

The Video Essay About The Show

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A multipart video essay both examining and imitating *The Show About The Show*, a long-running cult webseries created by independent filmmaker Caveh Zahedi.



Trailer



Research Statement

“The Video Essay About The Show” is a multi-episode video essay about the multi-episode cult webseries *The Show About The Show* created by independent filmmaker Caveh Zahedi. Similar to its object of analysis, the video essay takes a reflexive approach to its topic by structuring each chapter to comment and reflect upon the previous episodes, and thus it does not fully reveal its approach and rhetorical mode until deeper into the series. The video essay is designed to be accessible to viewers unfamiliar with *The Show*, and thus I suggest watching the videos before reading the rest of this statement that unpacks some of the strategies and approaches employed within the series of videos.

Chapter 1



Chapter 2



Chapter 2 ½



Content Notice: This video essay contains images of Woody Allen and footage from *Annie Hall*.

Chapter 3



Video essays are notable for their ability to quote from their objects of study—as Christian Keathley (2011) foundationally argued, digital video tools enable “film scholars to write using the very materials that constitute their object of study: moving images and sounds” (2011). While the re-use of sounds and images from our media sources is an essential and transformative dimension of videographic criticism, it is not the form’s only facet that can bridge the gap between critical and creative practice. Another less explored dimension is the ability to use video techniques to emulate the style, tone, and experience of media objects, an approach that I explore here with “The Video Essay About The Show.”

As discussed in [Chapter 3](#) of this video essay, we can think of such emulation tactics as creating *variations* of its source media, an approach coined—and expertly practiced—by Lého Galibert-Lainé (2019, 2020). Unlike Galibert-Lainé’s exemplary videographic variations that aim to increase their empathy with films’ creators and subjects, my take on *The Show About The Show* embraces more ambiguity toward both the series and its creator Zahedi. I am fascinated by *The Show*, both in terms of its creative use of serialized media reflexivity, the topic of my current research project, and how it leaves me uncertain about how I feel about it. I find watching *The Show* to be both enjoyable and disconcerting, making me respect Zahedi as a filmmaker but not as a person who is documenting and restaging his life. Because his work is so autobiographical and intertwined with his life, any judgment of *The Show* becomes a judgment on Zahedi himself, placing a critic in an uncomfortable position—which is even more compounded through my technique of videographic variation where I emulate Zahedi’s presentational style and reflexive mode, as well as inviting him to appear in the project via online conversations (Johnson 2020; Jovanovic 2023).

This model of critic-as-performer in a video essay is still fairly uncommon among academic videographic work, although many voiceover-driven videos have a performative dimension that can help shape an essay’s tone and impact.¹ Onscreen appearance and performance is much more common on more popular YouTube videos, where well-known creators like hbombguy (Harry Brewis), Contrapoints (Natalie Wynn), Folding Ideas (Dan Olson), and many others regularly film themselves talking to the camera and performing staged scenes as part of their lengthy video essays (MacDowell 2025). *The Show* shares some formal features with such YouTube works, but clearly Zahedi’s approach is less analytical than narrative—or at least his analysis

¹ Beyond Galibert-Lainé’s work, other academic video essayists who have explored filming themselves within some of their videos include Kevin B. Lee, Pavel Tavares, Dayna McLeod, Evelyn Kreutzer, and Christian Keathley.

is solely inward-facing, probing his own creative practices and life choices for our entertainment (and discomfort). Both my approach and Zahedi's style also draws from a tradition of performative embodiment in video art, where creators like Dara Birnbaum, Joan Braderman, Martha Rosler, and Ryan Trecartin put their bodies onscreen as part of their critical and creative practices; unlike many of these video artists, I try to maintain a plausible representation of "real life" and sincere direct address, rather than overt performativity in both my critical monologues and filmed footage, mimicking the tone that Zahedi maintains throughout most of his work.

Thus one of my primary goals with "The Video Essay About The Show" was to transplant Zahedi's nonfiction narrative approach onto an analytic project, exploring how serialized, reflexive production practices could help shine insights into both his original work and the broader videographic critical project. From the start, I aimed to create a multipart video which would, at least nominally, adhere to Zahedi's stated mission for *The Show*: "every episode will be about the making of the previous episode" (*The Show* episode 1). Additionally, I wanted each chapter to shift its videographic rhetorical mode, expanding to include new dimensions from both *The Show* and broader video essay possibilities. Thus the resulting video essay is arguably more like YouTube-style videos than typical academic videographic work, as well as an experimental performance project that denies the straightforward analytical approach typical of video essays in both popular and academic modes.

Additionally, I use humor and irony throughout to both mimic and comment upon Zahedi's tone, knowing full well that jokes don't always land and thus there is some risk with trying to embed commentary within moments played for laughs or otherwise presenting scenes that are insincere or staged. I believe it is worth the risk to expand the rhetorical possibilities of videographic practice, both in appealing to a broader audience and enabling particular ideas and affective reactions that are otherwise hard to explore via more "straight" presentational modes. As Keathley (2011) notably suggested that even more poetical and experimental video essays strive to create a "knowledge effect" (182), I'd extend this to suggest that employing ambiguity, irony, and humor in videographic work can also create a "knowledge affect," allowing us to *feel* a different understanding of a video's analytic object.

