

The Aesthetics of Authenticity: Mediated Sincerity and the Edited Reality of Video Essays

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Abstract

Video essays in all genres and on all topics have taken over a corner of the YouTube media landscape. With a specific aesthetic grammar and media ecology as the backbone of their presence online, video essays nowadays can be understood as their own genre of media product purely (and solely) available on YouTube. This paper will examine the specific aesthetics of authenticity these video essayists use to convey their message. Using a collection of video essays on diverse topics but with the common denominator that they in one way or another speak touch upon Shinto, a religion from Japan, as a case study, I will argue for the existence of a specific aesthetics of authenticity that is shared by most of if not all video essays on YouTube. One that is both aware and to be understood to function within the media specific environment of the digital mass media, making use of popular culture and transmediating traditional media aesthetics, while at the same time being both aesthetically and technically autopoietic and self-referential to YouTube as a socio-cultural digital platform with an audiovisual aesthetics onto itself.

I am interested in looking at how authenticity is transmediated from older and more established media forms, as well as adjacent digital platforms and how these are reimagined through multimodality and intermediality and reworked on YouTube. Truth claims, sincerity and authenticity are always mediated and dependent of second-order observed edited knowledge of reality communicated and made tangible via the technical medium of display. Via a study of this mediated sincerity, realized by a complex multimodal network of basic and qualified media products found within the technical medium of display, I will argue that successful communication online always is realized via a media specific aesthetics of authenticity, both performed, authenticated via mediation, and contested, by the edited reality brought forth by YouTube as a cultural practice. Therefore, in conclusion, at the core of this

paper lies a theoretical argument for aesthetics of authenticity as one of the main modes of online communication.

Keywords

Video essays, authenticity, aesthetics, transmediation, digital platforms

Bio

Martin van der Linden is a PhD student in the study of religion at Linnaeus University, Växjö Sweden, and a member of the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies (IMS). His doctoral project “Shaping Shinto: A Multimethod Study in the Digital Aesthetics of Religion” explores the production, reproduction, remediation, and dissemination of Shinto on YouTube in the context of global digitalization. He is also interested in religion and ecology, multimodal and intermedial relations, media theory, the relationship between religion and popular culture, and the semiotics of religion..

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