

# SOUTH LOOP REVIEW

Creative Nonfiction + Art



**Winning Essay: 2012 Contest Judged by Ander Monson**

Interviews with Claudia Rankine,  
John Bresland and Tom Montgomery Fate

# INTERVIEW: JOHN BRESLAND

Interviewed by Jenny Buschner, Braulio Fonseca, Kristen Paz, Kelsey Storen

**South Loop Review:** Why the video essay? What attracted you to the form and were there any people who influenced you?

**John Bresland:** I was eleven when MTV launched and I'll never forget the shock of it. One of the first videos I saw was "In the Air Tonight" by Phil Collins. At the time, there were all these myths around that song. People said Phil Collins had witnessed a forced drowning as a boy, that the killer was still at large, that Phil Collins invited him to attend his concert and sang to him, "I was there and I saw what you did. . . ." At the time, this gave me chills; now it just sounds silly. It's such a literal take-away from the lyrics of that song. What blew me away with those early MTV videos was how they dispensed with literal visual illustration. Early music videos routinely took liberties with the lyrics, alternately argued with and celebrated them. For me, a kid growing up in the suburbs, MTV was *the avant-garde*. It was the one venue where I was allowed some measure of imaginative space, where the image wasn't slave to the lyric, and the lyric didn't necessarily illustrate the image. This fascinated me in 1981 and it still does. To me, the great potential of the video essay form lies in its ability to convey language and images and sound with equal facility. Video essayists have at their disposal the full arsenal of human input.

Maybe MTV collapsed because it was too good to be true, all those great little art films amid all that commerce. When we watch the evening news we like to settle back into a passive state. We can be sure that anything said in a voiceover or interview will be shown on screen. Very little is asked of the viewer. All the information is provided, seemingly. This isn't a criticism; it's how television has evolved as a commercial platform. But I've always found the idea of a voiceover doing one thing while the image does another a seductive one, allowing for what is essentially a literary experience on the screen. People are calling this form of nonfiction the video essay. I don't know what else to call it. You can call it experimental film, but the elements are more anchored to the real, the arguments more ordered, and language plays a crucial role.

**SLR:** Where did this idea originate and have you seen any other writers attempting to engage their audiences in such a way?

**Bresland:** Right about the time I was making my first video essay in 2000 a breakthrough film-essay was released in France, where I lived at the time, called *The Gleaners and I*, a well-known work authored by Agnes Varda. Varda's closely associated with the French New Wave, but I see her as an essayist, which is not a huge surprise. Most of the New Wave artists were writers, first, before they broke into and reshaped film. Once I saw Agnes Varda's work, I knew what I wanted to do. But long before I

encountered *The Gleaners*, I remember hearing the great, diverse, hypnotic radio art of Joe Frank. He was the one who made me understand that language and sound belonged together, that sound could extend the reach of language.

**SLR:** Ross McElwee and Agnes Varda make nonfiction films that definitely differ from the documentary. What constitutes the video essay? What is the difference between what Agnes Varda is doing and what Michael Moore is doing?

**Bresland:** To me, the difference between the documentary and the video essay is what my friend Marilyn Freeman calls *self-reflexivity*. I think that's a term used a lot in academia and sounds like jargon—but it's jargon I can get behind. What I think self-reflexivity means in this context is that you have a narrator or presiding consciousness that is effectively saying, "I don't really know what to think about this thing, and I'm figuring it out as I go along." That's the sense you have when you watch McElwee's films, or for that matter, reading an essay by Montaigne. He's finding his way. When you see Michael Moore's work, you get the feeling that he long ago dialed in his answer and is now making his case, which is fine. Moore's films tend to be arguments whereas McElwee's films tend toward meditation. For me, the key difference is one of temperament. Do you want to be sitting in a dark room with a guy telling it like it is, or another guy who, like the rest of us, is in the process of figuring it all out?

**SLR:** You seem to be open-minded about the video essay. What is important for the way your work is interpreted?

**Bresland:** How would I like my work to be seen?

**SLR:** Not only your own, but the video essay itself. The classification and its title doesn't matter. What we want to know is what can this form do for an audience?

**Bresland:** First of all, I'm convinced that some scholar or artist is going to step into this creative space and do all the genre heavy lifting. Somebody will define the video essay, put it into some elegant critical context. That's a job suited to a better mind than mine.

What's interesting to me is that within this year, one hundred million Americans will buy a smartphone. As irritating as I think mobile devices are, there are certain real virtues these little machines possess. For example, one in three Americans are walking around with editing suites in their pockets and can now capture and record high quality video and audio. Couple that with the fact that the Internet provides most of our entertainment and information. Well, the Internet is a conveyance of not just text but audio and video, more like real life. Predicting the future is a fool's errand, but it's not hard to imagine a change in the writer's relationship to language in the decade ahead.

Our literature, I believe, will become less logocentric. And English departments, God bless them, will have to contend with this new literature—or risk becoming more museum-like than they already are. I'm not saying this change will come at the expense of language. Language will never go away because language is the foundation of thought. Language, for me, *is* thought. And writing is how we think. But that's the sticky part, that word—*writing*. What it means to write is changing before our eyes.

