

Against Illustration

Spatiotemporal principles and mimetic rhetorical functions in videographic criticism



Stephen Broomer

is a filmmaker and author. He holds a Ph.D. in Communication and Culture from Toronto Metropolitan University, and he has been a Fulbright visiting fellow at the Prelinger Library in San Francisco. He teaches video essaying at University of Toronto's Cinema Studies Institute.

Abstract

Against Illustration advocates for a methodology of purposeful difficulty in video essaying, in search of new critical entrances into their objects of study. The field of videographic criticism encompasses a broad variety of formal approaches that often differ in their invocation of root objects. Where the dominant ideology of cinema has been perpetuated through common systems of visual codes, and tends to invite an evidentiary approach, videographic criticism has often sought, as a symptom and practice of empowered, post-modern cinephilia, to develop subjective and intimate transformations of objects. In this they enrich, celebrate, and just as often, trouble the themes, iconographies and histories of cinema. *Against Illustration* suggests for a reconciliation between the purposeful difficulty of experimental cinema and the promise of such an approach in videographic essaying. To do so, the author explores George Steiner's typology of difficulty in poetry (and in particular its tactical and ontological manifestations), Steiner's suggestions for creative reading/spectatorship, and his pursuit of a critical entrance into an art steered against easy perception and ready interpretation.

Keywords: videographic criticism, critical cinema, experimental film, materiality, difficulty

In this video essay, I have offered a series of proposals that pass in a sequence, from the tactile transit that cinema has undertaken since Raymond Bellour speculated upon its unattainability, to the purpose of the essay itself, to the limitations of didactic and demonstrative approaches. The questions that I have asked do not have easy answers, and the image at times runs counter to the pronouncements of the narration. The response I offer to these queries is not in the 'illustrative' sequences that accompany each claim, but through another form that, in time, creeps in: the palimpsest, made literal, as these illustrations intersect with one another, all episodes coalescing into one vision, of flickering and co-penetrating superimpositions.

In 2011, Christian Keathley offered with optimism that, in some quarters, the field of cinema studies was following in the hopes of Bellour: for writings to be "more numerous, more imaginative, more accurate," thanks to the newfound 'attainability' of movies

(Bellour 1975, 19). Still, Keathley argues, this is only the beginning of an evolution towards a necessary reinvention of cinephilia and cinema criticism, one that is bound to contend with the sharp distinctions of explanatory discourse and poetic register (Keathley 2011, 181). Keathley's conception is not of a schism between didacticism and intuition, or between evidence and feeling, but an acknowledgment of the promise of audiovisual forms: the critic operating in the material grammar of their subject might evolve a critical approach that is true to that material and that is thus distinguished from a critical heritage reared on the older and more conventional forms of criticism (Keathley 2011, 190).

More than a decade on from Keathley's report, there remain hard divisions of methodology and approach, as well as a burden of disciplinary isolation in scholarly film criticism, however, thanks to pedagogical organizing and community mentorship among video essayists, territory has been carved out for poetic and intuitive approaches. Catherine Grant's prolific output as a videographic critic is emblematic of the poetic bearing in video essaying, resistant to explication of meaning, summoning the mysterious power of her borrowed sources and shaping their plastic and rhythmic traits to match her own individual subjectivity. Grant's work often invites—as art is inclined to—the participation of the viewer in the construction of her work's meaning, emphasizing experiential traits that resist didactic, narrow conclusions: this is an invitation in plastic, drawing the eye to engage critically through the use of techniques such as the multi-screen (*Beast Fables*; *Falling*, both 2019), reflection (*Magic Mirror Maze*, 2019), and the sawed image (*Fated to be Mated: An Architectural Promenade*, 2018). Grant complements the plastic dimension of her work with a curatorial metaphor, as in her text accompanying "Falling: 3 x *Girls in Uniform*" (2023). There Grant argues that curatorial acts can be "articulatory acts as well as ideational ones," and this approach of video as pictures-in-an-exhibition, as salon wall, offers the curated vision as a new entrance into the object, a possibility of bridging associative, poetic thought (Grant 2023, 50). Grant's approach embraces a freedom of form and undertakes the quest for new analytical models that resist field-defining codification, and the example she sets with her work is one of a free, exploratory approach to film studies. This exploratory command often makes the work multi-vocal, as in Grant's epigraphic

works, in which the artist builds perceptual connections between borrowed texts and her own sequence/image, entangling Grant's individuation as a remix artist with those voices that have anticipated her own, as in her use of Gilles Deleuze in *Liquid Perception* (2020), Claude Levi-Strauss in *Carnal Locomotive* (2015), or even in her integration of the literal voices of non-theorists, as in her 2018 memorial to the actress Jeanne Moreau.

