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YouTube Video Essays as Self-Reflexive Form of Audiovisual Science Communication in the Humanities

Abstract: This article explores how the video essay on YouTube works as science communication for the humanities. Although its modes of expressions are delimited by platform affordances, the cultivation of YouTube's audiovisual platform vernaculars have shaped the video essay to popularize the findings of the humanities and social sciences, both on the level of editing and performance. The appropriation and showing of footage oftentimes happen in self-reflexive ways that emphasize the mediality of the analyzed material and the argumentative research process. The analysis focuses on two exemplary video essay channels on YouTube: *Pop Culture Detective* by Jonathan McIntosh and *What's so Great About That* by Grace Lee.

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1. Introduction

One of the reasons why "the video essay has been shaping global media culture and media studies for several years" now, is, arguably, its variety in terms of forms of expression.[1] One way to conceptualize this variety is through what Kevin B. Lee calls "'vernacular' forms of video essays" or "audiovisual vernaculars".[2] Lee does not specify exactly how he understands 'vernacular' as a term, but with regards to online video, it has been understood as non-institutional forms of expression: According to Miram Hansen "the term vernacular combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, translatability".[3] Lee specifically names mashups, fan videos along with other online forms as examples for audiovisual vernaculars.[4]

This article specifically explores the video essay on YouTube as vernacular "mode of communication".[5] More precisely, some video essays could even be conceived as a form of audiovisual science communication for subjects within the humanities: By looking at movies through a particular theoretical lens, they demonstrate that "[o]ne of the jobs that media scholars do is […] to assign meaning, to offer explanations, to pose arguments about" a certain media text.[6] The aspect of science communication comes in when they take theories and concepts, explain them and then apply them, thus showing the practice of how media studies work. Moreover, on the level of form, through the way the material is represented visually, these video essays are shown to be "a form that thinks" about itself as well as the media they are examining.[7] This is happening primarily through self-reflexive means in editing – even when the video essays I will look at in this article employ an "explanatory mode".[8] *Pop Culture Detective* by Jonathan McIntosh and Grace Lee's *What's So Great About That?* are two YouTube channels that fulfil these two criteria of communicating audiovisually about the humanities and thinking self-reflexively about their subjects.

Up until now, with regards to science communication, the video essay has mainly been conceived as a way for *scholarly* communication, i.e. to address a mainly

[1] Kreutzer et al. (2023).

[2] Lee 2020.

[3] Hansen: 1990: 60.

[4] Lee 2020.

[5] Kiss 2020.

[6] Newman 2022: 35, 43.

[7] e.g. Lee 2021: 35; López/Martin 2014. The phrase "cinema as a form that thinks" is usually traced back to Jean Luc-Godard's L'Histoire du Cinema, Episode 3A (12:44). For an explanation how this phrase has been understood, see Pantenburg 2015: 68–72.

[8] Keathley 2011: 179, 181.

academic audience.[9] Through the two aforementioned examples, I want to extend both the discussion about the video essay and science communication to the "non-academic or […] popular or […] fanish" domain that creators on YouTube embody.[10] The practices on there are, to an extent, shaped by YouTube's platform affordances, namely the Copyright ID system and the pressure to keep engagement on their individual videos high, so they are favored by the algorithm – among others. These affordances, in turn, create so-called "platform vernaculars".[11] According to Martin Gibbs et al. these "shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication […] emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users."[12] More specifically, "[t]hese genres of communication emerge from the affordances of particular social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice."[13] In the case of the video essay on YouTube, they are expressed in certain conventions of editing and vocal delivery, which will be analyzed in depths in chapters 2.1 and 2.2. These chapters also analyze what and how these video essays communicate about the humanities and how this process is enhanced through a self-reflexive manner. Before that, chapter 2 examines how YouTube video essays engage in vernacular forms of science communication for the humanities.

2.   YouTube video essays as science communication

For the purposes of this article, I understand the 'YouTube video essay' as videos that analyze media, uploaded to and created for YouTube by individuals to their personalized channel.[14] When considering how YouTube is discussed in relation to the (scholarly) video essay and the platform affordances, Kevin L. Ferguson and Drew Morton remark that "YouTube's monetization policies and algorithms have developed certain norms around video length, thumbnails, and presentational style."[15] Although this might at first appear to refute the aspect of vernaculars when the modes of communications on YouTube are set 'top-down', I would still argue that the way creators and users interact with these restrictions shows vernacular characteristics. One example for how this is done by creators is through establishing

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9   see Canet 2019; Gills/Grant/O'Leary 2024: 5. Generally, there seems to be more discussion about what constitutes a scholarly video essay as need for this format to get academic recognition, rather than engaging in a discussion about how such a popular form like the YouTube video essay can be reckoned with.

