

EXPLORATIONS INTO STAND-UP COMEDY THROUGH THE  
MULTIMEDIA ESSAY:  
“STAND UP COMEDY AND THE ESSAY, AKA LOUIS C.K. MEET  
MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE” AND “YOU’RE IN THE SUN”

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By

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## **A. Introduction**

This thesis is an exploration of the tradition and practice of stand-up comedy. To accomplish this aim, I use the essay in both its traditional and non-traditional forms. My thesis consists of two pieces: “Stand Up Comedy And The Essay AKA Louis C.K. Meet Michel De Montaigne,” published in *The Weeklings* online magazine, and “You’re In The Sun,” a ten-minute video essay. These pieces each offer an analysis of comedy, but they also investigate the essay as a genre, focusing on the extent to which the video essay is an effective sub-genre for essayistic communication.

My focus on the video essay is crucial to my critical introduction. To date, the video essay has a relatively short history as a subgenre and little critical commentary. After reviewing what little history and commentary exists, I offer my own definition and analysis of the video essay. I do so by first discussing the craft of the essay in general, especially as it pertains to stand-up comedy. I then place the video essay in that larger history, reviewing the critical discussion of this subgenre, referring to key video essay works, and showing the relevance of my enhanced definition and analysis. Finally, I discuss how the video that I have created for my thesis expands the subgenre.

## **B. Evolution and Reflection on Written Essay Component**

My interest in comedy stems from a love of telling jokes to friends and strangers. After finding and trying stand-up for the first time, the stand-up comedy stage acted as a haven for me as both a comic and spectator. My passion did not stay limited to laughing with friends. I enjoy working through jokes on the sentence level,

decoding why something is funny and predicting what else will be funny to an audience. I learned that humor is a weapon, pointed too often at those with little agency.

In my written piece, I combine the personal narrative of my exploration of comedy and the craft lessons that I have learned as a comedy enthusiast. My essay consists of five sections: a personal introduction, The Minstrel Show, Stand-Up Says Something, The Narrative and the Comic, and Where Stand-Up Can and Should Go. Taken together, these sections ultimately make an argument about the way in which stand-up comedy illuminates the current state and future of both stand-up and the essay as a genre.

My introduction begins with a transcription, interrupted periodically by commentary, of a stand-up joke I tell about a drug heist into which an acquaintance tried to coax me. This personal story introduces the reader to the art of joke construction and demonstrates how comics like me convey the humor behind a joke. The second section, about the reductive comedy of the Minstrel Show in America (as well as the New Minstrelsy played out in modern, mainstream stand-up), explores stand-up as an industry plagued by problems. Outsiders often have difficulties understanding stand-up because they often see only comedy that thrives off of stereotypes. Be it race, gender, or sexual orientation, comics use all types of bigoted shock to elicit responses from their audience. From discussion on stand-up's dark side, I move toward the ranks of comics far more respected than these offensive comics. I use the jokes and examples of Richard Pryor, George Carlin, and Lenny Bruce to

show mainstream stand-up's evolution away from simple and often stereotype-based jokes and its movement into the political sensibilities of the 1960s and 1970s. I then compare comics' joke structuring with good narrative writing, providing examples from comedian Louis C.K. I close by discussing where stand-up is evolving now, pointing to the many storytelling comics and stand-up comics whose work transcends a traditional format of set-ups and punchlines.

The essay functions as a personal craft piece, examining an artistic movement through active participation by its narrator. I walk the reader through my world as both an active force in the narration and a knowledgeable historian. The opening joke, with its asides and twists, introduces and illustrates my theory that good stand-up is the creation of an immersive world for the audience. Whether this creation is through observational, real world comedy or an exaggerated world in which my friend carries out his drug heist, the world created must be constructed so that the audience can explore it with the comic. My view runs counter to the tradition of mainstream stand-up: the late Mel Helitzer, a former professor who specialized in stand-up and authored *Comedy Writing Secrets*, lists the "target" as one of the most important factors of a joke. The target refers to a single person, multiple people, a corporation, a profession, or anything that bears the brunt of jokes. Helitzer writes that, "Humor is an attempt to challenge the status quo, but targeting must reaffirm the audience's hostilities and prejudices" (Helitzer via Barker). *TIME* described Howitzer's book as "a textbook in college courses on comedy writing," in an article called *How To Be Funny: The Six Essential Steps To Humor*. I depart greatly from this tradition, instead claiming that

the best comedians approach comedy with social consciousness and bring their audiences along for the ride.

Describing a clip of amateur comic Manny Maldonado, I show that present-day minorities, too, dive into tired stereotypes because of industry pressure. I advocate for progressive content to dispel the belief that all stand-up is reductive and instead advocate for a view that empowers talented yet marginalized comics. I try to put all of the nastiness out in the open to combat it. My opinions on the race and gender politics in stand-up are shared, sometimes overtly but often covertly, by many young comics in the industry today. In fact, the new Comedy Central series *Broad City*, about two hyperbolically decadent New York women, was recently labeled by the *Wall Street Journal* flatteringly as “sneak-attack feminism.” Comedy can be used as a tool to advance positive social agendas and representation without the stigma and alienation that the movements often confront and produce. Even established mainstream comics like Sarah Silverman and Dave Chappelle have used the stage to challenge hegemony. I argue in my work that these comics’ personal expression and progressive viewpoints make the stage both more inclusive and more potent as a place of progressive social commentary.

Beyond analyzing comedy, I introduce stand-up comedy and essay genres as sharing a common goal. Both seek truth in a complex modern society and offer a subjective perspective on current cultural trends. Montaigne once wrote an essay on the taboos of discussing sexual intercourse in polite society: through far less elegant language, stand-up comics often confront the same challenge. Comparing famous

essayists to modern comedians provides a unique glimpse into each form. I can humanize 17<sup>th</sup> century writers and place contemporary comics in an academic tradition.

I do not simply wish to comment on the essay: I also provide new media elements through embedded YouTube clips of each joke referenced in the piece to show where I believe the essay should go. The reader receives my commentary on a joke as the joke plays, diminishing the reader's need for prior context. The comics I choose, George Carlin, Louis C.K., and Tig Notaro, are all quality comics that will lead the reader directly to the world-creating stand-up to which I refer and in which I believe. New media allows cultural criticism, a fundamental element of the essay, to feel more immediate. Rather than reacting to a trend, I comment on one in real time to my reader. I can discuss the bits of other great comics and personal heroes in the present tense.

In the literary tradition, my essay fits in tone with published pieces in *Salon*: it is conversational, reflective, and gives a personal illustration of a larger social phenomenon. *The Weeklings*, a collective of writers dedicated to publishing an essay in the style Michel de Montaigne each day, published the essay in February of 2014. Work published there has been featured in *Salon* and other publications showcasing personal essays and cultural commentaries. *The Weeklings*' placed my essay among excellent personal narratives and cultural criticism pieces, attesting to the nature of its genre.

