The video essay as a persuasive genre

A qualitative genre analysis with a focus on evaluative and persuasive linguistic features

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Abstract
So called ‘video essays’ on films and cinema have gained substantial popularity on the video sharing internet site YouTube in the past years. This essay explores this relatively recent type of video production from the perspective of genre analysis in order to investigate whether a pattern of form, content and style can be identified, which would suggest the emergence of a new genre. Previous research has investigated a similar genre, the film review, by identifying its pervasive or obligatory moves or stages (Taboada, 2011; de Jong & Burgers, 2013). However, video essays seem to be a rather subjective form of communication, with a clear persuasive purpose. For this reason, linguistic elements expressing evaluation, assessment, feelings and opinions are analyzed in the following under the umbrella term for evaluative language use, that is Appraisal (White, 2015). Five video essays from different creators were chosen for the present analysis, which is focused on situational, structural, and Appraisal elements. The analysis shows that there indeed are similarities between the video essays, pertaining both to their situational context and structure, and their use of evaluative language. Several overall pervasive moves were found, which suggests that the essays follow a specific structural pattern. The evaluative language indicates an intention of persuading the viewer.

Keywords
Video essays, genre, genre analysis, Appraisal, evaluative/subjective language.
Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................ 1
2. Background and research questions ................................................................. 2
   2. 1 Background.................................................................................................. 2
       2.1.1 Genre ................................................................................................. 2
       2.1.2 Appraisal theory ............................................................................... 3
       2.1.3 Literature review .............................................................................. 4
       2.1.4 Research Questions ........................................................................... 5
3. Method and material .......................................................................................... 5
   3.1 Method ......................................................................................................... 5
   3.2 Material ........................................................................................................ 6
       3.2.1 Situational context ........................................................................... 7
4. Results and discussion ..................................................................................... 8
   4.1 Structural features ....................................................................................... 8
       4.1.1 The introduction ............................................................................... 9
       4.1.2 The analysis ..................................................................................... 10
       4.1.3 The closing ...................................................................................... 12
   4.2 Features of Appraisal in the video essays ................................................ 13
       4.2.1 Engagement ....................................................................................... 13
       4.2.2 Graduation ...................................................................................... 16
5. Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 17
References ............................................................................................................. 19
Appendix A ............................................................................................................. 20
Appendix B ............................................................................................................. 22
Appendix C ............................................................................................................. 25
Appendix D ............................................................................................................. 28
Appendix E ............................................................................................................. 30
1. Introduction

As technology advances, so do the many ways we as humans communicate with each other. With the internet, a brand-new type of media – social media – has emerged, and consequently, various new platforms where we can make ourselves heard. As a result, new communication styles, or genres, have been arising. Interestingly, often the genres online are digital varieties of their traditional predecessors. The film review, for instance, takes several shapes; it can be produced by professional reviewers in newspapers, magazines, or television programs, and by amateurs or consumers online. It is a genre that can be realized in both spoken and written forms, and more recently, also in the form of video reviews.

One of the most popular platforms on which people can share video film reviews is the video sharing website YouTube. Here, the line between the amateur and professional is blurred as some consumers choose to produce and post reviews as their part- or full-time occupation, and as a result earn an income through advertisement revenue, crowd funding, and sponsorships. Since there are many both well-established and less known reviewers on the platform, the strong competition may be one of the reasons an alternative type of film critique has emerged. There are content creators who go beyond reviewing a film; they analyze it, focus on the craft of filmmaking, observe it from different perspectives, and more. These videos may be called film analysis videos, or rather, as they are more commonly referred to within the cinema community on YouTube, video essays. One short and simple definition of the video essay is “a short analytical film about film or film culture” (McWhirter, 2015, p. 369). Video essays seem to, despite obvious similarities, deviate from film reviews enough as to be regarded as their own genre. For instance, the purpose of reviews is to persuade and affect the viewer’s or reader’s decision to watch the film in question (de Jong & Burgers, 2013, p. 75). It is quite unquestionable that reviews written by both professionals and consumers are an opinion-based genre; they are a type of ‘word-of-mouth’ and have an impact on film grosses (de Jong & Burgers, 2013, p. 76). The goal of video essays, however, seems to be to convince the viewer to accept the idea or perspective conveyed, for instance: that the creator’s interpretation of a film is valid. Video essays could therefore be looked upon as a different genre, one indication being the somewhat related, yet clearly different goals and purposes of this format in comparison to a traditional film review.

Since film reviews exist in different setups, it seems there is no single format established as the prototypical type. However, at least a portion of the different formats seems to have their own recognizable stages or steps, enabling differentiation between sub-genres, such as professionally written reviews or, more specifically, professionally written reviews in newspapers (Taboada, 2011, p. 251). While quite a few review types have been studied, the same attention has not been paid to the film analysis video essays, probably due to their quite recent emergence. Film analysis in the written form has been investigated as a genre in the past; however, the focus of those analyses has been predominantly on texts written by students in academic fields (e.g. Donohue, 2012). As the video essays on YouTube are made for an entirely different medium and
purpose – that is internet-based entertainment (although there is a somewhat educational purpose as well, it is not to the same extent as in the academically written essays) – there will presumably be enough differences between the two types to regard them as different genres, or at the very least, different sub-genres. Therefore, as video essays seem to deviate from the regular film reviews as well as academic film analyses, the main interest of this paper is to analyze them as an independent genre, with the primary purpose of assessing whether they fulfill the necessary conditions to be regarded as such. Video essays seem to be a rather subjective genre, although they may differ from film reviews in terms of the types and degree of subjectivity involved, given their creator’s focus on persuasion.

Much like film reviews have been studied as a genre, no research pertaining to this question has been conducted on video essays. However, not only is this format interesting from the point of view of the increasing public interest in internet-based communication, but this type of content seems to be a valuable material for an analysis of linguistic features that contribute to conveying and broadcasting one’s opinion and point of view. These features are treated here under an umbrella term of Appraisal (see section 2.1.2 for a detailed discussion). Consequently, it is of interest to the current paper to explore the type of evaluation or subjectivity features prominent in this alleged genre. The key term in the present analysis is Appraisal – a framework created for the analysis of evaluative language and the language means by which speakers express stances and attitudes. Before the analysis begins, however, it is important to understand the concept of Appraisal, and even more importantly, to define the notion of genre adopted for the present purposes.

2. Background and research questions

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Genre

Genre is a concept generally regarded as the various ways different types of discourse can be structured (Shaw, 2016, p. 243). In linguistic research, the term is often used to define varieties of text or speech. However, there is no one single specific definition of genre that is accepted and used by all. Instead, researchers may choose how they want to define the concept, often by means of adopting definitions established by other linguists. Even though there are many definitions of the term, similarities and overlaps between descriptions are common; genres are often regarded as discourse types that have specific communicative purposes and are used in certain situations (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 21). One definition that covers what many researchers think of as an important aspect of genre is that by Flowerdew (as cited in Shaw, 2016, p. 244), who describes genres as planned and structured events of communication that are used by members of certain discourse communities for certain communicative purposes (p. 244). Within a framework that pertains to the relationship between language and
context, and most notably, function – Systemic Functional Linguistics\(^1\) – a similar definition is used; again, for a specific communicative purpose, members within a culture\(^2\) partake in a social procedure in which they structure language in a predictable way (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 22). Genre has also been described as structured text whose organization and features follow the accepted convention (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 22). As these definitions are fairly similar, and generally approved of within the field of linguistics, they will be the basis of how genre is defined in the current paper.

2.1.2 Appraisal theory

In every communicative event, writers and speakers can choose to what degree they want to involve themselves personally and express their own subjective presence or voice. These choices commonly lead to the authors taking stance towards not only ideas, entities and phenomena, but also towards other potential participants in these communicative events. How writers and speakers choose to express their stance in discourse is discussed by the theory of Appraisal (or Appraisal Framework; see Martin & White, 2005), where *appraisal* means the ‘language of evaluation’. Overall, appraisal is any form of negative or positive evaluation that occurs in text and speech, which can be construed on various levels of overtness and strength (White, 2015, p. 1). Analyzing resources that convey evaluative meaning can reveal the author’s personal involvement in the text (White, 2015, p. 1). The focus of the Appraisal Framework is on linguistic resources that can be used to express attitudes in order to achieve a specific effect (Martin, 2000, p. 143). Moreover, the Appraisal Framework focuses on how writers and speakers choose to express involvement and attitudes, as well as on how they choose to construe their textual voice in the communicative event. The Appraisal framework relates to SFL, in that the way language is viewed in SFL has been adopted in the framework (White, 2015, p. 1). It concerns the ways in which interpersonal relations are constructed in a communicative event. In other words, appraisal can be tied specifically to the interpersonal metafunction in SFL. This metafunction pertains to the relationship between participants in the communicative event, and how their identities and social roles are portrayed (White, 2015, p. 1). Interpersonal engagement is expressed through feelings, opinions, evaluations, etc., which are shared between participants (Nir & Zima, 2017, p. 4). Given that video essays seem to be a rather subjective and persuasion-oriented format, the interpersonal metafunction of language becomes of interest to the current analysis.

In the Appraisal framework, Martin and White (2005) have identified three subsystems of evaluative language, known as attitude, engagement, and graduation. Attitude involves the different types of feelings that people intend to convey; they make assessment towards other people, objects, etc., and these assessments pertain to

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\(^1\) From now on, the abbreviation SFL will be used.

\(^2\) In this framework, culture refers to the context of a community and the environment in which language (in this case, specific varieties of language) operates (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013, p. 32-33).
emotion, judgment, or value. (White, 2015, p. 2). Engagement revolves around resources that portray the addressee’s positioning towards propositions; in other words, the addressee can be less or more certain of the truth value of the propositions s/he makes (White, 2015, p. 4-5). The concept concerns a dialogic perspective; addressees may or may not construe a dialogue in a communicative event (Martin & White, 2005, p. 92). Finally, graduation is connected to the previous two subsystems, for it tackles the gradability of attitudes and values of engagement. When expressing a proposition, an addressee will have a certain degree of personal investment in it, which can vary from low to high (White, 2015, p. 4). As mentioned, Appraisal is used to investigate the interpersonal function of language, which has to do with how people interact, share feelings, and negate social relations (2005, p. 7). Therefore, it would be valuable to use Appraisal to investigate texts such as film reviews and video essays. The addressee not only conveys her/his own stance and attitudes, but also construes her/his authoritative voice and more importantly, influences the addressee to adopt her/his views and align her/himself with the addressee (Martin & White 2005, p. 2). Rose (2012) also briefly mentions Appraisal, specifically in relation to genre. Appraisal plays an important part in genres of evaluating discourse, because the linguistic resources used to form arguments can be a powerful tool for promoting certain views (Rose, 2012, p. 220).

