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Magic at the Crossroads: the Rise of the Video Essay

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the birth, rise in popularity, and evolution of the video essay, a subgenre of the essay found recently in online literary journals. Chapter one provides a brief history of the alphabetic essay as it expands to include photo essays, audio essays, and essay-films. The second chapter outlines the history of the online literary journal and John Bresland's role in the introduction of the video essay as it appears in online journals. Chapter three contains an examination of the way image, text, and sound function in video essays and the tools and strategies essayists are using to create them. The fourth chapter is composed of three case studies of Bresland's work in an attempt to analyze the continuing evolution and breadth of the form.

Chapter 1: From Page to Screen

In 1992, in an essay for *The Threepenny Review,* Philip Lopate writes: "my intention here is to define, describe, survey, and celebrate a cinematic genre that barely exists." Here, twenty-four years later, I have the same intention. Lopate's essay is entitled "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film" and in it he expresses his desire for more filmmakers to create true essayistic cinematography. He alludes to the magical qualities such a genre would boast in his centaur metaphor, but it is difficult to ignore the reputations of the beasts of mythology: while clever, their liminality also makes them often untamed, unstable, and violent. Without the strict confines of one genre to clearly define it and reign it in, the video essay or essay film seems both intimidating and potentially ineffective. Lopate assumes that fear of this vulnerability, as well as an unfortunate trend of detached montage or pastiche that stems from the popularity of deconstructionism and post-modernism, is what keeps filmmakers from creating true essay-films. He ends his essay with a wistful declaration of vigilance: "But I will go on patiently stoking the embers of the form as I envision it, convinced that the truly great essay-films have yet to be made, and that this succulent opportunity awaits the daring cine-essayists of the future." Lopate's future may finally have arrived, though perhaps not exactly how he envisioned it: most of the creators of his centaur are primarily essayists wielding tiny, portable video cameras—not filmmakers with crew in tow—and their essays are of computer video quality and length rather than feature films; however, based on the criteria Lopate set forth, a version of his centaur has

been found, and in increasingly great abundance, particularly with the ever-growing number of undergraduate and graduate courses devoted to its production.

Video essays have been published in online literary journals like *Blackbird* and *TriQuarterly* for over ten years now, but their popularity has surged as of late. Writers are taking advantage of the technology that invites them to create pieces that consume the senses of their readers through actual images, text, and sound, and those who work with the form usually stumble across it as they search for the best way to tell a particular story, show a particular journey, or ask a particular question. In other words, they discover the form when more traditional genres aren't flexible, multi-layered, or sensory enough to tell their story.

Lopate feels he must first outline his definition of the literary essay before proposing the five criteria he thinks need apply for a form to be classified as an essay-film, and it is in his requirements for the literary essay that I find the criteria for the video essay as well. The essay, according to Lopate, "offers personal views," "tracks a person's thoughts as he or she tries to work out some mental knot, however various its strands," and is "a search to find out what one thinks about something," It must have "a certain sparkle or stylistic flourish"; "it is not enough for the essayist to slay the bull; it must be done with more finesse than butchery." And finally, what I consider to be the most important criterion, "an essay is a continual asking of questions—not necessarily finding 'solutions' but enacting the struggle for truth in full view" ("In Search of the Centaur"). It is important to note that none of these requisites dictate length; in fact, none of these mention container at all. Well-known writers, English teachers, and academicians have come to prescribe the essay as several pages of alphabetic text, but for what reason? Philip Lopate admits excluding Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* from his 1995 anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay* because they are too long (li).

Print publication issues aside, however, if a struggle is best enacted in a hundred pages, why limit an essay to twenty, or thirty? If an essayist's "mental knot" is best worked out through a series of images, why only write in text? And finally, if a certain "stylistic flourish" is injected into an essay through the use of ironic music, why steep your text in silence?

The essay—both defined and undefined by its fluidity and habit of meandering—has resisted a clearly circumscribed form since Montaigne first put ink to parchment. The mystique of the essay makes it a popular topic among those who wish to gather the intellectual musings of the genre's most esteemed writers and compile them into a guide—the original recipe—for essay writing. Carl Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French recently published an anthology, *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time* (2012), which chronologically presents works musing on all aspects of essays and their writers— from structure to authors' presence and personalities—straight from the horses' mouths. In his introduction, "Toward a Collective Poetics of the Essay," Klaus selects a few poignant lines from the essays that follow to construct a skimming overview of the form, focusing on that aspect that actually fails to define the genre at all: its fluidity and lack of prescribed form. He presents Cynthia Ozick's oft-repeated definition of the essay "'as the movement of a free mind at play'" and then deconstructs it: "such a wide-open conception of the genre tacitly implies a freedom from any kind of form, which suggests that strictly speaking the essay is an antigenre, a heretical form of writing in the universe of discourse" (xviii). However, different essay writers and "schools" of essayists have often limited this freedom of the genre, creating certain traditions and types. The universe of discourse that Klaus was investigating in 2012 is changing still, and if the personal essay is heretical in its eccentricity, the video essay is, perhaps, sacrilege.

Montaigne gave the essay its name and identity: *essais,* or attempts or trials—a description that encourages play and the spirit of exploration; so while styles may shift, fade, and eventually return, Montaigne, with his fascination with self and tendency toward meandering discovery, will always embody the essence of the essay. In his book, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, after Marker*, Timothy Corrigan claims that Montaigne's essays "describe a bond between a personal life and the surrounding events of that life in sixteenth-century France, and, in revision after revision that characterize these essays (1580, 1588, 1595), they testify not only to the constant changes and adjustments of a mind as it defers to experience but also to the transformation of the essayistic self as part of that process" (13). This "encounter between the self and the public domain" is a strict identifier of the literary essay; where form is lacking in formal guidelines, purpose is not (6). Through the literary essay's evolution from Montaigne to the English essayists and beyond, two identifying factors have remained paramount in defining the form: it presents an attempt (*essai*, try) to figure something out, and it is a marriage of personal experience in public performance.

The beauty of the personal essay is its ability to expand and accommodate—always pregnant with possibilities for form, voice, style, modes of support and elaboration, presentation and reception. It can be infused with philosophy, journalism, criticism, political persuasion, poetry, and even fiction so long as the author's intent is made clear to the reader; at times, the intent can remain ambiguous, divided, with the essay evolving in contradictory directions. In Lopate's 1995 anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the* Present, he presents Ivan Turgenev's late nineteenth-century essay, "The Execution of Tropmann," which infuses Turgenev's memoir-like personal account with reportage and succeeds in becoming "one of the strongest indictments of capital punishment ever written" (*The*

Art of the Personal Essay 305). James Baldwin writes about racism with an urgent fervor laced with pain and preaching; of him, Lopate writes: "in Baldwin's hands . . . the essay lost its stigma of benign, belletristic coziness and became a matter of life and death" (*The Art of the Personal Essay* 586). Both Adrienne Rich and Richard Rodriguez explore their sexual and ethnic identities as products of their ever-changing environments and richly diverse families. Joan Didion's incredible knack for "gathering disparate fragments to convey the randomness and absence of narrative coherence in contemporary life" reminds the essay-reading world that the ability of form to capture the essence of living in a world that is real and messy is its charm (*The Art of the Personal Essay* 680). In "Binding Proteus," his opening essay for Alexander J. Butrym's 1989 *Essays on the Essay,* O.B. Hardison nails the description perfectly: "the essay is the most expressive literary form of our age because it comes closest to being what all literature is supposed to be—an imitation of the real" (28). The "real," which is filtered through subjectivity and relative to world view, need not always be spelled out explicitly; sometimes it's captured with fewer words curated and artfully assembled into something more resembling a poem than an essay, sometimes it's captured using snippets of newspaper articles or personal journals, and now, it can be captured using a combination of images, text, and sound.

In 2003 John D'Agata publishes *The Next American Essay*—an anthology whose title suggests an evolution the form that is represented by works by John McPhee, Jamaica Kincaid, Annie Dillard, Anne Carson, Sherman Alexie, and others. In fact, D'Agata introduces his anthology by listing the numbers of included men, women, Americans, non-Americans—a spewing of statistics meant to show how diverse this group of writers is. He does this because he knows the reader expects facts from nonfiction, but D'Agata wants to get facts out of the way so that the reader can focus on artistry inherent in the pieces: "henceforth, please do not consider

these ‘nonfictions.’ I want you preoccupied with art in this book, not with facts for the sake of facts” (1). I presume he does this because he wants the focus off of strict labels, titles, or categories, to prepare the reader for essays that might not fit the traditional notion of the form. Indeed, many essays in the anthology feature eccentricities that emphasize the ever-increasing breadth of the genre. McPhee’s “The Search for Marvin Gardens” brings a Monopoly game to life. Jenny Boully’s “The Body” is written entirely in footnotes. David Foster Wallace’s “Ticket to the Fair” is a unique, immersion journalism-essay hybrid. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s haunting “Erato Love Poetry” has a genre label in its name, and it’s not “essay.” In his 1989 introduction to *Essays on the Essay,* Hardison introduces an enlightening metaphor when he rails against those who say the essay is dying: “the essay is not a sensitive species on the point of extinction. It is tough, infinitely adaptable, and ubiquitous. It has more in common with the German cockroach than the Tennessee snail darter. . . The cockroach is a primitive creature. It appears very early on in the evolutionary chain. The essay is also primitive” (11-12). Primitive, but willing and able to evolve, because evolution is necessary if the essay is going to continue to imitate the real.

In 1982, seven years before Hardison writes of the evolutionary nature of the essay, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha publishes her book *Dictée;* it is filled with images, fragments, self-evaluation, search for identity, darkness, and light. Her lyric essay “Erato Love Poetry” is bookended by images of St. Therese and Maria Falconetti in their roles as Joan of Arc. The text is printed within a thin border, sometimes in large chunks and other times in sparse lines. It reads not chronologically by page, but with one thread traced on the right-hand page and one on the left—two stories unfolding simultaneously. Words and phrases and entire sections are repeated. Her language and its arrangement is so visual and visceral—more interactive than a traditional

essay, and more saturated than a poem, but with the strengths of both. Cha's quiet rebellion against conventional form mirrors the slowly building uprising against oppression being performed by her female narrator. Her avant-garde piece pushes even the loose parameters of the lyric essay; her three-dimensional crafting produces writing that nearly escapes the confines of paper.

Cha was not the first to use photographs to complicate the meaning and enhance the impact of her writing. In Timothy Corrigan's 2011 journey from defining the literary essay to his analysis of the essay film, he briefly pauses to discuss the photo essay, "in which the visual itself begins to acquire the expressivity and instability associated with the verbal realm of the literary voice and now often becomes not oppositional to but an alternative mode of expressivity" (20). This "alternate mode of expressivity" became extremely useful, especially to journalists and photojournalists wishing to expose calamitous situations or cultural anomalies that wouldn't have previously been known by or accessible to the rest of the public—in these situations, photographs are much harder to ignore than photographs. Corrigan refers to Jacob Riis's 1890 *How the Other Half Lives* and James Agee and Walker Evans's 1939 *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as examples of photo essays that call into question "the adequacy of a verbal text to express the fragmentary mobility of images" (20). Both texts sought to draw attention to the conditions of poverty through photographs rather than statistics and textual description. Corrigan quotes Henry Luce's claim in his 1937 "The Camera as Essayist" that the camera "'is not merely a reporter. It can also be a commentator. It can comment as it reports. It can interpret as it presents. It can picture the world as a seventeenth-century essayist or as a twentieth-century columnist would picture it'" (21). While pictures can ask questions, make assertions, and evoke emotion,

for an essayist, the artistry lies in the reading, composition, and sometimes textual commentary of the images.

In 1973, Michael Lesy publishes *Wisconsin Death Trip,* a book of black-and-white photographs taken by Charles Van Schaick in Black River Falls, Wisconsin. Lesy intersperses the photographs with newspaper fragments that detail the horrors of this town in the late nineteenth century: murders, suicide, insanity, disease, and supernatural occurrences. In an interview on backstoryradio.org, Lesy discusses the context and greater fabric of the ordering of the photographs, pinpointing a recurring paisley cloth that connects a photograph of a crippled woman and one of dead infant girl twins: "and so you get a sense that this was simply a human condition, a female condition, a feminine condition, the risks of being in love, of being married, of giving birth, of nurturing." While Lesy originally had no personal stake in these families and the photographs and newspaper clippings that illustrate their hardships, after discovering Van Schaick's collection, Lesy felt compelled to understand—and help his generation understand—the troubling nature of the psychological composition of this town and the results and effects of that composition. Warren Susman, former professor of American history and historian at Rutgers from 1960 until his death in 1985, composed a preface for the 1973 edition for *Wisconsin Death Trip.* Of Lesy's intent, he writes: "His first obligation as an historian, he clearly believes, is to find the patters and rhythms of lives and to present them in a manner sufficiently artful so that we too sense those patterns and rhythms" (Susman). The photographs and newspaper clippings are organized by year; the first section is labeled "1885-6" in a box in the middle of the page, and the date is followed by the themes represented in those pages in italics and a brief summary of the stories described in the newspaper clippings. Lesy's composition of the themes is almost as haunting as the stories and photographs they represent; his words—such as "the private made

public Insanity Ghost Clairvoyant Poetry Suicide Incendiary fire Incendiary fire"—run into one another with no punctuation, repeat in different capacities, and are capitalized and indented inconsistently. The effect is a sense of chaos, overexposure, and unrelenting terror. Amidst the clippings describing acts of arson, supernatural sightings, amputations, and mental illness, set in the middle of the page is the following quotation: "'More poetry is said to come from Wisconsin than from any other state in the Union'" (Lesy). Lesy's intentionality and placement of this particular newspaper clipping cements this book's status as an essay; it is important to him to reveal to the public his discovery that within this death and destruction the citizens of Wisconsin searched for beauty, and that language heals and thrives in the midst of pain.

In 1999, James Marsh turns the book into a docudrama that intersperses the black-and-white photographs "with contrasting color sequences of modern life in the area. It combines re-enactments of some of the events described in the book with a voice-over narration by Ian Holm" ("Wisconsin Death Trip). Of the film's visual style, Marsh says, "I wanted to convey in the film the real pathos contained in a four line newspaper report that simultaneously records and dismisses the end of someone's life" ("Wisconsin Death Trip"). However, I think Lesy captures this pathos in his inclusion and arrangement of the photographs. The alarming nature of the newspaper clippings is caused in part by the inclusion of detailed accounts of the causes of death—suicide by sheep shears, a train accident that resulted in scattered brains, death by freezing—but the photographs serve to re-humanize the town and incite empathy rather than morbid fascination. Photographs of new mothers holding their infants precede images of deceased babies in coffins, drawing a concrete, human connection between death and mourning. The series of photographs that follows of the feminine bed, the woman in the wheelchair, and the small children, after viewing the mothers and their infants, reminds the reader how dangerous

childbirth once was, and that it was (and still is) an overwhelming act of sacrifice performed by women. Lesy finds the love buried in the horror of these images and wants his reader to do the same.