### **C. Definition (Or Lack Thereof) of the Video Essay**

In studying the video essay while creating one, a fact became abundantly clear: my work functions in a tradition with little clarity. The video essay is a new form and one that its proponents say will revolutionize our common understanding of the essay. Marilyn Freeman, a video essayist and author of “On The Form Of Video Essay,” describes the form as “the brainy, bratty, mixed breed love child of poetry, creative nonfiction, art house indies, documentary, and experimental media art” (Freeman).

This definition provides an exciting jumble of creative origins for video essays: some manipulate text, some images, some break frame to explore the process of filmmaking, some work with fractured narrative structures, and all work with few boundaries. The lack of convention can also daunt those entering into the medium, so I started by finding as many examples of the video essay as possible and using their conventions for my own creative vision. I found a wide array of resources, examples, and definitions, all of which brought their own sensibility to the form. To make my own, I synthesized all of this material to create my own working definitions using insights from the criticism and examples that inspired me.

Like most genres, no perfect definition exists, which led me to create my own criteria. I set out to make a video essay with a *strong personal narrative, intricate story construction, rich video layering*, and a *sense of humor*. In many ways, my definition fits aims listed by other scholars and practitioners of the genre, while also adding elements most pertinent to my own sensibility. Video essayists consistently lend their own definitions to challenge the expectations of the essay medium as a whole, which is one of only a few traditions in the genre. I tried to bring my own voice

to that conversation with this work. To enter that conversation I had to begin my project by finding the already existing definitions and sensibilities among creators and theorists.

In preparation for the thesis, I emailed a strong advocate of the video essay form and video essay creator, John Bresland. Bresland, Freeman's colleague and co-editor of TriQuarterly's Video Essay section, gave me a list of the films and their impact on the genre. He also recommended relevant criticism by essayist Philip Lopate and author Timothy Corrigan. Corrigan establishes a definition of the video essay up front in his book, *The Essay-Film*:

(1) A testing of expressive subjectivity through (2) experiential encounters in a public arena, (3) the product of which becomes the figuration of thinking or thought [either the development of thought or the final product of an experience] as a cinematic address and a spectatorial response. (30)

I find the "test of expressive subjectivity" most important in this definition. Essayists since the personal essay's inception have used their own knowledge of their subject matter, through both research and rumination, as a basis for offering substantive, subjective viewpoints. Point two necessitates a consumer as part of the definition: essay-films delve into the public experience in order to impart meaning to the audience. Corrigan's description of the essay-film, while cumbersome, aptly describes the personal essay and the essay-film's place in the genre. On the whole, this definition coincides with my own definition's "strong personal narrative" as the most important element in distinguishing the video essay.



For context, length is the only discernable difference between “essay-film” and “video essay” for Corrigan and other critics. Both monikers contain the same elements. Further clarifying this definition, Corrigan portrays a public arena as a social place where ideas are developed through experience. He argues that the essayistic subject and the film essay’s narrative must venture into society to test ideals and subsequently develop them. These criteria all provide excellent examples and benchmarks for discerning whether a personal narrative qualifies as a video essay as opposed to a documentary.

Corrigan also argues that the essay is a response to any number of social, political, and environmental concerns. He writes, “because of the tendency of the essay[s] to respond to and depend on other cultural events that precede them...essays have frequently been viewed as a parasitic practice” (4). Still, he asserts, “the power of the essay, however, lies precisely in its ability to question or redefine these and other representational assumptions” (4). Adherence to a political and responsive element in the essay leads Corrigan to expect social or artistic commentary out of the video essay.

Corrigan’s definition also adheres to the classic vision of the essay: “expressive subjectivity” and “experiential encounters” could adequately describe the works of essayists Joseph Addison and Richard Steele or even Michel de Montaigne. Only the medium separates the regular essay and the film essay, according to the final component of Corrigan’s definition. Unaddressed in this definition is how one accomplishes an “experiential encounter in a public arena” through a “cinematic

address.” Corrigan explains this process through numerous examples, some of which I will take up in the next section.

Corrigan is not alone: other critics have explored the potentials of this new genre. Phillip Lopate in his essay, “In Search of the Centaur,” goes deeper into the requirements for classification as a video essay. He lists five qualifications to define a “genre that barely exists” (Lopate 19).

- 1) An essay-film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled, or intertitled...
- 2) The text must represent a single voice...
- 3) The text must represent the speaker’s attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse on a problem...
- 4) The text must impart more than information; it must have a strong, personal point of view...
- 5) The text’s language should be as eloquent, well-written and interesting as possible. (19)

Once again, the definition places a premium on the writing and, perhaps even more than Corrigan’s, the authorial voice. Fundamentally, these critics and I agree upon the presence of a single voice. Certainly, this single narrative voice fits with the essay, but it also fits within film tradition through the auteur theory. A theory that grew out of the French New Wave, an auteur is thought to be a creator with a distinct identity that makes his or her films instantly distinguishable to viewers. Lopate proceeds to mention the essayistic quality of various auteurs, citing Woody Allen, Jean-Luc Godard, and others as semi-to-total practitioners of the essay-film.

Particularly problematic is point five’s imprecision, as “well-written” and “interesting” are minimum benchmarks for any artist. I interpret these criteria as a hint at my belief in the need for intricate story construction and layering in video essays.

Many examples from Corrigan and Lopate accomplish elegance through intertextual images and sounds, as well as experimental storytelling. Lopate does not necessarily advocate for non-traditional narratives, but his desire for an essay-film that imparts meaning relies on more than just a monologue set to pictures. Like point five in Corrigan's discussion, this definition as a whole is far too vague, and yet Lopate and Corrigan remain some of the foremost experts in scholarly discussion of video essays and essay-films.

The problems in their definitions come, in part, from the historical and technological myopia in which they discuss the films: these definitions don't seem to account for the fact that essayists are now working in a digital age. The rise of social networking, digital devices, a massive internet distribution network, and portable phones/tablets have all revolutionized artistic capabilities. Labeling a genre with a checklist in this age of new media feels like a feeble grasp at definition. Like the video essay as a whole, pinpointing an actual definition for "new media" itself is difficult. In *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, commentator Martin Lister discusses which media forms qualify as "new media:"

We take them to be those methods and social practices of communication, representation, and the expression that have developed using the digital, multimedia, **networked** [sic] computer and the ways that this machine is held to have transformed work in other media: from books to movies, from telephones to television (Lister 19).

Lister accurately explores the complexity and freedom offered through new media. Creators have the means to transform and visualize ideas that could previously be expressed only through words. Digital editors can completely replicate the work of

film editors with more precision. A writer can transform a piece on a current cultural event into an immersive experience for the reader or consumer. Even “reader” is too simple a term for the modern essayist. Whether in a commercial video game coded by designers or work of art by an artist or auteur, immersion requires that the *user* must inhabit that space. To the video essayist, possibilities for immersion are endless. The director can edit found footage (footage discovered from friends, the internet, even old tapes from his or her family), accidental footage, and behind-the-scenes content into the film. New media contributes both the technology for amateurs to edit video on cheap software and the means for any creator to distribute worldwide their own art through various publications and electronic venues.

