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The Anatomy of a Video Essay - A Conversation with Cormac Donnelly

Thomas Britt

> 'We produce more to make our lives more comfortable, but in the process of production we create false needs and addict ourselves to mindless consumerism. We produce more to make our lives and the lives of our children better, but in the process of production we poison the environment in which we live. In plain language, all of this amounts to a suicidal use of our creative energy to push ourselves closer and closer toward total omnicide. Our culture is in love with violence, destruction, and death, and its murderous tendencies cannot be reversed either soon or easily, if at all.'
>
> - Predrag Cicovacki, 'The Anatomy of Evil' (2005)

Dr. Cormac Donnelly is an award-winning video essayist, Senior Lecturer in Film at Liverpool John Moores University, and founding editor of *Fragments: A Journal of videographic form and method*. Invited to contribute to the inaugural issue of *Cinégraphia, Donnelly created The Anthropocene Will Eat Itself in response to the theme of the Camera Stylo 5 conference: Approaching Extinction: Anthropological and Environmental Encounters in Literature and Cinema.*

The following is a condensed transcript of a discussion covering some of the high points of Donnelly's career as a critic/essayist, his approach to ideation and editing, his work as an educator, and how research into the Anthropocene informed his creative and technical decisions in this video essay.

Thomas Britt: To begin, could you describe the highlights of the exhibition of your work, or the reception to your work.

Cormac Donnelly: Right at the start, this is in 2019, it had been suggested to me to, as I was starting my PhD, to consider making some videographic pieces as part of my research. At the time, my thesis was going to be a traditional written thesis, because to be perfectly honest, that was what I understood a PhD to be. It was Dr. Liz Green who was at Liverpool John Moores at the time, had suggested to try a video essay. She'd sent me some links, one of which was *Pass the Salt* by Professor Christian Keathley, who's at Middlebury College, and just watching that really opened my eyes to the possibilities.

Because *Pass the Salt* is this piece which is personal. It is research led. It is playful. It twists your idea of the narrator a little, and yet it is meticulous and really quite beautiful to watch and listen to, and it made me rethink, I suppose, in my head what I conceived—even without watching one—what I might have conceived the video essay to be so when I then set out. I think it helped me understand what I could do. I could do this.

My first piece, then, was *Pan Scan Venkman*, and I think probably the first highlight then was having that accepted for publication in *[in]Transition*. It blew my mind, the idea that you know that I could make a piece of work about something that was so dear to me like *Ghostbusters*. And also about an idea I'd had for years, for, you know, 10

or 15 years this idea about this one particular scene, and to have that be something that I could create in the comfort of my own room, and put out into the world, and have other people not only accept it but enjoy it, respond to it. That that probably remains a massive highlight, simply because it was so unexpected to have any sort of response to the work.

So, you know, I started my PhD in 2019. I had my viva in February of this year. Over that period of time, there are so many other kinds of highlights, and they all get wrapped up in the process of the PhD. My PhD Is now inextricably linked with this wonderful experience of being welcomed into a videographic community of scholars getting a chance to know some of them and spend time with them and become friends with them. This amazing international group of people like Professor Keathley, who I've now met a couple of times, and, you know, is an absolute gentleman. But so many other scholars as well, who have been making this work for years. People like Kevin B. Lee and Catherine Grant. Who I was, you know, lucky enough again to meet quite early in the process of being someone who was making this work, and who was so encouraging and so generous with their time and their support.

Fast forward, I suppose to, a period where just this year past, when I'd submitted my PhD. And I was kind of in that no man's land where it's like, *it's in. I can't do anything else with it*, and I'm just waiting and waiting, and I also I haven't made anything for ages, because I've been so focused on that. And there was a video essay curation at the Museum of the Moving image in New York, and *Pan Scan Venkman* was chosen to be shown at that, and I had all the same feelings all over again. This, you know, these goosebumps, and this whole, just flood of emotion that you know this, this piece of work, which again is just personal, and is about me as much as it is about anything else to have it still be thought of, and then to have it being shown, you know, at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York as part of a showcase of thirty-some video essays, all of which are amazing.