2.1.3 Literature review

As mentioned, the video essay has apparently not yet been the subject of research within linguistics. The closely related type of film review, by contrast, has been the focus of a considerable amount of research. The following studies have specifically investigated written reviews. Taboada (2011, p. 249), for instance, utilizes SFL to analyze online film reviews written by non-professionals as a genre. In her article, genre is defined as an activity with specific goals and purposes, consisting of different predetermined stages, in which members of a particular culture can partake. Taboada discusses not only the notion of genre, but also that of register, and demonstrates how the notions relate to the SFL. Linking the situational context: field, tenor (the relations among participants), and mode, to their realized metafunctions: ideational (the construed world of experience), interpersonal (the construed relationships, identities, and social roles among participants), and textual (how the ideational and interpersonal meanings are realized and organized into text), the author defines genre as the relationship between language and specifically the context of culture which speakers engage in as members (Taboada, 2011, p. 248-249). In a culture, a text serves a function – a social function for a communicative purpose – and the function determines the staging in the text (Taboada, 2011, p. 249). By analyzing 50 reviews, Taboada (2011, p. 252-253) identifies five distinct stages as the most typical structure of the genre: subject matter, plot, characters, background and evaluation, the first four being descriptive types and the last one an evaluative type.

A structural analysis is also the focus in de Jong and Burgers’ (2013) article, where 72 reviews written by professionals and consumers are compared. SFL was not adopted for this study, and the structure was divided into what can be defined as moves rather than stages; yet both Taboada’s stages and these moves share the same sense. While there is no clear, specific definition of genre in this article, the authors do mention that genre
relates to communicative goals and textual conventions (de Jong & Burgers, 2013, p. 76). Much like Taboada, de Jong and Burgers identify five moves, three of which are descriptive: giving practical information, describing the film, and placing the movie in context, while the other two are evaluative: giving critique and recommending the movie to the reader (2011, p. 79-80). Moreover, the authors argue that there is a difference between amateur-written and professionally written reviews, based on the fact that consumers use more evaluative moves, while professionals use more descriptive ones. Further, it turns out that consumers are more focused on presenting their opinion than professionals, who rather inform the reader about the film.

2.1.4 Research Questions

Given the aim of the current study, the analysis will be guided by two specific research questions: one concerning the notion of genre and the other relating to appraisal. These research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What do the YouTube video essays have in common in terms of situational and linguistic characteristics? In other words, what points toward the video essay as an emerging genre?

2. What kind of linguistic features can be identified in the content of the video essays, which convey the persuasive, subjective, and evaluative stance characteristic of this particular genre?

3. Method and material

3.1 Method

In order to answer the first research question, a genre analysis of five video essays will be conducted in two steps. The first step aims to understand the situational context in which the material exists and will be carried out by means of a situational analysis (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 31). In other words, the current purpose is to investigate the circumstances surrounding the material and its creation. Scrutinizing the material in its context is important because it may help us understand the conventions present within a genre and the reasons why a genre involves certain traits (Bhatia, 1993, p. 22). Biber and Conrad (2009) have provided a framework for situational analysis, including a list of characteristics that are of potential interest within genre analysis, such as communicative purpose. This framework will be utilized in the sense that some of the characteristics from the list provided by Biber and Conrad (see 2009, p. 40) that are deemed relevant for the video essays will be included in the analysis. The significance of the situational context for the genre will be further discussed in sections 3.2.1 and 4.1, but to put it briefly, the situational context, in relation to the linguistic features, will help explain why certain linguistic features are used in this discourse type, and whether they are functional (i.e., serve an important function in the text), or purely conventional (i.e., used for aesthetic or stylistic effect; see Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 71).
The second step involves the analysis of the transcripts of the video essays selected for the study. This procedure focuses on the organizational appearance of the texts. The present objective is to discover what the videos have in common in terms of structure; thus, the structural characteristics are of importance here, because they indicate how the message within a genre is usually organized, thus revealing the ideal for how to convey one’s intentions within that specific genre (Bhatia, 1993, p. 29). Normally, creators of a text belonging to a specific genre will produce texts in a similar manner, with few deviations within the structure (Bhatia, 1993, p. 29). If the current material indeed constitutes a genre, certain structural rigor can be expected in the analyzed corpus.

The analysis will follow several steps – first, the material will be divided into three parts, the beginning, middle, and end, because that is the most basic structure of a genre (Taboada, 2011, p. 249). Secondly, the moves within each part will be identified. A move is, in the current analysis, regarded as a component of text that serves a certain function (de Jong & Burgers, 2013, p. 76). Identification of the moves will emphasize the cognitive aspects of the genre, such as the addressor’s desires, because s/he signals her/his intentions through the moves (Bhatia, 1993, p. 29-30). The identification of the moves will not follow any particular framework or previous categorization, but will rather be based on my own observations.

Given the present interest in subjectivity and evaluation, and in order to answer the second research question, the current analysis of the evaluative language will follow the Appraisal framework proposed by Martin and White (2005). Since the focus here is specifically on persuasion, the most relevant linguistic resources in the subsystems of engagement and graduation will be of particular interest in the study. Within the concept of engagement, for instance, ‘bare’ assertions are one relevant variable, because they indicate an attempt to appear neutral – they are statements which the addressor does not engage in nor distances her/himself from by overtly taking a stance (Martin & White, 2005, p. 99). Another feature related to engagement is attributions, i.e. statements that come from other (external) sources as opposed to the addressor her/himself, which is a way for the addressor to subdue her/his own subjective voice for certain rhetorical purposes (Martin & White, 2005, p. 111). Finally, entertainment (i.e., whether the addressor signals recognition of other possibilities outside her/his own claims; see Martin & White, 2005, p. 104) will be investigated as well. Within the graduation concept, the element of force, i.e. the level of intensity in an assessment, is relevant because it indicates the author’s commitment to a proposition (Martin & White, 2005, p. 135-136).

3.2 Material

The material consists of five videos available on the video sharing site YouTube. The videos have been chosen from five different creators in order to ascertain a wider representation of this discourse type. Differentiating the video essays from film reviews, and what follows, choosing videos for the present study has been quite straightforward, as the creators of the chosen videos have classified their own material as ‘video essays’, whether it is in the videos themselves, the video descriptions, or other circumstances.
The length of video essays on YouTube varies greatly; however, an average length seems to be around 10 minutes, perhaps because a minimum length of 10 minutes grants creators a greater advertisement revenue. For the sake of consistency, videos with a length of around 10 minutes (plus/minus a few minutes), were selected for this study. The audio part of the videos has been manually transcribed; however, the transcription does not follow any specific convention. Since the material will be analyzed as a text rather than natural dialogue, no particular convention appeared necessary for the present purposes. Most of the audio material consists of the creator’s narration; however, the audio and dialogues from the films in question are often integrated in the narration of the videos, which is why they also have been transcribed.

Even though the focus here is on the narrator’s utterances, some attention will also be payed to the visual elements in the videos as endorsing the author’s point of view. While video essays consist mostly of clips from the films that the videos are about, creators will sometimes use additional visual aids, such as text, still images, drawings, etc. The visuals will not be analyzed as such, but they are discussed in this paper to the extent they are involved in the moves (see section 4.2).

3.2.1 Situational context

Each video has one apparent addressor – the narrator, usually the only addressor, because a majority produce their content by themselves; yet there are instances where several addressors might be involved, which is hinted at through the pronoun “we” when used to refer to the channel/means of production. The addressee in this communicative event is, of course, a specific audience – the person watching the video. However, there is no single intended addressee, as the videos are meant to reach out to a large number of people.

The addressor is the only one speaking in the video; thus, the communication format is a monologue. Addressees cannot respond directly or in real time; the video is already a finished piece of communication. Thus, the addressees cannot influence the communication directly; however, they can interact with the addressor in other ways, such as leaving comments in the comment section of the video, or via social media, such as Facebook. The interactional power dynamics between the addressor and the addressees are debatably asymmetrical; the addressor is the voice most heard; the video is the central means of communication and the addressee’s response is usually a short comment. The extent of shared background knowledge between the addressor and addressee is rather unclear, in regard to filmmaking. Nevertheless, there seems to be an expectancy of shared knowledge of the film in question; the addressor most likely assumes that the addressee has seen it. This is hinted at via certain features used in the videos, which will be mentioned further into the analysis (see section 4.2).

Since the videos are pre-taped, they do not take place in real time. They are planned and edited in post-production (which is made clear because of obvious cuts in audio/video). The videos are also, at the very least, semi-scripted, since the addressors often go through numerous points with a great deal of specific information. Another factor likely to support this conclusion is the quality of speech itself, which at times is spontaneous and rambling, but mostly organized (with complete sentences, etc.). The setting of the
communication is arguably not overtly shared; the audience has no knowledge of when and where the videos were created, but only when and where the videos were shared to the public. In that sense, somewhat of a shared setting does exist, i.e. the site; however, not in the same physical way as in a conversation that takes place here-and-now.

Generally, the purpose of the video essays is mainly persuasion (e.g., convincing the audience to believe certain claims), but also entertainment (e.g., bringing up interesting points and providing visuals, style, etc. that keep the audience captivated) and, to some extent, education (e.g., informing the audience about techniques, history, etc.) The importance of the latter two varies; some creators seem to focus more on entertainment while others prioritize education. The overarching purposes of the essays are realized through several subordinate, specific purposes, which can shift within each video, between narrating, describing, explaining, and interpreting. The course of the shift pertains to the specific, subordinate purpose; in one part of the video, for example, the specific purpose is the description of a particular scene in a film, while in another part, the purpose shifts to interpreting the same scene. The addressor’s objectivity also varies between and within the videos, with factual information (e.g. about a filmmaking practice or the film) pervaded with personal opinions and speculation as common features of the addressor’s communicative purpose. The factual information is presumably not the focus, as the addressors can express themselves as they please, and their assumptions about the addressee’s knowledge of the film plot are quite clear (for instance, that they know important plot points). With that said, expressions of stance are common in these videos.