10   O'Leary/Kreutzer 2024: 13:14–13:24.

11   Gibbs et al. 2015: 257.

12   ibid.

13   ibid.

14   This leaves out videos that are created for specific services and channels like Mubi or Amazon Prime UK & IE among others. While they are also beholden to some of YouTube's platform affordances, they at least do not have to pay attention to Copyright ID.

15   Ferguson/Morten 2024: 139; see also "On Video Essays' Knowledge Generation via Modes of Communication on YouTube and Vimeo." 6:22–7:40

workarounds, especially regarding YouTube's Copyright ID system. Still, other affordances exist, e.g. YouTube algorithmically ranking the channel higher in search results and recommendations when it has high viewer retention rates as well as so-called 'watch time' which Google prioritizes since 2012.[16] I want to argue in this article that the videos discussed below find ways to 'obey' these aforementioned norms set by the platform affordances by establishing vernacular forms of expressions that become established parts of the video essay form on YouTube. These can be, among others, employing a relatable way of addressing the audience as well as a visual language that self-reflexively engages with their media objects.[17] This is, as will be shown, also a way of possibly bypassing Copyright ID. Thereby, the video essays are combining the demands of the platform with the ones for audiovisual popular science communication in the humanities.

In previous attempts to identify types and genres of audiovisual forms of science communication, the video essay has not come up as distinct category.[18] Additionally, none of these typologies specifically focused on how subject-specific audiovisual science communication works in the humanities.[19] One possible video type – that is also mentioned in some form in the typologies that has some possible overlap with the video essay is the "explanatory video".[20] This format "convey[s] declarative knowledge such as theories, concepts or complex descriptions of the world […] and […] contextualize[s] and illustrate[s] abstract knowledge".[21] While certain *explanatory* video essays fit this definition, especially on YouTube, others do not.[22] Additionally, there appears to be a gap in how findings in the humanities are communicated in the media and how, in turn, the field is perceived in the broader public.[23] According to some researchers, this is because scholars from these fields are more present in the media to comment more generally on societal questions, which, in turn, are not perceived as scientific issues relating to the humanities as subject.[24]

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[16]   Rieder/Matamoros-Fernández/Coromina 2018: 53; see also the related concept of "platform imaginaries" in van Es/Poell 2020: 3.

[17]   For the purposes of this article, I understand medial self-reflexivity as the video essay exhibiting an artefact's own mediality, thus underlining the video essay's own constructedness.

[18]   see Morcillo/Czurda/Robertson-von Trotha 2016: 11-12; Boy/Bucher/Christ 2020: 4–7 and Bucher/Boy/Christ 2022: 51. A possible reason for this might be that the sample size is too small, the methods of retrieval for a corpus automatically excludes video essays or the method of categorization which is usually done inductively leaves out video essays entirely.

[19]   On the representation of the humanities in the media generally, see e.g. Cassidy 2021: 198–213.

[20]   see Morcillo/Czurda/Robertson-von Trotha 2016: 10; Boy/Bucher/Christ 2020, 6–7; Bucher/Boy/Christ 2022: 51.

[21]   Honkomp-Wilkens et al. 2024: 3.

[22]   For a discussion on the typologies of the video essay see "On Video Essays' Knowledge Generation via Modes of Communication on YouTube and Vimeo."

[23]   see Schäfer 2018: 25; Cassidy 2021: 201–202, 206 and Scheu/Volpers 2017: 392, 399–400

[24]   ibid.

The following two chapters analyze two exemplary video essays from two channels. As will be shown, these videos concretize the theories from the humanities by focusing on popular movies.

