnel* (Sky Atlantic/Canal+, 2013-2018) and *The Bridge* (FX, 2013-2014). Grant and McCabe’s work of feminist reframing and defamiliarisation (*Ostranenie*) offers a decentring of the television series’ originary thematics, by tripling them (‘in-triplicating’ and intensifying them).[3] The videos also performatively – multi-vocally – explore, across each of the televisual sources, the political matters raised in the quotations (or epigraphs) figured in the works, as well as in the strikingly allegorical lyrics of the theme songs from these series, deployed in slow motion in the second part of each video to open a space of uneasy contemplation of the repetitions and variations of the forensic femininities (and masculinities) played out across these different but distinctly connected national and regional spaces. The videos are accompanied by McCabe’s thoughtful and detailed commentary on this research.

The third audiovisual essay is Juan Llamas-Rodriguez’ ‘The Female Narco-Trafficker’s Tongue / La Lengua de la Narco-Traficante’, which focuses on the figure of the female narcotrafficker in US American and Mexican television series, most notably in the Spanish-language telenovela and English-language drama series adaptations of *La Reina del Sur*, Spanish novelist Arturo Pérez-Reverte’s international bestseller about globe-trotting narcotrafficker Teresa Mendoza, aka La Mexicana. The use of the epigraphic form, presented bilingually, results in a propulsively captivating and at times deliberately confusing mixture of images, sounds, and written texts, inviting

the viewer rapidly to make comparative and contrastive connections between the various depictions of these female characters and their story worlds. Like McCabe and Grant's work, Llamas-Rodriguez' video lays bare the devices of transnational television adaptation and remaking by reframing them in a work of simultaneous performance that asks the viewer at once to take sides *and* to see the other side. This is an approach to television studies that is intensively *interstitial and relational*, evoking the spirit of Laura Rascaroli's notion of essay filmmaking as the art of gaps.[4]

The section ends with Angelo Restivo's '*Breaking Bad and Surrealism*', a video made to accompany the third chapter of his book *Breaking Bad and Cinematic Television* (Duke University Press, 2019). Poetically edited and set to the soundtrack of El Alacran's 'Reflejo De Luna', Restivo's video connects images of *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) to avant-garde cinema of the 1930s, 1960s, and 1970s. Regardless of whether or not these 'citations' were *intended* (are they conscious influences or remarkable coincidences?), this work invites the viewer to perceive – or better, to watch – *Breaking Bad* beyond the plot-driven logic of fictional television, paying attention instead to the series' aesthetics. Here cinephilia meets telephilia in a productive way, showing how images have histories that can be rendered visible through intermedial inter-textual connections.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger showed how the medium of television allowed, or even forced, a new and demystifying perspective on the visual arts. We borrowed his title to emphasise that videographic criticism can help us to watch television differently, adding '(and Hearing)' to acknowledge the importance of sound, which often is neglected in the study of television. Obviously, there is far more (televisual) ground to cover. We have not been able (yet) to include audiovisual essays that focus on typical television genres such as the sitcom, the talk show, the music video, or reality programming. That said, we hope that our selection will at least function as an invitation for yet more, and more varied, videographic telephilia, not limited to so-called 'quality television' that stays close to the cinematic, but that also recognises, and explores audiovisually, the qualities of television in all its aesthetic, political, national and transnational, and technical forms.

Authors

Catherine Grant is Professor of Digital Media and Screen Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. A prolific experimental video-essayist, she has authored and edited numerous studies of audio-visual film and moving image research and scholarship, including: *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image* (co-authored with Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, 2nd ed., 2019); screenstudies.video (2019), a monographic website collecting and reflecting on her own practice; and another website collection *The Audiovisual Essay* (2014-present). She is also creator of *Film Studies for Free* and a co-founding editor of *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic and Moving Image Studies*.

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Notes

- [1] Jason Mittell, 'Videographic Telephilia', *[in]Transition* 4.1 (2017): <http://mediacommons.org/in-transition/2017/videographic-telephilia>
- [2] Volker Pantenburg, 'Towards an alternative history of the video essay: Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Cologne', *NECSUS*, 6:2, Autumn 2017: <https://necsus-ejms.org/towards-an-alternative-history-of-the-video-essay-westdeutscher-rundfunk-cologne/>
- [3] For further discussion of Grant's split-screen audiovisual essay methodologies, see Catherine Grant, 'Déjà-viewing?: videographic experiments in intertextual film studies', *Mediascape: UCLA's Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, Winter 2013: http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Winter2013_DejaViewing.html; also Catherine Grant, "'Screen Memories": A Video Essay on *Smultronstället/Wild Strawberries*', *CINERGIE: Il Cinema e le altre Arti*, 13, 2018: <https://cinergie.unibo.it/article/view/7914/8116>; and Catherine Grant and Amber Jacobs, 'Persona Non Grata Sonata', *MAI: Feminism & Visual Culture*, Issue, 1, Spring 2018: <http://maifeminism.com/persona-non-grata-sonata/>.
- [4] See the numerous mentions of gaps, dialectics, the interval and the interstitial in Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). See, for example, the discussion of these concepts in the first chapter of this book, pp. 7-13.