More recently, Lawrence Sutin pairs postcards with pieces of flash prose meditating on his life (both what it has been and what it could be) in his 2000 *A Postcard Memoir*. In his prologue, Sutin explains how, when he tried to turn away from his postcard collection, they haunted him, insisting he reckon with them. He writes, "It came about that certain memories of mine began to seep into certain postcards, there to remain like bugs in amber. Other postcards challenged me to come out after them and fight like a writer, which I did, realizing, accidentally again, and they were egging me on through the stations of my life" (Sutin 3). The relationship between memories and images, especially images that can't be easily explained, is an otherworldly one, and an attempt to explore that relationship creates an abundance of space for rumination and insight. Judith Kitchen's 2012 *Half in Shade: Family, Photography, and Fate* is a series of meditations on photographs she's found in a family scrapbook of her immediate family members, deceased ancestors, and strangers. Alex Starace, reviewer for *TriQuarterly,* calls it "part-memoir, part-historical fiction, part-speculation," but Kitchen's honest grappling with her impressions and memories of her mother is raw, vulnerable, and essayistic. In the introduction, she voices the questions most inherent in the composition of a photo essay: "Suddenly, as a writer, not just as a viewer—I had a whole new set of questions. How to give 'voice' to what is inherent in the visual? How to keep the visual from dominating, making all my thoughts redundant?" (Kitchen). Kitchen's thoughts are indeed not redundant, but essential; she builds a history, family, personality, and emotion around the subjects of each photographs, using speculation when she doesn't have facts. When image informs text and vice versa, the essay is

found in the spaces between the two, in the murky waters that fill the channel there and must be navigated.

The ever-evolving essay is an immersive experience, as the ability to introduce these sensual components also allows for more artistry, more layers, and ultimately a more precise imitation of the subjective real. The inclusion of moving images and sound requires even more risk, but can also provide an even greater reward. The essay has been primed for this leap onto the screen from the beginning, as Lopate notes that its "suitability for experimental method and self-reflective process, its tolerance for the fragmentary and irresolution, make it uniquely appropriate to the present era" (*The Art of the Personal Essay* l). Hans Richter is credited for first using the term in his 1940 paper "The Film Essay." In it, he writes: "'The film essay enables the filmmaker to make the 'invisible' world of thoughts and ideas visible on the screen . . . The essay film produces complex thought – reflections that are not necessarily bound to reality, but can also be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic'" (Yeung). D. W. Griffith, with his 1909 *A Corner in Wheat* and, Dziga Vertov, with his 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera,* had already done with a camera what Richter suggested in print. Both are silent films, but Griffith uses spliced scenes of the poor in line for bread and lavish parties of the wealthy to critique the dirty business practices of tycoons, and Vertov uses avant-garde cinematic techniques, such as superimposed images and slow motion, to comment on Soviet society and the capabilities of the camera and filmmaking. Chris Marker, master of essayistic forays into various fields of multimedia, is often revered as the quintessential film essayist because of his consistently unique and personal approach to travel, cultural norms, and politics. In "In Search of the Centaur," Lopate refers specifically to Marker's 1958 *Letter from Siberia* and 1983 *Sans Soleil* and dissects the specific qualities that make Marker an excellent essayist with the camera:

> In Marker there is a tension between the politically committed, self-effacing, leftwing documentarist of the Thirties/Ivens tendency, and an irrepressibly Montaignesque personal tone. He has a reputation for being elusive and shy-not the best qualities, on the face of it, for a personal essayist-and yet, perhaps because he has evolved so diverse and complicated a self (ex-Resistance fighter, novelist, poet, filmmaker), he can emit enough particles of this self to convey a strong sense of individuality and still keep his secrets. He also has the essayist's aphoristic gift, which enables him to assert a collective historical persona, a first-person plural, even when the first-person single is held in abeyance. Finally, he has the essayist's impulse to tell the truth: not always a comfortable attribute for an engage artist. (19-20)

In Lopate's eyes, and—after viewing several of his films—in mine as well, Marker was first and foremost an essayist, but he had a fluid conception of essayists, photographers, videographers, and artists who, because of their openness and experimental spirit, are able to produce moving pieces that blur the boundaries between the personal and the public. In his 2009 essay, "Go-For-Broke Games of History: Chris Marker Between 'Old' and 'New' Media," Rick Warner characterizes Marker using Marker's own description of "versatile painter/photographer/filmmaker William Klein:

> 'The trouble with people like this is that we tend to cut them into pieces and to leave each piece to the specialists: a film to the film critic, a photograph to the photographic expert, a picture to the art pundit. . . Whereas the really interesting phenomenon is the totality of these forms of expression, their obvious or secret correspondences, their interdependence. The painter does not really turn to photography, then to the cinema, he starts from a single preoccupation . . . and modulates it through all the media.'"

For Marker, then, the point is in the sinew that connects the visual, auditory, and textual embodiments of an essayistic exploration and also keeps a certain tension among them. He "notes the exchangeability of aesthetic forms and opposes any field-specific attempt to keep them separate. He regards media difference as a range of options for an already existing spirit of inquiry, and media change as a change of scenery" (Warner). With the focus shifted from form, then, what become the defining factors of multimedia essay and, more specifically, of essay film?

Corrigan draws his criteria from Aldous Huxley's three poles of the essay: the pole of the "'personal and autobiographical,'" the pole of the "'objective, the factual, the concrete-particular,'" and the pole of the "'abstract-universal,'" of which Huxley states that "the most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist'" (14). While Corrigan alters his poles to include "the intersecting activity of personal expression, public experience, and the process of thinking" (14), Corrigan agrees whole-heartedly with Huxley's assertion that the magic is at the crossroads: "across the history of its shifting practices, the essayistic stretches and balances itself between abstracted and exaggerated representation of the self (in language and image) and an experiential world encountered and acquired through the discourse of thinking out loud" (15). Just as the transformative magic of the form takes place in the movement and spaces between devices, tools, and technologies, the heart of the essay's purpose lies in the openings between private and public, self and other. Furthermore, according to Corrigan, the essayistic self should also be transformative: "essayistic expression (as writing, as film, or as any other representational mode) thus demands both loss of self and the rethinking and remaking of the self" (17). Essentially, the process and finished product must carry weight. If the product isn't transformative, it isn't worth it to create or to consume as a reader and viewer. Corrigan translates the criteria for his literary essay into essay-film guidelines: "building on these and extending them in light of the history and theory of the literary essay, I return to my formulation of the essay film as (1) a testing of expressive subjectivity through (2) experiential encounters in a public arena, (3) the product of which becomes the figuration of thinking or thought as a cinematic address and a spectatorial response" (30).

Lopate's requirements for the essay-film are more concrete. He lists the following: (1) "an essay film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled, or intertitled"; (2) "the text must represent a single voice. It may be either that of the director or screenwriter, or, if collaborative, then stitched together in such a way as to sound like a single perspective"; (3) "the text must represent the speaker's attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem"; (4) "the text must impart more than information; it must have a strong, personal point of view"; (5) "finally, the text's language should be as eloquent, well-written and interesting as possible" ("In Search of the Centaur"). Both Corrigan and Lopate delineate valid characterizations, and a combination of their definitions is where I find my personal version of the essay-film. In "In Search of the Centaur," Lopate provides a list of films that he may or may not deem essay-films; as I viewed them and took into consideration the rule-breaking that knocked each from its post, or the thin fulfillments that justified another, I came to understand that another piece of criteria became paramount for me in determining a film's essayistic status: the tone and direction of the film must remain—even to the bitter end—seeking, open, and unbound. The moment I feel the filmmaker holds a magic key of life to which I, having finished his film, am now also privy, I label the film "documentary" and strike it from the list (Michael Moore's genre-bending be damned). The essential transformative nature of essay forbids the writer from being able to capture answers; they ought to remain slippery, elusive, just out of reach. Essay imitates reality, and how often in our brief lives can we truly say we've captured something? Beyond this, my only hard-and-fast rule, I adhered to Lopate's and Corrgian's guidelines in varying degrees in my search for the direct ancestors of the literary video essay as we know it today.

Corrigan sorts essay-films into five categories: portrait and self-portrait, travel essay, the diary film, social and political essay, and refractive cinema. These are helpful descriptions, and many essay-films can be tidily sorted using those titles, but many of the essays that I see informing video essays today do not sort neatly. Just as Aldous Huxley asserted that "the most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best of . . . all three worlds" (the personal, the objective, and the abstract-universal) "in which it is possible for the essay to exist," I assert that the most powerful essay-films—those which fulfill the expectations set forth by the title most completely—are those which seek to explore personal and autobiographical realms while also peering into the wider, social sphere (Corrigan 14).

In "In Search of the Centaur," Lopate pinpoints Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* as his first "glimpse of the centaur" and cites Jean Cayrol's "self-interrogatory voice, dubious, ironical, probing, like a true essayist's, for the heart of its subject matter" that brings art and essayistic exploration to the horrifying images of the Holocaust (19). *Night and Fog* is a political essay in that it "demonstrate[s] the crucial work needed to discover an agency within the current events of history or what might be called the currencies of history" (Corrgian 154). This agency is encapsulated in the line that Lopate mentions haunts him most: "the only sign—but you have to know—is the ceiling scored by fingernails" because it "thrilled [him] like an unexpected, aggressive pinch: its direct address broke the neutral contract of spectatorship and forced [him] to acknowledge a conversation, with its responsibilities" (19). Indeed, the camera pans what looks like shower heads and then, as the viewer realizes—just as the prisoners must have—that killing, not cleaning happens here, glides smoothly over to the vent, the concrete walls, and the scratched concrete ceiling. This implication of the reader is essential to the political essay—Resnais is not seeking to shock viewers with horrors of the past; he's seeking to warn viewers

that it could happen again. As the camera searches through tracking shots of the dilapidated buildings and crumbling walls, there is a sense that they are still deadly, still sturdy enough to contain, and when Michel Bouquet says "we pretend it all happened only once at a given time and place," we feel the cruelty of humanity like needles in the skin. As each officer denies responsibility for the camps, we feel responsible.

Resnais does meditate on time and place in *Night and Fog*, and parts of it function like a travel essay. He has returned to the camps ten years after the prisoners' liberation, and the fact that grass is growing in the yards seems to be a startling discovery, counterintuitive to his sense that this should be a place where only death, not life, is found. In his 1955 color shots of the camps, the camera constantly tracks over the stone walls and fields, through the barbed-wire fences and past the barracks, seemingly always searching for signs of suffering in the green grass. There is a strong element of portraiture (or self-portraiture) present, too—most likely through the screenwriting of concentration camp survivor Jean Cayrol. Corrigan defines self-portraiture as "an intensification of the thinking through of self as a public discourse, experience, and history—and in that intensity appears the essential bond between self-expression and death" (96). Cayrol had written a work entitled "Poems of Night and Fog" about his time in Gusen concentration camp and this became the script for the film. Cayrol was reluctant to view Resnais's footage of the camps and the archived video of the prisoners, so his script was reworked by Chris Marker to fit Resnais's composition of the tracking shots and black-and-white footage ("*Night and Fog"*). The film, in essence, becomes Resnais's (and Marker's) exploration of Cayrol's—representing every concentration camp prisoner's—experience of excruciating dehumanization, as well as Resnais's insistent, terrified warning that this kind of mass cruelty and genocide could happen again.

Perhaps the only natural film-essayist, as Lopate might claim, Chris Marker has not produced a single film that isn't in some way essayistic, but *Letter to Siberia* and *Sans Soleil* are held up as inspiration over and over again by video essayists. *Sans Soleil* intrigues me in particular because of its liminality—it is at once travelogue, fiction, nonfiction, essay, epistolary, diary, political, and self-portrait. In 2011, Corrigan calls it "one of the most ambitious and complex journeys around the world" (105) and Lopate, in 1992, "perhaps the one masterpiece of the essay-film genre" (20), but the phrase that immediately came to my mind upon viewing it was a question: *who is this woman who is speaking?* Characteristic of Marker and his inclination toward seclusion, he has fictionalized the narrative and distanced himself through the use of the female narrator "reading" letters. I came to understand very quickly that the writer of the letters—Sandor Krasna—is truly Marker (Lopate compares him to Lamb's Elia), but I continued to wonder first of all about the slight fictionalization inherent in the use of the female narrator, but also about Marker's purpose in allowing himself to be an extra step removed from the obviously personal journey. On October 8, 2013, on his site chrismarker.org, Daniel L. Potter posted "Letter to Theresa by Chris Marker—Behind the Veils of *Sans Soleil*." He acknowledges Emiko Omori for sending the undated letter and declares it "too compelling" to "refrain from reproducing it here." And it is overwhelmingly compelling—through his confessions in the letter Marker reveals *Sans Soleil* to be much more of a self-portrait rather than a travel essay. He admits that each of the four "characters" he concocted and claimed had come together to create the project are each just pieces of himself:

> Even if I frequently do my own music, I would have felt preposterous to sign it along my director's credits. . . so I invented Michel [Krasna] . . . Hayao Yamaneko was more meaningful. I was very conscious of the limitations that plagued the first image synthesizers, and inserting these images in the editing, like that, could create some misunderstanding, as if I boasted "this is modernity" when those were the first stumbling steps on the long road that would lead to the

> computerized and virtual world. I just wanted to stress the point that such images were possible, and would change our perception of the visual . . . As for Sandor Krasna, I suppose you caught the idea, which was to use some degree of fiction to add a layer of poetry to the "factuality" of the so-called documentary. From the start I had always refused the omniscient, anonymous "voice" of the classical travelogue, and I had bluntly used the first-person. For that I was sometimes reproached, accused of pretension. ("Letter to Theresa")

In this way, Marker felt like he could offer himself up completely to the public without sacrificing his privacy or authority. With regard to the inclusion of the female narrator reading the letters, Marker says, "I came to consider . . . having another voice, that of the addressee, establishing a new distance. The audience would be free to imagine whatever they wanted between those two, in a more creative way than if I had told their story myself" ("Letter to Theresa"). Does the distance create a layer of fiction that's too heavy, though? I don't think so. Like Lamb, many personal essayists employ a fictionalized voice, even if they don't rename or identify this character-version of themselves. In Carl Klaus's 2010 book *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*, he writes: "the 'person' in a personal essay is written construct, a fabricated thing, a character of sorts—the sound of its voice a byproduct of carefully chosen words . . . much tidier than the mess of memories, thoughts, and feelings arising in one's consciousness" (1). By filtering his voice through the letters of Krasna and the woman reading them, Marker removes the baggage that would accompany him in an unveiled first person account and creates space for the viewer's interpretation. Through these openings, Marker establishes himself as a master of showcasing personal expression through public experience and the process of thinking on the screen. He admits that the film's transformative properties were explosive for him:

> Oh, and did the film change me? Well, perhaps you remember the moment when I mention the Year of the Dog. I was just sixty then, which means that the different combinations between the twelve animals of the year and the four elements have

> been exhausted, and you're in for a brand new life. I didn't realize that when I began, but at that moment I understood that the whole film was a kind of exorcism for sixty years on this dubious planet, and a way to take leave of them. You could call that a change. ("Letter to Theresa by Chris Marker")

This sense of completing a cycle and beginning anew is inherent in the film; in the first few moments, the narrator reads from Krasna's letter: "I've been round the world several times and now only banality still interests me" (Marker). Through Krasna's writing and the female narrator's voice, the viewer hears the shift in Marker's life, from adventuresome and wide-eyed to detail-oriented and concerned with the individual.