Since the videos are all centered around film and filmmaking, it is the specific topics that differ between the videos; they all discuss different films and different aspects of filmmaking, such as character and symbolism. Some specific topics are broader than others, which are more specialized; for instance, one video is about how one movie portrays relationships and the media, while another is about a single element, planting and payoff, which is practiced in filmmaking.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Structural features

The following sections discuss several common structural features identified in the analyzed material. The discussion is meant to demonstrate how these features create and contribute to the content of the video essays, which suggests that they can be perceived as specific traits of the genre. As mentioned, the videos can be divided into three distinct parts: the beginning, the middle, and the end. Once the parts were identified, they were labeled according to their communicative purpose, and hence: the introduction, the analysis, and the closing. In each of these sections, distinct moves which are either conventional or functional can be identified (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 71). Within each part, the moves may not always appear in the same order in every video but will rather slightly vary from addressor to addressor. Furthermore, all moves are not necessarily obligatory for all videos; any moves that occur in at least three of the five videos were included in the results.
4.1.1 The introduction

The introduction part is meant to, quite obviously, introduce the video and inform the audience what the video is going to be about. This part covers all topics that will be touched upon in the video, including the film and the aspect of the film that is being focused upon. Further, the introduction contains some sort of explanation or justification of the topic chosen. The length of the introductions varies, with a word count of between 115 to 285 words; this probably depends on the length of the video as a whole. Below are the identified moves that have been found throughout the introductions:

- Move 1: Presenting the channel.
- Move 2: Opening sentence.
- Move 3: Elaborating the topic.
- Move 4: Justifying or explaining the choice of the topic.

Move 1 is not always included by all narrators. Arguably, the move is not necessarily needed, because the channel name is always visible beneath the video, and is purely conventional. Those that do include it, use a title card where the channel name is provided. In some cases, the narrator will mention the channel name as well, sometimes presenting themselves with their name too. Move 2 is simply the first sentence spoken (unless, of course, move 1 includes an utterance), usually immediately informing the audience of at least some aspects of the video’s content. For instance, the narrator may mention the film, or a feature related to the film, such as the director. Alternatively, it is the aspect of filmmaking focused on that will be mentioned. These elements, exemplified below (from essays 1 and 5, see appendix A and E), can be viewed as key words that tell the audience what they can expect:

(1) Gone Girl’s opening and closing shots are almost identical, of Amy looking up at Nick, but also up at us, the audience.

(2) Today I want to talk about a simple yet important element in narrative structure known as planting and payoff.

These examples look considerably different: (1) talks about two specific shots in the film, while (2) is more general but, at the same time, explicitly states the topic. The moves still perform the same action of letting the viewer know some aspect of the topic (in (1) it is the film, Gone Girl, and in (2) it is the filmmaking practice of planting and payoff). This feature is so common and prominent that it can be categorized as a potential genre element of this format.

Move 3 is essentially the elaboration and specification of the topic, where the narrator can talk extensively about an aspect of the subject, which typically requires several sentences. The narrator essentially lays down groundwork of information to prepare the audience for the coming discussion. For example (from essay 2, see appendix B):

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3 Underlined text is used to highlight words/phrases that perform the function/action discussed.
He becomes a stringer, someone who films breaking stories, often tragic and violent, and sells the footage to TV stations. Lou is motivated, clever, and a sociopath. Throughout the film, Lou’s lack of empathy and drive to succeed leads him to take increasingly unforgivable actions. Yet he remains the hero of the story, while we, the audience, stay engaged. Why? How necessary is it to have a likeable protagonist?

The passage describes a character, as well as narrates the character’s story, signaling to the audience that the topic of the video is the character. Furthermore, the narrator focuses on how a character with negative qualities is still positively viewed by an audience. While it is still relatively general information, and something that may even be widely known, it is a way for the narrator to specify the topic for the audience. Finally, move 4 is not always the last move in the introduction, as it is often collapsed with move 3. This move, combined with the explanation in move 3, represents the narrator’s opportunity to convince the audience that it is an interesting or important topic, which is realized in the two questions raised at the end of (3).

The narrator questions the contrastive elements (e.g. lack of empathy and unforgivable actions versus hero of the story) through the question “Why?” and, in the final question, he emphasizes the importance of the topic through the word “necessary”. The interrogative is, of course, posed so that it can be answered in the video; however, questions are not commonly used for this move otherwise. Other times, the narrators will include their own subjective view, commonly via mental or desire verbs, such as “I want to talk about…” or: “Which is why I got intrigued by…”. What is significant about this move is that the narrators show their own engagement in the topic, and at the same time indicate that their topic is of importance, at least within the world of cinema. Consequently, the audience should realize this fact, and continue watching. Moreover, this move works as a transition into the analysis part of the video.

4.1.2 The analysis

The analysis is the main part of the video and could perhaps be considered the actual substance: this is the place for the narrators to talk about the film extensively and to present their observations and interpretations. As a result, it is the longest part that takes up most time in the video. Since it is such a large section, some narrators choose to organize it into two or three smaller parts based on topic. They do it by overtly stating the topics in the introduction, and by providing titles or text within the analysis when shifting from one topic to another. This type of meta structure, however, has not been analyzed in depth here, as only two of the examples in the data have utilized it. Moreover, the focus of the current work is the moves and their functions within the analysis rather than the meta structure of the videos. The moves presented below have been analyzed differently than those in the other parts; they are not seen as fixed, major units that only occur once in the analysis, but rather as smaller units that are combined to form each major argument, of which there are several. Since this part consists mainly of argumentation, the moves are constantly repeated and interchangeably used for every claim that the narrator makes. The following four moves could be identified in the analysis part of the essays:
Move 1: Providing further, more specific information about the topic.
Move 2: Making a claim in relation to the previous information.
Move 3: Presenting supportive arguments for the claim.
Move 4: Shifting the topic for the next claim.

The moves identified here could perhaps be called evaluative discourse; some of them can be likened to exposition, where a thesis is proposed and then supported through several arguments (Rose, 2012, p. 219). Move 1 involves either talking about a specific scene or an aspect of filmmaking in question; sometimes, however, the latter is immediately connected to a scene. When talking about a scene, this is where description and/or narration serves a specific purpose. Below is an example (from essay 1, see appendix A) of move 1:

(4) When we first see Amy looking up at the audience, there is the appearance of innocence on her end. The opening lines in the film are Nick saying [movie audio: “I always think of her head. I picture cracking her lovely skull”]. From the outside looking in, this appears to be a hostile relationship between these two. One of abuse and of mistreatment.

Not only does the addressor narrate the scene, but he demonstrates it at the same time as well. The audience watches the scene while it is discussed, and in addition, the narrator uses audio material from that scene. While the narrator provides information about the scene, they already assume that the audience has seen the film; thus, in the sentence: “When we first see Amy”, the plural pronoun “we” is inclusive and refers to both addressees and the addressor. The audience gets a feeling of the scene and consequently understands what the narrator means when they describe the relationship as hostile. In contrast, if move 1 includes a filmmaking aspect, the communicative purpose is explanation. By explaining the topic further, it is hoped that the audience will achieve a better understanding of its nature and relevance. Whether move 1 is achieved through explaining, describing, or narrating, the narrators intend to prepare the audience for the claim, or ‘thesis’ that they are about to present, which is move 2. The narrator utilizes the information previously provided to make a proposition, or an interpretation, in this move. Often this move is short, containing only one or two sentences, such as the case below (from essay 1, see appendix A):

(5) This is by all means a hostile relationship, but as David Fincher shows, this hostile relationship ultimately stems from Nick and Amy being inherently different people.

The narrator contrasts the claim in (5) against that of (4), where Amy seems innocent and Nick seems abusive. The conjunction “but” is a type of concession, which is common in the discussion type of evaluating discourses; it signals a rebuttal to the previous statement, building the evaluating discourse through arguments and counterarguments (Rose, 2012, p. 219). The narrator signals to the audience a shift in his perspective. Now, in order for the audience to accept the new perspective, move 3 is deployed. In this move, narration, description, and/or explanation once again play an important part, because this is where the evidence is provided. In essay 1, the narrator presents all the aspects of how the characters Nick and Amy are different; for instance, by pointing out that they grew up in different families and providing a description of
each family. Again, alongside describing/narrating, the narrator demonstrates his points through visuals from the film. In some cases, there will be references to other films or stories as well, sometimes accompanied by visuals from that particular reference, in order to further demonstrate the point.

Finally, the narrators will often also use external sources to support their claim, by using quotes, reported speech or audio from, for instance, film directors (this is further discussed in section 4.3.1.2 below). The last move is essentially a way for the narrator to proceed to the next claim they want to make. This shift enables a smoother transition into the next topic. For instance, once again referring to the case discussed here, the topic moves from Nick and Amy’s relationship failing because they are different people, to Nick’s relationship with his sister. The narrator then continues to explain that Nick’s relationship with his sister is better, because they have experienced the same things, and so the relationship with his sister becomes the new topic. The narrator can now use all the moves again in a new cycle.

4.1.3 The closing

The closing part is usually the shortest part of the video essays, as all the points have already been argued for in the previous part and so the narrator is now free to add some final general thoughts about the film. However, this part does not necessarily revolve around the film entirely, as other topics are usually also brought up. The narrators will usually spend this time to address the audience and talk about aspects surrounding their channel, such as sponsorships. While certain moves are commonly present in all videos, the order of the moves may differ from video to video, and some may occur twice in one closing. The following five moves have been identified in the closing sections:

Move 1: Praising the film.  
Move 2: Thanking the audience.  
Move 3: Prompting the audience to engage in certain activities.  
Move 4: Thanking third parties.  
Move 5: The good-bye.