2.1 *Pop Culture Detective*: Sociological Movie Critique and Self-Reflexive Editing

Pop Culture Detective is a YouTube channel created by Jonathan McIntosh in 2016.[25] It mainly focuses on depictions of masculinity in audiovisual media.[26] The channel got its popularity from political remix videos.[27] Thusly, his work is already recognized by scholars. Additionally, McIntosh used to be a writer for one of the first dedicated video essay series on YouTube focused on media analysis, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*.[28] The first video under the "Pop Culture Detective Agency" label has been uploaded on the 13th of July 2016.[29] This article is going to focus on his video "Patriarchy According to The Barbie Movie", uploaded on May 5th 2024.[30] It can be classified as an explanatory video essay, given that McIntosh is using "the movie as a sort of primer to help explain what patriarchy actually *is* [and] what it *isn't*" (02:42–02:46). As indicated by the list of references in the video description, he uses academic literature and mainly relies on Allan G. Johnson's *Masculinities* (2014) for definitory purposes, applying the characteristics of Johnson's definition of 'patriarchy' to specific scenes and examples from the movie (07:49–20:53). This fits into "strategies of popularization", according to Hans-Jürgen Bucher where research is re-contextualized for viewer's everyday-life in order to create so-called 'takeaways' for the broad viewership on YouTube.[31] This is emphasized when McIntosh talks about how the viewers can learn "what […] men [can] do to make a difference in ending the system" of patriarchy (28:02–28:05). This shows a "service-orientation" that is also appearing in YouTube videos that communicate about science.[32] With regards to the video specifically, McIntosh offers general advice to "challenge other men on their behavior and encourage them to rebel against

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[25]   As of writing, the channel has 1,09 million subscribers and uploaded 80 videos (31.01.2025).

[26]   The channel description reads: "Video essays exploring the intersections of politics, masculinity, and entertainment." (McIntosh [n.d.] "Channel Description")

[27]   see McIntosh 2012; Jenkins 2019: 194–210 as well as Scott/Stein 2017: 160–161. These videos remix "footage […] to make a critical, often subversive [political, DH] statement" (Gallagher, 2018, 24).

[28]   c.f. Scott/Stein 2017: 181–182.

[29]   see "Emotional Expression on Steven Universe".

[30]   It currently has 589.575 views and 2.796 comments.

[31]   Bucher 2020: 60, see also: 59–63. To specify the target group a bit more, e.g. through comments (see above) it appears that most commentators are already familiar with the movie and therefore want to see an interpretation that either confirms their views or elaborates on them. Fewer comments appear to have not seen the movie and thus encounter this interpretation without any pre-existing knowledge. This leaves out negative reactions to the video that call it "feminist propaganda".

[32]   ibid.: 67.

patriarchal expectations" (30:38–30:44). Here, the advice is less based on science, but rather commenting on society with an appeal to make a change.[33] The explication of the abstract concept of patriarchy through the movie concretizes it and also sheds a light on how masculinity is represented in film and television through e.g. supercuts (3:17–5:49) and scenes that show how the Kens behave in their newly formed 'Kendomland', contrasted with other movies.[34] Here, McIntosh lists four main characteristics of a patriarchal society by Johnson and explains them with scenes from *Barbie* as well as other movies that accompany his analytic and interpretative voice-over (7:48–20:53).

One important aspect that is mediated as well is the way this video essay self-reflexively imitates other media through digital means: For example, at the beginning of the video, McIntosh shows multiple television clips from conservative television and talk show hosts reacting negatively to the word and (perceived) depiction of 'patriarchy' in *Barbie* (US 2023) (00:43–02:21 and throughout). We see TV static between these compiled clips (0:24, 0:49, 01:01 etc.). Christian Eduard Drăgan talks about ways of evoking self-reference in video essays, though not about this one in particular:

> "This signals that the footage we are seeing is not to be taken at face value, it is not to be appreciated [and appropriated in the video, D.H.] as an immersive experience, but as an object of inquiry. The *mise en abyme* lies in this very highlighting of the two different formats in question in this screen within the screen situation."[35]

While I would not go as far to say that this practice goes back to underline the video essay's own medial roots in taped television programs, it rather underlines the video essay's digital nature on YouTube and can therefore be conceived as aesthetic and vernacular choice rather than demonstrating an awareness of media history. This incorporation of other media content is emphasized by the background: Some of the clips of concerned men talking about the movie are masked onto an image of a television we see in Barbie's 'Dreamhouse' that has been refurnished by the Kens into their *Mojo Dojo Casa House* later on in the movie (1:18:44): The room now features an array of large whey protein bottles under the television (see Figure 1).[36] This way, it appears like the conservatives are watched by someone embracing their viewpoints. Through the stereotypical set design the movie utilizes, the video essay subtly links the ridicule of the patriarchy with the talking heads of the conservatives. Additionally, it also serves as a way to 'trick' YouTube's Copyright ID system by

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[33]   See Schäfer 2018: 25.

[34]   In the video description, McIntosh links to three longer supercuts from this video on his Patreon page. On the topic of supercuts, see Tohline 2021.

[35]   Drăgan 2021: 118.