Michael Moore's first documentary (which is how he refers to the piece in the film, yet then labels it a "comedy" instead because of its whimsical, nontraditional style and also to establish a satirical tone) *Roger and Me* seems as if it will be an essay-film of the self-portraiture/political hybrid variety. At the very least, Moore establishes why he is making this film, which for me is enough to say that "the text represent[s] the speaker's attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem"; however, Moore's anger and political agenda seem to consume his film and he loses sight of the trying, the searching, the "untying of the mental knot" ("In Search of the Centaur"). Lopate thinks Moore loses sight of himself: "unlike a true personal essayist, Moore resists the burden of self-understanding, electing to ridicule the inanities of the rich while not being hard enough on himself" ("In Search of the Centaur" 21). *Roger and Me* resists the label of essay-film in my eyes because Moore becomes closed off to possibilities beyond the singular situation he has established as truth, abandoning the open, sincerely questioning, unbound tone of the essayist.

Since *The Threepenny Review* published "In Search of the Centaur" in 1992, Agnes Varda, contemporary and friend of Chris Marker, produced what Lopate is sure to find a shining example of the essay-film and a direct predecessor to the literary video essay. Varda's 2000 *The*

Gleaners and I is a beautifully braided meditation on gleaning, aging, death, and afterlife that combines travelogue, social commentary, portraiture, and self-portraiture, as well as refractive cinematography. For Varda, essayistic meandering seems to come so organically—her historic view of harvest gleaning leads smoothly into the gleaning of the urban streets by the poor and homeless, and she isn't shy about turning the camera on herself and admitting that she is gleaning all she can through her filming. The types of gleaners she meets on her travels—those who glean to survive, those who glean for ethical reasons, those who glean for art—provide a colorful landscape into which Varda continuously inserts herself, filming her hand up close, or her eye in a mirror, and stopping to say: "This is my project. To film one hand with my other hand. To enter into the horror of it." While she gleans these experiences she is also gleaning fragments of herself, taking stock of each deep line and grey hair: "The essayistic becomes about the struggles to think the self within a field of death and passing, where images of self are redeemed only as a gleaned excess from the world" (Corrigan 72). There is beauty in the concept that Varda has captured images of refuse and waste and those who gather it and make art from it.

Marilyn Freeman, video essayist and former professor of nonfiction multimedia, praises Varda's (self-)reflexivity in including footage of her lens cap swinging in and out of the frame because she forgot to turn off her camera: "we are made aware. It's uncomfortable. *Wait a minute, that's her lens cap.* We laugh, uncertain. Varda forfeits the authority of the filmmaker, transparently, self-consciously. She tells us, 'I forgot to turn my camera off.' In the middle of the film Varda pulls back the curtain and engages us in the making" (Freeman). However, I think this transparency is apparent for the duration of the film: we are constantly aware that we are on a journey with Varda and that she is showing us what she wants us to see. Her hand films her other hand reaching out of the car window toward the passing trucks, her fingers opening and

closing as if she's trying to capture them, but she tells us, "No, just playing." There is the sense that the viewer knows everything Varda knows; she isn't holding back for a big reveal or tidy eureka moment.

As politically charged and experimental film colleagues of the Left Bank film initiative, there is a good reason why Marker, Varda, and Resnais are most often mentioned as "the quintessential cinema essayists" and the inspiration behind many video essayists (Freeman). In privileging discovery, truth, exploration, and art over commercial success, they are able to create films that are complex, vulnerable, and powerful. Canadian actress, writer, and director Sarah Polley also accomplishes this with her 2012 *Stories We Tell.* In searching for the truth about her mother Diane Elizabeth MacMillan, and her biological father Harry Gulkin, through interviews with family members, she learns "that we can't all be right and we can't all be wrong. So we must be unintentionally distorting things to varying degrees in order to feed our own version of what we need the past and history to be, and in our way, we must all be telling the truth as well" (*Stories We Tell*). Polley explains to them that she wants to tell the story from everyone's point of view, giving each story equal weight, but in the end they each point out that she, as director and editor, will have the last say in how the story is told.

What begins as a lovely portrait of her mother—as painted by Polley's siblings and her mother's lovers and friends—transitions into the narrative of Polley's tender, tentative, tumultuous relationship with her biological father Harry Gulkin as she seeks to know him while protecting the father who raised her, Michael Polley. Truly though, the film becomes a tribute to Michael and his love for Sarah: he is featured interview-style along with the siblings and Harry, but he is also given command over the story as the narrator as he reads a manuscript of his and Diane's life together, as well as a letter he wrote to Sarah following the discovery of her true

paternity. In an interview sequence, Sarah asks Michael about the day her mom died and he becomes emotional, calling her (in jest) a cruel director. He says it reminds him of the time she was shooting a montage for film school, and she had him submerge himself into a pool in full suit. The suit made it difficult for him to stay under, and she kept asking him to sink farther, alluding to his willingness to do anything for her regardless of their DNA.

Polley includes an element of reflexive cinematography through images of herself filming, moments when her siblings invert the interview and ask her questions, and repeated requests for Michael to "take that line again" while he is in the sound booth. The resulting film is a meditation on relationships and family, multiple portraits, and a quest for truth that ends with the conclusion that we make our own emotional truths.

Shortly after Marker's death, London's BFI Southbank Whitechapel Gallery featured retrospectives of essay film in August 2013 and 2015. Chris Darke, co-curator of the 2015 retrospective, and Peter Yeung, who covered the interest in "The Secret History of the Essay Film" in *Dazed*, have looser and perhaps more contemporary guidelines than either Lopate or Corrigan for the essay film: "It is 'the personal aspect and style of address' that makes the essay film distinct. It is this flexibility that has appealed to contemporary filmmakers, permitting a fresh, nuanced viewing experience" (Yeung). Previously captured almost exclusively by the French filmmakers of the Left Bank, this intimate personality and point of view is now being expressed and utilized by both contemporary filmmakers and essayists interested in multimodal writing. NYU professor of English Sukhdev Sandhu's 2013 article for the *The Guardian*, "Vagrancy and Drift: The Rise of the Roaming Essay Film" concentrates on the searching, questioning, yearning qualities of the essay that may be tempting to cull or edit out of film: "Essay film-makers commonly foreground the process of thought and the labour of constructing

a narrative rather than aiming for seamless artefacts that conceal the conceptual questions that went into their making. Incompletion, loose ends, directorial inadequacy: these are acknowledged rather than brushed over." Truly, these aspects are not just acknowledged in contemporary essay-films; rather, they're enhanced and explored, exploited for their hidden meanings and nuances. Despite the varieties of length of their pieces, the magnitude of their projects, and their filmmakers' backgrounds, Resnais, Marker, Varda, and Polley all succeed in this reflexivity and intimacy—the cornerstones of the essay-film and now, also the video essay.

Chapter 2: John Bresland & the Rise of the Online Literary Journal

If the essence of the essay-film and video essay are the same, why the shift to a shorter, inherently less formal container? Why not just let the essay-film ride the wave of, in Marilyn Freeman's words, "reflexive, subjective, autobiographic, poetic, interdisciplinary" multimedia? John Bresland, a filmmaker, writer, professor at Northwestern, and the video essayist largely responsible for the form's rise in popularity, claims the transition from film to video is all in the making and viewing experience. In his 2012 "On the Origins of the Video Essay," he emphasizes mobility and realism:

> Video, on the other hand, from the way it's acquired (on small, light digital cameras with startling image quality) to the way it's consumed (on mobile devices, on planes, as shared links crossing the ether) is now being carried everywhere, the way books and magazines once were. And there's a certain texture to video, a telltale combination of compression artifacts, blown-out whites and noisy blacks that isn't pretty. But it's not ugly, either. It's real.

While films are tending toward a grittier, less polished appearance lately to increase a sense of realism, the word "video" still invokes an impression of an edgier, less formal product, and with modern technology, it is certainly easier to make a video than a full-length film.

Freeman speaks of the reflexivity, openness, and intimacy video offers: "By contrast, the video essay aims to move audiences deeper [than conventional films]. It disrupts the smooth impenetrable surface of standard cinema with unexpected couplings of sound and image. Those couplings open up the video essay to interpretation and invite in audiences to co-create meaning." Perhaps there isn't as much room for the audience when a much larger crew is

involved in the making, as is the case for most film productions; all of the video essays I have encountered and the ones I studied for this project are the product of one essayists or the collaboration of one essayist and one cameraman. This, too, is a distinct difference in the essay-film and the video essay: where Lopate envisioned filmmakers creating essay-films, what has occurred in reality is that essayists have begun picking up video cameras and smart phones alongside their pens (perhaps word processors) and started "writing" with both—sometimes with little to no prior filming experience.

Beyond having the vision and tools to write essays with images, sound, and text, writers like Bresland have also found a medium for publication in the online literary journal as it rose in popularity in the early twenty-first century. According to the *BluePrintReview*, an online journal edited by German author Dorothee Lang, the first online journals appeared in 1995: *CrossConnect*, *Eclectica*, *Mississippi Review Online*, *Blue Moon Review*, *Makar*, and *Recursive Angel*. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, literally thousands of online literary journals, mostly published by universities across the country, had emerged. M.A. Keller, senior online editor and one of the founding editors of Virginia Commonwealth University's *Blackbird*, which debuted on April 15, 2002, reminiscing about the difficulties associated with being one of the first online-only literary journals, remembers trying to solicit work for the first few issues and attempting to convince writers that *Blackbird* would "be responsible with their work, that it would be archived" (Interview, 22 Feb. 2016). With no money for a print journal, the editors—Keller along with Mary Flinn and Greg Donovan—"had the false impression that starting an online journal would be easy." They grappled with the concept of an online journal; many outside voices tried to convince the *Blackbird* editors that existing online required inviting conversations about work via forums, or that fresh content needed to be featured every week. In

2009, Sandra Beasley, poet, memoirist, and contributor to *Blackbird*, wrote an article for *Poets & Writers* about the questions writers faced when deciding whether to publish their work online: "'Who reads [online journals]? Are the editors literate? Are they all just out of MFA programs? I can't defend these suspicions with facts. I feel, privately, as though my work—if published online—would drop into a black hole. I'm no Luddite, but I still hanker for hard copy.'" Of course, we now know that the likely editors of online journals are just as reputable and experienced as those of print journals, and if published online, your work is probably *less* likely to drop into a black hole thanks to the archiving systems the internet provides, but the online world did not gain the trust of the writing community quickly or easily. "We solicited work for those first few issues . . . and I remember trying to convince people that this is the future of the literary journal," Keller says. "We wanted to publish 'traditional' content—poetry, fiction, some nonfiction—but then ask that question: 'what could we provide beyond that as an online journal?' We wanted to include drama, audio, video, performative art in the gallery" (Interview, 22 Feb. 2016).

Keller met John Bresland at the 2005 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Annual Conference in Vancouver. Bresland presented on and moderated a panel, "The Video Essay: Writing with Images and Sound," along with Jeff Porter and Kara Lynch. Though not archived with AWP or anywhere else on the web that I can find, Bresland sent me the official panel description via email:

> Thanks to the freedom granted by digital cameras, the video essay is fast emerging as a new form of creative nonfiction. Agnes Varda, the poetic French filmmaker who coined the term cinécriture (film-writing), best described the promise of the video essay when noting that, for her, writing meant more than simply wording a script. Shooting, making cuts, designing sound—these too were part of that process. We'll show how sound and image alter the writer's relationship to language.

Keller remembers Bresland's two AWP pieces, "The Seinfeld Analog" and "Les Cruel Shoes," and, deciding that "The Seinfeld Analog" looked like a copyright nightmare for a fairly new journal, Keller told Bresland that *Blackbird* would be interested in publishing "Les Cruel Shoes." Bresland doesn't remember what he showed as part of the panel, but does remember passing out DVDs with both video essays on them and recalls Keller reaching out to him later about publishing "Les Cruel Shoes." Whatever transpired, the video essay was featured in volume four, number one in the spring of 2005. As Keller says, "I remember telling the others, 'We've got to get on this' . . . but I don't think [the video essay] was that well understood yet" (Interview, 22 Feb. 2016). The introduction for "Les Cruel Shoes" in the issue's forward reads only, "also in the Gallery, John Bresland introduces us to cinécriture with a foray into a relatively new form, the video essay, in 'Les Cruel Shoes.' We hope later to bring you additional work as a feature to relieve the dog days of summer" ("Forward"). This brief and uncharacteristic introduction is revealing in two ways: first, simply in that the editors are hoping to publish more of Bresland's work soon, and second, they have no idea what to say about Bresland's work and its genre.

Keller recalls remaining insistent on digging deeper into the video essay field, and in the fall of 2008, *Blackbird* put out a special call for video essay submissions in volume seven, number two. No longer at a loss for words, the editors (with Bresland's help) crafted a beautiful description of the video essay:

> Like its print counterpart, the video essay is an attempt of personal reflection while engaging with the facts of the world. The video essay, writes Phillip Lopate, "wears proudly the confusion of an independent soul trying to grope in isolation toward truth." Agnes Varda, the poetic French filmmaker who coined the term cinécriture, or film-writing, best described the promise of the video essay when noting that, for her, writing meant more than simply wording a script. Choosing images, designing sound—these, too, are part of that process. At its best, the video essay combines the visceral power of sound and image, building a sympathetic resonance with language and taking a direct route to the senses. We

> believe this emerging form of creative nonfiction to be, by its very nature, personal, poetic, open to invention. We invite your explorations. ("Special Call for Submissions: The Video Essay")

Also specified are desired length (between two and ten minutes, ideally five to seven) and specific, bulleted instructions for submission, which introduced an entirely new set of complications regarding the video essay. Receiving, viewing, embedding, and featuring media added another layer of difficulty to publishing online, especially in 2005. Keller recalls trying to decide whether *Blackbird* would stream media or provide downloadable files, realizing that once the editors made the decision, it would be nearly impossible to change later because of the volume of archived work that would have accumulated. The editors decided to stream: "I think there was the idea early on that if we put it there to download, people could reproduce it in the wild . . . streaming felt more like broadcasting or that we had ownership of it." While streaming protects the video from being reproduced or shared out of *Blackbird'*s context, it is not always reliable because of its dependency on Internet quality and speed, and Keller remembers working through a time when the video essays played correctly locally, but glitched in other parts of the country and world. And—as Beasley notes—expansive readership is one of the major draws of publishing online: "Since Bruce Covey launched his online magazine, *Coconut*, in 2005, he has monitored visitor traffic. 'A new issue of *Coconut* gets about ten thousand unique page views in its first two weeks," he reported recently. "Readership has increased with every issue. We have readers in Japan, Korea, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, France, Italy, the Philippines, Qatar—all over the world.'" This extensive reach and the ease with which the international population can access online journals not only boosts the popularity of literary journals, but also encourages an increase in diverse submissions. An online format benefits both the readers and editors.

With solicited work and responses to their special call, *Blackbird* published their Video Essay Suite in volume nine, number one in the spring of 2010. Bresland wrote an alphabetic essay, "On the Origins of the Video Essay," to introduce the suite. In it, he hails Chris Marker and Agnes Varda as the film essay masters, references Lopate's longing in "In Search of the Centaur," and pinpoints the stimulus of the rise of the video essay as the boom of the internet and the development—far beyond anything we ever could have imagined in 1992 when Lopate's essay was published—of electronic tools and the ease with which the general population can access and use them. He finishes by establishing the authority of the video essay with etymology, tying the new form's label firmly to its roots: "The video essay. *Video* from the Latin verb *vidēre*—to see. *Essay* in the Greek sense, meaning to ask. In the Japanese sense, to quicken the heart. In the French sense, to try" ("On the Origins of the Video Essay"). He emphasizes that the video essay is not only a new experience for the reader, but it's also new for the writer, as she learns how to tell her stories with layers of images and sound that enhance, or complete, her text rather than drowning it out. "The essayist pushes toward some insight or some truth. That insight, that truth, tends to be hard won, if at all, for the essay tends to ask more than it answers. That asking—whether inscribed in ancient mud, printed on paper, or streamed thirty frames per second—is central to the essay, is the essay" ("On the Origins of the Video Essay").