The order of moves 1 and 2 will sometimes be swapped but move 1 always occurs early in the closing section. Move 1 is essentially a way for the narrator to conclude their discussion, by saying something general about the film that does not directly tie into the previously discussed topics. Often, the narrators will overtly state their opinion on the film or some aspect of it. While there are video essays that cover films perceived as technically deficient, most focus on well produced films, which is why this move can be labelled ‘praising the film’. Consider the following example (from essay 5, see appendix E):

(6) The great thing about this movie is that you could go on for hours about all the ways it uses its medium to maximize its potential, because ultimately that's what this is all about, how to best tell a story using your given medium. Mad Max Fury Road isn't perfect but it's about as close to perfect as a movie made by humans is going to get.

The narrator is quite expressive, using attributive adjectives such as “great” and “perfect”; clearly, this is an evaluation. This move can be likened to the evaluative stage
in film reviews, where the addressor’s opinion on the film is expressed (Taboada, 2011, p. 256).

Thanking the audience is simply the narrator addressing the audience directly and thanking them for watching the video. Further, move 3 involves asking the audience to undertake either one or several of the following: visit another site that belongs to either a sponsor, or another third party that might have helped the creator in the production of their video, subscribing to the channel, and donating to the creator (via a site called Patreon). Move 4 is usually a part of move 3; the narrators will thank their sponsor or the third party that has helped them. Finally, move 5 is the last move, which is meant to signal to the audience that the video is over, usually with a “See you next time”; however, sometimes move 2 will also function as the good-bye if placed last. For instance, the sentence (from essay 2, see appendix B): “And finally and most importantly, thank you for watching”, also signals the end through the adverb “finally”.

4.2 Features of Appraisal in the video essays

The following sections discuss engagement and graduation, and demonstrate how specific linguistic features/strategies are used to convey stance, persuade the audience, and appear neutral/objective, which suggests that the video essays are persuasive and subjective.

4.2.1 Engagement

4.2.1.1 Bare assertions

The narrator’s level of engagement in the videos fluctuates greatly; some statements are expressed as factual with certainty, while, in other cases, the addressor does not appear to be as confident. Interestingly, even in statements that are presented as fact, the narrator’s degree of involvement can vary from neutral to highly engaged. There are certain instances where the addressor uses bare assertions, where they are neither engaging nor distancing themselves, as exemplified below (from essays 1 and 2, see appendix A and B):

(7) The way that this film portrays the media is that of a heartless machine that is only focused on trying to get masses of people to agree with its perspective.

(8) Being a hard worker is an example of a sympathetic character trait that is separate from morality.

The audience is supposed to accept this kind of statement as fact, but the narrator does not use any particular overt language elements to express his certainty about this claim. The addressor appears neutral towards the statement, or even objective (Martin & White, 2005, p. 99). Bare assertions are not necessarily objective or to be accepted as fact, and in fact, both (7) and (8) are somewhat evaluative given the presence of attributive adjectives, which clearly convey an opinion (e.g. heartless machine). Yet in these examples, the narrator clearly wants the audience to see the statements as such. The statements are meant to be taken for granted; the narrator assumes that the audience
already knows and agrees with the claim, using no signals which indicate that it is up for discussion (Martin & White, 2005, p. 100). Bare assertions are a strategy for the narrator to convince the audience that these statements are not meant to be argued against; they are already correct or true, perhaps even to be regarded as common knowledge. Moreover, these statements make a supportive ground for any arguments related to them, with the narrator probably assuming that the already ‘accepted’ statements will help persuade the audience to accept the other arguments.

**4.2.1.2 Attributions**

Another common feature present in the videos is attributions. Nearly all attributions are acknowledgements, in other words, attributions that the narrator is not explicitly agreeing or disagreeing with (Martin & White, 2005, p. 112). Whereas acknowledgements will typically not indicate the narrator’s stance, in the case of the video essays, the addressors use them to support their own interpretations and claims. The external sources brought up are usually directors, writers, poets, etc. The following (from essays 4, 3, and 2, see appendix D, C and B) are examples of such attributions:

(9) You could almost call this film meta-metacinematic in that it functions as a kind of rulebook for how to achieve this immersive effect without seeming deconstructionist, to use Nolan’s words.

(10) The late poet Robert Graves argued that what these various stories have in common is that they share a journey of the main character to both a physical as well as a mental underworld.

(11) As Robert McKee says in Story, likeability is no guarantee of audience involvement, it’s merely an aspect of characterization.

Because the videos are multimodal, the ways in which attributions are realized differ. The narrator can use direct citations or paraphrasing to present the utterance or thought (Martin & White, 2005, p. 111). This is done by either typing the quote onto the screen, the narrator uttering it, or by inserting the audio file with the original utterer’s production. In (11), for instance, the quote is presented in text as well as the narrator’s utterance. No matter what form the acknowledgement takes, the purpose is the same, that is, to fade the presence of the narrator’s own subjective voice. Again, this does not mean that the utterance thus becomes objective – such overt perspectivation of the context has been argued to “invite an addressee to identify with a particular perspective on an object of conceptualization that is itself represented in the embedded clause” (Verhagen, 2005, p. 79). To convey this perspective, the presence of certain linguistic elements is necessary (e.g. verbs of cognition, perception, evaluation; feelings, attitudes, etc.), which is seen in examples (10) and (11) above.

In general, attributions are used to emphasize that other views are possible; consequently, the statements are not treated as factual but instead, as a part of dialogue in which multiple voices and views can be heard (Nádraská, 2017, p. 66). The narrators not only present their own subjective views, but other subjective views as well, signaling that they are open to different perspectives. As a result, the audience are less
likely to reject the idea presented, and more likely to be persuaded that the idea is plausible and trustworthy (Nádraská, 2017, p. 66).

4.2.1.3 Entertainment

There are several ways for the narrator to entertain certain ideas. To express assessment of the probability of a claim to be true, different modalities of probability are often used (Martin & White 2005, p. 104-105). One common feature is modal auxiliary verbs, as demonstrated below (from essays 4 and 1, see appendix D and A):

(12) But the same simple cut can traverse great distances, also and great lengths of time in either direction.

(13) People believe that the news anchors are there to tell us facts, when in all reality, that may not be true.

The narrator presents the statement as one possibility among several others (Martin & White 2005, p. 105). Thus, he does not appear completely confident that his statement is factual. Another modal feature commonly used is modal adjuncts, where the level of the narrator’s engagement varies. Consider the following sentences (from essays 3 and 1, see appendix C and A), where (14) is more distanced and (15) is more engaged (Biber & Finegan, 1989, p. 119):

(14) A perhaps more strikingly similar connection can be found in Nordic mythology.

(15) They obviously care for her, but they aren’t a huge part of her life.

Instances like (14) are more common than (15) in the video essays. Much like the auxiliaries, the adjuncts with less engagement cannot be presented as a factual proposition. The narrators will also often make suggestions that are based on their observations, in other words, appearance and evidence-based statements (Martin & White 2005, p. 105). Below are examples of such statements (from essays 1 and 3, see appendix A and C):

(16) From the outside looking in, this appears to be a hostile relationship between these two.

(17) So on a metaphorical level, the maze in Prisoners then seems to loosely echo this age old Greek myth.

Here, the narrators present their own observations and interpretations. In fact, all three features of entertainment mentioned in this section represent the narrator’s own subjective views (Martin & White 2005, p. 105). The features signal that, while the addressees are invested in their statements, they also acknowledge other possibilities beyond what they say and that the audience may disagree with them (Martin & White, 2005, p. 106). Depending on the context, the audience may also interpret such statements as the addressee’s limited certainty or knowledge of the subject (Martin & White 2005, p. 107). While this rhetorical strategy may not have a persuasive effect, being overtly subjective is perhaps another way for the narrator to prevent criticism yet invite further discussion. The narrator recognizes that there are other views and
perspectives, basically making space for them (Martin & White, 2005, p. 108). By default, their own views should deserve recognition as well.

4.2.2 Graduation

4.2.2.1 Force

Graduation is another prevalent aspect of evaluative language present in the videos. It is found to be most commonly used when expressing attitudes, such as judgement and affect. Most graduation is realized as force, in other words: the intensity of an assessment (Martin & White, 2005, p. 140). Intensification is achieved in two ways: either by up-scaling, which results in higher intensity, or down-scaling, which results in lower intensity (Martin & White, 2005, p. 141). In the video essays, there seems to be a tendency for up-scaling assessments. While down-scaling does occur, it is not nearly as frequent as up-scaling. The resources used for force are similar to those of entertainment; however, they are used for conveying personal investment in the statements rather than the extent to which the text is dialogic. Both down and up-scaling of attitudes is achieved mainly through adverbs and premodifiers of adjectives (Martin & White, 2005, p. 141-142). A few examples of up-scaling are presented below (from essays 3, 2, and 4, see appendix C, B and D):

(18) The maze is an incredibly relevant archetypal symbol of the human experience.

(19) First of all, Lou is a very hard worker.

(20) Cinema, as a shared narrative, can be a hugely powerful cultural force.

The premodifier “very” is particularly frequent compared to other adverbs that signal up-scaling. While it is not the highest on the scale of intensity provided by Martin & White (2005, p. 136), it is still fairly high, but the other examples are even higher on this same scale. The narrator expresses his opinions rather freely, not inhibited in using subjective language. By upscaling assessments, the narrator intends to maximize his apparent commitment to his propositions, and consequently, attempting to affect the audience to adopt the same opinion (Martin & White, 2005, p. 152). Down-scaling, on the other hand, is signaled through adverbs such as “almost” and “somewhat”. Possibly, down-scaling is purposefully used less frequently, as it creates the opposite effect of up-scaling and so the reasoning becomes less persuasive (Martin & White, 2005, p. 153). Therefore, the narrators tend to up-scale the assessments with the purpose of convincing the audience about their point of view. Graduation may occur in relation to engagement as well, with varied intensity. “If I had to guess” and “I think”, for instance, are on the lower end of the scale, while adverbs like “undeniably” and “decidedly” signal more commitment (Martin & White, 2005, p. 136). Additionally, in the first two examples, the narrator’s subjective voice becomes apparent with the first-person pronoun, emphasizing that these are his own speculations.
5. Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to investigate whether video essays shared on YouTube have enough in common to be considered an emerging genre, and to explore their persuasive and subjective language in the framework of Appraisal - an approach to describing and explaining the way language is used to evaluate, to express stances, and manage interpersonal relationships (White, 2015, p. 1). The specific research questions pursued were: (1) what do the YouTube video essays have in common in terms of situational and linguistic characteristics, which points toward the video essay as an emerging genre; and (2) what kind of linguistic features can be identified in the content of the video essays, which convey the persuasive, subjective, and evaluative stance characteristic of this particular genre?