I suppose I could bookend. They're both *Pan Scan Venkman*, which you know, which is my *Citizen Kane*. It's just there, and I'm so happy about that. But those two bookends really across the last sort of five or six years are really, really special.

TB: I recall talking with you about *Pan Scan Venkman* in Wolverhampton in 2019, at the Kathryn Bigelow event. You must have just completed it or were working on it then.

CD: Yeah, I was working on it. I was working on it for a long, long time. And this is, it's interesting. I wondered if, as I went along over the period of five years, I wondered if I would get quicker, and I haven't. It took it took such a long time, partly because a lot of this, you know, you talk to anybody who's making this work. Anybody who's making a video essay, anyone who's ever made a video essay. And it's all different. It's all process. And it's all individual. And what I find fascinating is to hear those other processes. But my own process was very much set in stone with that one piece which was, I'm going to sit with this in my head for months and I'm going to wool gather you know, there's a lot of there's a lot of research. There's a lot of gathering things. Gathering the things, gathering the books and the videos and the ephemera. But I kind of I don't really touch the editor for a long, long time. It all sits in my head for ages and ages and ages, and I kind of I think of it as like finding a shape.

All this material kind of coalesces into a shape that I can see that I can kind of grasp. And I can manipulate. And I can sense a beginning, and I can sense an end, and I can start to understand how things might work. But you know, and part of that is easy with something like *Pan Scan Venkman*, because I know the film so well, so you know it was easy to just play with that in my head. But it takes that length of time, however long, that is, months before I can sit down and finally say, *okay, now the making.*

The actual making of the thing can happen, and then it can be, it can be reasonably quick, but then reasonably quick is still generally weeks and weeks of work.

I suppose this was something that came to me a good while ago, I think. It was during my master's, and my supervisor was asking me about, you know, the creative process, because at that I was doing some sound design work. And it just it just kind of occurred to me that this is what it felt like when ideas were coming together. It felt a little bit like you had kind of an agglomeration of content, and they all sort of landed in a shape, and I always envisage a sphere like they're all coming together into this sort of this, this conceptual sphere which I think I can hold on to. I think that's the key. It's something that I can grasp. It's not scattered elements. It's not like a spider chart or something where I'm trying to trace things across. They're all kind of fitting in a way that I can hold on to this thing. And then I feel like I can actually move and start working with it.

TB: There's a direct parallel, I guess, between holding onto the shape and the tactile sort of engagement you've discussed elsewhere and in other comments about gathering different video formats for *Pan Scan Venkman*.

CD: Yeah, yeah. I think as well, it's something like, I suppose it's something like a critical mass. It feels like there's enough here to go with. Doing *Pan Scan Venkman* was one thing, doing the next one, that was even worse, because then it's like, you know: *I don't even know how I did the first one. How do I do the second one?* So, you know, then all those conceptual questions are kind of are coming out. So, I think I really leaned into it for the second and the third and I spent probably more time gathering that content until I felt like I couldn't be second-guessed. I couldn't be questioned on the quality of the research, or the thinking, or anything like that, you know. There's always a little bit of imposter in there.

TB: Did the process of gathering materials or your ideation for the *Anthropocene* piece differ from your past work? Did you do anything new for this one that you hadn't done previously?

CD: Not as such, I suppose. Like, I said, it's been a little while since I made something, and actually, that was quite nice. It's probably been about twelve months since I've sat down to make something with, you know, with a real intent behind it. If anything, I suppose my process is a little more streamlined. Part of that, I suppose, is down to teaching. I teach a video essay class to undergraduates here in the UK at John Moores, and part of that is clarifying my own process, so I can try and talk to them in a way that over the period of twelve weeks, they have a chance to do some of this themselves. It's not like my process is in any way the best. But I suppose I can break down some of the ideas that I explore in the ways I do it, and some of the ways that other people do it, and then I can kind of deliver them a little bit of a process map that they can follow to get themselves up and running. So, I think that over the last couple of years that's really helped me clarify a little bit for myself, how I do go about this. I love the Internet Archive more than almost anything.