Because of new media’s limitless options, the video essay is different to all sorts of practitioners, from directors to critics to authors to essayists to performers. I concede that Lopate and Corrigan’s fundamental points get to the heart of what the essay is, but numerous contradictions exist between their stated definitions and the films that resonate powerfully with audiences. For one, their definitions fail to meet any criteria for the visual end of the video essay. Lopate offers little on this topic, expressing his own confusion while dissecting Orson Welles’s *Filming Othello*:

Welles solves through his own charisma the sticky problem of what to do about visuals in an essay-film—simply by filling the screen with himself talking. Suddenly we are face to face with our essayist, rather than hearing a disembodied voice. Cutaways [between different conversations] ...provide sufficient visual variety to his talking torso. (21)

In my mind, there is absolutely no “sticky problem,” as visuals are essential to the video essay as a form. Whether the visuals emerge as clear examples of the narration’s

subject matter or meaningfully contradict the narrative, the tension between the auditory narrator and the visuals that the video essayist *chooses* to use are essential to my understanding of the video essay. Perhaps in a serious moment, a hilarious video clip crosses the screen, popping the narrator's bubble in a self-depreciative moment. Perhaps instead, as an interviewer and interviewee laugh, a funeral takes place on-screen. The hypothetical funeral would not be out of place: essayists use discomfort to heighten tension and challenge their audience to answer questions posed by the piece. The video essay poses more of a challenge than the written essay because of the natural separation of sound and image. Visual irony, when used in an effective video essay, strikes deep and highlights complexities within the piece.

A focus on the authorial voice may be good enough for Corrigan and Lopate, but Freeman feels that the visuals can add far more to that voice. To illustrate her point, she discusses a scene from Agn s Varda's film *The Gleaners and I*, in which Varda's lens cap is allowed in the shot:

We are made aware. It's uncomfortable. *Wait a minute, that's her lens cap.* We laugh, uncertain. Varda forfeits the authority of the filmmaker, transparently, self-consciously...In the middle of the film Varda pulls back the curtain and engages us in the making. (Freeman)

Self-reflexivity through visuals, a process that Freeman describes here, has become a staple of the video essay, in part from artists like Varda and Ross McElwee. Self-reflexive, in the film world, refers to a film's acknowledgement of its own manufactured nature: the video essay may attempt to find truth, but the medium of film is manipulated constantly through editing and staging. A glimpse behind the filming process, for Freeman, helps fundamentally differentiate the voice of the

essayist from the voice of the documentarian. I strongly agree with Freeman's assertion. Self-reflexivity is an element of the video essay important to the genre's development and aesthetic. Suddenly, these techniques humanize the authoritative voice and enter that new character into the often non-linear narrative. For the new video essayists, inserting personal voice through either error or behind-the-scenes revelations exposes the consumer to the essayist. Self-reflexivity has been used effectively since Montaigne and visuals can subvert and/or reinforce the narrative itself with perhaps even less distraction.

Most importantly, Freeman says, the video essay "insists on creative egalitarianism and engages practitioners without discrimination—the writer, the filmmaker, the painter, the installation artist, the scholar." Contrary to Lopate and Corrigan, Freeman defines video essays as a genre interdisciplinary by nature, with no inherent bias toward narrative or visual meaning. She analyzes the meaning that emerges from the interrelationship of various means. I echo this inclusion in my own definition, calling for both layering of video and structuring of a personal narrative. Freeman's thought process and my own research into defining video essays highlight the need for both sight and sound to work together coherently while functioning separately as well.

John Bresland seconds that call in his "Call for Cinemoems and Video Essays," writing, "We call them video essays, but what they're called doesn't matter so much as what they do. We're looking for essays that use language, image, and sound with equal fluency and brio."

So, in short, the genre examined here is obsessively engaged in reflexivity, assigned a nebulous definition it undoes, and littered with practitioners who attempt to subvert expectations while providing emphatic meaning. Each influential example possesses a different quality that fits no specific list of criteria. Every tepidly assigned definition (including my own) has a counterexample within the work of filmmakers and essayists. Scholars may fail to assign the video essay a concrete definition, but the films that demonstrate essayistic qualities excite both traditional essay-film and new media scholars. In this conversation, I attempt to provide the strong narrative voice that defines the medium in my own essay, with visual and auditory elements to challenge audience expectations. I also critically examine the world in which my own voice resides. My video essay represents my own definition of the form, both aligning and differing from discussion surrounding the genre.

#### **D. Examples in the Video Essay Medium**

In a genre with such slippery definitions and characteristics, the examples of video essay that I admired exerted the most influence on my work. Elements of these examples explain the video essay as I understand it: they illustrate the elements in my definition that drew me toward the medium as a means of self-exploration and self-expression.

Following up on a fundamental point in each video essay definition, I searched for many works with strong personal narratives. I found beautiful works like Derek Jarman's *Blue* and Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*, but I will focus on Ross McElwee's *Bright Leaves* because of its focused exploration of the filmmaker's personal story.

*Bright Leaves*, a video essay released in 2003, tells the story of a filmmaker's family through the history of an obscure Hollywood film. McElwee uses this film's story of his ancestor's failure in the tobacco business to examine his own complicity in the hundreds of thousands of lives claimed by cigarettes. In a particularly telling scene, McElwee interviews a patient with a terminal illness from cigarette complications, only to zoom out and reveal his son capturing the audio and listening intently to the disturbing story (Corrigan 25). McElwee breaks frame to reveal another thread of his film's story. His voice as a narrator adds layers of depth to an exploration of family and responsibility.

Like Orson Welles and other filmmakers, McElwee explores his topic obsessively, documenting all his discoveries and thoughts from his filming process. McElwee obsesses equally as a technician, stopping throughout the film to experiment with various shots and keeping some of his mistakes in the final cut. In one specific instance, McElwee works with different focuses and lenses on a mirror image of himself outside of a hotel. He remains so intent in his concentration that he misses in the background the largest rat I have ever seen. In another scene, he inserts multiple takes he shot of himself walking past small sculptures. A simple shot actually takes many tries, once because a dog attacks his foot. Mistakes and improvised camerawork open viewers up to the creative process behind filming a documentary, bringing them closer to the author and subject of *Bright Leaves*.

If *Bright Leaves* glorifies its mistakes and spontaneity, *Waltz With Bashir*, nominated for the Oscar's Best Foreign Language Film, takes pride in its precision.