Included in Blackbird's video essay suite are "Mangoes," by Bresland; "The Wren," by Jessica Bardsley and Penny Lane; "Blobsquatch: In the Expanded Field," by Carl Diehl; "Baptism," by Marilyn Freeman; "Zidane," by Claudia Rankine and John Lucas; and "Notes on Liberty," by John Scott. Their subjects range from parenting to racism to naming to Bigfoot, their styles from docu-montage to personal narrative, and their lengths from four minutes to twenty-nine minutes. The suite is a truly diverse and impressive display of a relatively new and

innovative form, and as far as I can find to date, it was published at least two years before any other journals featured video essays.

With Bresland as its video editor, Northwestern's *TriQuarterly* began publishing video essays in issue 141 in January of 2012. *TriQuarterly*'s inaugural suite includes pieces by Dinty W. Moore, Robin Schiff and Nick Twemlow, and Kristen Radtke, and is introduced by Marilyn Freeman's alphabetic essay, "On the Form of the Video Essay." Radtke, graphic memoirist, managing editor at Sarabande Books, and now video editor for *TriQuarterly*, stumbled across the video essay at a time when she happened to be sick of her own writing and trying to create illustrated essays. In an interview with *Blackbird*'s associate production editor Mary Selph, Radtke says: "In the middle of one disastrous illustrated essay, I saw the wonderful John Bresland screen a video at the 2010 Nonfiction Now Conference, held at the University of Iowa. I loved the way he used off-the-page elements—sound, color, abstract shapes—so simply to create something whole and elegant" (Radtke). It is not surprising to hear her credit Bresland with her video essay discovery; however, now he considers her the master: "we're looking for works that use language, image and sound with equal fluency and brio . . . Kristen Radtke more or less created that standard" (Hart). Radtke's pieces incorporate her illustrations and utilize stop motion—a technique in which the animator physically moves objects and photographs them in small increments to create the illusion of movement—so her process and relationship with images is complicated, but she continues to strive to strike a balance between images and verbal text: "that's definitely the goal of work that combines text and image—creating both without being redundant, complicating without throwing a reader/viewer off course (unless that diversion is part of the intention)" (Radtke). The difficulty of striking this balance, compounded with the

addition of sound, ensures that the video essay remains a challenging form to create, and even more so to create well.

In Northwestern's news release about the *TriQuarterly* video essay collection, Wendy Leopold, journalist for the university, interviews Bresland about the appearance and rise of the form. He notes that while uniformity in class titles or content certainly isn't in place, "when [he] surveyed the curricula of 30 major universities, he found nearly all offered classes similar to video essay courses he teaches in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences and School of Continuing Studies. But what he calls video essay, another university might label 'experimental media,' 'multimedia storytelling' or 'writing with video.'" While the video essay may not yet be fixed by name, as a form, it has become well established in the academic world. Under the title of video essay, the form is gaining momentum in the realm of the online journal. Since 2010, Blackbird has published two more video essays by Bresland: "Hook" in volume eleven, number one in the spring of 2012, which also includes a conversation among Bresland, his coauthor, Brian Bouldrey, and *Blackbird*'s senior online editor M.A. Keller about collaboration and the process of creation; and "Peyton Place: a Haiku Soap Opera" in volume fourteen, number two in the fall of 2015. *Blackbird*'s Bresland collection allows the video essay—at least as imagined by one writer—to be examined as a living, breathing form, one with a brief but rich history and an upward trajectory as its creators continue to refine its identity and expand its reach. As I write this, besides *Blackbird, TriQuarterly,* and Bresland's own site, video essays can now also be found in *Ninth Letter, Drunken Boat,* and *Split Lip*.

Writers—the best ones especially, it seems, considering Shakespeare, Swift, and David Foster Wallace—have a long history of breaking the rules, and with the barriers of print melting

away and making legitimate room for the digital, all bets are off. Marilyn Freeman quotes Theodor Adorno—"The essay's innermost formal law is heresy"—and says:

> Every time I read that line from 'The Essay as Form,' Adorno's midcentury manifesto, I feel the kind of joy I felt when I accidentally rang the fire alarm instead of the recess bell in seventh grade at St. Francis of Assisi in Spokane. I feel guilty, involuntary joy. And I think of the video essay—the brainy, bratty, mixed breed love child of poetry, creative nonfiction, art house indies, documentary, and experimental media art. It is an ascendant incarnation of Adorno's heresy, and the moment has never been better for it. (Freeman)

It's somehow perfectly fitting that what some have called the most primitive genre, with some of the oldest origins, is evolving with ease to express on the screen what used to be strictly relegated to the page. To end his "On the Origins of the Video Essay," Bresland, chronicler of his own personal narratives and those of a digital generation, writes: "I can think of no better way to take on the problems of being alive right now than to write this way, with a pen in one hand and a lens in the other" ("On the Origins of the Video Essay").

3. Images, Sound, Text, & Composition

With writing no longer strictly meaning composing pages and lines with nouns, verbs, and adjectives, but composing meaning with images, sound, and text, the process of creating has become more complex and more nuanced, perhaps sometimes not as controlled, like Lopate's centaur. In her "On the Form of the Video Essay," Marilyn Freeman asserts that it is the collision of these generally separate aspects that lends the video essay its sense of urgency, groundedness, and relatability:

> Interdisciplinarity is the mongrel beauty of our love child. It insists on creative egalitarianism and engages practitioners without discrimination—the writer, the filmmaker, the painter, the installation artist, the scholar. There is the erasure of the carefully constructed word on the page. There is the intrusion of pop culture optics and audio. The erosion of visual dominance. The imposition of literary text, voiced, sometimes wall-to-wall. There is the lack of hierarchy and the conflated tweaking of the written word, the recorded word, ambient sound, music, low-resolution images, high-resolution images, hand-made images. There is no primacy. The video essay does not privilege literary text over image, nor image over text, or either over sound or vice versa.

Freeman certainly describes an ideal, but at this stage in the development of the genre, I think privilege lies with the writer. A well-written text can encourage the viewer to more quickly forgive low-quality or redundant images, or shoddy sound. While the genre is still new and quickly evolving, video essayists who have been creating for a few years now (ten, in some cases), through both practice and in theory, have developed general guidelines for how images, sound, and text should work together to create the video equivalent of a literary essay.

IMAGES

Just as Kristen Radtke's exploration of the video essay began with her illustrated images, Dinty Moore was inspired by photographs he took while working in Edinburgh, Scotland. He thinks, initially, that he will tell the story of an Edinburgh castle that demands attention and dominates much of his video footage, but his still photographs reveal a more personal struggle, and in examining the scores of photographs of elderly men he has captured, he discovers his preoccupation with exploring missing links in his ancestry. In the "Contributor's Note" that accompanies his video essay "History" on *TriQuarterly*'s website, Moore writes: "For this video essay, I tried to rely less on words and ideas and instead trust the visuals. It was two weeks in before I realized the story here was not the Castle, or other snippets of video I had collected, but what I was capturing with my still camera. The heart of it was more personal than cultural" (Moore). He recognizes that the subjects of his photographs—elderly, Scottish men—reveal a desire in him to know his lineage, and, in effect, know more about himself. The parade of photographs represents possibilities for his great grandfather, who isn't buried in the family plot and whose story seems to have been erased from his family's history. The images in "History" illustrate his travels, but the way Moore orders them and plots their sequence against a soundtrack of piano and harp music and street noise, and dictates their familial theme with voiceover, allows them to represent kinship among strangers and the human desire to know one's origins.

While the relationship between images and words in "History" is fairly straightforward, many video essayists follow a seemingly opposite school of thought: "'The trick,' says Bresland, 'is to avoid redundancy between images and words. Better to let the visuals and the language do their own delving, and even to contradict one another, as our real-life thoughts and experiences

tend to do. When there's distance between the image and the word, there's space for the viewer's imagination'" (Hart). While I understand Bresland's argument, I tend to think that the most effective use of visuals lies somewhere in between the Bresland and Moore approaches. A composition of images that is illustrative of the text, but perhaps pushes the borders of the text beyond where it explicitly leads, maintains the tension between them and creates space for interpretation without leaving the viewer confused or lost. In "Dust Off," the video essay Bresland created with his wife, Eula Biss, three separate but connected stories are superimposed on three scenes that change and develop in time with the stories ("Dust Off"). The images represent themes that run through the narrative: three empty swings and abandoned park toys indicate loss of innocence, a blustery snow scene viewed through a canted camera angle gives a sense of distortion and confusion, and a sharp light speeding through a night sky evokes reckless abandon and isolation. As the haunting voiceover, performed by Gail Shapiro, unfolds the stories of three young men who "died in the pursuit of pleasure" with very little reflective alphabetic text, the images incite curiosity, provoke the imagination, and engage the emotions of the viewer so that the textual spaces are filled with her own reflections. The spaces between the text and images are vast, however, and some might critique the video essay as being too abstract or void of reflection.

Robyn Schiff and Nick Twemlow, both poets and another husband and wife team, constructed "Wolfvision" (also found in *TriQuarterly*) with found video footage from the Internet. Twemlow edited the footage together and Schiff wrote the voiceover script in response to his sequence of images. The clips, which feature a woman exposing the grisly consequences of her eating disorder, a supposed UFO sighting in China, and surveillance footage of the discovery of a child, dead from heatstroke, in the backseat of a car, are sequenced in such a way

to evoke the haunting feeling that accompanies being observed or watched and to emphasize the eerie fact of twenty-first century life that one is almost always being watched, especially with the pervasiveness of the internet. In the contributor's note that accompanies the piece, Twemlow admits that he exploits this circumstance for the sake of exploration: "Part of the charge of using other people's images is that you get to change the context in which the viewer looks at them. Maybe I'm suggesting that images are a lot like words—a writer doesn't hesitate to use whatever word occurs to her when working on a poem or short story. Words, after all, are available to everyone (at least for now). Why not the image?" (Schiff and Twemlow). His theory, that images will someday be used as words, is quickly coming to fruition, especially in the world of the video essay. In the video essay, images function most often not just as additional layers or complexity to a streamlined text, but as the rest of the text—as the parts of speech, emotion, reflection, horizontal and vertical movement.

SOUND

Most often, the sound of video essays is comprised of voiceover script, dialogue within video clips, naturalistic and background noises, music, and sometimes—for example, in the case of "Wolfvision"—all of the above. Sometimes sound is used in a straightforward fashion. In "Situation 7," by poet Claudia Rankine and documentary photographer John Lucas and featured in a more recent issue of *TriQuarterly*, voiceover, environmental sounds, and a beautiful soundtrack accompany shadowy images of a young man on a train. In sharp contrast to Gail Shapiro's slippery voice in "Dust Off," Claudia Rankine's sounds robotic at the onset of "Situation 7," but softens as the classical piano music begins to fill in from behind. Rankine's background in poetry is evident in her narration—she reads using rhythm, musicality, enjambment and full end stops where appropriate. Rankine's piece explores the racial

stereotyping that unfortunately often occurs in public spaces, here illustrated by the speaker wondering about a black man on a metro or train beside whom no one sits. The music quickens as she stops speaking, and its pace matches the speeding of the train and the world going by outside. Recorded announcements from a train loudspeaker and various cell phone sounds are layered under the score, giving the viewer the sense that she is daydreaming in a public sphere. The end credits indicate that two musical pieces, "Laceration" and "Moments of our Mornings" both by Kai Engel, accompany the essay, but it is nearly impossible to tell where one ends and the next begins. At the end of the piece, the music becomes more digitized and auto-tuned, ushering the reader into a contemporary space where this situation—one of fear or misunderstanding due to racial tension—shouldn't be a situation at all.

In her interview in *Blackbird*, Kristen Radtke indicates her difficulty in having complete control over the manipulation of sound simply due to lack of skill or experience. When Mary Selph asks what role non-verbal sounds play in her essays, Radtke references a friend, José Orduna, and how she would "listen to what he'd make, how he'd manipulate and overlay, how sounds intrude upon and complicate and make the text come alive." Beyond requiring skill and experience, sound is one of the most difficult aspects of the video essay to incorporate effectively because individuals listen so differently. Much more so than with text or image, what one person audibly notices another may not, and what one person interprets as calming or soothing music, another may think sounds ominous or sorrowful. As for herself, Radtke says, "the best I hope to do is make sound that contributes to a mood without calling too much attention to itself. Usually that means lying in bed all day and recording the sound of my feet on sheets, cups being dragged across the nightstand . . ." (Ratdke and Selph). In her video essay "That Kind of Daughter," the only sound barely underlining Radtke's smooth, sometimes cruel voice is the faintest whisper of

a door creaking open. While her simplicity of sound may be a product of her limited technical experience, Radtke's background sounds are comforting in a way the viewer may not consciously process, and a certain starkness is essential to this piece.

On the opposite end of this spectrum, Dinty Moore's "History" uses music and sound to color, punctuate, and infuse emotion into his piece. The narrator, Moore himself, begins with a sigh that easily could have been edited out; its intentionality indicates a general weariness or perhaps a sense of labor that goes into telling the story. Music of harmonious, sustained tones, barely noticeable, fills out Moore's voice as he introduces his viewer to Edinburgh, the castle, and the history of both. If the viewer hasn't noticed the music, she notices it when it stops, and emergency sirens usher in Moore's dark personal history. While Moore asks questions about and searches for his great grandfather, the only sound to be heard is that of background noise: cars, birds, light breezes. His questions remain unanswered, and his upsetting family revelations are underlined by the same intensifying, harmonious tone that was heard at the beginning of the video essay. As Moore finds solace in his photographs of elderly men and in his acceptance that he may never know the truth about his great grandfather, pleasant harp music—more melodious than anything heard so far in the piece—is layered under that sustained, intensifying tone.

Bresland explains the need for compelling sound in his 2009 essay for the online literary journal *Brevity*, "On Writing for the Ear," in which he explains that his essay "Future Ex Buys Pajamas" was meant to be an audio piece: "part of what makes confessions seductive (and uncomfortable) is their intimacy. To try to bottle that, I wrote the essay orally, speaking the words as I typed. No sentence was set before I could say it in a way that felt whispered in the dark" ("On Writing for the Ear"). Bresland details his struggles with audio editing software to make his voice "sound close"—deciding to filter his voice through a telephone speaker—and his

search for the perfect accompanying musical track, moving through songs “that sounded great, but didn't advance the essay's central idea,” one that made his text feel “like a lie,” and finally landing on one that’s “better, and better is good enough for today.” He embeds files of the audio essay accompanied by the different tracks into “On Writing for the Ear” and it becomes an instructive and helpful tool in exploring sound in the essay.

TEXT

The alphabetic text of video essays—what some might call the meat of the piece—is sometimes written before the writer even realizes that the piece will become a video essay. Other times, images—photographs, illustrations, video—inspire the piece and the text is written in response to them. Radtke claims her process is usually uniform: “[I] write the text, draw the static images, record the narration, pull the images apart and animate them, and then see how it works together. Usually that means going back and revising the text and images a fair amount along the way” (Radtke and Selph). Her images are responses to the text, and the animation and stop motion that come later provide movement, texture, and tension in her pieces. It is worth noting, however, that these elements do not often fit together neatly upon first attempt; each addition or subtraction complicates the meaning of the video essay in ways not easily predicted.

