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Concepts with Compassion: How ContraPoints Uses the Video Essay Format to Promote Intellectualism and Catharsis

Leika Keys



Abstract: The YouTuber ContraPoints, also known as Natalie Wynn, is a fascinating and complicated artist who is taking the video essay genre to new heights with videos on politics, philosophy, and culture. This paper analyzes her videos *Incels* (2018) and *Canceling* (2020) within the context of the essay film and video essay genres, while also exploring what ContraPoints is and why the project's message is prominent in 2022. However, some of the tools she uses to explore video topics, such as empathy and compassion, are seen as faults by some. While Wynn's videos started out by examining contemporary issues, her fame has grown — bringing more meta or self-referential elements to the forefront of her artistry. While she may have started her YouTube career by making videos about politics and philosophy, she has had to use her talents for defending herself online, particularly in relation to her controversies around non-binary identity. Ultimately, this paper argues that Wynn, through the use of performance, mise-en-scène, personality, postmodernist qualities, and dialogue, has been successful not only in raising and exploring questions of today's cultural and political debates, but also showcasing Wynn as an artist and person.

Keywords: YouTube, video essay, essay film, ContraPoints, cancel culture

The video streaming site YouTube has come far from mere cat videos and irreverent sketches that flooded the site in the early 2000s. In the past decade, the video essay genre has exploded on the platform and other video streaming sites, bringing a new form of “infotainment” (a portmanteau of information and entertainment) to viewers. While the genre was originally dominated by film analysis, it has since been expanded to topics within all kinds of art, politics, and culture. At the forefront of the new wave of the political video essay format is YouTuber and YouTube channel ContraPoints. The creator of this channel, Natalie Wynn, a Ph.D. program dropout, has helped take the video essay genre to new heights with her videos that range from discussions on transgender issues to the concept of justice. While the arguments Wynn offers to her viewers are both thought-provoking and well-researched, it is the performance of her arguments that make the videos all the more effective in their messaging. Through her specific performance, *mise-en-scène* (scene composition), personality, postmodern ideology, and dialogue, she has been able to use the video essay format not only to further intellectual discussion, but to spur emotional reckonings within her audience as well. For the most part, Wynn, with over one million subscribers, has been largely successful in creating sympathetic and empathetic conversations with her audience about noteworthy people and topics. She shows that nuanced conversations surrounding the greater culture war(s) can find a home on the internet and within our lives. However, this paper will also explore how her passionate politics became problematic for her when it brought forth intense criticism from her own community. For this paper, the focus will be on two of her videos: *Incels* (2018) and *Canceling* (2020).

Defining the film essay or video essay seems to be an impossible task. Is it a short film? Is it a form of documentary? Is it an invention or an intervention of the media? Could it be both simultaneously? (Tracy et al. 2019). First and foremost, the video essay cannot be separated from the genre of essay film, a genre that is also difficult to describe in a concise manner. Professor of film and screen media at University College Cork, Laura Rascaroli writes that the category of essay film is notoriously

under-theorized, while at the same time ripe enough to be over-theorized and all-encompassing (2008, 28). Hans Richter, who has been credited with coining “film essay,” wrote that the genre “... allows the filmmaker to transgress the rules and parameters of the traditional documentary practice, granting the imagination with all its artistic potentiality free reign” (1940). Richter calls it both intellectual and emotional cinema, which produces complex thought that can be contradictory, irrational, and fantastic. For the purpose of this paper, the essay film will be viewed as a medium that invites the audience on a journey or exercise to question, feel, understand, and explore, without necessarily providing definitive concrete answers to the questions it brings forth.

Stemming from the essay film, the genre of video essay, also known as the film essay, was first explored by YouTube channels such as *The Nerdwriter* and *Every Frame a Painting*, which engage in criticism and analysis strictly related to film and television. Kevin B. Lee, founding editor and former chief video essayist for Fandor’s film magazine *Keyframe*, writes that the video essay “explicitly reflects on the materials it presents, to actualise the thinking process itself” (2017). In another article Lee explicitly links video essays and essay film saying, “I see video essays as one strain of the essay film whose defining characteristic is the articulation of thought in audiovisual form ... [it is] the reworking of the material through the use of editing, sound, and music” (Bernstein 2016). In recent years, the video essay has expanded, moving beyond the topic of film and now can encompass any topic, such as events, trends, pop culture, or other pieces of media with the main aim of further describing the human condition. ContraPoints, as a project, fits this description and then some as Wynn uses her YouTube videos to present her thinking process and philosophical musings in both an artistic and intellectual manner that educates and moves her audience.