The results indicate that the videos do possess certain traits of a genre – in line with the genre definitions proposed in section 2.1.1 – they are planned events with clear communicative purposes (which is shown in the shared situational context) and they are structured in a similar manner. The general communicative purposes: persuasion, entertainment, and education, are realized by means of description, narration, and explanation, which in turn are realized through several moves common for all analyzed texts.

The identified parts in the structure of the video essays are: the introduction – four moves informing the audience about the topic; the analysis – four moves that have an argumentative/persuasive/evaluative function; the closing – five moves which address the audience and signal the end. There are, therefore, enough similarities in the structure in the videos to consider them a genre, also from this point of view. The video essays also share similarities with film reviews; they are meant to reach similar discourse communities (at least in terms of cinematic discourse), and they both serve descriptive and evaluative functions. How they differ from the classic film reviews is their presupposed more subjective stance. It can, however, be conservatively concluded that the video essay is, at the very least, a subgenre of the film review.

The analyzed linguistic features of Appraisal suggest that the pervasive goal of the essays is persuasion; however, the adopted strategies indicate attempts of appearing neutral and objective rather than subjective, often signifying a dialogic perspective (i.e., the acknowledgement of other possibilities beyond the narrator’s own claims). The reason for that is likely to be the creators’ intention to appear credible and reliable. However, the video essays can be likened to evaluating discourse, as they exhibit features of commitment and subjective stance. The evaluative language also pervades the sections meant to entertain ideas and is a tool to intensify statements.

The current study has several limitations, one of which is time constraints. The notion of genre can be analyzed on several other dimensions, such as lexico-grammatical features and textualization. There are also more steps in the procedure to explore a genre, such as consulting experts (Bhatia, 1993, p. 25-35). Conducting a more thorough analysis would, of course, be beneficial for assessing whether video essays truly are a genre. This study focused on what the videos have in common, without factoring in potential differences between them, which could provide a clearer answer. A
comparative analysis with additional material will help further the desirable generalization of potential genre features (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 52). Finally, further investigation of the features of Appraisal could also be useful, for instance, including the third subsystem – attitude (not used here) – to analyze how judgements, feelings, etc. are conveyed (White, 2015, p. 2). Assuming that video essays as analyzed here are a separate subgenre of film reviews, a further investigation of this kind would likely yield valuable insights into how the specific purposes of this genre are realized by overt linguistic means.
References


Appendix A

Video essay 1
Gone Girl – Exploring the Modern World (by Jack’s Movie Reviews)

Gone Girl’s opening and closing shots are almost identical, of Amy looking up at Nick, but also up at us, the audience. Out of context it is hard to find meaning in it, but once you watch the movie, both of these take on a brand-new meaning as we understand exactly what these characters have been through. At the heart of this movie we see the relationship between Nick and Amy, but in all reality, this is only used as a way for other explored different themes and ideas, all the while taking a closer look at the illusion of the modern loving relationship. This movie is excellent in almost every single aspect, at this point in his career, David Fincher had built up a style, has found a group of incredibly talented people who can make his movies stay consistent on a technical level, and now uses his format to take a closer look into different stories that speak to him.

Today we’re obviously going to be taking a closer look at Gone Girl, and two aspects in particular. First and foremost, we’re going to take a look at the relationship between Nick and Amy, and then move on to explore the media in the modern world. When we first see Amy looking up at the audience, there is the appearance of innocence on her end. The opening lines in the film are Nick saying [movie audio: “I always think of her head. I picture cracking her lovely skull”]. From the outside looking in, this appears to be a hostile relationship between these two. One of abuse and of mistreatment. But we had come to learn in this film, that isn’t exactly true. This is by all means a hostile relationship, but as David Fincher shows, this hostile relationship ultimately stems from Nick and Amy being inherently different people. Let’s take a look at their families. Nick grew up in a very supportive family, he has a sister for whom he cares considerably, he was very close to his mother and even moved back home to care of her, he is on the outs with his father, this really isn’t explained but we do know that Nick still takes care of his father. If I had to guess, it would seem like they had had a dispute or a disagreement, but they still care about each other enough, because of their familial bond.

Amy, on the other hand, grew up rich, she was an only child with two very successful parents. They pushed her to do her best and she always succeeded. She doesn’t seem very close with her parents, they obviously care for her, but they aren’t a huge part of her life. The reason I wanted to mention this is that they are two very, very different people. They grew up in different parts of the world, have different family structures, have different morals, different levels of education, and yet, they made each other happy. When they first met, they were happy together. But as this film shows, when there are two people who are as different as these are, living together, things are going to go downhill. People who are inherently different aren’t fit to pretend to be the same. This difference grows into disdain as the two try to live together and try to appreciate one another, but it doesn’t work. The woman that Nick feels closest with isn’t his wife, but instead his sister. In the film, someone talks about this and calls it “twincest”, when in all reality, that is not true. Nick and his sister care for one another, because they have lived such similar lives. They’ve had to deal with some hardships, and that has made their relationship stronger. They relate to one another, because they are so similar. Now, this is by no means sexual, but it seems like today, people want to label everything in a particular way, when most things can’t be labeled. When we see the same shot at the end of the movie, we hear [movie audio: “What have we done to each other?”]. This shows that the abuse that we saw in the movie wasn’t physical, it was mental. When two people spend time together, ideas are going to clash, sparks are going to fly, that is what is going to happen. A strong marriage will be able to sustain this, the people are willing to work their way through it. But Nick and Amy do not have a strong marriage and they let pride get in their way, and they’re not able to work their way
through it. Which in turn lead to hate, betrayal, and murder. Now, David Fincher isn’t saying “don’t get married”, that isn’t his message of his film. He is instead saying “make sure, if you do get married, you’re getting married to someone you care about and who you can have a positive relationship with”.

[Text on screen: “The people will believe what the media tells them they believe” – George Orwell]. But the third player or the third mindset that is in this movie is actually the media. The way that this film portrays the media is that of a heartless machine that is only focused on trying to get masses of people to agree with its perspective. The media in this movie isn’t portrayed as a reliable news source, but instead as a gossip feed that is trying to take a stance on everything, even when it doesn’t know anything about it. As we learn, early on in the investigation, nobody knows what actually happened. Well, nobody besides Amy. But that doesn’t stop the different news sources from trying to act like they are experts. In this movie the point of the media isn’t to objectively tell you what has been happening, but instead to try and convince you to believe one thing. At this point in the film, Ellen Abbott, the anchor who appears to have a personal vendetta against Nick, tells the world that he killed his wife. Later, once it turns out that she was wrong, she buddies up to him and pretends like she was just doing her job. But this extends outside the world of the film, and into our real world, too. In his director’s commentary, David Fincher said in order to market this movie the right way, the team behind the trailers would have to make it look like Nick is at least somewhat responsible. In the trailer, it leads the audience into believing that Nick killed his wife. [Movie audio: “Did you kill your wife, Nick?”]. When Ellen asks if Nick does kill his wife, there’s hesitation as if it appears like he might say yes. This, in a way, shows how easy it is for people to be lead to believe something, especially when we see it on TV. There is an inherent cultural bias where people believe what they are told when it comes from someone in a power position. People believe that the news anchors are there to tell us facts, when in all reality, that may not be true.

One of the most important parts about this movie is actually some advice that it gives, advice for the news, that they have incredible power, but the way that they wield it is quite frankly irresponsible. In the past, news has been able to change public perception, manipulate what people think about court cases, try and change the outcome of elections. I think I’m going to stop right here, because I don’t like talking politics when we should be talking movies. But I’d like to end this video with some advice. Today, more than ever, it is important to be informed. Our world is changing at a rate faster than ever. We need to know what is happening, when it is happening, and why it is happening. However, what we normally think of as a news source is not always reliable. I’m not conspiracy theorist, I don’t want to tell you what to do and what not to do, but my advice, if you take anything from Gone Girl, would be please, be careful when looking online, or watching the news. Thank you so much for watching, I know I got away from the actual movie a little bit there at the end, but when the movie’s message is so important in today’s world, I wanna spend a minute talking about it. Next week we are going to be looking at Pulp Fiction, there’s a link to that video on the right on the screen and that’s going to be out next Saturday. On the left of the screen is my last video and we looked at Steve Jobs. Thanks for watching and be sure to check out movie rehab dot com for a lot of reviews of theatrical releases, but also movies new to DVD and Blu-ray, along with lists, essays and a whole lot of other really great content. Anyway, thanks for watching and I’ll see you next week.
Appendix B

Video essay 2
Nightcrawler – Empathy for the Antihero (by Lessons From The Screenplay)

Hi, I’m Michael, this is Lessons from the screenplay. In Nightcrawler, Jake Gyllenhaal plays a character named Lou Bloom who stumbles upon the world of local TV news. He becomes a stringer, someone who films breaking stories, often tragic and violent, and sells the footage to TV stations. Lou is motivated, clever, [movie audio: Lou laughing], and a sociopath. [Movie audio: “What if my problem wasn’t that I don’t understand people, but that I don’t like them?] Throughout the film, Lou’s lack of empathy and drive to succeed leads him to take increasingly unforgivable actions. Yet he remains the hero of the story, while we, the audience, stay engaged. Why? How necessary is it to have a likeable protagonist? And what do antiheroes offer that conventional heroes may not? Let’s step further into the world of Nightcrawler. [text on screen: NGITHCRAWLER Screenplay by Dan Gilroy (spoilers ahead)]

Sympathetic characters. [text on screen: Sympathetic Characters] Usually when you hear the phrase sympathetic character it’s referring to how likeable a character is [text on screen: “sympathetic character”≈“likeable character”]. We tend to like characters who have traits that we find admirable [text on screen: generosity, humility, confidence, honestly, gratitude, commitment, confidence] but the idea that a protagonist must be nice [text on screen: nice, morally flawless] or morally flawless to be sympathetic is a misconception [the words being crossed out on the screen]. [images on screen of various film characters] Some of the greatest protagonists in film and TV history have been rude people with questionable morals. But they still have other traits that can make them sympathetic to a certain extent. Let’s look at a couple of ways screenwriter Dan Gilroy creates sympathy for Lou. First of all, Lou is a very hard worker. [text on screen: very hard-worker] [movie audio: “My motto is if you wanna win the lottery, you have to make the money to buy a ticket.”] This is demonstrated in the sequences where Lou is first learning how to be a nightcrawler. He does whatever it takes to succeed and quickly becomes very good at what he does. Both traits that tend to be impressive and respectable. [movie audio: “oh, that’s a great piece of tape.”] Being a hard worker is an example of a sympathetic character trait that is separate from morality. Lou has another trait that is more traditionally associated with likeability. [Movie audio: “I’m just beginning so praise from someone such as yourself, well you can imagine that it means quite a lot.”] Lou is polite. [Movie audio: “the ad didn’t say what the job was?” “It’s a fine opportunity for some lucky someone.”] But we quickly see that there is something off about his politeness. [Movie audio: “You heard I’m adding a second van?” “I didn’t hear that!” “Gonna be a game changer.”] When he starts threatening people in the same, calm, polite manner it becomes a chilling reminder of his sociopathic nature. [Movie audio: “I feel like grabbing you by your ears right now and screaming in your face, I’m not fucking interested.”] This emphasizes a potential problem with trying to create likeable protagonists.