The text of “Wolfvision” was written by Robyn Schiff in response to her husband’s edit of found video clips; because of this method of collaboration, this video essay is perhaps the one in existence now that most challenges one of Lopate’s original qualifications of what makes an essay film. In “In Search of the Centaur,” Lopate posits that the essay film should “represent a single voice.” Many video essays are the product of pairs, and often these pairs are comprised of people in intimate relationships (married couples) where one person brings his writing talent and the other, her skills with the video camera and editing software. However, the lines of

responsibility are generally more blurred than within this collaboration, where the voiceover text is essentially a response to the composition of images. Does the piece represent a single voice? If it doesn't, should it still be considered an essay? The voiceover begins: "'I said to my husband,' she wrote, 'I don't want to see the tape of the cars in the parking lot, even if what you dare to splice between the image of the mother arriving, and the mother rushing around to the back passenger side seat to unbuckle the limp child makes suggestions I can't deny, and have often sensed myself, slipping, for instance, a Keats poem beneath the eye of the Wolfvision document camera in my classroom.'" Schiff's text is epistolary and written in the third person, and the person who reads the voiceover text is male, possibly Twemlow. These points of departure create distance from the original author, blurring the lines between what were, at the onset of creation, Twemlow's contributions and what were Schiff's. The use of found internet footage to compose the video also calls into question the notion of a single voice; how does the girl with the eating disorder, who talks about her "pretty teeth," and the woman who narrates the ghostly encounter, fit into that singular voice? They contribute their experiences and Twemlow composes them into a single video, infusing his own voice through the artistry in the construction of his composition. Schiff's voiceover cements the montage as an essay, her words illuminating Twemlow's "suggestions" through reflection and association.

In his 2012 essay on the video essay in *American Book Review*, Ned Stuckey-French dismisses the collaborative concern: "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 assistances" ("The Video Essay"). Stuckey-French goes on to comment on the abundance of video essays created by pairs and lists Robyn Schiff and Nick Twemlow as successful collaborators, but doesn't specify what makes their collaboration

beneficial and not detrimental. In this case, Twemlow's careful consideration of the composition of the videos and Schiff's thoughtful reflection, along with a respect for one another's work and the found internet footage, resulted in a moving video essay that is collaborative in several different ways. There are certainly very few alphabetic essays—or any pieces of nonfiction, fiction, or poetry, for that matter—that are the creation of a sole writer. Workshops, editors, professors, peers, and spouses: these help writers define their voice, tailor their message, and perfect their style.

Just because the text in a video essay may be sparser or briefer than that which constitutes an alphabetic essay doesn't mean the quality can be poor; Bresland emphasizes this aspect often in interviews. Of the *TriQuarterly* video essay suite, he says: "All of these essays use visuals in surprising ways . . . as well, they're exquisitely written" (Hart). While the collective English "we" refers to literature as living, Bresland also emphasizes the surprisingly powerful impact that spoken words can have because of their animate qualities: they come straight from the writer's head (usually with some shaping), are often transmitted in the writer's own voice, and absorbed by the viewer's ears—the experience is intimate. It's obvious that Bresland wants to change the essayistic landscape: "'Writing is no longer just words,' he says. 'I'm hungry for films that aren't afraid to talk to us or to think aloud on a voiceover track'" (Hart). Video essays offer alternative ways, including audible immersion, for readers to experience writers' work.

COMPOSITION & TOOLS

While collaboration on video essays is common because two people can often bring more skills to a project than one can, the tools available to writers today are so inexpensive, accessible, and easy-to-use that often a professional filmmaker's expertise is unnecessary. Bresland emphasizes this phenomena in his "On the Origins of the Video Essay":

> Today artists have access to video editing tools that ship free on most computers. A generation ago, such capability didn't exist at any price. . . The act of writing has always been a personal pursuit, a concentrated form of thought. And now filmmaking, too, shares that meditative space. The tools are handheld, affordable, no less accessible than a Smith-Corona. You can shoot and edit video, compelling video, on a cell phone. ("On the Origins of the Video Essay")

Bresland even admits to making his video essay "Mangoes" on a five-year-old iPhone and lauds the always-available technology for being "good at capturing real moments between people" (Hart). Just as the poetry of a phrase or the melody of a line can strike a writer and beg to be written down immediately, so too do images and sound, and thankfully, we're always carrying the device we need to capture those moments. Even more opportunities exist in technology for writers like Radtke, whose talents in illustrating or crafting can now be used to complicate, enhance, and fill out their work:

> The screen of an iPad, for example, isn't just a substitute for paper. It's a canvas, a movie screen, an animation studio, a keyboard, a guitar, a microphone, a mixing board. The mobile devices we now use to collect our thoughts and memories don't care whether we compose using words or images or sounds or all three. I believe the act of writing will always be, as writer Don DeLillo describes it, a concentrated form of thinking. But I also believe that fewer authors in the years ahead will choose to stop at the printed word. (Bresland, northwestern.edu)

Sukhdev Sandhu, professor of English at NYU, in his 2013 article for *The Guardian*, concentrates on the generational tendencies of rising authors and their attraction to essay-films, "especially younger people who have been weaned on cheap editing software, platforms such as Tumblr and the archival riches at YouTube and UbuWeb. Visually literate and semiotically savvy, they have tools – conceptual as well as technological – not only to critique and curate (moving) images, but to capture and assemble them" (Sandhu). And this group is growing, especially via students under Bresland's wing or the wide net he has cast through past students and mentees. Of his students, he says, "They delight in making sense of their world using the full arsenal of sensory input—image, text, sound, voice. Not that it's all wine and roses. I think most

students realize, in the end, that no matter the medium, the heavy lifting of real thinking can't be avoided" (Leopold).

Chapter 4: Case Studies—Bresland

The beginning of the rise of the literary video essay can be traced to the relationship between John Bresland and *Blackbird* with the publication of "Les Cruel Shoes" in 2005. Though not robust by any means, *Blackbird*'s collection of four video essays by Bresland (published over the course of ten years) provides a helpful evolution of the form—as envisioned and created by the writer who gave the form its literary birth, and as published by one literary journal—a series of video essays that can be analyzed, compared, and contrasted with the hope of beginning to discover criteria for and categories within the form.

After analyzing several films using Lopate's criteria to determine whether any of them qualify as essay-films, I have decided that his are not the most accurate or specific criteria for determining the status and gauging the quality of video essays. Lopate emphasizes that, for a film to qualify as an essay-film in his eyes, it must have text (I assume he means alphabetic) that "represents a single voice," "represents the speaker's attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem," "must have a strong, personal point of view," and "should be as eloquent, well-written and interesting as possible" ("In Search of the Centaur" 19). Because the video essay allows essayists to "write" using image and sound as well as text, it is just as important to determine criteria that can also be applied to these aspects. Therefore, when viewed as a whole, the video essay should meet the same conditions originally set forth for the alphabetic literary essay. I return to Lopate's criteria: the essay "offers personal views," "tracks a person's thoughts as he or she tries to work through some mental knot, however various its

strands," "is a search to find out what one thinks of something," "must have a certain sparkle or flourish," and "is a continual asking of questions—not necessarily finding 'solutions' but enacting the struggle for truth in full view" ("In Search of the Centaur" 19). If a piece meets these criteria, in my eyes, it qualifies as a literary video essay. Determination of quality is another matter. The use and composition of images, text, and sound must be executed in a way that enhances essayistic qualities, whether it be introspection, reflection, beauty, exploration, or a combination thereof. The goal is not to compose these aspects in a way that is balanced, but in a way that serves essayistic quality most effectively and provides balance for the piece.

"Les Cruel Shoes," published in 2005, "Hook" published in 2012, and "Peyton Place: A Haiku Soap Opera," published in 2015, are three distinctly different pieces—one is a personal narrative driven by a strong first-person narrator perspective, one is a collaboration, and one is an edit that contains no original material. The way each video essay is composed of image, sound, and text is unique, demonstrating Bresland's growth and trajectory of experimentation and skill in creating within the form. As they are some of the first video essays to appear, Bresland's work also begins to carve out distinct categories, or sub forms, of the genre. To determine these, I return to the broader categories of Aldous Huxley's three poles: "the personal and autobiographical," "the objective, the factual, and the concrete-particular," and "the abstract/universal" and the notion that the strongest essays exist where all three poles overlap (Corrigan 14). To identify the video essays more specifically, Timothy Corrigan's categories of essay-films become helpful: the portrait and self-portrait, essayistic travel, diary, social and political, and refractive cinema. Corrigan would say, as does Huxley, that the most successful video essays lie at the point of overlapping categories.

To analyze these pieces, I watched each in their entirety first and immediately recorded any knee-jerk reactions, loose associations, emotions, or reflections I had after an initial viewing. Next, I pulled apart the strands of composition and recorded what occurred with the voiceover text, images, and sound during each "scene" of the essay—much as one would do with segments or notable sections when analyzing an alphabetic essay—and recorded reflections that came to me during these close readings. Finally, I read any contributor's notes or interviews that may have accompanied the video essay's publication and researched any allusions in the essay that I didn't immediately understand before watching the piece again. I found it helpful to save this step for last so that first, the piece could exist independently without the explanations or insights of the author; however, these notes and interviews revealed information about process, intention, and context that was beneficial not only to analysis, but also to understanding the creative and collaborative processes associated with video essay composition.

"Les Cruel Shoes"

While reading the contributor's note that accompanies the 2005 publication of "Les Cruel Shoes" in *Blackbird* was one of my last steps, I feel the need to provide information from that before the analysis here for several reasons. First, the text of the contributor's note precedes the link to the streaming video on *Blackbird*'s page, so it is fair to assume that many readers will read the text to prepare themselves to view the video. Furthermore, Bresland provides an anecdote in this note that answers many questions I had after viewing "Les Cruel Shoes" for the first time, among them, what inciting incident caused Bresland to finally feel accepted, granting him the hindsight and reflection he needed to create the video essay?

Bresland recalls a moment when, after living in Paris for several years, he was approached by an older French couple for directions and was able to provide them. He is

delighted not by his own competence, but by the fact that the couple mistook him for a Paris native rather than a tourist. He admits that he had longed to be taken for a Parisian for years—"which longing had nothing to do with politics or history. It was neither a renunciation of [his] American belief that one man can make a difference, nor an embrace of the European view that it takes a village" ("'Les Cruel Shoes' Contributor's Note"). He simply wanted his competence recognized; he wanted to be seen as "a man of utility rather than a tourist" ("'Les Cruel Shoes' Contributor's Note"). He asserts that "this four-minute video essay . . . shows one way to locate a sense of belonging, a sense of home, amid the most popular tourist destination on Earth" ("'Les Cruel Shoes' Contributor's Note"). Bresland also mentions that this piece was shot with a borrowed mini-DV camcorder—an indication, perhaps, of his unfamiliarity and inexperience (at the time) with creating video essay, but also proof to support his claim that the technology needed to create a video essay is small, inexpensive, and easily accessible.

"Les Cruel Shoes" begins with light brightening on a closed door which is subsequently opened, stepped out of, and closed by a first-person perspective narrator. The only sounds are ambient noises of the door opening and closing and light footsteps. Because of the first-person perspective, the viewer immediately feels implicit in this journey that is clearly about to begin. The voiceover text begins: "A few years ago, when I first moved here, I found this apartment. I got a local phone number, and I got a Paris mailing address" ("Les Cruel Shoes"). The viewer descends with the narrator down a winding, spiral staircase of concrete starkness, finally lighting on a pretty, patterned tiled floor. Bresland's voice is slow and deliberate and full of personality and expression—the viewer can hear how proud he is of his Paris mailing address and phone number. Through more ambient sounds of doors opening and closing and footsteps, he continues, "And I got a really great haircut." As he speaks the last word emphatically, the image abruptly

changes to that of a man with a stereotypically metro European haircut, artfully tousled and gelled. He is kissing something—perhaps a leather case—and light travels across the picture, causing it to glisten appealingly. Following the haircut are shoes, which Bresland describes as if he were speaking of a lover—"beautiful, cruel Italian shoes"—and showcases artfully posed on and around David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest.* Here, the possibilities for analysis are endless; was *Infinite Jest* simply the most "intellectual" book Bresland had lying around while shooting, or is he alluding to the themes of loneliness and belonging that run through *Infinite Jest*? The title might also hold some insight here—"infinite," meaning never-ending or boundless, perhaps lifelong, and "jest," meaning joking or mocking, the sense that one is "having one pulled over on him"—together indicating that while Bresland is busy getting a haircut and buying shoes, life in Paris is passing him by, and he'd be better off living it and exploring the city. The image of the shoes is graced by the same light as the haircut, and the viewer understands that these components of sophistication are "keys" to successful Paris living.

The narrator and reader exit another set of doors that lead out to the Paris streets at dusk, turn right and look down the street before turning left and deciding to continue in that direction. Parked cars line the street in either direction. Bresland's voiceover continues: "And I got a job. That's how I learned to speak French. Getting a job was key because everything fell into place after that. I learned the language—well, sort of—and I made a couple of friends. This took some time." Heavy, even jogging footfall begins and continues through a cut away from the darkened street to people the viewer assumes are Bresland's friends. Something about the way the two friends act—one shoos the camera away and the other makes a funny face—feels forced and awkward. The words "this took some time" underscore this uneasy feeling, and when Bresland stops talking a discordant, digitized chord ascends to an uncomfortable volume over the scene. It

is clear to the viewer that the narrator's transition to life in Paris was not an easy one. As the narrator and viewer continue their jog down dull, greyish streets, a horizontal line of blue light appears to the right of center through the scene. With the pressing, rising discordant sound and Bresland's last line of voiceover text, the viewer feels time passing. Suddenly, the perspective changes, and for the first time the viewer sees the jogger as he passes over bridges and by fishing boats. This piece naturally breaks into three sections, and a fade to white signals the end of the first. The viewer senses a disjointedness among text, images, and sound. Bresland's voice is confident, assured—his recipe for fitting in and being accepted in Paris is foolproof—but he's lonely. This discomfort is indicated by the inharmonious sounds that are prevalent throughout the scenes and the first-person point of view. All of the imagery that surrounds is partial or incomplete; the viewer feels as if she's seeing an unfamiliar world. There is the impression that this will be a *bildung* narrative, or coming of age story; perhaps that confidence in the narrator's voice is actually the Bresland of today mocking himself.

The second section of "Les Cruel Shoes" begins with the scene brightening on the reflection of the metro in mirrored buildings and Bresland's voiceover text: "I rode the subway to work and, you know, there are these windows all around, and sometimes I'd check myself out. I'd been living in France for years checking myself out in subway windows thinking I still look like a tourist, and that feeling never quite went away." Accordion music begins playing before the visual scene shifts into the subway, focusing on a man playing the accordion, looking straight at the camera. When Bresland speaks the word "feeling," the image abruptly changes to the base of the Eiffel tower and the discordant, high-pitched chord returns. The scene fades to black and the second section ends. Here, the image is illustrative of the text. The viewer understands that the accordion player represents a Paris native and the stereotypical Eiffel tower picture

represents Bresland, the forever tourist. In the admission that he checks himself out in subway windows Bresland seals his very American uneasiness; a (stereotypical) European sensibility means one feels confident without having to check reflections in windows. It's also interesting that Bresland chooses to leave interrupters, like "you know," in his voiceover text; they also contribute to his American essence, but they serve another purpose: they make the text sound unscripted. In theory, this should allow the viewer to feel intimate and comfortable with Bresland, but his sometimes aloof tone simultaneously keeps her at arm's length. Overall, the impression this combination leaves is of someone who is uncomfortable in his own skin, and identity emerges as one of Bresland's themes.

