

Mellon Grant Report, Fall 2017
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Class: COMM 3442 – Visual Communication – The Video Essay

Visual Communication is an intermediate-level class in the Department of Communication. Topics vary, but each class is supposed to address the theory and practice of some aspect of visual communication, teaching specific technical skills while asking students to use those skills reflectively.

Assignment: Video Essay on Film History/Close Analysis

In Fall 2017, I introduced a new variant of the class, focusing on “The Video Essay.” The video essay is a new form of scholarship in film studies, using audiovisual tools to produce scholarly arguments about audiovisual works. In a sense, they are videos about films—short video documentaries that take topics in film studies as their subjects. It is important to emphasize that the video essay is a *scholarly* format. A good video essay may contain a thesis statement, a set of carefully chosen quotations, a close analysis of a specific example, a list of works cited, and other features that we commonly associate with written discourse.

My original plan was to assign seven video projects, building up to a final project in film history. That seventh project would have required substantial outside research. In the end, I did assign seven videos, but I decided to make the final project a Close Analysis assignment, as close analysis seemed more relevant to the critical/practical skills covered in the course. Students selected a film and developed an interpretation of a single scene, closely observed.

Reflection:

By shifting the focus from Film History to Close Analysis, I am afraid that I reduced the “research” portion of the assignment. However, I was very happy with the decision, because I think that the course as a whole greatly improved my students’ skill with close analysis. When you make a video essay, you find yourself watching the same movie over and over again. This repetitive viewing is perfectly suited to the close analysis approach, because you start to notice things you had overlooked on first viewing. By the time they got to their final projects, the students were quite good at close analysis; they had been practicing it all semester long. Some of the projects were so creative that I will ask the students to submit their works to *Film Matters*, an undergraduate film studies journal that publishes video essays.

Overall, I am quite proud of my new Video Essay course. In previous versions of Visual Communication, the connection between theory and practice was tentative, at best. In this version, students learn how to analyze films, and they learn how to edit films at the same time. Indeed, they learn how to analyze films *by* editing them—by creating unexpected juxtapositions that yield fresh insights.