[36]   The scene this shot is from, is – ironically – one that directly thematizes the Kens' version of patriarchy with one of the Kens watching Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (US 1972), a movie that has, discursively, become one of the stereotypical epitomes of the so-called 'Film Bro' (see Höwelkröger 2024).

resizing the footage, making it not recognizable for the system. Another instance of footage interacting with the video's content appears when a semi-transparent black background comes into view. On that screen quotes from the theories McIntosh uses are shown. Simultaneously, movie footage is displayed underneath it, while the quotes they are read out (06:08–06:16; 10:19-10:25; 13:42–13:53). Thus, McIntosh combines two "videographic operations" of commentary and constellation, as the meaning shown by the written word corresponds with the respective scenes onscreen.[37]

Fig. 1: Conservatives in Ken's *Mojo Dojo Casa House*. Not only is the change of dispositifs commenting on the way the viewers are watching the video, but also on the topic of patriarchy ("Patriarchy According to The Barbie Movie": 1:29)

There are further instances in the video when the scenes from *Barbie* are seemingly directly 'responding' to the script, making it entertaining to watch through reaction shots of movie characters edited to make them appear to respond to the script or the talk show hosts (e.g. 01:31–01:41, 02:56–3:04). According to Bucher, this fulfils the so-called "maxim of entertainment", making the essay more entertaining to watch with a pacing that keeps viewers interested.[38]

Apart from these sequences, the video essay's mode of communication is pretty straight-forward with convincing delivery (some might even say *authoritative* regarding McIntosh's arguments), the insertion of the cover and several quotes from

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37   Pantenburg 2024. One example occurs at 26:55 when a quote by bell hooks (2004: 155) about male masculinity is displayed and read over footage of Zack Snyder's *300* (US 2006). This works well for viewers who are familiar with the movie.

38   Bucher 2020: 61.

Johnson's book (e.g. 21:45, 26:43), and complementary voice-over.[39] He uses what Kevin B. Lee calls "assertive opinionating" that is "made appealing by [a] conversational tone" in YouTube video essays (00:05–01:25 and throughout).[40] This can be seen as another concession to YouTube's platform affordances as well as a vernacular way to address the audience on YouTube: The viewer keeps up because of the entertaining delivery, maximizing the watch time on the video.

Regarding YouTube's platform affordances, McIntosh has had Copyright ID issues with the video taken down by Warner Bros Discovery before being reinstated after an appeal to *fair use*.[41] According to the YouTuber, the multiple takedowns impacted the performance of the video significantly, as can be seen in his analytics.[42] The second example I want to highlight in this article is thematically different, but highlights the mediality of both the theory and some of its audiovisual material in a particular way.

2.2 What's So Great About That? Showing the Research Process Through the Desktop

Grace Lee created the channel *What's so Great About That* in 2016. They currently have 80.700 subscribers and 42 videos on their channel. The channel description reads: "Video essays examining the connections between media, philosophy and art - and how ideas and images reoccur in fiction and culture."[43] It is well-known and regarded in the field of video essay research.[44] I want to focus on their video "Jaws: When Seeing Isn't Believing" which was uploaded on the 30th of October 2020.[45] It examines Stevem Spielberg's *Jaws* (US 1975) as a horror movie with a special focus on the meaning of the shark. Here, self-reflexivity is not just generated through the video's citation of audiovisual sources but also through its depiction of its text

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[39]   The only time McIntosh appears on camera and addresses the audience directly is at the end of the video when he moderates the 'end card' where he refers to his Patreon page and upcoming videos.

[40]   "269. What Makes a Video Essay Great?": 02:19–02:34. Kevin B. Lee specifically talks about Tony Zhous and Taylor Ramos' channel *Every Frame a Painting* here.

[41]   @PopDetective (17.05.2024) [Post on X], https://x.com/PopDetective/status/1790778140052308027 (31.01.2025). The legality of the practice of videographic *scholarship*/criticism is heavily debated among researchers as well, though most appeal to the US principle of fair use; see Mittell 2019: 53–61. Despite that, YouTube's own platform affordances do often play a more significant role when there are takedown notices. (c.f. Meadows/Trocan/Webb 2023).

[42]   @PopDetective (20.05.2024) [Post on X], https://x.com/PopDetective/status/1792639300615442753 (31.01.2025).

[43]   Lee (n.d.): "Channel Description."

