

# TEACHING THE AUDIOVISUAL ESSAY

## Finding Your Voice

### Context of the Assignment

This assignment was given in a Video Essay course that I teach to undergraduates – from a range of different majors and with a range of skills, many without any production experience – in the Media Arts & Culture Department at Occidental College in Los Angeles. It was the second in a series of three video essay assignments, all focused on a single film of each student's choosing, which were intended to introduce students to the practice of videographic criticism. The assignment sequencing was inspired by the 'Middlebury method,' as described by Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell and Catherine Grant in *The Videographic Essay* (2019).

When teaching video essays I have found that students invariably struggle not only with finding their creative and critical voices but also with hearing their actual voices when assignments call for a voiceover. It was for this reason that I designed an assignment specifically intended to encourage experimentation with vocal performance, narration, and narrator identity / subjectivity. To help students think about the relationship between all three, we screened Chris Marker's iconic essay film, *Sans Soleil* (1983) – in which Marker's ideas are expressed via the conceit of a nameless female narrator

reading excerpts of letters from a fictional cinematographer named Sandor Krasna – followed, a week later, by Richard Misek's essay film, *Rohmer in Paris* (2013). In tandem with the latter screening, they read Richard Misek's essay, "All I have to offer is myself": The Film-Maker as Narrator', in which he describes what he calls 'the slippery brilliance of the voice-over in *San Soleil*', and then reflects on his own voiceover in *Rohmer in Paris*, whose semi-fictional approach took inspiration from Marker's film, but in which, as he admits, 'I eventually became trapped in my narrative persona' (2020: 193).

This is a wonderful essay for a course module on voice-over / narration for a number of reasons. First, it introduces Aldous Huxley's three-poled frame of reference for the essayistic – the pole of the personal and/or autobiographical, the pole of the factual and/or concrete-particular, and the pole of the abstract and/or universal – which I incorporate in the assignment. Huxley believed that the 'most richly satisfying' essays' traverse all three poles, and I have found his frame of reference a helpful starting point for discussing how to engage different registers of meaning within essayistic work. Second, Misek's account of his process in creating his voice-over, and his self-perceived missteps, model for students the importance of trial and error, an iterative process of creation, and learning from one's mistakes. Third, in his consideration of the relationship between 'the constructed identity of the narrative "I" and the actual identity of the person saying "I"' Misek engages the more foundational 'question of how to communicate thought processes in film' (2020: 190).

For inspiration in creating video essays that include Huxley's first pole, I invited students to screen sample essays from the '*Once Upon A Screen: Screen Traumas and Cinephilic Hauntings*' video essay collection published in *Issue 15 of The Cine-Files* on the Scholarly Video Essay. The collection began as an invitation from Ariel Avissar and Evelyn Kreutzer to the community of scholarly video essayists to use videographic practices to 'confront the most personal, intimidating, and visceral encounters with film' experienced during childhood. While each author narrates their own story, and each narrative is in the first person, the collection as a whole provides a range of different rhetorical approaches and styles. A few even hit all of Huxley's poles, for example Kevin B. Lee's '*Explosive*

*Paradox*' and Jessica McGoff's '*My Mulholland*'. As a way of kickstarting a discussion on the vulnerability of using one's own voice, we screen Ian Garwood's video essay '*The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism*', which examines the role of voiceover in the academic video essay, while emphasizing the dearth of female voiceovers. This is followed by Barbara Zecchi's '*Empowering the Accent: an (accented) video essay*', which examines the problematics, possibilities, and strategies of accented voices in video essays, while drawing clever connections between Hamid Naficy's conception of 'accented cinema' and the practice of videographic criticism.

### The Assignment

'Freely, effortlessly, thought and feeling move in these consummate works of art, either and thither between the essay's three poles – from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the object datum to the inner experience.' How to find a single voice that can move between these poles?