The image returns back to the first-person perspective of dimly lit streets, seen through an unsteady camera lens held by a jogging narrator. The viewer and narrator jog up steep stairs and down an alley bathed in low green light. Bresland's voiceover text resumes: "It was around this time I started running again—you know, jogging. Something I haven't done since high school, and it turned out to be a surprisingly intimate way to see the city. A little spooky sometimes, but intimate, and so different from what I saw during the day." Following this text are three scenes of popular Paris tourist destinations, including the Louvre and the Arc de Triomphe, each shown in turn during the day and then again in the dark. The daytime scenes are brightly lit, bustling with people, and accompanied by ambient sounds—traffic, people yelling and talking, horns and sirens. The darkened scenes feature no people except in some, the lone jogger, the shadows conceal and alter signs and buildings that are clear during the day, and the comforting ambient noise is replaced by the discordant chord. More binaries, representing the facets of Breland's identity and his search for acceptance, float to the surface: day/night, native/tourist, spooky/comfortable, intimate/exposed. These scenes, unaccompanied by voiceover text which

allows for a few moments of quiet reflection, provide a sense that change is underway. The narrator is beginning to see that there are benefits to seeing a world no one else does, even if, in theory, the practice of jogging separates him even further from the locals. Bresland's voiceover begins again with more examples: "Take these cobblestone streets: charming enough by day but at night, pretty much just creepy. And these turn of the century buildings, like sculpted works of art during the day, sprout graffiti in the dark." While the night scenes are creepy, there is also the notion that the narrator sees deeper, sees something others don't have the motivation or self-assuredness to notice because it isn't visible during the day. The image shifts from first-person jogger perspective to a well-lit close-up of a sculpted face on a building back to jogging down darkened streets, passing graffiti-tagged concrete buildings. A digital, tonal sound, not unpleasing like the discordant chord, has a softening effect. The viewer, along with the narrator, feels more comfortable, even assertive and intuitive, in the dark now.

As the narrator and viewer jog around a traffic circle, shakily surrounding a gold statue bathed in yellow light, Bresland says: "I think it's fair to say the French are opposed to jogging—something in their DNA forbidding them to wear sweatpants in public—so they sleep in, and every morning, I am the only runner out here. I'm not exaggerating either. It's not like I see a lone runner every once in a while. I'm saying I see nobody, ever." Frustratingly, the camera never quite captures the statue; the viewer sees the base clearly and quick glimpses of rounded gold edges, but never the statue in its entirety. The steady, jogging footfall is absent here—the only sound is the softer tonal chord. The viewer senses that this moment is pivotal, a *volta*, and the narrator finds resolution or consolation in the activity that separates him the most from Paris natives. As the footfall resumes, he says, "Running is how I begin to feel a little less like a tourist because even if I look ridiculous, I do know the names of these streets and I know where they

lead." When Bresland speaks the word "ridiculous," the perspective changes and the viewer sees the lone jogger in the darkened streets for a few seconds before switching back to first person as the narrator jogs downhill through the end of the piece. The narrator understands that the time he spent trying to look or act like a Parisian was spent in vain, but that time spent jogging was rewarded with an intimate knowledge of the city, a knowledge some would say runs even deeper than that of the natives. Bresland's use of the juxtaposition of the third and first person emphasizes this understanding; he can see himself as an outsider or he can take charge of his own experiences and focus on the city around him, not how he fits in it.

"Les Cruel Shoes" represents Bresland's journey to try and figure out why jogging provided him the consolation and sense of belonging he needed upon moving to Paris. Through his use of images and sound, the viewer understands that jogging was Bresland's way of making the city his own; even though wearing sweatpants in public and jogging is the antithesis of being a true Parisian, it allowed him to know a Paris no one else knows—the Paris at dawn, with dim, green-lit streets and graffitied buildings, no tourists milling outside the Louvre, and no horns, sirens, or ambient traffic noise. Jogging also allowed him to learn street names and directions, giving him both competence and confidence. The video essay's title, "Les Cruel Shoes" gives it a layer of complexity that is lacking in the voiceover text. It is a tongue-in-cheek blend of French and English—emphasizing Bresland's attempt to learn the language but failure to see himself as anything but a tourist—and highlights a part of the video essay that could easily be forgotten, the "beautiful, cruel Italian shoes" he purchases in search of Parisian sophistication and poses around *Infinite Jest.* Their proximity to the book and its themes suggests that his attempt to become more accepted by looking and acting European wasn't successful at all, and that really, only

when he embraced a habit that is shunned by the locals (and requires comfortable, functional, probably not beautiful shoes—sneakers) did he begin to feel comfortable.

This piece is a successful early attempt by Bresland to use image, text, and sound in a way that enhances essayistic theme; however, the themes and the resulting video essay is rather simplistic, especially in comparison to Bresland's later works. Furthermore, I think Bresland's contributor's note does a little too much of the heavy lifting for this piece; were this an alphabetic essay, he probably would have included the anecdote about successfully providing directions to the older couple because it represents his moment of arrival; then, not only does he see himself as a capable and self-assured, but so do others. His inclusion of the anecdote in the contributor's note is an acknowledgement of its importance, so why does he choose to leave it out of his video essay? There is a coy minimalistic reputation sometimes attached to the text in video essays—in an interview between Bresland and his co-creator John Bouldrey, Bouldrey reveals that Bresland taught him that a video essay can sometimes be "too textual" (Bouldrey and Bresland). I understand the careful consideration that goes into the composition of a video essay with regard to image, text, and sound; however, a fuller, more fleshed-out text proves to be beneficial in Bresland's later pieces, and image and sound here are used rather simplistically. Generally speaking, the images of "Les Cruel Shoes" are illustrative of the text, and it is the shifts in perspective that make "Les Cruel Shoes" interesting. The viewer feels alternately isolated when the image is in first-person perspective and empathetic when she watches the lone runner jogging through the empty streets. When starkly juxtaposed against the lonely images, Bresland's animated, confident tone of voice also adds to the sense of isolation. Categorically speaking, "Les Cruel Shoes" lands squarely in the pole of the personal/autobiographical and can be designated as a self-portrait or diary, but there are universal themes at play here as well—

loneliness and a quest for identity and acceptance are themes and experiences essential to human life, and Bresland's video essay illustrates them in a way that makes his experience relatable to a broad audience.

While "Les Cruel Shoes" is considered to be a single-author piece in the way that most alphabetic texts are, it is also collaborative in the same way that most alphabetic texts are workshopped or molded by editors or friends and family who provide feedback. Bresland thanks two people at the end of "Les Cruel Shoes," Brendan Marcus and Kazumi, perhaps two of the Parisian friends he mentions in the video. While the capacity of their assistance is not designated, it can be assumed that someone had to film Bresland jogging through the streets of Paris; if it is not Bresland (or if the person is not supposed to represent him) running, his claim that he never saw another jogger would be invalidated. Marcus and Kazumi may have also provided opinions and feedback on the shots and composition of the video essay, but the situation captured here is deeply personal to Bresland and "Les Cruel Shoes" is considered a single-authored piece.

"Hook"

According to the creators of "Hook," Bresland and his fellow Northwestern faculty member Brian Bouldrey, it is about children's literature, but the video essay's themes are much more complex than that. "Hook" was first published in *Blackbird* in the spring of 2012 accompanied by an interview with Bresland and Bouldrey conducted by M.A. Keller, *Blackbird*'s online editor. The interview is enlightening because the creators discuss process, especially with regard to collaboration on the video essay: "[Bouldrey] came into [Bresland's] office with a fully formed idea" and Bresland shot the video, but their roles were more interdependent than parallel ("A Conversation with Brian Bouldrey and John Bresland"). Bouldrey explains how Bresland's "understanding of how text/words enter into the mind and

heart more slowly, but perhaps more deeply than image, and even sound, has opened up huge possibilities in [Bouldrey's] craft as an artist in the broadest sense of the term." Bresland credits Bouldrey with being open to the "creative destruction" that Bresland's images imposed on his voiceover script rather than pushing for a rigid interpretation and remaining attached to his original intent: "Just about everything I shot exerted some kind of pressure on Brian's text. . . Brian's original tone—and his intent—is subverted by the image, or distorted." Before shooting, "Hook" represented only Bouldrey's voice, but with the give and take of creation with regard to the voiceover script, images, music, other sounds, allusions, and meanings, the video essay becomes the product of both Bouldrey and Bresland, and represents their more complex and layered—but also united—voice. It is clear, too, when reading their conversation, that though Bouldrey wrote the text, the images shot by Bresland complicated that text by extracting or enhancing previously unnoticed themes: "That's where John had the strongest influence on the narrative text—there was a point late in the game where we had made so many discoveries of what was hidden in the essay that I was writing new material." However, even in that expansion, Bresland reels Bouldrey in, convincing him that a video essay can indeed be "too textual," perhaps suggesting that for image and sound to play an equally weighted role in the video essay, subtlety is often the best route for voiceover text ("A Conversation with Brian Bouldrey and John Bresland"). Comparatively speaking, "Hook" is a rather text-heavy video essay, but rather than being illustrative, the visuals are often contrary or adjacent to the text in a way that changes or complicates the meaning, leaving space for viewer interpretation. This outcome is exemplary of what the video essay can be and, I think, what Bresland strives for with each of his pieces. The collaborative style naturally gives the video essay tension as two visions work together,

contradict each other, and become enmeshed in a way that is tangled, complicated, dense, and illuminating.

"Hook" opens on a shadowy image of a German shepherd in profile, panting in slow motion. A low and dark, but not unpleasant, chord ascends on the scene. After a few seconds, Bouldrey speaks: "I like to be the guy who introduces kids to dogs. We belong together, man and beast. But we need to be careful, because the world is full of unexpected dangers" ("Hook"). His voice is amiable and theatrical, enunciating the last consonants of "man" and "beast," but his tone lends a hint of sarcasm to the last line. The viewer can already sense the tension at play here between the speaker and those who warn of dangers, in this case dogs, and also—if she has read the accompanying interview—the tension at play between the text and the images and sounds. Bresland points to this early moment as an indicator of what's to come: "His opening line, 'I like to be the guy who introduces kids to dogs,' sits pretty innocuously on the page. The slavering dog image, though, and the ominous drone, exaggerate the line, give it a bizarre comic menace" ("A Conversation with Brian Bouldrey and John Bresland"). Bouldrey appears on the screen and the viewer sees him standing cross-armed, with a challenging or defensive expression, next to a gargoyle statue with red eyes. The voiceover goes on: "There was a time between dogs, when one had died and I wasn't ready to warm my house, or heart, again, and I would walk through the park and feel disconnected" ("Hook"). Bouldrey turns to the gargoyle, bends down to look at it in the face, and scratches it under the chin as if it were a dog. The viewer understands that something that can be perceived as a threat is actually harmless—perhaps establishing a theme of this video essay.

What happens next is an Agnes Varda-esque break of the fourth wall and moment of reflexivity: the Bouldrey seen leaning against the gargoyle, not the Bouldrey of the voiceover,

begins to speak to Bresland, who is behind the camera. Bouldrey asks, "Did you ever see *Rosemary's Baby*?" Unseen, Bresland responds, "Yeah." Bouldrey, in an extremely theatrical voice and the expression to match: "What have you done to his eyes?" M.A. Keller asks about this moment in their interview; he wants to know if it was scripted or "banter that found its way in," and Bouldrey responds that it was not planned. He says, "'Oh,' we want the viewer to think, 'it's *that* kind of spooky.' In a way, too, it *includes* the viewer in the meta-level of co-creating. I would hope that the viewer sees that little moment as a way into the process: everybody is refocusing their own camera lens in that shot" ("A Conversation with Brian Bouldrey and John Bresland"). Mostly, "Hook" is about unnecessarily protecting children from the world's dangers; Bouldrey and Bresland suggest that the earlier children know danger and evil, the more quickly they can grow up. Furthermore, while children often seem innocent and harmless, in their carelessness and naivety, they can become dangerous and hurtful. *Rosemary's Baby* is about a mother who births the spawn of Satan (who has glowing, red eyes) and there is the suggestion at the end, as she rocks the baby and smiles quietly to herself, that she will care for it anyway. Perhaps, in this moment, Bouldrey and Bresland are hinting at the dangers of a parent's unconditional love for his or her child, that children are born to hurt their parents.

I am torn about the effectiveness of this scene. While I appreciate the reflexivity and playful wink toward the viewer it affords, and see clearly how it contributes another layer toward the theme, I also feel that it takes the viewer out of the essay, interrupting the already intriguing story underway. However, perhaps this is the nature of the video essay: an interrupted, complicated surface rather than a smooth, impenetrable one. The appeal of Agnes Varda's *The Gleaners and I* is the immediacy and intimacy of her visibility to the viewer throughout her

journey, so perhaps it is important for the viewer to acknowledge Bouldrey and Bresland's roles as participators in, not just creators of, their journey in "Hook."

In the next scene, Bouldrey relates an incident in which he is walking in the park by himself and two children do something to make him "laugh loudly and in spite of [himself]"; two mothers see him and "descend upon their children like, well, wolf mothers protecting their pups," and Bouldrey realizes that he is "stranger danger" ("Hook"). While Bouldrey reads this text in the voiceover, a full moon moves across a darkened sky, crossing behind clouds and emerging again, as the sound of an emergency radio ascends over the drone. Static and canned voices reciting code numbers and saying "standby" provide the sense that this is an emergency situation. The moon comes closer and is blown out brighter, flashing eclipse-like on the side of the screen. Bresland thinks the visual here "sits neatly beneath the word," but I think the combination of apocalyptic moon and emergency radio sounds dramatize the scene to near-comic effect. It is, though, a traumatizing event for both parties, as the mothers feel as if their children are being threatened and Bouldrey feels that he seems threatening, prompting him to get a dog immediately. He seems to be cautioning against the dangers of stereotyping when he says, "Now I can be at the park at two in the morning, if I have my dog. Because I am white, I am male, and I have a dog." The image is a low shot of a long, short, chubby, extremely non-threatening little dog with a toothy grin walking next to his owner. The viewer sees only the legs of the owner, suggesting that it's the dog who makes the person nonthreatening, no matter what his or her behavioral tendencies or arrest records might show.

The low drone is layered under ambient conversation—adults talk, children squeal with delight—as a little girl in a Bulls jersey runs through a room, then joins her little brother, who is smiling at the camera quietly. Bouldrey says, in voiceover text, "And still I don't know how to

say this without making people descend upon their wolf pups. I like children, but I like being that other adult in their lives. I like to be the babysitter who is asked to play Barbies for the hundredth, millionth time and says, instead, each time, 'I prefer not to. I prefer not to.' Which is just as fun as Barbies, admit it, kid." Bouldrey is in the scene now, pulling his glasses farther from and closer to his face, distorting his right eye and making the little girl smile. When he says, "and I like to give them children's books they are not quite ready for," an image of a droopy-eyed dog lying down transitions back to the little girl, whose right eye is now distorted by Bouldrey's glasses. It is clear from this scene that children like the type of adult Bouldrey is referring to, that they like the chase of trying to convince an adult to do something he "prefers not to," and that these adults provide something for children that their parents cannot. The element of distortion and the last line, though, suggest that Bouldrey's interactions with the children are somehow changing them, and in the eyes of some parents, perhaps not for the better. On the other hand, Bouldrey placing his glasses on the little girl can indicate that he's helping her to see some part of the world more clearly.

