

Seeking a Cure for Cinephilia

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For the videographic essay to fully inhabit a place as a scholarly genre, but specifically an anti-racist, anti-heterosexist place, maybe we should find a cure for cinephilia?

One evening during the Middlebury videographic workshop which I attended, my colleagues and I had a brief conversation about the videographic essay and didacticism. Most of the folks gathered viewed didacticism with skepticism. They were hoping the videographic essay would provide a way to move beyond the didacticism of the traditional academic essay. It was a conversation that was linked to other moments during the workshop, where participants and workshop leaders alike expressed similar fears that their work might be too didactic. This struck me as odd. We are professors, I thought, perhaps we should...uh, I dunno...profess.

The key question, it seems to me, is what is it that we profess—both consciously and unconsciously?

To be honest, perhaps I wasn't really mystified by the impulse to reject the didactic. My colleagues were reacting to the negative resonances of the word, whereas I had purposely limited my definition to "educational." I could see that some of their concern emerged from a desire to eschew the stiff, stuffy wordiness of the academic essay genre (see how I used "eschew" rather than "avoid"). I recognized, too, that the reaction also emerged from the creative thrill and beguiling promise that manipulating images and sound might afford us new ways to produce meaning and knowledge. However, beyond this, I think the fear of didacticism might emerge from justifiable discomfort in taking up the mantle from those old school academics, still very much alive and kicking (so much

kicking), who revel(ed) in issuing book- and article-length edicts that position the vast majority of the world's population at the bottom of their racist, heterosexist, nationalist, ableist hierarchies and taxonomies.

Now, the online YouTube video essayist has few problems asserting his (and it often is a he) teacherly authority (and some have even spun it into the sometimes lucrative video essay YouTube channel). Assured male voices make pronouncements about Hollywood blockbusters and, occasionally, "art" films; and I hear echoes in those pronouncements. Either they are echoes of the type of analysis that the YouTube essayist learned in a college class or from his ongoing autodidactic endeavors or his cinephilic fan pleasures—the kind of pleasures that compel the essayist to pore with loving obsession over the films of that director, this franchise, that genre. I wonder, sometimes, if the self-conscious inclusion of "scholarship" in the designation of the videographic essay is because media and film scholars worry that they see a lot of themselves in the fan and geek deconstructive reading practices of the YouTube essayist. I don't, however, think that is where the concern should lie. Feminist and cultural studies scholars have successfully challenged the often classist, sexist and racist wall that some scholars want to erect between "town knowledge" and "gown knowledge." As a fan of many YouTube video essay channels, I often find the content not just fascinating and entertaining, but also frequently insightful.

Rather, what is concerning is when scholarly video essays *and* (putatively) non-scholarly video essays share an intense love of the global circulation of the same types of visual images and film movements, which often manifests in a type of Eurocentrism. For example, there is a way that the emerging body of writing on the videographic essay references essay creation as "playing" in "the archive." There is the suggestion that playing in the archive might lead to new "discoveries." Certainly these are metaphors, but they are colonialist metaphors—they invite a set of fascinated, loving responses to form and content, reproduce long held hierarchies, and discourage any awareness of what is absent.

Where videographic essays can take a scholarly lead is in drawing on the feminist, postcolonial, critical race, critical and digital media scholarship that strips "the archive" of any possible claims of disinterested innocence. Lauren Berliner (this issue) has highlighted the dangers of approaching the archive as if it were simply an innocent repository. The very architecture of "the archive" is about constructing hierarchies of human and non-human. So here we might return to the question of the

didactic professor who uses videographic essays to profess. What might the videographic essay scholar profess? My students and I have been worrying at this issue by seeking to learn from anticolonial filmmakers' efforts to crack open and betray the colonality of "the archive." We're still working on it.

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