Through the lens of the essay film, Natalie Wynn, also known as ContraPoints, continues the tradition of asking provocative questions and providing detailed analysis on social and political issues, candidly exploring manners that are emotional, artistic, and complicated (Bernstein 2016). With lavish backdrops, skillful editing, intelligently

written scripts, and music crafted by British composer Zoë Blade to boot, Wynn is meticulous in her artistic vision. By heavily utilizing certain elements such as drag and surrealism, or unnerving and illogical qualities in her videos, she expresses the belief that aesthetics can be just as important as politics. In other words, the method in which one makes an argument is just as vital as the argument itself, which is explicitly shown in her other videos *The Aesthetic* (2018), *Opulence* (2019), and *Beauty* (2019). Without going so far as to say that Wynn is a postmodernist, there is a postmodern strain within her videos that is common in the film essay genre, as they tend to align with the postmodernist thinking that there is no objective reality that people can see that is devoid of the human experience (Grenz 1996, 6). Wynn however, does not utilize the common “voice of God” narration found in the film essay genre. Rather, she communicates *as herself*, showing that her politics and arguments cannot be separated from her identity and experiences (Brook 2018). In both *Incels* and *Canceling*, she speaks directly to the audience as herself, not through the characters featured in her videos *The Aesthetic* (2018), *The Apocalypse* (2018), and *Transtrenders* (2019). As Rascaroli notes, the personalistic, almost autobiographical nature of the film essay is crucial, and evidently, something Wynn excels at; her videos are nothing if not personal (2008, 24). Within these videos, a common theme comes up repeatedly: compassion. Wynn frequently engages with people and ideas in her videos that she adamantly disagrees with, yet her aim is to understand them, not lash out against them.

Her most-watched video to date, *Incels*, tackles the topic of “involuntarily celibate” men on the Internet who have built identities and a community around not being able to attract (usually female) sexual and romantic partners (Rascaroli 2008). Bathed in red lighting, Wynn introduces the video while swirling a glass of wine and states the purpose of this endeavor: “In this video, I don’t want to mock incels or lecture them or even sympathize with them. I just want to understand who they are and why they’re like this” (Wynn 2018, 2:24). However, as the video progresses, she ultimately does more than what she promises in her original thesis, instead offering a more nuanced take, which propels

the audience into an intellectual journey of compassion and sympathy. The video itself is segmented into five parts. In the first part, “1st Base: Incelese,” the lighting changes to blue and pink hues, easily recognizable as the colors of the traditional gender binary (Wynn 2018, 2:54). The color of the lighting changes with each segment, while Wynn largely remains the same: glass in hand, directly talking to the camera. At certain points, she changes costumes that range from an 18th Century French aristocratic female dress (5:28) to a trans-exclusionary radical feminist in a wig and beret (19:11) to her character Tiffany Tumbles, a hyper-feminine right-wing transgender woman based on fellow YouTuber Blaire White (28:44). Dressing up in extravagant costumes that can be traced to drag performance not only allows Wynn to deliver information in an amusing and extravagant fashion, but also enables her to present arguments in a dialectical manner, namely that of the Socratic Method. However, this tactic becomes problematic, as she says many misinterpreted her characters and their dialogue, believing they represent her actual beliefs and feelings (Wynn 2020, 44:36).

In *Incels*, Wynn implements these theatrical tactics to sympathize with the subjects she discusses. The video gets help from actress Abigail Thorn (credited as Olly Thorn) of the YouTube channel *PhilosophyTube*, who reads a sampling of Reddit posts made by these self-described incels that discuss women in an inhumane manner, such as by calling them “femoids” (3:00). In Thorn’s reading of the posts and memes made by the incel community, there is an inherent sense of mockery, but it is merely the mocking of the posts and the ideology behind them, not ridiculing the Reddit users *as human beings*. In fact, as the posts get darker and reveal the suicidal ideation and hopelessness of the posters, Thorn’s inflection grows more serious (25:06). If Wynn had recited the posts herself, with her feminine voice, as she does with her Tinder messages in the same video, her interpretation would have come across as pure mockery (18:58). By utilizing Thorn, she shows that a lot of these posts are the ramblings of emotionally damaged and complicated people — they are hurting and their questionable coping mechanism of choice is posting cruel misogynistic diatribes online.