Intricately animated and deeply embedded in the tradition of French New Wave artists Jean-Luc Godard and Varda, filmmaker Ari Folman chronicles his experience as an Israeli soldier in the 1982 Lebanon War. Filmed 21 years after the fact, the film mixes flashbacks with a contemporary Folman tracking down friends in an effort to remember his experiences. He spends 85 minutes of the film doing just that, to further success. As his memories solidify, he edits in interviews with actual soldiers involved in the massacre, culminating in news footage of the thousands dead in an act of genocide against Muslims by a Christian faction. Folman creates a feature-length personal essay to inform humans on just one news story that they might otherwise passively dismiss on the nightly news. *Waltz With Bashir*, full of precision and beautiful animated scenes, may function tonally differently from *Bright Leaves*, but its complexity makes it equally representative of the video essay genre. Folman layers an animated and fictional “present-day,” animated flashbacks to the war, dream sequences, partly animated genuine interviews of military personnel, and actual news footage to provide a complex story and a structurally rich piece.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of video essays to a filmmaker, the form can potentially provide an immersive sensory experience through various modes of auditory and visual communication. *Waltz With Bashir* and *The Gleaners and I* create some of the best crescendos of shots and sounds. The interplay between the two creates the compelling layering that characterizes the genre. Filmmakers create meaning through the melding of the two: both audio and visual elements have the ability to redefine their counterpart.

My favorite example comes from a ten-minute video essay called *Zero Station* by John Bresland. An exploration of our dependence on technology, Bresland's essay uses the sounds of indie band Deerhoof, his own low musings, and voicemails from his mother to construct a narrative. Bresland constructs a scene in which the elements experienced by the user thus far (driving, texting, weather radar radio, Deerhoof's fragment) all come together on top of one another. Bresland begins the scene with a musical swell and footage from the dash of a car weaving through traffic. The weather radio plays under it. Suddenly, a robotic voice addresses Bresland directly, and texts about his son's circumcision build on top of the screen, obscuring the road from the audience. On the dash cam, Bresland weaves through traffic recklessly with all of the other sensory information layered on top. He creates tension from both the immersive experience and a union of themes familiar to the audience. Bresland produces his modern take on the essayistic quality of synthesis, elevating what was once a safe reading experience in the classic-print genre to an edge-of-the-seat thrill ride in a short film.

Despite the plentiful works already mentioned, as well as others by Terrence Malick and Godard, few video essays make any real attempt at humor outside of cynical ironies. Through the prevalence of new media and means to make editing easier and cheaper, newer video essays seem to be more comfortable in frivolity and fun. Brian Bouldrey's *Hook*, about his desire to rid children of their innocence through knowledge, utilizes the potential for humor in the video essay much more than the few sarcastic quips offered by other pieces. Bouldrey jokes around in his narration

constantly: he rattles off a list of words that are not vulgar in definition, but instead through double entendre, such as “cockatoo,” “cummerbund,” and “hung jury.” The film breaks frame like the other essays above, this time to show its narrator unable to contain laughter at the name “Dick Butkus.” *Hook* even plays with conventions in tone. Shot with Bresland’s clear, personal touch, the film does not sport his gravelly tones and gravity of dialogue. Unlike many of the other video essays, Bouldrey approaches his dialogue lightly, with a higher pitch and conversational attitude. Perhaps even more than my other examples above, Bouldrey exemplifies Corrigan’s “spectatorial response.” He may focus on interactions with children but, through his desire to communicate the harsh truths of the world to kids, he communicates these truths instead to the viewer.

I chose these examples to express both the diverse potential of the video essay and reveal the most direct inspirations from the tradition of the video essay on my own creative work. Working within such a small tradition, I found it important to contextualize my work in light of other films in the genre. Through these films, I better understood my own perceptions on essayistic voice while simultaneously learning the conventions of the video essay. Video essays offer more chances to practice traditional essayistic techniques while also leaving ample room to reinvent or refine the form from its notable practitioners.

### **E. Comedy And Reflexivity**

Besides my experience and sincere love for comedy, I chose stand-up comedy as the subject of my video essay because of its own tradition in self-reflexivity. This

tradition stems from a few works, such as the hit show *Seinfeld* and autobiographical films like Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*. *Seinfeld*, known for challenging television norms, executes a story arc in which the Jerry Seinfeld of the show and his best friend George (an author-avatar for comedian Larry David) pitch "a show about nothing" to NBC as a pilot ("The Pitch"). The arc parallels the show's real life production process, culminating in a pilot taping in which most of the guest characters from the show's past appear.

*Annie Hall*, 1977 Best Picture winner, also qualifies as a film with essayistic conventions. Through author-avatar Alvy Singer, Woody Allen details an entire love affair between an affable stand-up comic and Diane Keaton's Annie Hall. The film paralleled the real life relationship and split between Keaton and Allen. Allen displays his comedy and filmmaking skill to the audience through the mixture of direct addresses to the audience, quick flashbacks, and seamless slips back into scene. Beyond earning my own respect, Allen is also cited by Lopate as one of the semi-video essayists that he admires.

Most recently, FX television show *Louie* brings comedy and the essay's self-reflexivity together in a fascinating way, using tangential bits from Louis C.K.'s stand-up act to inform sketches that express C.K.'s unique brand of comedy. *Louie* focuses on C.K. after his divorce as he balances his healthy stand-up career with raising two young daughters as a single parent. Unlike most sitcoms, C.K.'s show portrays the life of a stand-up comic with the thoroughness and intensity of an essayist. In his first season, C.K. takes on religion, aging, and the futility of

relationships, both onstage at New York City comedy clubs and in his life. The episode “God,” particularly, moves between stand-up sets in the present day and a reenactment of a young Louis C.K. dealing with fear-mongering Sunday school teachers. His final views on religion are expressed through a touching speech from C.K.’s mother to the panicked child: “Jesus was a really, really nice guy who lived a long time ago and told everyone to love each other and boy did he get his for that. But you had nothing to do with it” (Season 1, Episode 11).

As actor/writer/director, Louis C.K.’s thoughts come unfiltered, without the normal creative control usually retained by networks. *Louie* has become a landmark show in the comedy world because of the honest glimpse into the life of its creator. In the second season, C.K. sends his title character on a U.S.O. tour modeled on C.K.’s own experience. In the following season, he pulls back the curtain on late-night television while Louie the character competes to host the Late Show with David Letterman. While the U.S.O. tour focuses on honor, Late Night is fraught with lies and alliances. Both successfully strike a serious note, but the comedy both on and off stage is equally potent.

Productions like *Annie Hall* and *Louie* provide a precedent for the use of both humor and reflexivity in classic films and TV shows. While Bouldrey uses vulgarity to express his jokes, reflexive storytelling and imagery can allow for deeper, highbrow humor, as well. Allen, Seinfeld, and C.K. are all stand-up comics who know to construct a good story and are willing to break out of genre conventions in service of

their narratives. Video essayists with my comic concerns share the same boldness, blurring the line between experimental comedy film and video essaying.

### **F. My Video Essay**

In my personal definition of the video essay, I situated my work in the tradition of the video essay by defining the subgenre as a work that includes a personal narrative, intricate story/narration structure, rich video layering of text and image, and an intelligent sense of humor.