[44]   They attended two conferences about the video essay as a speaker, see: "Grace Lee: The Video Essay on YouTube: Diary, Discourse and Demonetisation", "Session 4 – Creating Audience Engagements: Discussion with Liz Greene and Grace Lee", "Interrogating the Modes of Videographic Criticism: Desktop Documentary (Day 1 Panel 1)" (10:22–23:10) and talked about their work on *The Video Essay Podcast* (see DiGravio 2019). Their work is also referenced by scholars as 'scholarly' (see e.g. Greene 2020).

[45]   As of January 31st 2025, it has 15.866 views and 162 comments.

sources, which imitates pens and markers writing on paper (see Fig. 2) (e.g. 02:19–02:22, 07:34–07:55 etc.).[46] Despite this effect being added in post-production, there is still a tactility to it enforced by the sound design. It also contributes to the feeling of the viewers watching someone doing their research on a desk, even if it is just simulated.
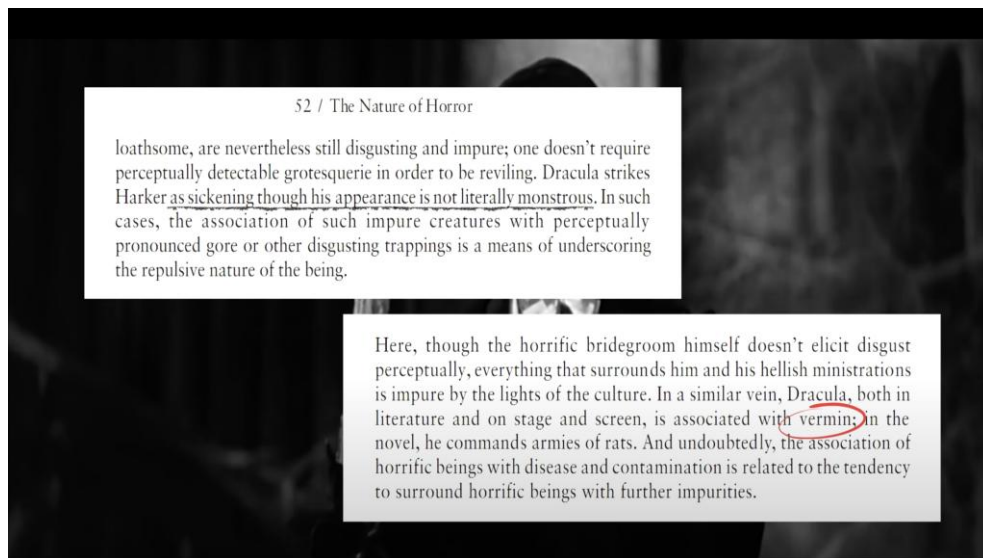
Fig. 2: Doing research on a digital desk(top). The text annotations make the screenshots appear as if they are being annotated physically. By arranging them over movie footage, Lee connects theory with the subject they are thinking about in the video "Jaws: When Seeing Isn't Believing" (02:22)

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Lee uses an array of sources, from academic literature to film criticism and poetry, as well as other YouTube videos.[47] However, when only considering the academic ones, these mainly come from books like Noël Carrolls *Philosophy of Horror* (1990) (0:46–02:30) and film criticism (07:32–8:13). When assessing what the shark in the movie 'means', Lee ultimately suggests interpretations based on the current state of research (9:33–10:46), but ultimately sees it as a metaphor for "the threats we can't

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46 For a behind-the-scenes process how these images are created in the editing program, see the talk "Grace Lee: The Video Essay on YouTube: Diary, Discourse and Demonetisation": 25:00–25:46. In it, Lee also adds they like to stay with the print source in a "scrap book approach" (24:27).

47 One example for film criticism Lee uses is Antonia Quirke's *Jaws: BFI Film Classics* (2002) (7:28-8:12, 10:30–10:36). According to Lee, these multitudes of sources are a way to "be more democratic" for them in the way they gather information, signifying that information that furthers thought can come from anywhere, in their case, especially online spaces ("Session 4 – Creating Audience Engagements: Discussion with Liz Greene and Grace Lee" (27:02, 26:25–27:30).

see", including climate change and capitalism (12:41, 11:30–12:42). Once again, a popular blockbuster movie is used to interpret abstract concepts from the humanities, like 'horror', and concretizes them in a way that tells viewers something about the society we are living in.