This is not to say that Wynn is forgiving of incels, as they do after all spew inexcusable, pathetic, and violent comments toward women. Wynn acknowledges this by saying, “So incels, I’m not gonna respond to your worldview like it’s a rational debate” (30:23). While recognizing that not all incels can nor want to be saved, she offers them a prescription regardless. She categorizes incels into two groups: those who hate themselves and those who hate women. She ultimately offers them both the same solution: reject this wretched way of life and open up to the idea of being able to have healthy and happy relationships, but she is fully aware that hardcore misogynists will refute this idea.

Again, however much Wynn may despise the incel outlook on life, she understands it to some degree. After highlighting the absurdity of the incel’s world view, in “3rd Base: Tinder is Garbage,” Wynn begins to talk about her own dating and sexual experiences, ultimately revealing to the viewer the true thesis of this video essay: “I know I said I wasn’t going to sympathize with incels, and I know they don’t want my sympathy anyway, and I know it’s bad praxis to sympathize with the devil—but on some level, I can’t help it” (17:13). She even implicates her own audience saying that many of them are probably able to relate to incels on some level (17:18). For Rascaroli, a distinguishing quality of the film essay is that there is a strong distinction between the narrator and the observer. ContraPoints acknowledges this, as she is fully aware of her audience throughout her videos and references them often (2008, 35).

Wynn speaks with her viewers as individuals and understands their general politics. By doing this, she is able to target specific groups of people to elicit a sense of understanding. As Rascaroli says, humanism is inherent in the essay structure, as it assumes a level of unity of the human experience, allowing two subjects to meet and communicate on the basis of their shared experiences (2008, 37). Wynn herself best describes this sentiment in *Are Traps Gay* (2019) by saying, “I’ve always believed that if you wanna persuade anyone, it helps to meet them where they’re at” (2:24). However, being compassionate to those with less than savory views eventually brings trouble to Wynn in later videos, as well as her personal life.

When Wynn endured her own “canceling,” this topic became personal. To introduce her video *Canceling* (2020), Wynn utilizes a quote by 17th Century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who writes, “I have laboured carefully, not to mock, lament, or execrate human actions, but to understand them” (0:01). It is an apt quote that defines not only canceling but ContraPoints’ overall mission statement as a project. For this video, rather than being in her more luxurious mise-en-scène, as seen in *Incels*, she is in a bathtub with a King Cobra liquor bottle in hand and heaps of trash in the background. The imagery here is clear — Wynn is equating herself and her situation to garbage. In this video, there are no other characters or elaborate makeup looks, just an exasperated Wynn delving into her own “canceling” and its implications on her and her loved ones, and shares her thoughts on it in the framework of the greater culture. Her environments are less extravagant than in her other videos as well, for the background changes only from her dining room, a tea room with an East Asian screen, to bright blue and pink backgrounds. In all of these segments, she never fails to have an alcoholic drink in hand and is clearly inebriated towards the end of the video. This puts the spotlight on Natalie Wynn as a human being, and not just the creator of ContraPoints.

Like in *Incels*, Wynn relates her own experiences to the experiences of others and discusses beauty YouTuber James Charles and sex worker August Ames who were also “canceled” to varying degrees. This “canceling” that Wynn experienced, to put it simply, was due both to her past tweets and work with transgender sex worker, Buck Angel, who has been accused of being a “transmedicalist.” A transmedicalist is a person who believes that the transgender experience is dependent on the feeling of gender dysphoria and going through medical treatment to treat one’s dysphoria. To an outsider of the transgender and non-binary community, this may seem almost trivial, but it is a heavy accusation and one that Wynn, as a transgender woman and well-meaning human, takes seriously. For Wynn, the fact that these accusations were from people within her own community is what felt the most painful and isolating. While she retracts a few poorly-worded tweets regarding her former opinions on non-binary identity, she stands by her opinion that her words regularly

get taken out of context online (53:04).