In creating a personal narrative, I wanted to use both thoughtful narration and film images that depicted my experience and worldview. I decided to incorporate old family tape as an important part of the film. Revisiting family tape was a long process: I sifted through hours upon hours of footage taken of my childhood. My family never missed a chance to record my siblings and me as we grew up, which luckily fit within the video essay's tradition. Ross McElwee, for instance, films countless hours of footage, finding the story within it during post-production (Corrigan 27). I replicated his process for my own video essay in my family room, narrating over shots a decade old with my present experiences.

While the old footage adds authenticity to my piece, I did not preoccupy myself with the facts behind the clips. Video essays seek to find truth in personal experience and identity, even at the cost of sacrificing accuracy in chronology or the factual documentation of events. In *Stories We Tell*, Sarah Polley shows Super 8 footage of her family throughout the film. As the footage reveals progressively more intimate moments, the viewer discovers Polley's disingenuous joke: the Super 8

footage is fraudulent. Polley admits the lie and introduces the hired actors and actresses who play her family throughout the entirety of the movie. The woman we thought was her late mother, seen constantly in the film with heartbreaking tenderness, was merely an actress in all of the private, ghostly moments the viewer experienced.

I treat my audience far better than that, but I, too, fold footage shot for other purposes into a personal narrative of my life as a performer and sufferer of social anxiety. My voiceover comments on the past Taylor, re-contextualizing his motives as he frolics naively and gleefully past the camera. I accuse my past self of developing a personality desperate for attention to illustrate the need for attention that many stand-up comics, including myself, suffer from.

In pre-production, I wrote the narration separate from the shots gleaned from old family tapes and YouTube found footage. I decided that I wanted my thoughts on the pursuit of comedy to carry themselves rather than stitching together notions out of the footage I had already deemed compelling. I approached the narration like any other essay, delving deep into my personal feelings, free writing, and editing until I achieved a coherent structure. Mine is not the only, or even the most common, process. Poets, actors, traditional essayists, traditional filmmakers, and students create video essays now: all approach the medium from a different sensibility with different aims and processes. I approached this project from an essayist's perspective. I wanted to craft my own narrative with no visual limitations. Like *Bright Leaves*, I use personal stories to discuss larger truths. McElwee illustrates the history of cigarette distribution in America through his great-grandfather's tobacco business while I

comment on comics' fanatical pursuit of unlikely success through a depiction of my anxious and ambitious childhood.

I found maintaining a coherent plot with an experimental structure particularly challenging in both production and pre-production. One key element differentiating the video essay from the short documentary is narrative voice, but structure arguably separate the two forms the most. *Zero Station* takes the viewer back and forth from bike rides to baby birds to iPhone capabilities to the amount of oil burned by the United States in a year. *That Kind Of Daughter* by Kristen Radtke chronicles just three fractured memories of her mother, all without any anchor in time. I organize my video essay by place: the piece moves from a question posed (why would anyone do stand-up?) into my answer through the comedy scenes in Columbus, Ohio; New York City; and Athens, Ohio.

Video essayists have historically used place to structure their essays. Chris Marker's essay-film *Sans Soleil (Sunless)* is often called a travelogue, but also serves as a landmark event in the development of video essays (Corrigan 127). Moving between Japan, West Africa, Iceland, San Francisco, and Paris, Marker uses fictitious letters and locations to tell his story. Like other video essays mentioned, the film explores memory and storytelling in a non-linear fashion to capture something honest about the human experience.

*Waltz With Bashir* is similar, telling an authentic narrative to its audience through the fictional, repressed memories within the narrator. Through non-linear movement, Folman reveals his question, conflict, and answer in his own time. He uses



structure to comment, like Marker, on the nature of memory, but also on the human tendency to gloss over tragedy. Folman spends an hour and a half slowly accumulating more memories to heighten the emotional impact of real footage of bodies and wailing survivors composing the final five minutes of the film. Through his non-traditional structure, Folman builds tension toward the powerful moment when animation disappears and reality appears.

While my essay is far less serious, I try to do the same by moving from place to place rather than through time. I cut back and forth between modern shots and family films, but I anchor the narrative in the places I discuss. Different cities' comedy scenes in my video essay, coupled with my progression as a comic, put emphasis on the different futures that await myself and other aspiring comics around the United States. While I highlight my own comedy career in Athens, the structure of my video essay reminds the viewer that I am a case study for a larger group of comics working open mics, hoping for a shot at a career in comedy. In Columbus, I chronicle the futility of attempting to perform stand-up at open mics: "In Columbus, only other comics watch you. Petty, desperate comics," I say. New York stands for the larger aspirations of each comic I meet, "Columbus but with opportunity...or rather hope." Athens, finally, is a cradle, a chance to grow while also staying sheltered and naïve. My visuals allow me to work within these worlds, highlighting the reasons for hope and fear in each.

Beyond the intricate structure of the narrative, I also use the self-reflexive techniques discussed by Freeman to break the frame of the essay and add further

complications. After expressing my cynicism toward the Columbus comedy scene, I include a shot of myself recording narration for the actual essay. In this behind-the-scenes look, my girlfriend stops me in the middle of my narration and tells me that I “still don’t sound convinced” delivering my lines. In the moment, I laugh, but also contemplate her suggestion. This moment is absolutely sincere, really challenging my thoughts regarding the project. I use this recorded, happy accident as a turning point in the video essay. Her interruption causes the actual essay to change course, leading the narrator to accept Columbus as a place of talent and friendship like Athens. This spontaneous interruption to the planned narrative reminds the audience that any story is subject to change, revision, and chance. Practitioners of the video essay, notably Polley and Folman, discuss the fragility of stories and memories through their works, providing precedents for my structural shift. I also end the piece on a note of self-reflexivity. My final line cuts into the voiceover booth, where I touched up and re-did the narration the audience hears throughout the film. This is the last shot of myself as a filmmaker. As I leave the studio and fade out, the comics I worked with at Ohio University and the child I was faded out with me.

When building my video essay, I wanted to include a layering of sounds and images that made the essay emotionally resonant. As a comic, I have faced little hardship: I am a student who has fun with comedy even when shows do not go well. My narration reads as cynical, but I deliver it lightly, conversationally, and with humor. I wanted to use the end of my video essay to explore my emotions about the future through a retrospective reconciliation with my past. In preparation, I poured

over the highway scene in *Zero Station*, which layers text messages over a speeding vehicle and weather radar over disjointed music by Deerhoof. I wanted to use these tactics to achieve a feeling of nostalgia and confusion in my own work.

To start, I had to decide whether the visual happenings or narrative voice is the more important focus of each scene. In *Zero Station*'s build, Bresland shifts from simplicity and coherence to complete sensory overload. Visually, I layer the image of leaving my voiceover booth with 16 frames of every single comic that took the stage in my organization this year. I then layer a heavily remixed song by a local artist with laughter from various sets throughout the year. The sounds blur and the images get more personal as the sequence builds, culminating in one final fadeout of the song and a final image of child Taylor absorbed into the sunlight. Many video essays use this build toward an emotional climax, not just *Zero Station*. In *Ode to Every Thing*, about the toys of a child, Eula Biss speeds up a scene of her husband playing with her child. Beauty may be subjective, but video essayists often use a progressively more emotionally charged sequence of scenes to capture some sort of universal majesty.