As Robert McKee says in Story, likeability is no guarantee of audience involvement, it’s merely an aspect of characterization.” [The same quote typed out on the screen, along with a picture of the book.] Being polite is an external behavior and does not equate to an internal goodness, and it’s that deeper character that the audience ultimately connects with. When trying to create a sympathetic character, it’s easy to end up with a one-dimensional collection of moral, nice, boring character traits instead of an actual character. As Nightcrawler progresses, any sympathy we may have had for Lou in the beginning fades. He takes increasingly extreme actions and holds clear that he’s dangerous and should be stopped. But if we, the audience, don’t want Lou
to succeed, why do we keep watching besides morbid curiosity? Why do we remain invested in
a story and engaged with Lou as a protagonist?

This brings us to empathy. [Text on screen: EMPATHY] Again, Robert McKee, the audience’s
emotional involvement is held by the glue of empathy [the quote and book shown on screen
once again]. So what exactly is empathy and how do you create it for your characters? The
definition of empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. And the key
to creating it for your characters is within its definition. Understand. We empathize with a
character when we understand the motives behind their actions. When despite disagreeing with
a choice, we know why it was made. Let’s look at how we gain empathy for Lou. When we
meet Lou, he’s trespassing, stealing, and attacking a security guard. But in the following scene
we get a sense of Lou’s situation, where he’s coming from. [Movie audio: “I’m looking for a
job. In fact, I’ve made up my mind to find a career that I can learn and grow into. Who am I?
I’m a hard worker, I set high goals, and I’ve been told that I’m persistent. So what do you say? I
can start tomorrow or even why not tonight?” “No.”] We see that Lou is in need of money, that
he’s a little strange, and that he’s searching for fulfillment. As Lou says in the first line of the
script [movie audio: “I’m lost.”], knowing all this about his situation, we understand why he’s
so excited to find the world of nightcrawling. [Movie audio: “Television news might just be
something that I love, as well as something I happen to be good at.”] We empathize with how it
must feel to find a well-paying job that you’re good at and also find fulfilling. That’s something
we can all relate to.

As the story goes on, the forces of antagonism apply more and more pressure to Lou, so he
responds by taking more and more extreme action. At one point, Lou is late to a great story, so
his rival gets the exclusive. [Movie audio: “Five fatalities, come screaming out of the fucking sky,
all lit up with the brush on fire. Mine. Exclusive.”] We understand the embarrassment that
comes from being beaten. [Movie audio: “Welcome to the future, brah.”] Because his rival got
the exclusive, Lou has nothing of value to bring to his boss, Nina. Nina explains this is
unacceptable and makes it very clear that he has to deliver something spectacular. We
understand the shame that comes from disappointing a respected authority figure. Now he’s
under a huge amount of pressure, and he knows his opponent has the upper hand. We
understand his frustration. So when Lou decides to sabotage his competitor’s van, causing a
crash that threatens his life, we know why Lou is doing what he’s doing. We don’t necessarily
approve, but we’re still involved with the story. Nightcrawler has a crystal-clear cause and
effect, it keeps us engaged with Lou and allows us to sympathize with each situation he’s in. So
now that we’ve seen a few techniques that keep an audience involved in the antihero
protagonist, I wanna briefly examine the virtue of doing so. In the case of Nightcrawler, having
Lou be our protagonist forces us into looking at our world in a different way.

[Text on screen: Looking at our world in a different way.] The movie itself doesn’t pass
judgement on Lou, as writer/director Dan Gilroy says… [audio: “I always saw this and see this
as a success story, I see it as the story of a young man who’s desperate for work at the beginning
of the film and at the end he’s the owner of a thriving business.”] After all, Lou didn’t create
this world of nightcrawling, of TV news built for sensationalist entertainment instead of
sensible education. He just stumbled onto it and is doing what he’s told. The fact that Lou’s
sociopathic nature lets him excel in this world only serves to further highlight the real problem.
[audio: “The real problem isn’t Lou, and this is again going back to the empathy for the
character, I believe the real problem is the society that creates a character like this and rewards a
character like this.”] Because we empathize with Lou, and understand why he does what he
does, it allows us to partially displace moral judgement. To realize that Lou is simply fulfilling
the supply that we, society, are demanding. This is the power of storytelling. When we
empathize with someone we wouldn’t normally, someone we may not even deem likeable, and
look at the world through their eyes, we have a fantastic opportunity to learn about ourselves.

[cuts to footage of the narrator talking to the camera] Hey, guys. Thanks to everyone that
suggested I look at Nightcrawler, it was one of my favorite movies of 2014, every time I watch
it I’m blown away by Jake Gyllenhaal’s amazing performance, it’s just so good. Thank you also
to the Q and A with Jeff Goldsmith for letting me use some of their audio, it’s a great podcast where he interviews screenwriters, I highly recommend it, link is in the description below. If you want more videos be sure to subscribe, if you’ve been enjoying the channel please consider supporting it on Patreon, and if you have a suggestion for a screenplay that I look at in the future, leave it in the comments below. And finally and most importantly, thank you for watching.
Appendix C

Video essay 3
Prisoners: Symbolism Done Right (by Storytellers)

Mazes have fascinated us for tens of thousands of years. From ancient wall drawings to Greek and Roman mythology to modern film, mazes and labyrinths have on some level always strongly resonated with the human experience, hinting at a symbolical layer deeper than the merely physical experience that you get from exploring its corridors. Which is a reason why I got intrigued by Denis Villeneuve’s 2013 film Prisoners and how it uses mazes as a symbol. In Prisoners we never get to see a maze in its physical form. In fact, the maze is not even really explicitly mentioned at all until later in the story. [Movie audio: “That looked more like a maze than a map”. “He’s got a thing for mazes.”] Remaining in the background for the better first half of the film. Yet its significance should not be understated as Denis Villeneuve himself seems to have a somewhat of a mild obsession with these puzzles. With characters having to venture through both physical and mental corridors trying not to lose themselves in search of answers. Answers about family, about what’s right and what’s wrong, about life, death, what connects us through language and about faith in the face of evil. Villeneuve’s puzzle is one that focuses on the metaphorical and the psychological symbolism of the maze rather than have it directly manifest itself in its physical form. Now, most western maze symbolism seems to be derived from the Greek myth of Theseus and the minotaur, which tells the story of Theseus who needs to find and kill a monstrous beast at the center of the labyrinth, using a thread of hair from his lover Ariadne to make sure he doesn’t get lost along the way. Now compare that to the story of Prisoners, which is about the kidnapping of two daughters and how the characters involved choose to react in order to get them back. The main focus here is placed on two characters, Keller Dover, a religious and protective dad who will do anything to keep his family safe and who will ultimately find the monster of his world with the help of a young girl, and Loki, an ace detective with a troubled background tasked with the mission to solve the mystery and find the missing kids. So on a metaphorical level, the maze in Prisoners then seems to loosely echo this age old Greek myth. Both these men set out on a search, using their own respective belief systems to lead them through the metaphorical maze of mystery and morality, hoping to find a truth at the center and confront those responsible for the kidnapping.

A perhaps more strikingly similar connection can be found in Nordic mythology, involving a maiden or a princess stuck in the center of a maze, again guarded by a monstrous creature of sorts. The late poet Robert Graves argued that what these various stories have in common is that they share a journey of the main character to both a physical as well as a mental underworld. Keller’s search for his daughter might be a physical one but as his faith is challenged and he’s forced to confront the darker, more violent parts of his nature, his journey into the maze of the underworld increasingly becomes a mental one. So much so that his goal to protect his family almost ends up destroying it as he neglects his traumatized wife and increasingly regresses back into old destructive habits and places. And so he literally descends into his own darkest place unimaginable, helpless and unable to save his daughter. [movie audio: “Wait, no, wait, wait, wait! Wait.”] Loki, on the other hand, has to unravel the truth by descending into a more physical hell, trying to find order and disorder and literally facing off against the forces of the devil. [movie audio: “Making children disappear is the war we wage with god.”] The maze here seems to be a symbol for the chaos the Jones’s set upon their victims until they kill them off with the venom of a snake, the archetypal symbol for the devil. Indeed, the archetype of the maze in Prisoners seems to stand for the opposite of paradise, or in the words of playwright Eugene Ionesco, if goodness is order, evil must be disorder, the straight path or the maze [the same quote typed onto the screen]. And it’s of this insight that Villeneuve utilized the symbol to explore the morality and the psychological nature of his characters.
Keller starts off as an openly devout Christian, which is made quite obvious through the usage of prayers, [movie audio: “You will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”] the abundance of Christian symbolism surrounding him, his metaphorically appropriate job as a carpenter, and through the names of his wife and mother. Moreover, Keller is shown to have a proclivity for orderliness and preparedness, both traits that consciously define his character. [movie audio: “Pray for the best, prepare for the worst.”] However, as I’ve shown, Keller’s journey is one of increasing amounts of disorder, a quest that shakes his faith to its core as he sees himself forced to perform ever escalating brutalities on the person he suspects holds the key to his daughter. [movie audio: “Why’re you making me do this?”] It’s only at the end of his journey, when he’s in his darkest place, that he finally surrenders and returns to his faith in God. [movie audio: “I’m ready, God. Protect my girl.”] Detective Loki goes down a decidedly different path of the maze. His faith is based in both the Christian, as well as the pagan, the eight-pointed star tattoo on his neck referring to such things as redemption, humility, strength, and compassion, his mason ring representing the search for enlightenment and rationality, aligning perfectly with his character and opposing the more emotionally based Keller. His odd name, in turn, comes from the Nordic god Loki, a cunning trickster and occasional helper of other gods, and even though the ace detective is shown not to be immune to frustration he never truly breaks away from his beliefs, which ultimately help him in finding the missing children and solving the mystery. So besides acting as a symbol for the physical and metaphorical journey into the underworld, the maze also comes to represent a psychological struggle in the human brain. Stanley Kubrick showed this in connection with the growing insanity of Jack Torrance in The Shining, but it’s also a symbol that has ample historical grounding. Both Christian and pagan faiths around the world have used the symbol of a linear, one-way labyrinth as a meditative pathway towards the center, towards god, self-individualization, and the tree of life.