In the scene that follows, a black-and-white photograph of a first communion class in a Catholic church is manipulated by a series of rudimentary black-and-white sketches and part of Bouldrey's face. One of the young men in the photograph, a stand-in for if not actually young Bouldrey, has the older Bouldrey's mouth, goatee and all, superimposed on his face. In the interview with M.A. Keller, Bresland specifies the music used in this section and also at the end as two pieces he heard on French radio by Psapp. The first piece, used here, is called "Marshrat" and uses a series of percussion sounds to resemble a whimsical machine before upbeat electronic keyboard is laced in. Bouldrey's voiceover begins the story: "When I was their age, books were sad, beaten dogs with their teeth pulled so the children could never get bit." The camera zooms

in on a young instructor holding an encyclopedia: “In the Childcraft Encyclopedia, I would read about Oedipus, the man who solved the riddle of the sphinx, became the king of Thebes, and lived happily ever after. The end.” Young Bouldrey, with his older mouth, speaks “lived happily ever after” before the camera zooms back out and a black-and-white sketch of a Theban soldier is seen situated in the corner of the picture, seeming to protect the children. The censored version of the story is being held by a religious teacher, insinuating that leadership, especially that of the religious variety, is likely to keep things from children for their protection. The voiceover continues: “The story was so compelling that even as a child, I wanted to find out more about my new hero. And when I found out the rest of the story, I felt dirty, guilty. Reading the hidden truth in effect made me so. I made Oedipus kill his father and marry his mother and dash out his eyes. That might have been the day I became a reader. A criminal.” By making children sneak around with their reading to find out answers on their own, leadership that withholds information causes children to feel guilty and criminalized—a devastating association that could cause children to later feel “weird” or “uncool” for preferring to read over other extracurricular activities. Over the image and little Bouldrey’s (with older Bouldrey’s mouth) sporadic talking, a sketch of Oedipus appears, and the only color in the image is the red of his gouged out eyes. As the camera zooms out, little Bouldrey is seen situated next to Oedipus, who has a heart tattoo on his shoulder that might say “MOM,” is wearing only underwear, and holding an ice pick—two criminals in search of the truth. Oedipus’s empty, red eye sockets recall the red eyes of the gargoyle in an earlier scene and the reference to the red eyes of Rosemary’s baby. The eyes of the gargoyle and baby seem to be emitting their red glow because of their evil souls, but Oedipus realizes he has committed evil and so blinds himself—is it better to contain some evil and be enlightened or to blind yourself to it as though it will protect you?

As a sketch of who the viewer can only assume to be Thomas Bowdler is tucked into the picture next to the teachers in their robes and crosses, Bouldrey's voiceover says: "Thomas Bowdler had a verb made out of his name, having edited out all of the dirty words of Shakespeare for the family of Shakespeare. To 'bowdlerize' is to abridge or censor literature for the purpose of protecting people from that which is vulgar and obscene." As he reads the definition, white text, all capitalized, spells it out across the picture. The white text continues to spell out words and definitions as Bouldrey continues to read: "I've decided that if my name were a verb, it would mean adding or detecting the vulgar and obscene in literature, whether it is there or not." As young Bouldrey stands in the frame and talks with his adult mouth, words fly in from the sides of the screen: "Titular archbishopric. Cummerbund. Cockatoo. Succumb. Hung Jury. Dick Butkus." The young Bouldrey speaking with his older mouth insinuates several things: first of all, it's a childlike practice to snicker at vulgarities within other words, but it's also a metaphor for searching out hidden truths or meanings. Beyond containing obscenities within them, these terms have little in common, but a growth or movement, however loosely associated, can be sensed through the list: leader of a dead diocese, a purely decorative belt or sash, both outdated or ineffective; a large, dull-colored parrot, a bird that feeds in flocks; a verb meaning to fail to resist, a group of people who resist pressure from one another, and a large, intimidating linebacker—the ultimate resistance. Visually, I conjure a continuum: a flock of birds mindlessly following tradition and outdated practices and a group of people who are individually-minded and resist being a "flock." On the last word, the young Bouldrey disappears and the current Bouldrey, with his restored mouth, laughs loudly before saying "mandate." Bouldrey doesn't laugh when he says "mandate," perhaps because neither the literal meaning, giving someone authority over you, nor the joke that can be made from it, two men going on a

date, is funny. The manipulation of this photograph in particular is also significant. First communion is viewed as a rite of passage for young children and usually follows baptism and first confession, once the child has reached the age in which he understands his religious roles and commitments. Young Bouldrey speaking "vulgarities" and associating with "criminals" like Oedipus in effect defaces the purity of the image.

The next scene opens on a dark, cloudy sky and features two red kite ribbons flying in the wind before the camera lowers and the viewer sees a little boy running down a concrete coast, laughing and looking behind him at the kite he is flying. Ambient ocean and wind sounds are punctuated by the laughter of the little boy. As Bouldrey's voiceover begins, the image shifts to the black and white pirate flag flying amidst dark clouds: "After Peter Pan has beaten Captain Hook, and the children, terrified by the man with the missing limb, go backstage to meet the cast, they pass by Peter Pan and go straight to meet Captain Hook. You can't stop the villains in this or that life; we will seek them out. We will find them. We will eventually find out, you know, if we have any spirit at all we will find out." As Bouldrey speaks the last few lines, the same little boy is seen from behind, running past a no swimming or no diving sign, and there is the ominous sound of thunder as the screen fades to black. It's true—as much as children look up to superheroes, they also relish and are fascinated by the bad guys in the same way that adults cannot turn away from horror films or homicide in the news—we are hardwired to venerate evil. In their interview, Keller asks about the kite, which was indeed selected to appear in the video essay. Bresland relates the anecdote: "My son had just gotten old enough to fly one, and he was pumped about having his own. So we went to the toy store where they had, of course, nine hundred different kites. Among those nine hundred was the Jolly Roger that flies "Hook." When I saw it, I thought of Brian's essay text, which we had just begun to film. . . I think I was just

relieved that my kid was as happy to fly the flag of a pirate as I was" ("A Conversation with Brian Bouldrey and John Bresland"). In that last statement, Bresland affirms that he's a bit of a Bouldrey-type adult as well, which is really just to say there are parts of them that have failed to "grow up" yet—they are caught between the innocence of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood, which might provide a clearer vantage point for life than either of the extremes.

As the ominous rolling thunder sound fades, the camera scrolls over the edge of a black-and-white photograph and Bouldrey's voiceover begins:

> There's a photograph from the 1940s by a photojournalist named Chim. It is the image of an Italian boy who has been blinded and has had his arms blown off by a wartime bomb. And he leans over a book in braille, reading the words with his tongue. However much you mean to protect children from bombs, and dogs, and books with hard, dark, cores, and well, me, life, real life, carries an enthusiasm and a need that will make it all happen.

This boy, who lost his eyes and arms to evil, finds another way to see, read, become enlightened. There is also a connection, unintentional by Bouldrey and Bresland—to Captain Hook in the Italian boy's missing hands. In the interview with Keller, Bresland expands on this thread when referring to the reflexive moment where Bouldrey and Bresland converse over the gargoyle. Whether that scene was effective or not, it did provide insight into the video essay they were creating, and these kind of moments happen in the composition of alphabetic text as well. Often, when beginning a nonfiction composition, the author does not yet know what she is writing about, and it takes an "unscheduled moment" when a tangential story comes out or an editor asks a question to reveal the theme:

> This unscheduled moment was also serendipitous to the discovery process for us. We were both elated, and fascinated, that so many examples of missing body parts informed the work. This was entirely unplanned. But you get those eyes, then you get Oedipus' lost eyes, and the Italian boy's; but you also find examples in Captain Hook's lost hand, the Italian boy's lost hands, the idea of dogs without teeth—all of these contribute to a notion that incomplete things will always reach

> for a state of completion. It was very exciting to discover these things in the process. It confirmed that this was truly an essay, an exploration of something, and that the creation of the work was as important as the product. ("A Conversation with Brian Bouldrey and John Bresland")

This notion of "incomplete things always [reaching] for a state of completion" also encapsulates Bouldrey's theories about childhood—children can sense that they are incomplete while still innocent and unknowing; darkness fulfills a need in each of us. And, even if it didn't, it will find us anyway—"life, real life, carries an enthusiasm and a need that will make it all happen" ("Hook"). The relationships between humans and the lives they lead are circular and interdependent. Over a black screen, with no ambient noise, the voiceover says, "We learn how to grow up." Evil and darkness forces us to, and we become wiser and less naïve because of it.

Drawings by Tina Gibbard and the second song by Psapp, "The Counter," are featured in this second to last scene. First, a black ink over pencil drawing of Peter Pan holding Captain Hook's severed hand (red blood lining the jagged wound) appears as Bouldrey says: "Children—you wish they would just stay that way. I don't. Think of the sharp, bright edge of the last words of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, a book that makes a boy who does not grow up the hero of the story." The song begins and it is a hauntingly beautiful soft, soprano singing. The sketch changes to one of Wendy's back as Margaret flies out of her bedroom window and Peter squats on the bed post as Bouldrey continues: "Wendy is a grown-up, and she catches Peter abducting her child, her daughter, Margaret. 'Can she come, too?' she begs Peter. Peter laughs and off they go, leaving a childless mother in tears." A mouthless, noseless Wendy cries perfect raindrop tears. The text appears on the screen as Bouldrey reads, "When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter's mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless," as Margaret's faceless daughter floats, corpse-like, and the angelic music continues. *Peter Pan* certainly emphasizes the element of tragedy in not growing up, but

many versions, including Barrie's 1904 original, hint at romantic undertones between Peter and Wendy, which provides for an Oedipus complex-type interpretation of the story. Peter takes Wendy to Neverland to serve as the mother, but he also insinuates that he wants to kiss her. Captain Hook, who onstage is usually played by the same actor who plays Wendy's father, represents the father Peter wants to kill. In "Hook" this reading contributes to the theme of tragedy in not growing up, and the Psapp's song, "The Counter," casts an even more melancholy tone over the drawing scenes. Here though, the emphasis is on mother-daughter relationships. It seems as if each of these daughters has died rather than flown away on a youthful adventure, and from the perspective of the mothers, this is precisely what has happened.

Finally, Bouldrey and Bresland's cautionary tale comes to an end in an apple orchard on a bright, serene day. A small, dark-haired child, a girl, picks an apple with some difficulty as Psapp's song plays in the background. Bouldrey speaks: "If I seem to hasten childhood's end, do not think me perverted or cruel. Think of me as a dark heart, its chambers as bloody as the one from which all children are brought, and just as life-affirming." The dark-haired little girl and little boy who flew the kite earlier in the piece sit on a hill eating the fruit and frolic through the trees under the sun. Here Bouldrey seals his theory: the darkness within him is just as invigorating and satisfying as the protection provided by a parent, and both are vitally necessary. The image of a girl here paired with Bouldrey's voiceover emphasizes the inexorable nature of the human lifecycle even further: girls are born, become children, lose their innocence and eventually become mothers, giving birth to children themselves.

"Hook" is an extraordinary video essay that follows a personal exploration through a universal and abstract journey. It addresses, with varying subtlety and sharp starkness, abstract philosophical concerns we've all faced and can see through different facets—from the point of

view of the child, the parent, or the Bouldrey-type adult. “Hook” sits firmly in the center of Aldous Huxley’s three poles: it analyzes the nature of children and the relationship between children and adults through Bresland’s personal anecdote, literature and slices of history, and higher, unbound abstractions, such as, “life, real life, carries an enthusiasm and a need that will make it all happen.” The artistry of the composition of the text, image, and sound here, so much more sophisticated than that of “Les Cruel Shoes,” could be attributed to Bresland’s increased experience and to the creators allowing each concept to be tackled by an expert in that field. Bresland says:

> “Hook” is also something of an upgrade over previous works, and not just with respect to Brian’s stellar voice. . . Psapp contributed two songs . . . which I heard at some point on French radio, and I’m still counting our blessings for their generous help. And . . . a brilliant painter named Tina Gibbard drew up those beguiling sketches of *Peter Pan*. As a collaboration, “Hook” went far beyond Brian writing and me shooting. (“A Conversation with Brian Bouldrey and John Bresland”).

“Hook,” along with many other video essays found in *Blackbird, TriQuarterly,* and elsewhere, proves that when it comes to the video essay, two or more heads are better than one. The February 2014 issue of *The Writer’s Chronicle* featured in article by Ravi Shankar, the executive director of *Drunken Boat.* In “Mess and Mayhem: The Plural Histories of Collaborative Writing,” he ties the practice of collaborative writing to historical pairings like Pound and Eliot and Coleridge and Wordsworth, but also discusses the benefits of collaborative projects today, especially in a digital world. He speaks mainly of reading, co-writing, and editing one another’s work through Google Docs or via email, but the root of his thoughts is applicable to Bouldrey and Bresland’s relationship: “The collision of disparate ideas, the wrestling with unexpected material, the attempt to synthesize different points of view are all things we undertake in our own solitary writing processes, and to foreground those aspects in the act of collaborative writing is to

understand one's own system of values and feelings about art" (79-80). However, a key worth mentioning is that collaboration tends to work best when all parties are contributing intentionally, with intimate knowledge of the project and its context and goals. Shankar cautions against collaboration that features input from unwelcome parties or is too broad in invitation: "There's clearly a difference, then, between a collaborative project that opens up its borders to anyone and everyone, and a more carefully curated project that blends together the words and sensibilities of two or more authors in a more intelligent and thoughtful way" (82). In this respect, "Hook" is an ideal example of the complex, charged product that can result when musicians, writers, illustrators, and filmmakers work together intentionally through a process of openness, showing respect for one another's ideas and crafts.

"*Peyton Place*: A Haiku Soap Opera"

Peyton Place has taken many forms over the course of its sixty years. Debuting as a novel by Grace Metalious in 1956, becoming a feature film starring Lana Turner and Hope Lange in 1957, running for five seasons from 1964-1969 as a television "adult" soap opera, and revived in two made-for-TV movies in 1977 and 1985, *Peyton Place* is presented now again by David Trinidad and John Bresland, but this time the soap is manipulated to re-expose and sometimes subvert the cultural norms that were first uncovered by Grace Metalious in 1956. Trinidad composed a haiku for each of the 514 episodes of the show and one for each of the made-for-TV movies. His haiku are catty, witty, and tongue-in-cheek, commenting on the sexuality, sexism, classism, and racism inherent in the show. In several reflexive moments, he comments on the composition of his own haiku and the tediousness of the process. Bresland superimposed Trinidad's haiku over scenes from the show and manipulated the characters' movements to emphasize moments that Bresland views as particularly disturbing. In order to

understand Bresland's most recent presentation of the show, several questions must be addressed: first, how have sixty years of cultural contexts constructed and shaped the nature and reception of *Peyton Place*, from novel to film to television show and now, to the subject of two critical commentaries? Second, what is the nature of the haiku? What about Trinidad's haiku? What is Trinidad's purpose in his book? Finally, what is Bresland's purpose in creating his video essay and how is its commentary different from Trinidad's?