I may complicate the fun of the first two-thirds, but I do not negate it with the buildup. The first two thirds of the film develop around the notion that the video essay format is conducive, indeed perfectly suited, for humor. Here, I break from most video essay tradition: film-essays began in the art community and remain engrained in the experimental tradition of taking on only the most serious and upsetting subjects.

One easy way to make the essay humorous is to take the tension inherent between video and sound and escalate it for humor rather than tragic emotional

energy. I illustrate the most effective moment of humor in my video essay through found footage on YouTube, where a young boy is hit hard in slow motion by a goat. Essayists use found footage from the internet, traditionally, to discuss the prevalence and capabilities of new media. Before this moment in my essay, I linger on a cute, young Taylor jumping at the camera while current Taylor comments on his need for attention. As a scared young Taylor walks to his first day of Kindergarten, I reveal that my insecurities as a five-year-old led to being bullied by the smallest kid in class. I explain that a goat running for its food hit the bully in question while the slow motion goat in the film makes contact with the other young boy's chest. I comment here on my anxiety from perceived danger of the world, but cloak the message in surprising physical comedy that elicits laughter in viewer.

Other jokes function on a surface level through the narration or the images onscreen. When writing my essay, I used my process for writing a stand-up set, crafting each element through different punchlines and tones for each section. Thanks to the video essay format, I can annunciate with audio/visual irony to change the meanings of certain lines. On paper, my script seems tragic and decidedly unfunny. In the video essay, though, I play with the sad lines and twist them into a joke at my own expense. On the surface, a line like "I would never find comfort in myself again: I had met other children" sounds serious and full of angst. But, delivering the line from the voiceover booth, I can make it tongue-in-cheek (a nod toward the stand-up tradition of self-deprecation) and focus the joke on my own hubris in my school days. I do the same with the line, "They say picture the audience in their underwear, but I picture

them as my parents.” I have fun with my own self-image as a narrator, comedian, and character.

I also provide humorous images even when the context is more serious. In the final emotional build, I initially edited in an Easter Show put on by my brother and I for our family. My brother performs as a “Strong Man,” lifting a baton over his head, while I perform the world’s worst magic act. Despite this, our family claps loudly for our performances. The senselessness of the scene, especially as I clumsily manage to reveal all of my secrets while struggling to pull a tiny rabbit out of a big hat, added both levity and poignancy to the final scene of the essay. I decided in post-production to move this silly scene, instead adding myself tripping over a toy lawnmower. I used post-production to try different jokes in different contexts and see what humor I can achieve.

In the section above, I mention Bouldrey’s *Hook* as an amusing video essay that influenced me. I was most influenced by Bouldrey’s monologue, where he writes humorous lines containing nuggets of truth. At one point, he comments:

I was stranger danger. I walked directly out of the park and, the next week, I got my new dog. Now I can be in the park at two in the morning, if I have my dog. Because I am white. And I am male. And I have a dog. (Bouldrey)

I tried to channel that in my discussion of comedy in Columbus:

Here I am trying to support an open mic at a falling-apart bar. Fantastic onion rings and a dozen spectators, three of which I brought. Across town, I watch some assholes win Columbus’s funniest person contest in the Famous Funny Bone while two of my talented friends receive moderate laughs...When you’re a club owner in Columbus, self-reflection is optional.

In the video essay, I stress the words “fantastic” and “Famous” to mock the futility of a Columbus open mic and the grandeur of the Funny Bone. Through his sarcasm, Bouldrey proves that pointed jokes can be made through a strong vocal performance of the written narration. Charisma adds yet another layer to an already heavily layered form.

### **G. Conclusion**

After submitting the thesis, I will submit my video for publication to John Bresland at *Tri-Quarterly Magazine* and then to other online new media publications. I hope to see my video essay join its contemporary counterparts. Developing my video essay was no easy task: I was at times cursed by the lack of a template for my work. The freedom was invigorating, but also a beckoning into the depths of my own mind. Still, the lack of tradition in the video essay gave me a chance to do what few English majors get to do: add original and meaningful input to the construction and conventions of a literary genre. I put my own definition into action. I included all of the elements that I love from the personal essay, the experimental short film, digital editing, and stand-up comedy to create my own, as Lopate would refer to it, “centaur”—a combination of film and literary traditions.

If my video essay is accepted for publication, I have the chance to meaningfully challenge the definitions that have preceded mine. I can prove to Lopate that visuals are no “sticky” problem. I can remind Corrigan that film conventions should impact his definition far more than they currently do. I can provide Freeman with my own scene like Varda’s dancing lens-cap for discussion and analysis. I can

prove to the comedy world that progressive ideologies are worth the risk of alienation, while proving to the outside world that comedy is a worthy artistic pursuit. My conventions, ideals, and processes provide another complication to a genre that each new practitioner seeks to complicate. That alone made the project a worthwhile and exciting creative endeavor.

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*3174 words*

STAND UP COMEDY AND THE ESSAY, AKA LOUIS C.K. MEET MICHEL DE  
MONTAIGNE

So I have this story for my stand-up act about a guy killing some dogs. I had a buddy who wanted to cut me into a drug heist, a dangerous one, in which we'd be breaking into a meth dealer's house, killing the dogs that guard his stash, gaining meth and money. It's a real story about a real kid that I was friends with because I peed in a Gatorade bottle to help him pass a drug test so I could impress this girl.

But with this guy, nothing is easy: his mother finds my urine and pours it down the sink, which makes no sense because there's a toilet in the room. At 14, I'm not even really certain drug dealers exist, let alone that my friend is one of them, so when he asks me if he should cut me in and get me a gun, I say, "Yeah, uh-huh, get me a gun." The next day he comes into school with a picture of himself holding a Desert Eagle semiautomatic, sporting it with his head mid-gangster nod.

"When did you say this was?" I ask.

"Saturday, bro!"



“Saturday? Oh, Saturday we have dinner with my grandma, I can’t kill meth dogs on Saturday.”

He’s crushed, but he begrudgingly accepts that dinner with grandma is just too important for meth.

I come in on Monday, and he’s sitting at a desk waiting for me. As I approach, he looks up with the emptiest expression, shakes his head, and says, “I killed those dogs, man.” Then he pulls out his wallet and shows me at least ten grand.

On stage, this joke works, and I often wonder why. How’s it put together so audiences follow along and laugh, rather than sit there wondering how a suburban kid like me could have almost wasted a meth dealer’s dog with an illegal handgun?

Part of it is the shock, especially at the end. A look up, a shake of the head, and then, “I killed those dogs, man.” The end always gets one of the biggest laughs, because, all along, the audience thinks the kid is full of shit. The reversal and the harsh reality shock them. Another part is my persona. I’m a 20-year-old kid who goes onstage in a style best described as “Harry Potter on Christmas.” My awkwardness, my hopeless lack of control, and my blindness to the terrifying reality around me are central to the joke. Like Woody Allen, Louis C.K., and Margaret Cho, I self-deprecate, and that lets the audience laugh.