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung recognized labyrinths and similar figures of center called Mandalas as a universally recurring archetype, always standing for transformation, wholeness, and the totality of an individual’s reality. These symbols can appear on the most common of household objects and things like pillows, sweaters, and picture frames, but they’re also expressed through religion such as the Christian cross and the tree of life. The wooden cross, as I’ve shown, is already abundantly represented in Prisoners, but so is the tree of life. In fact, Villeneuve spares no expense focusing his lens on trees, making them part of the plot, and having his main character interact with the substance. Trees undeniably take on an important role in the film, and there’s no coincidence that they too are connected to the mandala symbol and, by extension, the labyrinth. Their physical form is also a direct metaphor for the human nervous system and the psychological state of our characters, their bare and leafless branches aligning with our mood and mental state. Which brings us back to the maze used by the Jones’s. Now, it’s important to note that this particular maze is not a simple, linear one. Far from it. [movie audio: “There’s a connection. Okay?” “Connection is his last maze in the book, I did it, it’s unsolvable…” “No…” “There’s no way out. Your…”] The LSD influence maze process is specifically designed to mentally block the victims and their journey towards self-individualization. It’s a form of mind control that can help explain why Alex seems to be stuck in the mind of a ten year old and why Bobby Taylor, although physically free, is still obsessively trying to find a way out of his own mental hell. But the maze is not just a tool for the Jones’s to imprison children and lure in their parents, it also goes to show how some of the characters have been stuck in there all along. It’s revealed that Keller’s dad committed suicide in his house when Keller himself was still a teen. The contrast between his tidy house and his decapitated parental home and Keller’s unwillingness to renovate the place [movie audio: “I keep telling your mother it’s an old building, it’ll cost a fortune to fix it up.”] reveals to us that the death of his father has still not been resolved in his mind. Keller’s self-growth as a teen has been stunted by this trauma and, in a way, he is as much a prisoner as Alex Jones and Bobby Taylor. His repressed feelings of rage and despair awakened by the kidnapping of his daughter. Even Keller’s name meaning basement in German speaks to his character, his hidden away mental trauma, and foreshadows his destiny perfectly.
Holly Jones, on her turn, has been a prisoner of her own respective maze for quite some time. After their son died of cancer, the once devout christians lost their faith and decided to best to drag as many people into their mental hell as possible. Even detective Loki seems to have struggled with his own maze during his troubled childhood. [movie audio: “Hey, you know what, I spent six years at Huntington Boy’s Home, father. Now, you know the Huntington Boy’s Home, right? Huh?] The difference here is that Loki is one of the only of these characters who, like in the story of Andrea Ghisi’s Laberinto, has elevated himself from the mental trap, raising his consciousness in the process. It’s only fitting that he grows up to be an ace detective, tasked with helping and guiding others out of the maze. If the Jones’s are the servants of the devil and trauma, Loki is the servant of god and enlightenment. The maze is an incredibly relevant archetypal symbol of the human experience. It has been for thousands of years and continues to do so in our world and in films like Prisoners. Denis Villeneuve and writer Aaron Guzikowski have shown that, through adequate, perhaps at times instinctive knowledge of its symbol, a film can take on a quality that has the ability to make us wonder about it long after the credits roll. And not just because the symbol fits well with its story, but more importantly because it expressed a truth about the human experience that universally resonates with us as human beings, and our endless struggle and journey towards a higher self. In the words of the late Jungian psychoanalyst Edward C Whitmont, one of the oldest images of the mystery of life, death, transformation, and return is the labyrinth. It depicts the way to the unknown center, the mystery of death and rebirth, the risk of the search, the danger of losing the way, the quest, the finding, and the ability to return. Alright guys, that’s the end of yet another video essay. If you enjoy our content, consider supporting us on Patreon with just a dollar a video. In return, you’ll receive two of the stickers with our new channel look printed on it. Besides that, you can follow us on social media and, as always, thank you for watching, and see you in the next one.
Appendix D

Video essay 4
The Prestige – Hiding in plain sight (by Nerdwriter1)

Understanding Art
CASE STUDY:
The Prestige

As a filmmaker, Christopher Nolan always wants to walk a fine line. If there’s one fundamental theme that suffuses his entire filmography it’s that cinema, as a shared narrative, can be a hugely powerful cultural force. I’m far from the first to notice or mention that many of his films reference film itself. That, for example, the inception team bears a strong resemblance to a film crew. But interestingly, though a lot of his work could be called metacinematic, Nolan is extremely careful about avoiding metacinematic images in his work. For example, in the established Batman continuity, Bruce Wayne and his parents are out to see the Mask of Zorro film before the faithful double murder that incites the Dark Knight’s whole saga. In Batman Begins, however, Nolan’s retelling of that origin, the Waynes are out to the opera Mefistofele instead. That change is a purposeful one. As Nolan has said in an interview, we didn’t have young Bruce Wayne going to see Zorro because a character watching a movie in a movie is very different than a character in a comic book watching a movie. It creates a deconstructionist thing that we were trying to avoid. The reason Nolan is trying to avoid this is because, over and above everything, his cinema has always been about immersion, bringing you into a story so fully that the edges disappear and you’re carried along by the narrative momentum. This is the line that Nolan wants to walk, he wants to be immersive and metacinematic at the same time. In other words, he wants to hide in plain sight.

Hiding in plain sight is essentially the subject matter of Nolan’s fifth film, and my favorite, The Prestige. You could almost call this film meta-metacinematic in that it functions as a kind of rulebook for how to achieve this immersive effect without seeming deconstructionist, to use Nolan’s words. Just take the first sequence. The first thing you see is the film title over a mysterious shot of several mislaid top hats in the woods. The text here is, of course, the title card, but if you know the film, you know that this text also has a literal function, because these hats are the prestige of The Prestige itself. The second clue is in their number, doubles, copies, multiplicity, it’s the key to understanding the tricks of this film and this is echoed in the second shot as well, with bird cages full of identical canaries. From here, Michael Caine’s character goes on to describe how a magic trick works. [movie audio: “Every magic trick consists of three parts or acts.”] The pledge, the turn, and finally, the prestige. This sequence carefully sets up the film’s own pledges, that is Borden and Angier played by Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman respectively, while illustrating its method through Michael Caine’s voiceover and his trick for the little girl. But the film is playing its own tricks here, through editing. Where is this voiceover coming from? Usually in film, a voiceover means someone commenting on the events being shown from sometime in the future. When the scene ends it cuts to the courtroom scene of Borden’s murder trial, picking up the last phrase as if Michael Caine’s voiceover was testimony. It’s not until the end of the film that we learn that the bird trick with the girl is chronologically the last moment in the film. Nolan reverses the temporal relationship between the voiceover and the scene under it, and this kind of displacement is the key mechanism for the whole movie.

The Prestige is all about a trick that moves its object through time and space instantaneously. This is exactly what all film editing does. Most of editing cuts between short distances and continuous times, indeed with a simple cut, that’s what most people expect. But the same simple cut can traverse great distances, also and great lengths of time in either direction. Nolan has
described learning the power of this by watching Terrence Malick’s The Thin Red Line, in which Malick cuts to memories simply without blurs or fades or wavy lines, and the powerful effect this can have on the viewer. The Prestige exploits this power to the extreme, cutting between multiple different nested memories. Nolan sets up this device with Borden and Angier’s respective journals, but once these devices are established he cuts between the narratives at will and without warning. In this way, The Prestige demonstrates a unique capacity of film without compromising the audience’s suspended disbelief. The complex, narrative structure is totally subservient to the story Nolan wants to tell, it’s necessary to keep its twists secret until the film wants to reveal them. This is Christopher Nolan’s great gift as a filmmaker, he’s so in tune with the dynamics of film narrative that he can construct a plot with so much forward momentum, that even when he gives you all the clues, you remain at his mercy until the very final shot.