It is useful to discuss each chapter's approach in a bit more depth. **Chapter 1** limits itself to editing my own onscreen appearance in dialogue with media clips from *The Show* and other sources, following a fairly typical voiceover-driven videographic mode, but embedding my own direct-address footage in Zahedi's style instead of an unseen voiceover more typical of academic videographic work. It still remains firmly in an

analytic style, although my imitation of Zahedi’s presentational style certainly disrupts the typical distance maintained by a critic from their subject. A core concept briefly introduced in this chapter is “reality check,” where viewers try to operationally discern the fictional vs. factual status of a moment within a film or series, situating the work that we are watching within its own narrative diegesis; this concept expands on my use of the operational aesthetic (Mittell 2015; Mittell 2018) as a way to understand narrative comprehension as applied to works that intentionally blur their representational layers, like *The Show*.²

Chapter 2 expands the palette to add more types of original footage, including moments from my professional and home life, both online and in-person conversations with former students, and extended sequences shot in my classroom. Footage from *The Show* is mostly absent, while Zahedi appears primarily via his Zoom visit to my course. My critical approach shifts away from direct analysis of *The Show* and toward more reflexive consideration of my own engagement with the material, both as a viewer and video essayist, thus making the piece more personal and self-focused (some might say self-obsessed) than typical of academic work. However, the approach aims to foster continuous ambiguity around these representations—I strive to create “reality check” moments for viewers to consider what footage was staged versus captured, as well as complicating the distinction between these representational modes. In presenting these moments, my variation strives to recreate some of the pleasures and challenges offered by *The Show* in videographic form.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to examine my own videographic practices from the first two chapters, primarily by enlisting Galibert-Lainé to comment on my work in an extended critical conversation, creating a mode of embedded open peer review within the work itself. Through this edited exchange, I foreground their voice challenging the presentational mode that Zahedi—and by extension, I—use throughout the project, allowing Galibert-Lainé to articulate (more eloquently than I could) much of the discomfort that *The Show* prompts for me. Additionally, their unscripted reactions to my previous chapters help situate how particular moments were staged, resolving some of the ambiguity inherent in Chapter 2. The conclusion shifts back to my own lived practice, offering a somewhat sincere final note that aims to synthesize what I learned from the project, while still retaining a note of playful ambiguity and embrace of happy accidents.

² Note that my use of “reality check” differs from that of Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2013), who uses the term to explore the moral framework viewers use to engage with fictional vs. factual representations; in a future project, I will be expanding on this moral approach to the term in tandem with my own operational usage.

I have left my comments on [Chapter 2½](#) for the end, as in many ways this is an appendix to the project—it was not planned to be its own standalone video, but feedback I received on an earlier draft of Chapter 2 led me to remove footage concerning Woody Allen from the main series of videos. I wanted to retain a discussion of the ethical quandaries of imitating (and even viewing) morally questionable people in my videos as it was always one of the threads I hoped to explore, particularly in connection with Claire Dederer’s work (2023). After hearing reactions to this video when positioned as Chapter 4, I decided that it did not work as the “final chapter,” and thus should be presented before Chapter 3 but framed as a less essential part of the series. I will admit that I am still uncertain about the ethics of my own practices in reenacting moments from Woody Allen’s film *Annie Hall*, but I purposely did want to push boundaries of my own comfort (both as a producer and potential viewer) to emulate an element of Zahedi’s own practice, which I believe this now-optional part of the series accomplishes. I do plan to expand on this topic on the role of media reflexivity made by so-called “monsters” in my larger project, considering the complicated work and persona of Louie CK (Nussbaum 2019).

To conclude this commentary, I am particularly gratified by what making these videos revealed to me about seriality. Although I have made dozens of video essays and videographic research projects over the past decade, this was the first where I felt like I was cultivating a viewing experience defined by separate episodes presented sequentially. As someone who has dedicated much of my career to studying serial storytelling, the process of serial construction has helped me understand the relationship between episodes and an entire series in a more intimate way, even as I struggle to predict what viewers might make of my endeavors—as friends who have previewed the series have provided diametrically opposed feedback on numerous points! In lieu of trying to articulate my own intentions on how the sum of the whole project adds up, I will stop there and leave it to my viewers to put the pieces together however they see fit.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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In the Bathtub of the World (dir. Caveh Zahedi, 1999).

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I Am a Sex Addict (dir. Caveh Zahedi, 2005).

The Sheik and I (dir. Caveh Zahedi, 2012).

Adaptation. (dir. Spike Jonze, 2002).

The Player (dir. Robert Altman, 1992).

Stories We Tell (dir. Sarah Polley, 2012).

Annie Hall (dir. Woody Allen, 1977).