For Lee, the motivation for this discussion originates in another YouTube video essay, which they show on screen and even emulate its logo for a brief moment (00:55–01:02).[48] Lee imitates the experience of surfing through the web by employing a "desktop documentary aesthetic", starting from a notes document to the YouTube comments section (00:00–00:05, 2:37).[49] They show "the interactive process of computational multitasking and navigation, performed on various digital data and files", which are oftentimes scans of texts and book excerpts. However, these only come into view briefly through animated shots that tilt and shake to emphasize Lee's words (00:03–00:05, 00:47–00:53).[50] Concerning this videographic practice, Lee explains:

> "[T]his isn't maybe necessarily the typical desktop documentary fashion, but I often use it to try and present information in context […] where I can […] move stuff around in this way that kind of comes in with how I'm emphasizing what I'm saying, which is a way of […] expressing emotion […] or […] tone through visuals rather than using a face […]. So, these graphics kind of become me in a way and so I am one with the desktop [laughs] in the way that maybe we all increasingly are. […] [T]hat it is how we experience the world, now."[51]

Though it is understandable that Lee laughs at the phrase "I am one with the desktop", it is an apt method to explain the concept of the video essay as "a form that thinks" and another example for self-reflexive use of various footage.[52]

Presentation-wise, Lee talks about a "YouTube voice" they employ to deliver their analysis, similarly to McIntosh.[53] This gives the viewers the feeling to not be in a lecture, but rather have a conversation with a friend. While McIntosh's voice-over appears very convincing and argumentative, Lee's is more casual, as they (intentionally) digress, they hesitate and joke throughout (e.g. 00:46, 10:04, 11:55). This is a parasocial element in the video that creates a sense of 'relatability', which

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[48] The video essay in question is "Do All Horror Monsters Fit Into 5 Categories | Idea Channel | PBS Digital Studios."

[49] "Interrogating the Modes of Videographic Criticism: Desktop Documentary (Day 1 Panel 1)": 12:34.

[50] Bešlagić 2019: 51.

[51] "Interrogating the Modes of Videographic Criticism: Desktop Documentary (Day 1 Panel 1)": 13:17–14:18.

[52] see footnote 7.

[53] "Session 4 – Creating Audience Engagements: Discussion with Liz Greene and Grace Lee" 7:25. Lee also cites *Every Frame a Painting* as one of the video essay channels that is particularly known for popularizing this tone and mode of address. (c.f. "What's this, a Q & A?!": 5:18–5:36).

might enhance the credibility of the interpretations for the video's audience *because* of its presented (inter)subjectivity, also with regards to science communication.[54]

3. Conclusion

How the video essay on YouTube serves as audiovisual science communication in the humanities is shaped by the manifold interactions between platform affordances, vernaculars and rhetorical and structural requirements for science communication. YouTube creators are balancing how to present a topic with an opinionated interpretation and convincing argument, which must also remain relatable in its delivery, as to keep viewers engaged platform-wise and loyal to the video creator and their channel. Thus, video essayists develop a personal style of addressing their respective audience. In order to avoid setting off YouTube's Copyright ID system, they present footage in a self-reflexive manner, while referencing other media and sometimes performatively showing the research process. These editing strategies still root the video essay in the digital. Through the platform affordances as well as vernaculars, YouTube video essays may indeed fulfill the requirements for science communication, "strategies of popularization" as well as a "maxim of entertainment", as described by Hans Jürgen Bucher.[55] Both criteria are met by concretizing a field of theory and applying it to a specific movie. This way, the creators can deliver broader comments on societal and socio-cultural issues to their audiences.

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[54]   In their talks, Lee also emphasizes the "culture of personality" YouTube establishes ("Interrogating the Modes of Videographic Criticism: Desktop Documentary (Day 1 Panel 1)": 12:51) as well as YouTube's tendency to foster parasocial relationships between viewers and creators (see: "Grace Lee: The Video Essay on YouTube: Diary, Discourse and Demonetisation": 27:51–30:18). Bucher, Boy and Christ also emphasize the parasocial effect in science communication videos on YouTube (2022: 160).

[55]   Bucher 2020: 60, 63.

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List of Figures

Fig 1: Conservatives in Ken's *Mojo Dojo Casa House*. Not only is the change of dispositifs self-reflexively commenting on the way the viewers are watching the video, but also commenting on the topic of patriarchy. "Patriarchy According to The Barbie Movie." 01:29. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rK66s7VQmXE (31.01.2025).

Fig 2.: Doing research on a digital desk(top). The text annotations make the screenshots appear like they are being annotated physically. By arranging them over movie footage, Lee connects theory and subject they are thinking about in the video "Jaws: When Seeing isn't Believing." 02:22. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWnLq4UOxuE (31.01.2025).