– Aldous Huxley quoted in Richard Misek's 'All I Have to Offer is Myself'

In this assignment, you will experiment with voiceover and narration while exploring the rhetorical / critical movement between at least two of three Huxley's poles – the personal / subjective, the factual / objective, the abstract / universal / theoretical – one of which **must** be the first pole (personal, subjective, or autobiographical). In other words, as part of this assignment, you are going to speak from the personal experience or subjectivity of an 'I', whether or not that 'I' is you, and place it into relationship / dialogue with your media text to draw out something beyond the personal, of practical, critical, or universal significance.

In doing so, think about the relationship between the narrator you construct and the ideas you want to express. Think about the tone: is it informal, serious, humorous, etc.? Think about the vocal performance, including affect, pacing, inflection, etc. Think about the inscription of subjectivity (who is the narrator?). Think about the mode of address and the kind

of narrator / spectator relationship being set up (is the viewer being addressed as an audience member, a student, someone with whom you are close / intimate? Is the narration in the first, second, or third person or presented as a dialogue between two or more people?). Think about the narrative approach: is it direct, oblique, poetic, didactic, etc.?

### Constraints

- Your video can be no shorter than 3 minutes and no longer than 5 minutes.
- No more than 10 seconds without dialogue within the scene or VO.

### In-class Workshoping

There will be two in-class critique sessions:

- For the first session, you will write and record two different opening paragraph scripts, each representing a different approach to the voiceover (that is, a different narrative approach and a different approach to vocal performance).
- For the second session, you will present a draft of your final essay and receive peer feedback.

### Creator Statement

Along with your video essay, you will hand in a 500-word Creator Statement in which you discuss your approach to this assignment and creative / critical process, explaining the reasons behind the choices that you made, including your narrative script and vocal performance, as well as what you were trying to express (did you do any background research? If so, how did it inform your project?). Describe what the narrator's relationship is with you, the video maker. You should also reflect on what went worked well and what was less effective.

### The following elements will contribute to your assessment on this assignment:

- The project moves between the personal / subjective pole and the factual / objective and / or the abstract / universal

/ theoretical in a creative way that draws out something of greater significance about the media text (that is, something of practical, critical, or universal import).

- The VO / Narration seems well considered in terms of tone, performance, address, and delivery and enhances what is being analysed (extra points for doing something unexpected or out of the ordinary).
- The script is well-written and works in tandem with image, sound, and editing to produce understanding.
- The project abides by directions and follows constraints.

### Examples of Student Work

Ada Rosen on *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975)

<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=1kXQyo2Pr>

Patrick Pritchett on *Playtime* (Jacques Tati, 1967)

<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=An1vRaYUn>

Frannie DiBona on *Tampopo* (Juzo Itami, 1985)

<https://criticalcommons.org/view?m=BV82sk9fD>

### Reflection

In completing this assignment, while most students did not experiment with vocal performance to the extent that the prompt encouraged, the assignment did, as I had hoped, help students become more comfortable with voiceover. As the examples of student work that I provide here demonstrate, many students ended up commenting not only on their experience of a particular film, but on filmic spectatorship more generally. This was a surprising pattern, as was the lyrical quality of student work, both of which were, I think, an outcome of the requirement to traverse at least two of Huxley's poles. All in all, this was a productive assignment and, happily, many students continued using their own voices and experimenting with their narrative approach in subsequent projects.

### ALLISON DE FREN

Allison de Fren is a media maker and scholar whose documentaries and audiovisual essays have been screened internationally. Her work often focuses on the intersection of gender, media, and technology, as well as the integration of film/media theory and practice. Her scholarship on videographic criticism includes the chapter "From the Essay Film to the Video Essay: Between the Critical and the Popular" in the anthology *Reclaiming Popular Documentary*, eds. Christie Milliken and Steve F. Anderson (2021) and co-editing with Tracy Cox-Stanton *Cine-Files Issue 15* on the scholarly video essay (Winter 2020). She is a Professor in the Media Arts & Culture Department at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

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