**SLR:** Do you think because those forms are so accessible, the smart phone, e-reader, do you think it's going to help or hinder the art? It makes us think of that documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*. It's all about street art, but this guy ends up turning everything into and labeling it as "street art." Can anyone make a video essay and call it art then?

**Bresland:** I don't think it's the job of the practitioner to call it art, I think it's the job of the audience. What can't be disputed is that today over half of the books sold on Amazon are digital. Tablets are already playing a major role in academia, both in secondary and primary schools, and there's preliminary research suggesting iPads help students learn more effectively. All of these devices support not just text, but sound and image acquisition. So, to answer your question—yes. Anyone can make a video essay. Anyone with a smartphone and the will to see an idea through.

**SLR:** Well, a lot of people are scared of such a drastic progression. There is a love for the page from both a reader's and a writer's perspective; a love for particular words or the way a particular line breaks off, especially for poets. What are your thoughts on the reluctance of the traditionalist?

**Bresland:** My own belief is that just about any poet today who sits down to write is exploring two things at once. They're of course following their impulse to explore the limits of what they know, trying to get the words down. But they're also in conversation with a well-established tradition. When Robyn Schiff writes a poem, I suspect—though really I have no idea—but I *suspect* she's well aware not only of other poets who might have plied similar thematic territory, but how they did it, and why. Someday I'll ask her if that's a blessing or not. Anyway, it's interesting to me that suddenly we've got this new art form, one without thousands of years of tradition to guide—or haunt—us through the creative process. Editors of literary magazines don't really know what to make of the video essay, or of the image. Though some clearly do. *Blackbird* and *Ninth Letter* were early to the game. And now *Required* and *TriQuarterly* and *Wag's Review* are all actively soliciting video work.

That's why I keep waiting for someone to swoop in and make sense of the genre, someone to tell us all what to think about the video essay. But the fact that that's not happening allows this form to remain wide open, waiting to be written. A new tradition in the making. How often does this happen in a lifetime?

**SLR:** We interviewed a writer that you featured on your *Blackbird* website, Claudia Rankine, and asked for her thoughts on the video essay. She went on to say that timing matters. She stated that she doesn't want anything over five minutes with expectations that the attention span of the audience will not hold up. But yours are all over, well over five minutes, and they hold up well. Do you have any aspirations of expanding? Do you think that the video essay can maintain an audience for the duration of a feature?

**Bresland:** *Ahhhh*, I love that question!

**SLR:** There's really something about video essays where you really do lose track. There's a shot in *Mangoes* when you're talking about the bouncy chair, the sun is shining, and your child's feet are pushing off the floor. It's a beautiful shot; and there's so much happening there. To me time does not even matter anymore. In that, I think that feature-length video essay is indeed possible.

**Bresland:** Claudia Rankine is doing some thrilling video work with John Lucas. It's demanding stuff, highly distilled, and I think for the work she's doing, five minutes sounds about right. But two of the greatest essay films of recent times—*The Gleaners*, and also Ross McElwee's *Bright Leaves*—are challenging, layered, poetic films that run feature length without any problem. Of course, McElwee and Rankine are using language in very different ways. I think Rankine's voiceovers could be considered poetic speech, and that's a tougher nut to crack than McElwee's more familiar conversational style.

**SLR:** We wanted to talk about one of your videos, I don't even know how to pronounce it, *Mommaqatsi*?

**Bresland:** Mommaqatsi, yeah.

**SLR:** We *Googled* it. It's not a word.

**Bresland:** The root, *Qatsi*, is a Hopi word meaning "life." The word is used in the beautiful trilogy that Godfrey Reggio produced from 1980 to 2002-ish. Mommaqatsi was just an experiment; I didn't think it would end up being seen by anybody, ever. But some people really react to that essay.

**SLR:** How do you usually map out your projects? Do you take video footage and write an essay accordingly? Or do you start with an essay and capture footage to accompany it?

**Bresland:** Of the nine or so video essays I've made, every one has been approached in a different way. *Mommaqatsi* was a reaction to another work of art. I made it after seeing *Koyaanisqatsi*, a film that really got on my last nerve. *Koyaanisqatsi* has no dialogue and no voice or text; really, no language until the last few seconds. It's an interesting movie because Phillip Glass, the composer, closely collaborated with the filmmaker, that that composition would influence the way the film was constructed, and vice versa. The first time I saw that film I hated it; it gave me a massive headache. The score is awful, I thought at the time. Three months later I was still thinking about the score and I realized the score *is* the film. Sometimes we hate art. We hate it so much that we love it! We love it because it stays with us and changes the way we see and hear and think.