But the real reason this joke matters to me, and hopefully my audience, is the world that it constructs and the people who inhabit it. In that world, my audience accompanies me and watches the events unfold from an over-the-shoulder camera attached to 14-year-old Taylor; they plug into his brain. They see his opinion of his friend sour and they see him awaken to a rough, adult world.

And yet it's not just about me. The kid who kills the dogs needs the most attention. We need to understand him without sympathizing with him. His actions are horrifying, so the voice I give him is hard and forcibly careless. This is a person that I boil down to four lines, and I have to reveal something true through him. In this case, I'm using him to show that the world is far more serious than we think, especially in youth, and that the dark side in people goes deeper than drug tests and crushes. He's the senselessness from which we're often only a step removed.

Good stand-up is world creation. The comic creates a setting with characters, points of view, all with the aim of an enjoyable or enlightening experience. Ideally, both. When I watch a set, I might catch the world of someone crafting his Grimace/Mayor McCheese fan-fiction/pornography (this is a real and hilariously disgusting example). Comics create infinite worlds, yet all too often, I enter a less interesting world where the comic draws (or more likely traces) the lines with which we are all too familiar:

lines between blacks and whites, gays and straights, men and women. Unfortunately, such reductive and commonplace comedy has a glaring ancestor.

### **The Minstrel Show**

So here's the problem with my world-creation theory: scholars have determined pretty conclusively just where stand-up comedy comes from, and that place is the minstrel show. I'd love to blame this on stuffy old professors who don't get jokes unless tenure is the subject matter, but all one needs to do is turn on Comedy Central's featured comics to find the remains of the minstrel show broadcast nightly.

Onstage, we have an actor/comic who plays the fool for our laughs, who appeals to the lowest variety of humor he or she (but often he) can tap into. In minstrel shows, the target is the poor, dumb African-American that inspires the Jim Crow caricature. Stand-up is broader, but no less cruel. Hackiness is not just laughing at an unpopular person or group. White men telling stories about how terrible they are (their sexual impotence, poor morality, and general stupidity) is also a staple of the stage. This takes us no closer to complexity than a minstrel show, but at least these comics don't bring minority groups into their crippling, self-deprecating narcissism. Still, the "look at this dumbass over here" mentality of the minstrel show is ever-present and always lazy.

Here at Ohio University, I see brilliant and not-so-brilliant comedy. Recently, I was invited to the Latino Comedy Jam on campus and asked if I wanted to see the comic Manny Maldonado. I was given [this YouTube link](#).

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In it, Maldonado attempts to link jokes about Tetherball and Gay Mechanics with a transition and, instead of making a hard cut to a new subject, he claims that the gay mechanic is his brother and that hitting the tetherball turned him gay. The next joke is delivered with a wildly offensive lisp and normal mechanic jargon turned into “gay speak.” Sure it’s world-creation, but you don’t get any points for inventing a world of tired stereotypes. It’s harder than you would think to decide who is most debased in this clip. No one is treated with any dignity, including the comic. But the audience squeals in delight with every tetherball punch.

Even scarier is what minority comics are asked to do onstage in order to be “mainstream.” Raul Perez, a scholar on stand-up, reveals [in this study discussed by TIME](#) that people of other races are encouraged to throw out their old material for racial jokes (Perez via Steinmetz). “The lower on the racial hierarchy, the less elaborate the strategies.” For instance, a Latino student in Perez’s stand-up workshop was advised, “If you’re going to get racist, let’s go all the way.” Yikes. It also puts

Maldonado's comedy in perspective: this is what minority comics are advised to do throughout the industry. They're pushed to find the "easy laugh," which is often thought to lie in stereotypical premises, like airplane food and race. Just to keep everyone laughing. And audiences laugh, making it unclear whether these comics are the cause or symptom of an ugly, unsolved problem with stand-up.

### **Stand-Up Says Something**

But that's not the whole story. There are comics who resist what networks and advertisers want. The earliest and perhaps most revered figure in American political stand-up is George Carlin. Carlin's antics led to a Supreme Court case that allowed the FCC to censor based on "indecentcy" as well as obscenity. Very few people, let alone comics, can say they singlehandedly brought about a new era of public censorship. Carlin's bits on religion, homosexuals, human rights, and the famous Seven Dirty Words are just a few of his famous explorations. Between him, Lenny Bruce, and Richard Pryor, the 60's and 70's provided an explosion of raw expression on stage. These three are the most fascinating comics instrumental in gaining respect for stand-up as art, but I will focus on Carlin to illustrate the lineage over generations. Each would go on to influence virtually every comedian who followed, from Jerry Seinfeld to Bill Hicks.

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Carlin's ruminations are timeless: his bit on Vietnam is still harsh and relevant in today's imperialistic world.

In style, Carlin stands far closer to famed essayists than any other comic. Historical essayists such as Washington Irving and Richard Steele, as well as contemporary essayists such as bell hooks, Marilynne Robinson, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, write about race, gender, class, sexuality, politics, and every other issue in the world around them. Take this brutal excerpt from "Fear Of A Black President" by Coates in *The Atlantic*: "White folks, whatever their talk of freedom and liberty, would not allow a black president. They could not tolerate Emmett's boyish gaze. Dr. King turned the other cheek, and they blew it off. White folks shot Lincoln over 'nigger equality'...beat Freedom Riders over bus seats [and] slaughtered Medgar in his driveway like a dog." Tonally, it reads like a Carlin bit: blunt, angry, and full of perspective. Throughout this piece, Coates shocks the reader with his views, disturbing them with harsh language and brilliantly articulated anger.

It feels out of place, then, when Coates follows up this point in his essay with a stand-up joke from *Chappelle's Show*: "The comedian Dave Chappelle joked that the first black president would need a 'Vice President Santiago' —because the only thing that would ensure his life in the White House was a Hispanic president-in-waiting. A black president signing a bill into law might as well sign his own death certificate." Stand-up comics question social norms with the same ferocity and freedom as the best essayists. In Britain, comics reacting to Thatcher-led England brought on an

alternative comedy movement that swept quickly into the mainstream. In Africa, upcoming stand-up comics in Ghana and South Africa assert a cultural identity through thoughtful and angry stand-up, including alternative comic Mel Miller who was beaten by government officials in South Africa after an “indecent” show.

Stand-up, like the essay, has become a venue to discuss taboos. In his essay *Upon Some Uses Of Virgil*, Montaigne wondered why sexual intercourse was unable to be discussed in polite conversation: “But let us come to my subject: what has the act of generation, so natural, so necessary, and so just, done to men, to be a thing not to be spoken of without blushing, and to be excluded from all serious and moderate discourse? We boldly pronounce kill, rob, betray, and that we dare only to do betwixt the teeth.” Five hundred years later, poking fun at sexual repression is one of the central themes in American stand-up comedy. Carlin, Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and others brought that essayistic tradition of skepticism to stand-up, aggressively questioning popular truth in hopes of starting a new conversation.

