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## Imperfect Creative Criticism

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# Imperfect Creative Criticism

by PATRICIA PISTERS

“Emoticons” was my first experiment with a new form of film scholarship that I can discuss only with modesty.<sup>1</sup> Even though I have since honed my editing skills, and the audiovisual essay has become part of both my teaching practice and research method, I cannot claim the same expertise (thanks to years of practice) that I have with writing and other traditional forms of scholarship. And this experience “out of the comfort zone of mid-career habits” is the first aspect that comes to mind when thinking about videographic criticism: it’s a humbling experience. It’s also a very joyful experience. The making of a video essay allows a freer and more creative approach to theory and analysis, one that also opens up new spaces for thinking about the role of images in our audiovisual media culture. A Dutch newspaper recently published a special issue on the harvest of eleven years of YouTube. Besides the usual funny videos, how-to basics, and famous vloggers, the audiovisual essay is mentioned as “surprisingly substantive.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is invigorating to expand writing with words into writing with images and sounds, to literally feel the images and sounds in one’s hands. Submitting my first video for open peer review at *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* was yet another new experience, and I am very grateful to the editors of the journal for their open-minded approach in exploring a wide range of forms of audiovisual criticism.

It was somewhat with pounding heart that I read the peer reviewers’ commentaries. To my relief they were both spot-on. Catherine Fowler translated exactly what I intended to do in “Emoticons,” especially translating “inward” and “outward” modes of cinephilia. Richard Misek’s review drew more attention to the ambiguous status and imperfections of the piece: neither academic work nor video art. Misek indicated he could not review the piece according to the criteria of traditional academic peer review nor those of art criticism, and so he looked for new criteria to indicate what he enjoyed while also pointing out the flaws, which he nevertheless suggested not amending: “[t]he video is what it is.” This review translated the “amateur” feeling that I have every time I make and present an audiovisual essay. There is much joy in opening up all these new doors of the academic discipline of film and media scholarship, but I never quite feel

1 Patricia Pisters, “Emoticons,” *[in]Transition* 2, no. 1 (2015): <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/intransition/2015/03/10/emoticons>.

2 “De oogst van 11 jaar YouTube,” *de Volkskrant*, May 10, 2016, 13.

comfortable in how to present this type of work. I always hasten to say, “I am not an artist” and/or, depending on the context, “This is not traditional film scholarship.” So a certain “restlessness in new clothes” (to paraphrase Laura Mulvey) is certainly part of this experience of wandering in a new field.

And yet the pleasure of learning new skills such as editing, and the challenge of bringing theory, analysis, and practice together in creative ways, is one of the ways we can keep film and media studies both tied to the past and open to the future. The audiovisual essay is not a replacement for any form of traditional scholarship, which all remain intrinsically valuable. But it does open new doors, both intellectually and creatively. The open peer-review process was not only an invitation to accept imperfection and continue to learn more; it also led to new invitations to work with artists and film scholars in different ways, such as a project with Richard Misek on a collective video experiment following a project at “Indefinite Visions,” a collaboration between Whitechapel Gallery in London and *[in]Transition*. To be continued. \*

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