I built the audio track of *Mommaqatsi* with my mother's voicemails. I thought it would be an interesting response to Reggio's original intent, which was to show us that technology has run us out of our own human town. I thought, "Yeah Reggio, I agree with you! I've got all of these voicemails from my mother that I've stacked up just to prove how isolated we are." But in retrospect, after I assembled the voicemails in this essay it became a surprisingly warm document. The messages paint a portrait of a very warm and funny person reaching out across the ether. Today we might be immersed in digital gizmos, but there's plenty of humanity making its way through. *Mommaqatsi* became a refutation of the very work that inspired it. *Mangoes*, the essay about men strapping babies to their bellies, started out as a lark. I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to make a video essay using only a cell phone. It was just an experiment.

**SLR:** Do you sometimes just intentionally *not* pick up the phone when your mom calls?

**Bresland:** I was in grad school at the time. The opposite is true; she intentionally calls when she knows I won't answer. She doesn't actually like to talk on the phone. In fact she hates it. Telephone conversations are highly ritualized, and my Catholic mother has no tolerance for ritual. I was nervous about showing her *Mommaqatsi*. I didn't want her to feel exploited or exposed. Then I showed it to her and she was laughing throughout. I mean she seemed really delighted. But then, afterwards, she didn't call me for months.

**SLR:** We want to ask you about your usage of found footage. If used, does it discredit the essay or essayist in the way that editing might discredit truth in a documentary? Do you even consider your essays "nonfiction?"

**Bresland:** Yes.

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**SLR:** The biggest part of that question is a matter of the integrity of the artist. You're calling yourself a video essayist. Does that require you to hold the camera and capture every shot yourself? If not, does acquiring footage from a video library discredit your title?

**Bresland:** I think about the stance of one of the first great essayists, Montaigne. He had this go-to stance where he'd back off his text every once in a while, often cheekily, and write, "Ah! Well, what do I know?" That stance is important. Earlier I mentioned self-reflexivity as one of the defining differences between documentary and video essay. I think that phrase, "What do I know?" is a way of saying, "I'm not the impartial journalistic witness. If you need that, look to journalism." But I also believe journalism fails us, and often, for the fetish it makes out of impartiality, or objectivity. There is no such thing, in the world of thinking adults, as impartiality. Who cares whether footage is found or unfound? It doesn't matter. What matters is what a writer makes of it.

What the video essay has to offer, I think, is non-impartiality. I think for me, the most interesting practitioners in the essay, video or otherwise, are those who are honest about their emotions and their intentions. If journalists were more honest, or more forthcoming about their feelings, present day reporting would benefit, and life would suddenly get a whole lot more interesting.

**SLR:** What holds more precedence to you, the word, or in this case the voice-over, or the image?

**Bresland:** I take the most pleasure from doing the voice-over. It's simply the most fun, the most satisfying work. But I get some criticism, most of which strikes me as valid. People call my voice monotone. And I think, somewhat defensively, "Well what do you want? NPR? A movie trailer voice?" If you listen to Ross McElwee he's actually quite sincere in his delivery, quite straightforward. Who wants two hours of somebody lilting away in that phony narrator voice, that practiced tele-journalistic voice? The voice of God?

There will always be some primary element that you want the audience to focus on. What I love about working with the image is that I don't suffer from the same crippling doubt as I do about my writing or my voice. The image isn't as personal. If I have you on camera I can be pretty mercenary about how I cut my interview with you. But if it's my voice, I spend a lot of time covering up my weaknesses.

**SLR:** Do you watch your footage while you narrate?

**Bresland:** Yeah. It's maddening. Have you done any of this work before? Have any of you? It's a bit like juggling, or 3D chess. You start with the page. Write a brief text. Then go out and get some footage. Then you might pair the footage to the text, and test your voice-over against that footage. If it works, maybe you'll bring in some sound, some noise—it might be music, or just the sound of air moving around, the sound of space—and see how it all hangs together. But you might get a single sentence, which seemed bulletproof on the page, exposed as a lie when you voice it. So you have to rewrite or make adjustments to all the other elements. If you're working to revise a written text, this is a straightforward process. But if you're revising time-based media, you have to revise everything. Each revision causes the need for subsequent revisions in the video, or the text, or the audio. It's maddening, obsessive work.

**SLR:** Tell us a little bit about the course you intend to teach on the video essay at Northwestern.

**Bresland:** Yeah, I've taught it a few years now and I'm teaching it right now. You know, it's funny; can I ask how old you guys are, roughly?

**SLR:** 24 . . . 25 . . . 22 . . .

**Bresland:** These students are all 20 and 21 years old. When I first taught the video essay at Iowa six years ago, students spent the majority of the time learning to use the software. Today, the technical side takes up far less time. I don't know if it's because students are a lot more sophisticated now with digital media, or whether the tools for editing digital media have simplified and clarified themselves. Most likely both. As a teacher, I can spend a lot more time focusing on what people have to say—the actual essay-making business of it—rather than mouse clicks. It's gotten a lot easier. Students do have some trouble discerning the essay from documentary. And I think that is a difficult thing to teach, to say to a student effectively, “Look, we're not interested in the truth. We're interested in you making sense of the world. We're interested in your attempt.” I think that's hard to teach because, in the end, I really *do* want the truth. But I want it to be earned. I want it to be hard-won.