TB: Wasn't that a nightmare when it was down?

CD: It was terrible, and it went down in the middle of my video essay class, like a day after I'd said to everyone, the Internet Archive is great.

TB: I remember discussing how disruptive that was when we talked sometime in October or November of last year.

CD: Yeah, I think that was probably just the back end of that. And it really did make me appreciate just how important it is for so much stuff. So, I love that. I always go to that. I'm a big, I suppose, in my work, I'm a big believer in that process of exploring the

broadest audiovisual archive. You know, what is out there? What did people say about this thing that I'm interested in? In this case, the Anthropocene, and all the attendant ideas that float around that. What was being said about this in the, you know, in the nineties and in the eighties and news reports, and the Internet Archive's just great for that. It's either all there, or if it's not there, well then, okay, I've exhausted a kind of a resource. Let's see what else I can find. I used it a lot, probably for this, more than I have for anything else. It was back on *Minority Report* piece, where I really came to appreciate the value of it, really, when I was finding content for that. And so, from that point on, I've always gone to that.

I suppose one of the things that occurred to me immediately was, I knew very little, if anything, about the concept of the Anthropocene other than it was a phrase that was out there. It was a thing that people talked about. So yeah, there was a lot of foundational just work just to understand that. And then different ideas take you in different directions, and a lot of those ideas die on the branch. So, I have a whole, you know, folder archive of content that didn't ever make it anywhere near the edit and yet felt super important at the time.

TB: I was really fascinated by the trailer context as the form, or at least one of the key formal elements, for this video essay. Because that is, as you say, its own shape. A trailer has a definite shape and function, and normally it primes the audience, to make them want to take part in this thing, right? I appreciated the irony of using that form for something that's dreadful.

CD: Well, thank you, because I'm glad I'm glad it worked in that way. I think the point you've just made is kind of the essential point to it. A trailer is meant to make you want to be part of that, and I suppose the irony here is, we're *already* part of this.

TB: And most of us don't like it.

CD: Most of us don't like it. Yeah, for the longest time, it wasn't a trailer, it was- well, I wasn't sure what it was. But I didn't have that trailer idea in my head until I had that first AI voice introduction. So, I'd spent a long time thinking about what that was. I'd spent a long time on ElevenLabs, which is a brilliant resource, going through all of the voices and trying them all out, and which one to me sounded like the voiceover that I wanted.

And 'this video depicts the end of the human-centred era.' That was the original text, and I had that, and I had it exported, and I had it in my editor, and it was sat there, and I was happy with it. Again, teaching comes to the rescue. I was doing an editing class, and I'd set my students a task to make a short horror trailer so they could play around with. They could play around with some ideas about editing in terms of, you know metric process, rhythmic process, and it was only when I came home after maybe the second lecture on that when we'd been talking about it, and they'd been doing some work, and I'd been seeing their edits and really enjoying what they were doing and how they were doing it. I came home and I sat down, and I played the file back to myself, and I thought, *my God. I'm so dumb.* All I have to do is change one word, and it totally changes this whole thing. It's not this *video* depicts. It's this *trailer* depicts. And then I know what
this is.

So, you know, it's those moments again. They're always there. I suppose, in a lot of ways, you have to be lucky enough to appreciate it in the time, and there's probably a whole bunch of those moments that I've missed. But luckily this one landed.