The correspondence between such an approach and the forms of knowledge produced by modern and post-modern art becomes especially clear in Alan O'Leary's definition of a parametric scholarship, a definition into which he enfolds Grant's work: "texture, pattern, and world-building" guide such a scholarship (O'Leary 2021). O'Leary's proposal challenges the conservative foundations of an explanatory critical heritage. Audiovisual scholarship demands, by the blank questions posed by form, that the 'reader' participate in the construction of its knowledge. Such scholarship prioritizes perceptual experience and embraces ambiguities, and in doing so, challenges traditional models for the production of scholarship. It produces new knowledge, yet it is also a station in the pursuit of further knowledge.

In *Against Illustration*, I have dwelled primarily on objects that originate in or respond to the early decades of cinema. As Bart Testa demonstrates in *Back and Forth: Early Cinema and the Avant-Garde*, appropriation is a longstanding strategy of the avant-garde collage film. Such work has an inbuilt criticality, a quality that frays the lines between formal and discursive relations to borrowed light. For example, Ken Jacobs's *Tom-Tom the Piper's Son* (1970) elongates a silent-era film, inventing new ways to expand and exhaust the object of study. Al Razutis's *Lumière's Train (Arriving at the Station)* (1973) and his other *Visual Essays* (1973-1985) are, like Jacobs's film, aesthetically expressive and experiential, but made explicitly discursive through the labels given them by their maker ("essays"). Stripped of such claims, an inbuilt criticality remains, in the selection, manipulation, and technological digestion of these objects.

A discursive, explanatory approach still thrives in many quarters, in part because the material facts of film, or the sequential assemblage of many films, reinforce an evidentiary model of criticism. Like Eadweard Muybridge settling a bet, the explanatory critic cues up images to prove whether the horse is in the air, or its

feet are on the ground; the voice of the explanatory critic use films to illustrate and reinforce their findings, an argumentative model that operates in a vacuum of competition and dominance, and that seeks to exhaust its objects. Against this, I pose the model of purposeful difficulty that is the major legacy of twentieth-century poetry and art: work that functions in an atmosphere of risk, that is experiential and participatory, that often defies description and expands the containers of media. In the past, I have pursued a corresponding critical model, that of George Steiner's typology of difficult forms in poetry, in the analysis of experimental films (Broomer 2017). Difficult experimental films are marked, like the best of art and criticism, by the particular subjectivities of their makers. Against didacticism, they invite the viewer to travel with a blank map. Against explanation, they draw their purpose out from the viewer's experience. They can be deeply edifying without practical applications or reducible 'lessons'. They justify their existence simply by being and nothing more, and they do not pander or demand assent; on the contrary, such films thrive in dissent. The experimental film sets a standard for a critical cinema, and in turn, for scholarly filmmaking and video essaying. From Steiner's typology, it is tactical difficulty—the deformation of material invitation, a steeling-against of form that refuses easy interpretation—that most readily lends itself to the visual arts, and which has emerged naturally from the experimental film through the self-conscious strategies of structuralism. Kevin L. Ferguson's conception of digital surrealism (Ferguson 2016) acknowledges the new ways of seeing present in digital forms, an exploration of those "irrational and automatic digital transformations" that invoke the plastic deformations, aleatoric strategies, and violent provocations of the Surrealists. Ferguson's methodology, which combines data visualization and abstraction to rend form from content, and to expand the container into new multidimensional structures, follows in the strategies of his structuralist forebears. Finally, Steiner's conception of ontological difficulty offers the potential for the video essay to open new directions for subject-object relations and transform irrevocably our consciousness of the object, in which the object of study becomes the ur-text subsumed into imaginative response. The reader/viewer is invited to participate in the creation of meaning, and in doing so, transforms the tendered experience.

In *Against Illustration*, I pursue an aesthetic of purposeful difficulty. In an act of misdirection, I start the first section with plain illustration—the very thing I contest. As these episodes progress, the image shifts from illustration towards ambiguities, of evidence under distress. The suspended image (of the Lumière’s train at La Ciotat, in section one) gives way to the bent image (of De Chomon, doubly bent, in section two); the bent image yields to symmetries and inverted polarities of negative and positive (in animations of Muybridge’s locomotion studies, in section three); those inverted polarities give way to symmetry and text run backward (in a marriage of magic and materialism, Méliès meets Michael Snow, in section four). When the voice falls silent, in the fifth and final episode, there comes the summit of this progression: the palimpsest, a text written-over, all preceding parts colliding like multiple beams of a projector competing for the territory of the blank screen. If these were once illustrations, they are no more: four sequences, each representing spectacle, evidence and magic, combine to become a fifth, a sensual commingling of colour, lines, and the silvery riddle of the first moving images.

The collage tradition in experimental film, beyond its citations of cinema’s origins, offers valuable precedents for a deformative videographic criticism. The Canadian artist and filmmaker Jack Chambers once compared collage filmmaking to the work of a potter, taking materials of the earth and, in transforming them into something new, both honouring and transcending their material origins, ever ready to be shattered, broken down, reformed into new expressions. From Charles Ridley to Bruce Conner to Peter Tscherkassky, collage filmmakers have engaged in formal material critique of the world around them, transforming the stuff of their earth—newsreels, countdown leader, commercial cinema—into new critical experiences, against mere illustration.

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