She further maintains her ground on the Buck Angel situation and cites another incident in which she had brunch with a YouTuber who too did not take non-binary people seriously. While people online accused Wynn of fraternizing with the enemy, she claims that after speaking with this YouTuber about non-binary identity, said person promptly took down their videos mocking non-binary people (54:05). As Wynn so plainly put it, “The point is, that, sometimes people who seem ignorant or hateful just need to be given a nonjudgmental space to learn and grow and think” (55:47). While Wynn believes this sentiment to be true and a cornerstone in her philosophy, there are many online who disagree. The most jarring sequence in the entire video lasts about seven minutes, where she reads a montage of the tweets she received from those upset by her words and actions; in a ridiculing manner, she creates a background of anime girl photos and deceptively cheerful music (57:56). Compared to her other subjects, there is not much empathy extended to these Twitter users. This is understandable from Wynn’s perspective as one user even says that Wynn is deserving of violence.

While the video is mostly scripted, there are many moments when she drifts from the script and uses self-deprecating humor, irony, and sarcasm to get through difficult discussions of her past and present. Wynn’s display of self-consciousness here is at full volume and serves as another example of her embrace of postmodernist qualities, particularly being self-aware (Brook 2018). She reveals how her views on gender identity have changed over the years and how she has come to the conclusion that, akin to love, gender expression and identity cannot be rationally explained (48:04). This thinking is the heart of not only Wynn’s ultimate conclusion on this issue, but of her postmodern ideology as well — some things cannot be explained through the avenues of objective rationality and logic but can only be understood and expressed through emotion.

Compassion towards the bigoted in political discourse is controversial, particularly in leftist spaces. Should one respond to homophobia and racism with kindness? Can one engage in a debate

with those who advocate against one's own political emancipation? The crucial point to make about ContraPoints is that she never encourages her audience to be "nice" or to "love one's enemy." Instead, ContraPoints meets people halfway and only engages with those who she believes are of good faith and open to potentially being swayed by her argument. Again, as she says, "Sometimes people who seem ignorant or hateful just need to be given a non-judgemental space to learn and grow and think" (55:55).

Neither *Incels* nor *Canceling* end on particularly light or comforting notes: both videos end with a tired Natalie Wynn fully aware that she cannot always reach out to the audiences that she wants to, whether it be incels or leftists. The ContraPoints project is not about lecturing to prove a point. ContraPoints is about providing a counterargument and hoping somebody else will meet her halfway. She may occasionally come off as uncaring, sarcastic, or scornful in her persona, but it is clear that she cares deeply about building a better world.

It is a testament to Wynn's craft and care that her core audience will generally give her the benefit of the doubt and assume she is coming from a place of kindness and genuine empathy. Wynn was never truly "canceled" in the sense that society at large has tossed her aside. In fact, her viewership since the incident has increased. With her platform, Wynn has been able to foster conversations and create a space for her viewers who are no longer spectators, but are actively involved in discussion with her. This is not to say that Wynn has made no mistakes on her platform; Natalie Wynn is a flawed individual who tweets perhaps more than she should about politics and identity — the perfect cocktail for intense online disputes. However, it is her flaws as a person, internet personality, and creator that make for more interesting and nuanced art and arguments. The only reason she was able to create a delicate yet powerful video such as *Canceling* was because of her nuance as a person and artist.

While ContraPoints creator Natalie Wynn's entire filmography on YouTube shows the value of compassionate intellectualism, *Incels* and *Canceling* in particular highlight how her performance, mise-en-scène, personality, postmodern ideology, and dialogue have fostered both academic and emotional discourse with her conversation partner, the

viewer. It is also due to her controversial nature that she is able to explore complex and rousing avenues, not only as an artist and philosopher, but as an online figure that exemplifies our current political and cultural moment. Regardless of the condemnation she has received for certain statements, on the whole, the video essays under the project name ContraPoints are the perfect successors to the essay film by showing people that empathy can be both productive and meaningful, especially in politics.

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