Then the form. Yeah, the form was there, because, you know, trailers are not subtle. That's the first thing. They have a very distinct process. They enjoy the idea of repetition and rhythm and discontinuity which I thought was, you know, I think when

we spoke before I started even thinking about what this would be, I probably knew it was going to be much more of a montage led piece rather than an explanatory piece, or anything like that, so that really fitted. And then, I suppose, the more I dug into what a trailer was, the more I realized that I could use some music, and I could use some text on screen and create an aesthetic around that which would fit with the trailer as well. Then I could do, of course, at the end, I could have 'coming soon.'

TB: The final stake through the heart.

CD: I know, yeah. But there are a bunch of people along the way. Like all my students, I have to thank them, because without them doing their work and doing it so well and making me keep thinking about trailers. Without that it wouldn't have landed. My young son, so he's fourteen and when I hit on the idea of the trailer I said, well, I'll have a trailer card right, I'll have an age rating. I said to him one morning, I said, 'What age rating should this be?' Because I mean it's going to be pretty violent. 'Should I make it in 18?' And he already kind of knew what I was doing a little bit. We talked about it a little, and he just, like whip-smart, just like straight away, he was like, 'well, it should be U [universal], really, because it's about everybody,' and I was like, *Oh, my God! He's so right, that's so good.* And I might have got there myself, but...

Figure 1: The ‘Universal’ rating from Cormac Donnelly’s *The Anthropocene Will Eat Itself* (2025).

TB: It’s tragic, too, in a way. At his young age, he could articulate- The concern for the future includes the acknowledgement that young people already know far more than we sometimes give them credit for, about the kind of future we have created for them.

CD: You know, I've got two boys. I always ask one of them to just watch things every now and again, partly for the purpose of reading text on screen. It's always useful to have, like, someone who has no idea what I'm trying to achieve and also doesn't know what it's about. So, they have a genuine reading experience. And they don't flatter me. So, if it's too fast, they say, ‘Dad, that's way too fast.’

TB: It’s like having a test screening service in your home.

CD: I know. It's very helpful. But I think the thing which I really loved about the trailer was, I could play around with all of the technical toys and all the sound design ideas that maybe didn't fit in any of the other work that I'd done, that would have been superfluous to any other video essay. Whereas a trailer demanded them.

No piece of audio in that is straight. Everything's been tweaked or changed in some way, just because I could, just because it wanted it. It needed it. The trailer demanded it. So, there's actually a cassette emulation where you can run an audio file through it and it will emulate a cassette player, and then you can also adjust the motor so that the motor is, you know, broken. You can adjust the playback head. So, I loaded that, and then I just manipulated the song [‘You're Dead’ by Norma Tanega] just backwards and forwards, changing all of these settings so that it just slightly broke the audio. It's the wow and the flutter of a really, really bad cassette player, which I hope will also bypass any copyright protection that Vimeo throws at it, which it might, it might not.

There were bits of this when I was thinking, well, imagine this was dug up in five hundred years on a, you know, on a USB stick, and someone plugged it into a really old computer and played it. This is this is what it would be like. It's broken and damaged, and there's glitching. And this is this is all you've got to remember us after the Anthropocene has done us in.

There's a website called Film Looks, this brilliant resource of really competitively priced, like very competitively priced, like a few dollars for just collections of glitches and overlays and film grain and scratches—all these things that are for normal purposes would very rarely get used. But for the making of a trailer are mandatory.

TB: The grindhouse quality feels motivated here.

CD: Yeah. I mean, you know, I'm a sucker for the physical aspects of our, you know media past you know I enjoy the collection of these things. I enjoy the tactile nature of them. On the one hand, the form of the trailer isn't subtle, and so, therefore you kind of feel like everything is going to be, for want of a better term, turned up to eleven. But also, I did have this kind of this instinct that here was a way to look back on something from the far distance. Let's create a new analogue now. So, let's have you know that screen aesthetic. Let's place everything on the screen.