Now if this was the only lesson of the Prestige, I’d be satisfied in calling it a great film. But there’s one scene here, easily missed, that adds a final, important point, I think. [movie audio: “He killed him… No, he killed him.” “See? He’s alright, he’s fine, look at him.” “But where’s his brother?”] You can watch The Prestige and enjoy the story for what it is, that’s what Nolan wants for us. He wants us to be amazed, and as the film itself says, most of us want to be fooled. But all films, even one as tightly wound as this, invite a probing eye. As the boy sees into the bird trick, we can see into cinema. We’re accustomed to taking most editing for granted, but the way stories are told, the tools of any storytelling medium in large part determine the way we construct our own memories, shared of personal. This is all to say that studying film doesn’t kill its magic, it feeds that magic back into the real world. Hey everybody, thanks for watching and thank you again to Squarespace for sponsoring this video, I am just really fortunate to have Squarespace helping to fund this channel, like everybody out there who’s pledging on Patreon, allowing me to put all my energy into just making new videos, which is all I wanna do and I think makes for the best possible content. And Squarespace is actually really great, if you don’t know, it’s like sleek, professional, intuitive looking websites where you don’t have to know coding to make one. And you can get a free domain if you sign up for a year. You can start that trial today at squarespace dot com, it’s a free trial, and if you use the offer code nerdwriter you can get ten percent off of your first purchase. Squarespace, you should. Thanks guys, see you next week.
Appendix E

Video essay 5
Planting and Payoff – Featuring Mad Max: Fury Road (by Lindsay Ellis)

Today I want to talk about a simple yet important element in narrative structure known as planting and payoff [text on screen: PLANTING AND PAYOFF]. The most basic way to think of planting and payoff is the idea of Chekov’s gun. In an 1889 letter, Chekov wrote one must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn’t going to go off [the same quote typed onto the screen]. Chekov believed that all narrative elements of the story should be both necessary and irreplaceable. [movie audio: “Well, we’ve only got four for big boy here so he’s all but useless.”] Not all movies adhere to this principle, some just meander around and do whatever, but good ones do. [movie audio: gunshot, then “You’ve got two left”]. And I know a lot of this is a matter of taste but in a broader sense, audience satisfaction derives in part from the way that narrative elements are introduced and payed off. Some plantings are obvious, with an inferred this is going to pay off later basically emblazoned into the sky and others are more subtle. But for a full, satisfying narrative, generally, when an element is introduced, via plot, driven, thematic or physical [movie audio: “…by space aliens ten years ago! They did all kinds of experiments on me.] it should pay off in some way and also tie in to all the other narrative elements. [movie audio: “all right, you alien assholes, in the words of my generation, up yours!”] Whenever people correctly use the term deus ex machina, it isn’t so much because the salvation element is convenient but because it had not been planted or set up. You don’t call Max’s method for saving Furiosa at the end of Mad Max Fury Road a deus ex machina because the means are so thoroughly planted throughout the narrative, especially in the first act of the film. So that when the vuvalini says [movie audio: “She’s exsanguinated. Drained all her blood.”] the audience immediately knows what the solution is because Max’s universal donor blood has been repeatedly established.

The importance of how narrative information is planted and payed off is best demonstrated when it’s done poorly or not at all. Just because an element is planted [movie audio: “Martha…”] doesn’t mean the payoff [movie audio: “Save Martha!”], to put it diplomatically, is necessarily narratively satisfying. Narrative elements can be introduced in a manner of ways, dialogue is a common one [movie audio: “You have any money here in the states?”] but this is film, it is never as simple as just a line of dialogue introducing an element. [text on screen: Low angle = dominance; sound design – impart that this line signals a turning point; detachment from background – Wahlberg is detaching from reality] The framing, the color, the camera movement, the sound design, all of these elements imbue meaning. So pacing matters, so, too, does order. To pick on Zack Snyder, again, because he is really bad at this particular thing in which you place your elements matters. For example, the idea that Clark should hide his alien self in Man of Steel. [movie audio: “What was I supposed to do? Just let them die? “Maybe.”] The problem with introducing this conflict is that tension of will he or won’t he use his powers to help people has already been resolved. It’s resolved in the very first scene we see adult Clark. So we have the planting after the payoff, the answer is given before the question. The DC universe films, Man of Steel especially, rely too heavily on what the audience already knows about Superman, from their basic experiences of living in the world, rather than setting up its own internal narrative about this character. The trick with narrative is to plant elements early and eventually pay them off in a way that doesn’t feel obvious or contrived. [movie audio: “Phone…”] It needs to make sense and it needs to feel organic. Information can be imparted through dialogue, but I’m more interested in visual and sound information, so I wanted to do a brief overview of three non-dialogue elements from Mad Max Fury Road. The silver spray [text on screen: the spray], Max’s blood [text on screen: the blood], and Max’s boot [text on screen: the boot]. [movie audio: “Take me! I got his boot!”]

Your basic narrative planting and payoff will include a setup, a reminder, and the payoff. [movie audio] Though depending how closely together within the narrative the planting and the
payoff occurs, we may not need a reminder. Let’s look at the war boy spray. [movie audio] This nameless character is fatally wounded. The sound drops out, the film slows down, [movie audio] all of the characters pay attention to this guy, [movie audio] and it draws audience attention to the fact that this is important information, and you need to pay attention. First we get the visual element, the spray. [movie audio] Followed by a dialogue element. [movie audio: “Witness me!”] And then, this. [movie audio] Information acquired. Silver mouth spray signifies that a pseudo-religious suicide mission is about to take place, the witness call and response imparting that, to these guys, this is the most badass thing ever, and also communal, they are judged on their performance. See, these guys are impressed. [movie audio: “Witnessed!”] Slit, not so much. [movie audio: “Mediocre, Morsov!”] So the payoff for this comes not far down the road. Nux is the only war boy left who can stop Furiosa after she runs this vehicle into the hurricane. This further spurs him on, he wants to be like these guys. [movie audio: “Oh what a day, what a lovely day!”] So without having to say anything, so on the nose as it’s suicide bomb time, when Nux starts doing this, [movie audio: “Witness me, blood bag!”] we, like Max, immediately intuit his intentions. So what I find remarkable about the way this culture is explained to the audience, despite this world and culture being so removed and alien from our own, is that we don’t really need some fish out of water character having the details of the universe being explained to them. [movie audio: “In fact, all you see around you has been taken from the lessons garnered from the historical documents.” “Is this a… a spaceship?”] The audience gets a lot of information about this culture, the universe and how it works, but it’s seen only through the eyes of people who already live in it. They all know what the spray means. A clear planting of a narrative element, followed by the payoff a few minutes later.

But with the boot, a bit more time passes between planting and payoff, therefore with this one, we need a reminder. An important but subtle theme in Mad Max Fury Road is that of forgiveness, when and if circumstances allows. [movie audio: “He’s just a kid at the end of his half-life.] And it is most explicitly shown through the relationship between Max And Nux. Nux unquestioningly objectifies Max, using him as an ornament, and violating his body autonomy by stealing his blood. This is not done out of malice, but simply because it doesn’t occur to Nux that this might be wrong. [movie audio] This shot is a turning point, when they first look at each other, and this is also the beginning of Nux’s character arc, for one hair of a second, he sees Max as human. Then the setup thematically, in the form of the boot, [movie audio] which brings us to narrative element slash metaphor number... whatever. Slit gets kicked off the car by Max, Slit steals Max’s boot. [movie audio: “I got his boot!”] The setup. When Max finds Nux unconscious after they wreck the car, Max steals Nux’s boot. The reminder. And then the payoff comes, far later. Nux is learning to build empathy, has decided to switch sides. The payoff. Max steals a boot from the bullet farmer’s gang, gifts it to Nux. A practical element, now Nux has two shoes again, that’s nice, but also thematic, it shows that Max forgives Nux, and on a deeper level that completion points towards Nux finding his own sense of completion, by joining Furiosa’s ragtag band. A practical thread in the form of a prop, sure, but like everything in this movie it has a deeper level than that. In this case, one of forgiveness. Max and Nux barely speak a word to each other throughout the entire film, but in this simple gesture we get all that we need to know. Max and Nux would have no concrete connection, except for that boot. Besides the boot the only thing they have is... Max's blood. And Max's blood is a huge plot point, so I'm not gonna go into all of the ways it is set up and paid off. It establishes not only that this is effectively a culture comprised of mostly the sick and the dying, [movie audio: “You’re already a corpse.”] but that Max is a universal donor, a setup that pays off in a very big way at the end of the movie when Max gives Furiosa a direct blood transfusion. The blood tube is important here: first the setup, the reminder, and finally, the payoff. But, there's another setup that's one of my favourites in the film because it's like a sub-setup; and it uses not only visuals to get across the information, and not only sound editing, but sound mixing as well. [movie audio] Let's break that down, we're gonna talk a little bit about sound mixing. Max rises from the earth, like lava from a volcano, and first we get that heartbeat sound. [movie audio] Normally that's a pretty big cliché in sound design and they tell you to avoid that, like, on your first day as a film student, but since here it's literally his own heartbeat he's hearing we'll give it a pass. But it isn't
just that. Max's disorientation is intercut with shots of lava erupting, and corresponding sound effects that come with it. [movie audio] These sounds are mixed using a Low Pass filter, a type of audio EQ filter that cuts off higher frequency sounds. [movie audio] The easy way to remember it is that low frequencies pass on through, therefore it's a Low Pass, and high frequencies are cut out. Cutting off these frequencies gives almost the sensation of being underwater. [movie audio] Lower frequency sounds are more tenacious at travelling through liquids and solids. This is why bassy noises travel through walls better than piano music. [movie audio] Any sounds that are coming from inside rather than outside are going to have their higher frequencies cut off more, just by virtue of where the sound is coming from, and the mediums it has to move through. [movie audio] So Max's pain and disorientation in this scene is shown by higher frequency sounds in the scene being cut out. [movie audio] And the tension is relieved when we reintroduce higher frequencies back into the soundscape. [movie audio] The hiss of air escaping and the air tone of the atmosphere. See I focus on the sound here because the framing doesn't really get across the element that is being set up. That of an air bubble in Max's body, and the pain it's causing him. If you watch this scene with the sound off... you can't really tell what's going on, it just kinda looks like the needle was annoying him. But with the sound on... [movie audio] Oh. Removing the needle releases the air bubble. This may not seem like planted information but it pays off at the very end; both with the needle, and with the air accumulation in the body. [movie audio: “I am so sorry.”] It's almost like the guy who wrote this was a former ER doctor or something. Max doesn't need to explain what he's doing, we already know what he's doing, because the filmmakers trust the audience enough to intuit what's going on without having to have it explained to them. The information has been planted, and now it's time to pay it off.

The great thing about this movie is that you could go on for hours about all the ways it uses its medium to maximize its potential, because ultimately that's what this is all about, how to best tell a story using your given medium. Mad Max Fury Road isn't perfect but it's about as close to perfect as a movie made by humans is going to get. I mean, I could go on. Hell, I could go on about the sound design alone for another hour, but, that's enough for now. Thank you for watching. Like, share, subscribe, witness! [text on screen]