

Paul Edwards and The Video Essay as an Extension of Oral Interpretation

David P. Terry

Like many contemporary Performance Studies scholars, my academic career began with coursework in the Oral Interpretation of Literature. Adapting texts for live performance expanded my world in multiple ways. I learned to bifurcate narrators, play multiple roles with the same body, empathize with texts written from diverse perspectives, and challenge texts that confirmed my ideological assumptions. I engaged with short stories, poems, novels, and non-fiction as consequential and contested cultural texts with implications for living bodies in social contexts. Much has been written about the productive extension of this work and its explicit emphasis on embodied, co-present artistry into a variety of cultural texts traditionally studied by social scientists. Significantly less critical attention has been paid to the implications of Oral Interpretation practices for our collective understandings of and adaptations to new technological ways of knowing. The video essays in this collection offer an important contribution in this regard. In some cases they take specific instances of Oral Interpretation as objects of inquiry, of course, but, perhaps more importantly, they offer a tour de force of how effectively many of the methods honed throughout a distinguished career in Oral Interpretation—steeped from their very inception in moving across different technological and generic ways of knowing—can be effectively deployed in the digital realm.

The most salient feature of Edwards's extensive oeuvre of staged adaptations of literature (a significant sample of which is documented in this collection) is how much they feel simultaneously like plays *and* novels. Marvin Carlson, among others, has argued that performance is largely defined by the "consciousness of doubleness" (5): this is happening now but it has been rehearsed before; the person in front of me is both an actor and a character. Edwards's does not, generally, re-write literature as a script for live performance but instead stages literature *as* literature. In this way his work matrixes the generic constraints of meaning making: He invites audiences to consider how meaning is being made over and beyond the displayed meanings featured at any given moment. Because his adaptations do not attempt to hide the fact that they are adaptations, they

David P. Terry is Assistant Professor of Performance Studies in the Department of Communication Studies at Louisiana State University.

highlight the typically taken for granted constraints of genre and presentation technology rendering them “discussable” (Diamond 5).

Edwards brings much of this sense of doubleness to his video essays, which, at least for this viewer, feel simultaneously like essays *and* films. This is what separates them from the vast majority of the widely proliferating online video essays, most notably the TED Talk™ and its many spin-offs, which feel like lectures that have been skillfully recorded. While they have done a great deal to democratize scholarship and give wide audiences for “Ideas worth spreading,” they also carry with them some tacit, unexamined assumptions about what “ideas” should be shaped like, what knowledge is “worth” and how it should all be packaged for effective “spreading”: e.g. pithy soundbites; counterintuitive “aha moments”; confident, unquestioning speakers. In contrast, Edwards’s essays are full of epistemological humility, unreliable narration, artful contradiction, and polyvocality. They are not written essays boiled down into “ideas worth spreading” in their boiled down form; rather, they are masterfully rendered collages of ideas worth engaging *in their complexity*. This is the reason I am most excited to publish them together as a curated collection. Individually they offer pointed insights on a variety of subjects. Collectively, though,—and especially when viewed in conversation with Edwards’ extensive text annotations that I highly recommend reading alongside viewings—they offer a master class in what the video essay *as* video essay is and might become. By extension, they do much to point towards the “potential center of Performance studies in an emerging consciousness of digital thinking” (LeVan 213). We plan to follow this volume with a subsequent special issue of *Liminalities* dedicated to video essays by a variety of scholar-artists whose work similarly engages the video essay as a performance space marked by techno-generic doubling. Our political, environmental, social and cultural landscapes seem to be begging for just such complex, engaging, multi-textured analysis.

Works Cited

Carlson, Marvin. *Performance A Critical Introduction*. Routledge, 2003.

Diamond, Elin. *Performance and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, 1996.

LeVan, Michael. “The Digital Shoals: on Becoming and Sensation in Performance” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 32.3 (2012): 209-219.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA