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THE CASE FOR CINEMATIC AESTHETICS IN ONLINE VIDEO JOURNALISM: THE BBC NEWS AUTHORED STORY

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Abstract: **Online journalism is fast becoming a central source of news worldwide. Yet all too often the perception of online is that it's rough and ready, and what's worse, that audiences don't care. This paper argues that the predominantly authored form that we know as video journalism owes more to the cinematic aesthetics of documentary and cinema than traditional news, and that the growth of online digital literacy has had a profound impact on audiences' expectations of production quality. The author's recent work for BBC News are used as case studies to reveal how VJs are able to implement cinematic approaches at both a narrative and aesthetic level.**

Keywords: **Video Journalism, Aesthetics, Multiskilling, Cinematography, Cinema, Documentary, Authored**

I. INTRODUCTION

In a recent discussion on aesthetics in online video journalism, a colleague and former TV news producer bluntly remarked, "Aesthetics in video journalism? What aesthetics?" Though admittedly a little sarcastic, this perception is certainly not unique. Prevailing attitudes in television news are that video journalism stories are technically poorer – and what is more, that this is irrelevant as online viewers are somehow indifferent to aesthetics (Bock, 2012: 200). In recent years, much of the literature on convergent journalism deals with a central concern for the 'quality of output' that is underscored by multiskilling. And for good reason since, on a practical level, what happens when a crew of three is reduced to a one-man band? Or when a journalist is suddenly tossed a video camera? What compromises or limits are introduced? From the author's perspective as a filmmaker come journalist – not journalist turned filmmaker – these constraints would seem to introduce profound changes that go beyond pure journalistic practice. They have an adverse impact on the nature of screen production, that is, the creative and aesthetic ability to tell stories in a profound way using images and sounds. Wallace's studies (2009, 2013) on the effect of multiskilling and reskilling in BBC regional news are of particular interest, because while her analysis reflects on prevailing attitudes of VJs as manufacturers of technically inferior work, she also goes on to suggest that the new environment can also favour synergistic and innovative stories.

This article considers how the growth and presence of online video journalism – from what was once a secondary or tertiary source to now a central source of news in modern societies – has had a marked impact on audience expectations of its aesthetic value. It argues that as audiences move to secondary screens, their viewing choices while surfing the web are being increasingly geared to a higher expectation of production value across the board. The research draws upon the author's recent video journalism work for BBC News Online, and also interviews with senior video journalists at BBC London and Manchester. Through a brief analysis of the historical context surrounding the birth of online video journalism - and by investigating the significance and implications of working in a predominately documentary / authored form (as opposed to the traditional TV news package) and the implementation of cinematic techniques in the production process – the paper will demonstrate the growing relevance of aesthetic online video journalism in a web centric media society.

It should be noted the term 'aesthetics', as used in this context, has two stipulations. Firstly it refers to work that can contemplated and appreciated for its artistic (both visual and aural) qualities (Corrigan & White, 2012: 127). Secondly, that the work reveals a level of technique, on the part of the VJ, as a means of telling the story in a cinematic way. In this sense, the objective here is to reveal the difference between a VJ who simply 'records' events and one who fully capitalises on the tools and conventions of the medium to tell their stories.

Furthermore, the ensuing analysis is limited to online journalism of a 'soft' or 'feature' news form. This is not say, however, that the interpretations and resulting theories might not apply to other news contexts such as critical or investigative journalism (for example, one can certainly see the visceral style of journalism at the heart of works from Vice News). However, the key delineation here is that soft news forms are not in the firing line of debates about the legitimacy of aesthetic intervention – that "creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1933: 8)" - which is not a stress of this paper.

II. History

Critical or artisanal acceptance of new screen forms are often met with a hint of indignation. Television has for a long time been dealt invidious comparison to cinema's higher "culture value" or "quality" (Newcomb, 2007: 562); a view based on a plethora of factors such as its inherent slot segmentation, production-turnaround, and commercial-centric business model. Yet recent trends in high-end drama television would certainly suggest otherwise. HBO's string of critically acclaimed hits, beginning with *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999-2007), heralded the post-broadcast era of television. According to Thornton, the show's producer, "even intellectuals who had previously disdained television hailed the show as a ground-breaking work of art (2008: 61)." More recently, a wide cross section of factual television – from reality television (Huff, 2006) to live sports broadcasting (de Melo, 2012) – have garnered critical analysis in terms of their artistic tendencies.

In Cramerottis's *Aesthetic Journalism* (2009), the author contends that aesthetic journalism does exist - but in the art spaces and long form investigative documentaries, and to some small extent, the works of

journalist bloggers and citizen journalists on the internet. But why is it that online video journalism is largely overlooked? The answer, as we shall see, is complex, and firstly necessitates an understanding of its origins.

Video journalism is a natural outgrowth of media convergence, one in which the history of its coming to be is inextricably linked to the forthcoming of the Internet and the ensuing need of traditional media platforms to survive the wave. In the 90s when broadband was in its infancy, television news operations and newspapers cut their staff and asked (sometimes forced!) their journalists and photographers to learn how to use video equipment. As a consequence of this, "Video journalism's critics [saw] it as merely a way to do the same old thing with fewer people" (Bock, 2012: 35). Actually, the "same" is putting it politely – for in Wallace's studies there were concerns (and often rivalry) from traditional camera crews that VJs were producing content "no better than amateur video" (2009, 15). In my interview with BBC's senior VJ, John Galliver, he states "I think there's a perception that online is rough and ready…And I know it's happening here as well. People are encouraged to shoot on iPhones and that sort of stuff" (2014).

Salaverria's (2010) notion of a "confluence of contents", whereby online video journalism is mainly viewed as a mere digital copy (and an inferior one at that of the content already provided by Television News, gives us a sense of where the roots of this criticism might be coming from. And in reality, much of what one sees on the home landing pages of a global Internet news site such as the BBC is precisely this – stories that are transported from television and made readily available as streaming videos for audiences. But whether that is an accurate description of online video journalism is debatable – one must move further down the pages (the 'rabbit warren' so to speak) to find the work of BBC's resident and freelance VJs (we will come back to the significance of this in the next chapter).

In his article, *"From Remediation to Convergence"*, Canavilhas (2012) challenges Salverria's concept of Internet media as duplicative or indistinctive. He argues that online journalism has, and continues to, evolve into its own language through a complex remediation of traditional news and Web 2.0 languages – this evolutionary trend being termed 'convergence'. Bock's view, however, is that it is "unclear at this stage how video journalism is developing and whether its form is distinct" (2012: 33). Yet Bock concedes that the mounting adoption of video journalism by disparate news organisations, combined with its inherent singular authored mode of production and integration of new technological form certainly yields its "own presentational and narrative style" (34).

III. AUTHORED FORM

The key to understanding how video journalism has (and I believe will continue to) developed aesthetic qualities is rooted in its early application of a participatory documentary (see Nichols: 2001) over news package form. That is, a form in which narration is primarily driven by the subject, not journalist – and where the visuals and soundtrack direct the story in a cinematic way, not merely accompany it (see Table 1). As Bradshaw attests, within this context video journalism "borrows production techniques that owe more from film than television" (2011: 106).

News Package	Documentary / Authored
Piece to camera	Reporter is hidden
Character is secondary	Character is primary
Reporter's voiceover tells story	Character's voice tells story
Images illustrate	Images drive story
Audio captured on field	Audio is designed

Table 1 Differences between News and Authored Packages

We will look at the application of these filmic devices in an ensuing chapter, but before doing so let's briefly examine the historical, technological, and economic factors that are responsible for the authored form which now dominates what we come to perceive as online video journalism. When VJs were first deployed at the BBC, they were allowed more time to operate outside of conventional demands of deadlines and thus focus on human interest stories (Wallace, 2009: 688). Galliver (JG) remarks that when video journalism was in its infancy, his superiors wanted to be able to deliver a story in the most direct way possible, and thought that traditional reports put a barrier between the viewer and story. Also, in broadcast news, there is simply no other way to tell a story other than with pictures – whereas an online journalist has the ability to choose between a written, visual and/or sound feature.

JG - We don't do those traditional news packages because they don't really work, plus we already do that in the text form. We see it all the time on TV. You need to tell a story but your pictures are rubbish. There is no reason for it to be in video other than the fact that it is being broadcast. Online we have the luxury of saying it doesn't need to be video, it can be a text feature.

In *Convergent Journalism*, Quinn contends that video journalism was never intended to replace traditional news packages, but rather to supplement and provide more observational, personal stories (2001: 38). In an interview, Science Reporter and video journalist, Victoria Gill (VG) shares her thoughts on the advantages of authored videos:

VG - In news it can sit happily within a narrative written by the reporter…If you then put in a package that was reported by the reporter that's just like the same story being jammed together. Whereas if you have an authored piece…you hear from the person…hear their story. That's what an authored piece gives you…A little bit more insight.

One can see how this supplemental approach closely aligns to the design of the BBC's news website, where clusters of popular news sources are located on the front end of the site (the landing page) and access to the niche stories or more in-depth material are found on the nested pages – essentially what Chris Anderson defines as the "long-tail of the internet" (2004). Interestingly, the decision to one, commission video features over TV packages or written pieces and, two, where to place them, reflects the form's unique ability to capture and retain online audiences.

JG - We feel like there has to be a good reason to do a story in video…The audience online, we know unless it grabs them they're not going to watch it, whereas people watching TV are more likely to let it sort of wash over. Online there are so many distractions, if they get bored they'll stop watching.

Gill shares a similar viewpoint, "If you expect somebody to take four minutes out of their day to sit through a video, it needs to be satisfying…You need to tell a story well…And that's a lot about visuals."

IV. DIGITAL LITERACY

In "*Linking Online News and Social Media*", the authors contend that video features which perform well are more highly shared than news packages that have done just as well – which is in itself significant as much of what is discussed in social media is inspired by the news (Tsagkias, de Rikke, Weerkamp 2011). Moreover, as audiences' digital literacy and online video consumption increase, one might argue that there is a heightened expectation for acceptable online video content across the board. To illustrate, in a single browsing session a user might watch an episode of their favourite series on VOD, surf music videos on YouTube, view a number of shared videos while on Facebook or Twitter, and then switch to the BBC to see the latest headlines and browse feature videos of interest. Predominately, one would find most of these videos are shot to high production standards. American TV dramas for VOD average two million dollars per hour episode (Gorman, 2010). Even modestly budgeted documentaries – which more closely align in form to authored VJ feature stories – average 125 to 250 thousand dollars per episode (Hamilton, 2014).[1]

Yet it is not only commercial content where users are finding high production values. Filmmaking is now largely democratised – that is, recent technological advancements (i.e. non-linear editing, high definition, DSLR format cameras) permit avid amateurs and independent artists to produce cinematic looking video at affordable costs. According to Rivoltella's *Digital Literacy* (2008), the adoption and widespread use of advanced technologies such as the Internet and mobile devices marks a paradigm shift from a literary to multiscreen, online digitally literate society. As Galliver attests, "I absolutely think people care, because when it's poor people notice its poor, and it reflects poorly on your brand."

The rise of the digital era and democratised production has also had a marked effect on how audiences consume media. In *Rethinking Journalism*, Peters and Broersma contend that the most significant effect of the rise of the internet and digital technology is that viewer "autonomy to decide when to 'tune in' has essentially shifted" (2013: 8-11). In effect, routinized consumption of news media at a specific time and place has been replaced by active engagement when it is interesting, necessary, or convenient. Gill agrees, "If it looks really shoddy and it's off putting…you're just going to click away" (2014).

V. CINEMATIC JOURNALISM

As demonstrated, inextricable links exist between the adoption of an authored form, a rapid increase in digital literacy, and the consequential drive for aesthetic journalism. Yet while this desire is there from audiences and news programmers alike, a wide divide still exists between the aesthetic skillset of video journalists (Wallace: 2013, 104-7). Galliver's features, *The Man who Makes his Living Whittling Wooden Spoons* (2013) and *Time is up for Post-WWII Prefabs Still Lived in Today* (2013) reveal a level of cinematic storytelling that surpass that of many other VJs, and it's evident in the enduring popularity of his work online. Interestingly, while there are ample resources or 'how-to' guides for VJs (see: Bock; Lancaster; Bradshaw & Rohumaa) – the task of arming reporters with cinematic storytelling skills is not so deceptively simple.

JG - I've seen it so often, you can have the most amazing journalist…and they just don't have the aptitude for it…What I've seen a lot is they'll go...get the story, and then they'll shoot the pictures. You end up with something quite dull.

In this manner, rather than using pictures to drive the narrative, they become secondary to the story – a mere afterthought. In *Cinematic Storytelling* (2005), Van Sijll maintains that dialogue (acquired through interviews and/or voiceover) is only one way of rendering a story, and the most overdone technique at that. Cinematic language, on the other hand, most often operates on a viewer's subconscious – the techniques are rarely obvious to the untrained eye; or in this context, the VJ.

JG - You can be a journalist. You can shoot video. You can have all the technical skills and journalistic skills. It doesn't necessarily mean you can craft a beautiful feature that can tell a story in a satisfying way, there's a lot of skills there that you need to try to meld together…Not everyone can get there.

To illustrate, let's briefly examine a number of key cinematic approaches to mise-en-scène, mode of narration, editing, sound design and cinematography as implemented in this author's two BBC video features, *Urban Dolphins: Challenges of City Life Revealed* (Gill and Fasolo, 2012) and *The Balloon Artist who used to be a Truck Driver* (Fasolo, 2014). One should note, the intention here is not to play down the significance of the journalistic aspects of these stories or any other for that matter, but rather to reveal how a complimentary approach both serves the story and entices a growing digitally literate audience.

A. Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène, from the French term meaning 'placement in a scene', refers to elements that are arranged (or staged) in front of the camera before shooting commences, such as locales, subjects, performances, costuming, props and lighting (Corrigan & White, 2012). Though originally used in film analysis, Bill Nichols argues that documentary or authored forms "do not differ from fictions in their constructedness as texts" (1991, 111).[2] That is, a video journalist can deliberately pre-select and stage mise-en-scène for its aesthetic and connotative function. In *Urban Dolphins* each scenic element and action, including the pier, river, the voyage on the boat and dolphin sightings, provide visually rich backdrops and render the narrative in an efficient manner without resorting to lengthy voice-over or interview exposition. Moreover, the interview is deliberately staged on the boat, which provides a consistently aesthetic background (see Fig. 1) and establishes a narrative immediacy at the level of interaction between the researcher and her environment.

Fig. 1 Staging an interview with pleasing mise-en- scène

For example, when the researcher spots a pod of dolphins and interrupts the interviewer, exclaiming "Ah, we have dolphins", the narrative is naturally

steered in the direction of the dolphin sighting. In this way, the mise-en-scène, not interview, drives the piece. Locales, characters and actions are not merely referential elements, but rather their presence principally informs the story aesthetically and semantically.

B. Mode of Narration and Editing

On the subject of narrative direction, while mise-en-scène essentially dictates what is 'in' the take, the VJ's chosen mode of address informs how the film is told, and consequentially the way it is edited. In *The Balloon Artist who used to be a Truck Driver*, this author implemented a non-expository mode of representation that Nichols categorises as 'pseudomonologue'; whereby the absence of the journalist (both visually and aurally) places the viewer in a direct relation to the interviewee (1991, 54-5). Of course, the VJ is also absent in *Urban Dolphins*, but the difference here is that the interview is recorded separately at a different time and place, not alongside the event. In this manner, the artist's story is documented part as observational cinema (we observe his actions and gestures, we hear his conversations with the onlookers) and in part through the interviewee's narration to the audience.

From a practitioner's standpoint, the technique of montage – that is, the selection and associative temporal order, shot relations, and duration of shots – is ultimately responsible for the delivery of this mode of narration. Consider the opening sequence of events - a tight profile of a mouth blowing up a balloon; cut to a tranquil landscape – a truck suddenly blazes through the frame; cut to a bar; a commercial kitchen; and then finally the camera pulls focus from the kitchen to the artist (see Table 2). Only at this point, thirty seconds in, do we hear the interviewee's narration – exposition is suppressed till now in favour of observation.

In the case for cinematic aesthetics, this approach serves a dualistic purpose. Aesthetically, it brings the audio-visuals to the fore – we appreciate the distinctive sound of the balloon being inflated and deflated, the vastness of the landscape and clear blue sky, the pools of warm light surrounding the bar and the cacophony of sounds from the kitchen. Narratively speaking, the shots are arranged in a manner which exploits Eisenstein's alternate concept of dialectical montage, in which a succession of shots pose distinct questions and the answers are delayed in order to actively engage the viewer (Table 2). As Katz infers, a resounding factor in our appreciation of the films of auteur directors are the way in which they develop questions and response patterns to challenge audiences (1991: 147).

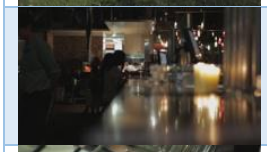
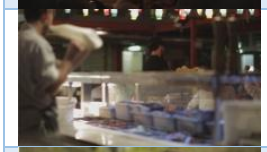
Vision	Question	Answer
	Who is this man blowing up the balloon?	
	Why do I see a truck?	
	What is the relationship between the bar, man and truck?	
		
		He works at the bar as a balloon twister.
		
		He was a former truck driver.

Table 2 Opening sequence from *Aussie Truck Driver Turned Balloon Artist*. The table illustrates the Q&A editing pattern

C. Sound Design

As demonstrated, the active restraint of expository narration has a number of implications, underlying of which is the empowering of other cinematic conventions. Calvacanti argues that in many successful films, speech and narration has almost always taken a second place to other conventions (*cited in* Weis & Belton: 1985, 103). In film studies, the unique influence of sound design at a narrative and artistic level has been well documented. It is in a sense 'invisible', and the audience often unconscious of its presence, are guided in a subliminal level. More recently, authors have indicated that documentary works too often undergo creative sound augmentation, manipulation, and even replacement.

> Yet there are also instances in which the actual recorded sound is disregarded in favour of one that will better help to tell the story. Whether fiction or non-fiction, the filmmaker's priority is in telling the story.
>
> (Murray, 2010: 134)

In the *Balloon Artist*, the author replaced a number of sound effects, such as those of the trucks, and the ambient sounds of the field and kitchen, for dramatic effect. The sounds of sheep bleating were put in as a narrative device to help locate the story in Australia for a predominant UK audience. The squeaky trolley and the sizzling frying pans were added, and the balloon twisting sound effects were augmented with cleaner versions captured later in a quiet environment.

One should note, though a critical element of cinematic technique, recording quality audio and implementing creative sound design is one of the biggest challenges that face VJs; those that tend to "stand out, get good audio" (Rosenblum *cited in* Bock, 2012: 81). For instance, in this story an array of technical equipment and expertise was needed – including a radio microphone on the artist, a separate audio recorder to capture the ambience of the bar, and a shotgun microphone attached to an audio recorder for the interview. The dialogue was treated with noise reduction in post-production to further isolate the artist from the surrounding environment.

In terms of multiskilling, this is a complex task for many VJs. Even experienced documentary practitioners work in teams of three, and this does not account for the sound and editing expertise brought in at a post-production level. Galliver, who admits his strengths are in filmmaking over journalism, feels he has learnt the power of telling story through a single image or sound (and it shows in the filmic quality of his work). He maintains, "I think it's having the courage to say it's ok not to have someone talking for 15 seconds...To let it breathe."

D. Cinematography

Returning to *Urban Dolphins*, let us lastly touch on the central role that cinematography plays in video journalism – given that consumption of online media is shifting to the moving image (Tyner: 2009, 8). Aesthetically speaking, the piece delivers an array of creative camera perspectives and compositions – from low-angle wide shots of the cityscape and interviewee, to tight macro shots of the various instruments on-board the boat. As Bock asserts, the difference between an amateur and professional is often evident in the angles chosen when creating the scene (2012, 46). In terms of lighting, the author purposefully shot into the sunlight in parts, creating a rich backlight that adds visual depth and contrast to the shots (see Fig. 2).

At times, this 'consciousness of activity' on the part of the VJ traverses pure aesthetics into the realm of visual and narrative efficiency. Note, in Fig. 3, how the Shot

dynamically reveals both the experienced hand of the researcher steering the boat and also her reflection as she looks for signs of dolphin activity.

Fig. 2 Creating aesthetic images through a backlit approach

Fig. 3 Narrative efficiency through cinematography

Similarly in the *Balloon Artist* – the integration of a pull focus technique to bring two worlds together in one frame, and the use of time lapse photography to emphasise the artist's skill – reveals a level of narrative efficiency and cinematic aesthetics akin to what one would see in documentary and film.

VI. Conclusion

The rise of digital literacy and online consumption increasingly has a marked impact on viewers' aesthetic expectations of moving image media across the board, whether it be in entertainment or factual/news form. Video journalism, now a dominant source of news worldwide, has traditionally been perceived as having little production value, yet its predominately authored form more closely aligns to the cinematic aesthetics present in participatory documentary. Given this alignment and the level of multiskilling required of VJs, it is hoped that this study draws a new found appreciation to the technical and artistic complexity of their work. The brief case studies in this article reveal how video journalists have the capacity to consciously implement the cinematic devices found in fiction and non-fiction films through direction, mise-en-scène, editing, sound and cinematography at both an aesthetic and narrative level.

Endnotes

[1] Comparatively speaking, a BBC feature story, based on a freelance rate, would equate to 35 thousand dollars per hour.

[2] Where fiction and documentary mise-en- scène can differ is in the take's circumstance or happenstance. For additional reading, see *"What is Documentary Mise-en-scène? Coutinho's Mannerism and Salles's 'Mauvaise Conscience"* (Ramos: 2014)

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