### **The Narrative and the Comic**

One difficult part equating stand-up with the essay is that the form itself is so nebulous. I’ve come across many definitions, but what an essay needs has no consensus. Perhaps the best aim of an essay that I have ever heard is Philip Lopate’s: to “interrogate your ignorance.” This process of interrogation, a collecting of scattered

thoughts and facts on a topic in an effort to glean understanding, plays out on the page to help the audience or reader find meaning. Certainly, that definition fits Carlin, but there are always more ways to interrogate ignorance. An important piece of stand-up's history aligns less with the political essay and more with the personal essay, with no better example than Louis C.K.

Let's compare a Louis C.K. joke to the work of the father of the personal essay, Michel de Montaigne. His most famous quotation asks: "What do I know?" In the Renaissance, Montaigne invented a written pursuit of knowledge, a genre he called an *essay* meaning "to try" or "to attempt." He made the case that writers should organize what they know, putting together all of their thoughts on one topic and asking questions in an attempt at discovery.

Four hundred years later, Louis C.K. follows suit: "Will the Earth always go around the Sun?"

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This question comes from Louis C.K.'s seven-year-old daughter. In a manner Montaigne would recognize, Louis gives what he feels is a good answer: "Well no, at some point the Sun is going to explode." She, of course, cries. To comfort her



justifiable horror, he says soothingly, “This won’t happen until you and everyone you know will have died.” The initial question opens up another four minutes on how his daughter is learning to understand a complicated world (she was bit by a pony). By following his daughter’s question onstage, he also follows the tradition of the essay deep into what he knows, only to discover more. That’s the very end that draws Montaigne to essay.

An alert on your scholarly narrator’s bias: Louis C.K. is my most favorite comic in the history of ever. He takes on a different role from the minstrel show, if one exactly as vulgar. Rather than identifying which fool needs mocked, he sets himself up to be the fool that is studied. This is also Montaigne’s move: examining himself and creating a complex character. He is the ignorant man that will be interrogated publicly and onstage. Like Montaigne, master craftsmen like Louis C.K. lead us into their world, guiding us through ideas toward a discovery that, because we know this is a performance, they’ve already discovered. This discovery provides laughter through the punch of knowledge. And Louis’s self is heavily involved, even when his story is not focused through his personal character. Fans like me love Louis because we feel like we know him. Everything makes sense because we trust him and because he smoothly leads the viewer to his conclusions.

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For reference, let's go to [this bit](#) above, where Louis contrasts the petty concerns of society with their technological marvels (*Hilarious*). He interrogates ignorance, certainly, though this time the focus is on others in Carlin-esque fashion. He finds that society is spoiled by technology to the point that past inconveniences are avoided and forgotten. Here, the world is stupid, and he is its mediator. How do comics create that world for themselves? They lie. And they do it a lot. Discussing the technology jokes [in TIME Magazine](#), Louis explains making up a punchline:

Like the story I tell Conan [O'Brien] about the guy sitting next to me on the airplane when the Internet shuts down suddenly, and he says, "This is bullshit," and I go, "How can you be angry? People owe you something that existed a minute ago?" There wasn't anybody next to me on the plane, that was me. People don't talk to me on airplanes. [Laughs] Anytime you see a bit where some stranger does something to me, it's me (Stephey).

Those characters spouting absurdities, such as "I don't want to take off my shoes" in an airport or "I hate Verizon" are the voices in Louis's head. They are his creations. And, wouldn't you know it, essayists use this classic technique: famed essayists Richard Steele and Joseph Addison were creating characters for their social worldviews in early 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain in their publication *The Spectator*. Beyond the lead character, Mr. Spectator, other fictional characters stand for various values. Sir

Roger de Coverley, a famous fictional example from the publication, stood for the need for chivalry in society in the same way that Louis C.K. discusses how much society takes technology for granted through his own author avatars.

Obviously, essayists are more committed to the truth than comics, but both are committed to the essential human experience, one that can be shared universally. We might call it Truth with a capital T.

### **Where Stand-Up Can And Should Go**

The stand-up world was shaken last year when Tig Notaro took the stage on the night of a showcase show in L.A. to no cameras and little fanfare. She revealed that she had been diagnosed just that week with breast cancer. In a beautiful monologue full of wry wit, Tig takes her listener (the “you,” ever-present in stand-up and the essay) through the last year of her life, stopping to discuss her mother’s death, her breakup, her career, and the news that still has her in a state of shock. At the behest of many famous comics from that night, she released the audio in a 30-minute block entitled “*Live*” (as in to live or die). Tig doesn’t know in the set whether she will be onstage for much longer with treatment around the corner. Her cancer has since gone into remission, but the deeply personal details of Tig’s life leaves that original, shocked audience hovering between tears and laughter.

Tig starts by acknowledging her applause with, “Good! Hello! I have cancer, how are you?!” The punchlines are there—“They found a lump. I was like, ‘no, that’s my boob’”—but Tig also has to acknowledge a few audience members who start to weep, likely from their own proximity to cancer. She says to one upset audience member, “It’s going to be okay!...It might not be okay. But you’ll be okay!” to huge laughs. Louis C.K., present for the set, called it the greatest stand-up set of all time. I argue that it transcends stand-up: *Live* is a modern American essay, chronicling one person’s attempt at understanding the scope and senselessness of personal tragedy.

Tig is far from alone in essayistic stand-up. Innovators like John Mulaney tell stories with amazing characters. Hannibal Buress elevates observational comedy into mini-essays on the mundane. Mike Birbiglia, in place of traditional jokes, gives hour-long monologues of enhanced stories. I have seen my friends at Ohio University discuss deeply traumatic experiences with racism, rape culture, disease, fear, bullying, and death. I have tried to live up to these examples: I try to lead my audience down a trail that I have blazed, even if we don’t travel far or if that trail has been blazed before by more competent artists. To keep an audience with my exploration of senseless violence that surrounds us all, I use shock and meth dogs.

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In this tearful tribute to George Carlin, Louis C.K. documents what he learned from Carlin about joke writing (C.K., “Tribute to George Carlin”). Write a new hour based on what you are feeling, do a TV special, and get rid of it. “Are you kidding? I worked 15 years on this shitty hour,” Louis jokingly reacts to Carlin’s advice. What follows is absolutely profound: “When you’re done telling jokes about airplanes and dogs, you can only dig deeper. Okay, talk about your feelings and who you are. So then you do those, and they’re gone. Then you start doing jokes about your fears and nightmares and then those are gone. And then you start going into weird shit.” Whenever I am talking to people with an interest in comedy, or talking to myself in the mirror after a bad set, I stress the need to find that weird shit. If stand-up comedy keeps chasing worlds that have yet to be shared, it will eventually be recognized as the art form that I love.

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