Metalious's novel, the original manifestation of the story and the purest with regard to intent, had and still has a reputation of being a scandalous read, but while Metalious did want to expose the not-quite-lily-white actions of the inhabitants of her town, she also focused the story around strong female characters who grew and persevered despite the town's hypocrisies, perversities, and violence. In his article "Return to Grace Metalious," F. J. Sypher, columnist for Columbia in 1993, pinpoints Allison McKenzie as a partly autobiographical figure "who refines her powers of observation and expression as she develops into a successful novelist. Her growth and artistic development constitute the core of the novel, which could well be termed a *Bildungsroman"* (4). Allison's coming-of-age story is barely noticed for all the scandal, and Sypher blames marketing: "The main reason Grace Metalious's work has been misunderstood is that the book that brought her fame, *Peyton Place,* was deliberately, aggressively, and successfully marketed as a sensational novel with daring sex scenes and scandalous revelations" (3). Even though Metalious's editor made attempts to make the plot slightly tamer (Selena Cross is raped by her stepfather, rather than her biological father, for example), the novel's calling card was still its unapologetically salacious nature. Sypher points to the tagline on the cover that reads, "'The explosive best seller that lifts the lid off a respectable New England town'" (3). Metalious's intent was subverted from the moment her manuscript went to print, and the book's

reputation quickly earned Metalious one as well. She wasn't prepare for the onslaught of criticism from the people in her hometown, who quickly identified the lightly fictionalized versions of themselves. Michael Callahan, in his 2006 article in *Vanity Fair*, "*Peyton Place*'s Real Victim," defends Metalious's intentions: "Her point wasn't that her life was perfect; it was that their lives weren't either. The only difference was she wasn't hiding it." While her purpose may have been exposure—a "cultural bitch slap at the duplicitous notions of proper conduct in the age of Eisenhower," Metalious herself provides *Peyton Place*'s cultural resonance through her novel's salacious reputation (Callahan). Callahan quotes American screenwriter Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal, who says that Metalious "was doing something on a cultural level that was extremely important. She was telling women it was O.K. to be sexual beings . . . to have the aspirations that men had." Unfortunately, Metalious's trailblazing bought her only criticism, alcoholism, and an early death, but her book is now featured in the curricula of women's studies classes as an "'exciting, dirty book'" that "'set new parameters for what you could say in a book—especially about women'"—something about which Metalious would probably feel one part proud and one part frustrated if she were here today (Callahan).

The 1957 film featuring Lana Turner and Hope Lange was a dulled, docile version of Metalious's novel—it is more difficult to view a film in secret the way the novel was consumed (in droves) across the country and a certain amount of censorship was necessary. Callahan calls the film "a sanitized sequence of slamming doors, wayward glances, and A-line skirts. The story line had no abortions, no moonlit swims, and certainly no Betty asking Rodney if it was up and hard" ("*Peyton Place*'s Real Victim"). Metalious, in all her vulgar, sexual, progressive glory, begins fading from the story's fabric, and the focus turns to the "finger-pointing" and scandal that lies under the surface of a proper façade (Callahan). However, Matthew Kennedy, writer and

film historian, viewed the film in 2004 when it was released on DVD and found value in its sociological facets: "With eerie accuracy, it intimated the upcoming split in American society begat by Vietnam, rock and roll, and a new drug culture. You can hear the future calling in *Peyton Place*, with 'generation gap,' 'sexual revolution,' 'women's liberation,' and even 'David Lynch' being whispered right around the corner." While it's often the goal of novels to tell a titillating story and impart wisdom for the ages, the goal of film is usually to tell a titillating story and capture a moment in time, with authenticity being a focus. This film may not have completely captured the essence of *Peyton Place* the novel, but it did encourage Metalious's reputation as a feminist mover and shaker, and Kennedy asks: "Did any movie capture the uneasy redefinition of America between World War II and Vietnam better than this one?" As the story of *Peyton Place* moves further away from its original author and time period, its plot, themes, and characters all become more distorted, and less true to Metalious's intentions.

The television series, running in 514 episodes from 1964-1969 and airing as a prime time soap opera, focused even more singularly on the melodrama, scandal, and spectacle of small-town life. Rather than taking place in an unidentified state in the years surrounding WWII, like the novel and film, the television series is set in present day Massachusetts, requiring the writers and producers to tackle cultural issues that were not yet pertinent when the novel was written and the film produced. The television series also provides an introductory line that Trinidad and Bresland enjoy playing with in their respective pieces: first, "This is the continuing story of *Peyton Place*," and later, in 1966, "In color, this is the continuing story of *Peyton Place*." This sense of continuity, of a story that never ends (even through 514 episodes and two made-for-TV movies), was emphasized when, at its peak, *Peyton Place* aired three times a week. Film historian Stephen Bowie outlines the highs and lows of the series in his 2013 article for *A.V.*

Club, "Why institutional memory was *Peyton Place*'s hidden asset." Bowie explains how Paul Monash, the series' executive producer, never intended for the show to resemble its novel predecessor: "Monash disdained the book as well as any comparison to daytime soap operas. Monash claimed that Metalious had written 'an attack on the town.' What he sought was 'a love affair with the town.' Instead of something tawdry, his Peyton Place would be about 'people evolving toward the light.' He explained that he was pioneering a new form, the 'novel for television'." These high and mighty aspirations were not bought by many, and the reviews were poor and Emmy nominations few, but Bowie still touts the series as "intelligent and well made" with a "deeply sensitive text." The transition to television heavily impacted some of the story's major plotlines; fear of criticism from the press and even backlash from Congress lead the producers to entirely cut Selena Cross and her family because "the familial rape angle was tasteless" (Bowie). Mia Farrow's role as Allison McKenzie dictated the show's success: when she was involved, the show occupied the top places in the Nielsen's ratings; when she became involved with Frank Sinatra and missed tapings due to month-long yacht trips, the show's ratings dropped (Bowie). In 1966, Monash decided that for the show to be more relatable and current, it would need to tackle race, and an African-American family was introduced into the storyline; however, the introduction of this storyline caused divides among the cast and crew over what was authentic and what wasn't, and Monash hired African-American writers to inform the dialogue, characterization, even musical selections (Bowie). Neither Monash's efforts to stay relevant nor his replacement for Mia Farrow, Leigh Taylor-Young, could save the series, and it ended unceremoniously in May 1969 (Bowie).

Forty-four years later, Trinidad, who has long been fascinated with mutating culture strands and the way they are represented in television and film, responds with haiku to an

outdated television show. He addresses *Peyton Place* as a cultural time capsule, but it seems that between the story's genre shifts and the nearly half a century that has passed, the awareness that Metalious was originally seeking to expose the hypocrisy of these small-town people and the strength of the young girls who must mature despite their surroundings has been lost, and the show has become a farce. Trinidad pokes fun at the show's attempt to take on race: "Guess who's coming to/dinner at the black family's/house. Nervous white folks" (141). Trinidad seeks to do more than just highlight the show's sexist, racist, and classist undertones, though; in poet Greg Donovan's introduction to Bresland's video essay for *Blackbird*, he calls Trinidad's book a "frank exploration of the many dimensions of 'the male gaze' [that] further examines the *looking* generated not only by the camera's eye, but also by our own changed vision of a set of cultural moments and icons that time and history have inescapably altered" (Donovan). Each of Trinidad's haiku examines the composition of a particularly striking scene in its corresponding episode, including the camera's focus on the sexuality of the characters and how it often overrides the cultural resonance of their interactions and events, such as this haiku, in response to episode twenty-four: "Both brothers shirtless/ in Norman's bedroom. Who cares/ what's in Mother's will (11). Trinidad also incorporates tongue-in-cheek reflexive commentary about his own process and the haiku themselves, including this one lamenting the trouble with a form that requires a certain number of syllables: "Rod may never walk/ again. My poor fingers may/ never stop counting" (130), and this one, expressing the frustrations of writer's block: "Watched this episode/ twice and still can't come up with/ idea for haiku" (9). If compared with longer, more thorough analyses of the series, Trinidad's haiku responses may seem dismissive or insincere, but even his responses add another layer of cultural resonance to *Peyton Place*—his commentary on hairstyles, Allison's poetry, the home décor, race relations, even his sexual

fixation on male characters signaling a normativity of homosexuality—all contribute to a continuum of culture that is constantly moving forward and looking backward.

Peyton Place: A Haiku Soap Opera does not feature any images of scenes from the series except for on the cover; on average, four haiku are centered and listed vertically on the page and are numbered and broken into the television show's seasons. Haiku are Japanese poems typically consisting of seventeen *morae* (in English, syllables, in Japanese, sounds) broken into three phrases of five, seven, and five *morae* each. Traditionally, haiku are seasonal or based in nature and juxtapose two unexpected images or ideas with a *kireji*, or "cutting word" between them ("Haiku"). Trinidad's use of haiku to capture the essence of *Peyton Place* inherently provides tension and a sense of juxtaposition between the strict, traditional form and the chaos of the series' content. Donovan remarks that while "reading this series of poems, carefully constructed within the confines of a taut form yet unleashing a sardonic and often laugh-generating appreciation of the oddities of a now-dated television drama, one is struck by an experience on the page that brings the television series back into the mind's eye with a pointed mix of humor, pathos, and social critique" (Donovan). For the most part, Trinidad's haiku follow the traditional guidelines, but he often uses humor as his *kireji*; for example, in Trinidad's very first haiku—"Dolorous premiere./ Worth it for tidal wave of/ Dorothy Malone's hair"—the reader is expecting him to say something poignant about the distressing or sorrowful nature of the episode, but instead he turns to the unnatural wave of Dorothy Malone's hair (5). Also, while the content of the haiku is not nature-centered or seasonal, the television series did emphasize the changing seasons to highlight the growth and change of characters, and Trinidad cleverly divides the episodes into their respective "seasons" and evokes emotional shifts in the haiku as the seasons change.

One would think that, after 516 (514 plus two for each made-for-TV movie) haiku, there wouldn't be much left to analyze, comment on, or critique about *Peyton Place,* but John Bresland brought the story back to the screen with his 2015 video essay "*Peyton Place:* A Haiku Soap Opera." In the nearly twenty-minute piece, Bresland superimposes the text of twenty-four of Trinidad's haiku over clips from the television series, both visually and with voiceover, creating an almost VH1 Pop-Up-Video-like experience where the text provides critical, sometimes comic, commentary rather than behind-the-scenes information. Bresland also layers in dark, quirky music by indie duo Dieterich and Barnes and saxophonist Arthur Taylor and alters the clips to emphasize certain actions, for example, a character blinking rapidly or an inappropriate embrace. To emphasize the line "nervous white folks," Bresland manipulates the clip so that the white couple laughs awkwardly and the male repeats putting his coat on. The haiku and scenes Bresland selects highlight several threads: male sexuality, the dual lives of the characters/actors, the movement of van Gogh's "Starry Night" from scene to scene, violent acts and the ways they're concealed, and racism. Bresland begins his video essay with one haiku that is out of order: "Lies, secrets, gossip/ and fucked-up families make this/ black-and-white world tick" (10). This, in a nutshell, is the theme of Trinidad's book, so what allows Bresland's work to not be redundant or irrelevant? In his introductory commentary for the video essay, Donovan, who is also a senior editor for *Blackbird,* writes: "Bresland's video piece provides its own unique experience that arises from the atmosphere generated by Trinidad's book while also plunging us into an even more pointed sense of the absurdities and strange possibilities of realization available in the now transformed and reconstituted images of what was once, and is now again, *Peyton Place*" (Donovan). The *Peyton Place* scenes (both visually and through dialogue), disturbing music, and low, flat voice of the narration all contribute to illuminating the

strangeness of the series but also the viewer's proximity to the scenes: for some, watching Bresland's video essay is like a lesson in self-awareness and self-reflection. For example, in the second scene and haiku, the voiceover narrates: "Ryan O'Neal fresh/ from shower. Eyes glued to bare/ chest, bulge in towel" ("*Peyton Place*: A Haiku Soap Opera"). The viewer feels caught, guilty, begins to think—"was I staring at his chest? Did I notice the bulge in his towel? What does it mean if I did/didn't? What if it had been a woman in a towel? Is it liberating or oppressive for sexuality to always be at the forefront?" In this way, Bresland's piece represents not only his personal exploration of the series and its accompanying culture, but also serves as a mirror for the viewer, a provocative self-check. Bresland's composition forces the viewer to consider herself within the broader setting of the television series, prompting her to ask, "Does the series exist in a vacuum or is it still culturally relevant today?" This inward self-examination also keeps the video essay from being simply reductive or glib. "*Peyton Place:* A Haiku Soap Opera" is a social commentary and also a layered example of reflexive cinema, from the reflective nature of the haiku to the manipulation of the clips and the superimposed narration.

"Peyton Place: A Haiku Soap Opera" is certainly a social commentary and displays elements of reflexive cinema, but it is difficult to categorize this video essay in terms of Huxley's poles. Bresland is passing judgment on the series based on the knowledge he has collected as an observant, intelligent twenty-first century writer, but he also comes to pass this judgment through his own personal opinions and experiences. In the composition of this video essay, Bresland must work out his own "mental knot" through Trinidad's poetry, Mia Farrow and Ryan O'Neal's acting, the darkly whimsical music of Dieterich and Barnes, and the seed of an idea planted by Grace Metalious in 1956, while considering a cultural shift of sixty years, analyzing what really has and hasn't changed in that time. In this type of composition, there is

danger in the collaboration of so many unwitting sources; Bresland seeks to comment on the television show using Trinidad's poetry, and the two of them seem to be more or less on the same page in their opinions, but Bresland's additional use of the clips of the series implicate the writers of the show, the actors, and Metalious herself. While edits and critical commentaries are popular, this kind of video essay often poses more questions about the writer's intentions than he anticipates, and after studying "*Peyton Place*: A Haiku Soap Opera," I wonder what Bresland is intending to assert about the show's cultural positions in the context of its time.

Though "Les Cruel Shoes," "Hook," and "*Peyton Place*: A Haiku Soap Opera" are pieces that occupy three different sub-spaces of the video essay, a degree of comparison among them is still possible. The sophistication of Bresland's juxtaposition and composition of images increases greatly in ten years, and I think it's fair to say that his ear for music that enhances or alters the mood of his pieces has improved also. Of his own work, Bresland says, "If you line the videos up, starting with 'Les Cruel Shoes,' you can—I hope—see an improvement in craft. The writing has gotten better, too, I like to believe, but what's clear, to my eye, at least, is the fact that the quality of the image as well as the soundscapes has improved quite a bit. Starting today, I feel qualified to make my first good video essay" ("Re: Video Essay Thesis"). Based on this analysis of Bresland's video essays, it also seems as if pieces produced through intentional, intimate collaboration are more layered, more exciting, and more refined than those created by a solo author. This is not hard to imagine when one considers the nature of the work—one essayist can produce a piece with, perhaps, excellent text, but subpar image or sound quality, or, the talents of many can work together to produce a piece where all aspects are well-crafted and extensively fleshed out. The challenge comes in the composition of these aspects—they must be fitted together in a manner that produces a singular, powerful exploration, not a mess of egos and

voices or misdirected cultural criticisms. Following this logic, “Les Cruel Shoes” is an impressive first attempt by Bresland and “Peyton Place: A Haiku Soap Opera” is a gutsy exertion of pressure against boundaries, but “Hook” is most successful as a collaboration, an essayistic pursuit, and a video that showcases expertly crafted and composed image, text, and sound.

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