And even that was kind of fun, because then it was playing around with, you know effects to try and bend the text, so it looked like it was on a curved screen. And you know those little things that you spend way too much time on that have only the merest impact. And yet, when I say I have fun making, those are the fun. That's the real pleasing...a little, an edit that you do that just kind of says something to you, like it sings to you when you watch it back, and it's a pleasure. It's not necessarily a pleasure in the fact that you've achieved something. It's a pleasure in the fact that it works.

In some ways, playing with what a viewer might get out of it. You know. What do they go away with? What's the thing that lingers?

TB: After watching this video essay several times, I realize the cut that most affects me each time is the introduction of graphic violence to the picture. Until that moment, it's clear that this is a dystopian subject, and we're reading depressing information about this state of the world and what we've done to it. But it's only in that moment that the literalization of cannibalization becomes clear. Then, like with any good trailer, I reinvest my attention because I know this thing is going to go somewhere I hadn't imagined. Could you talk about those decisions you made around literal or metaphorical depictions of horror and the consumption/cannibalization theme.

CD: I suppose this took a couple of turns. My original plan had been to address and connect this idea of cannibalism, and then, honestly, I had drifted off that. I was struggling to earn it. I landed on this a little while, kind of midway through working on it. I didn't feel like I was earning the end.

TB: Just to be clear, what are you defining as 'the end'?

CD: This kind of this musical sequence, moving into the idea of kind of those connections to consumption. There's, the trailer sets up, and then the trailer delivered. But I hadn't in in previous versions. I was aware that I had something, but I was aware that I also hadn't earned reaching that endpoint. Part of it was down to the fact that I'd probably just settled a little for that simpler idea of, you know, *Dawn of the Dead*, mall consumption zombie, you know. The Romero thing. I remember the first time I saw it; it really resonated with me. I was like, *oh, yeah.*

TB: It works.

CD: It totally works, but it was too easy an out for this. It was too easy an out for me to then earn the next part of the exploration. The next part of the discussion, the montage, finish, the kind of the climax, or whatever. And I hadn't really done enough to warrant that to make my audience go with me to that place. And that's, I think when I went back. In those moments I tend to always just go back to the research. It's like, *well, let's just go back. Let's go back to the research. And let's earn it by earning it*, you know.

Indeed, over a period of time of doing any research, you know, videographic or otherwise, I have come to my own understanding that if I, somewhere in my gut feel like I'm not earning it, then I do just have to go back and do more work. There's just more work. There's always more work. And I do tend to always finish a thing, go away, mull, realize there needs to be more and then come back and then fully finish a thing.

But that yeah, that that idea of, you know, the horror film and consumption. It was something that I suppose occurred to me at the point when I was thinking about the horror you know, the horror films that had popped up over the last twelve or eighteen months, where we were seeing more vampires again. This cycle of consumption seemed to be coming back round again, and it was then, I suppose, with that in the in the back of my head when I started in on the research, and I came across Kolbert's work.

And also, was it Brown? Yeah, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*, and then there were pieces like McFarland's work on ecocollapse. But then there was also a journal on Gothic horror and various other things. There were just these, I suppose, hints out there- some subtle, some not so subtle, that these connections were resurfacing, reacquainting. And that's when I when I came across *Blood Quantum*, which makes it

fully explicit from the outset. Actually, for a long time I was using a quote from that in the version I didn't earn. There was a quote where I think one of the older guys says something like ‘the earth is an animal living and breathing’ and then goes on to say, you know, ‘and this is why the dead are coming back.’

I was using that as a kind of a shortcut to get me where I wanted to go rather than earning the journey. It was kind of like, let's use this to bring me to that point, and I'll get there, and everything will be fine.

TB: ...which can be a legit way of threading your ideas.

CD: Yeah, it's totally legit. I like doing that. I like using something from the media rather than me having to signpost it and say, ‘Hey, we're going this direction now.’ But no, it didn't feel earned. It also felt a little bit like I was taking advantage of the work. It was me imposing that structure on it, rather than allowing me to be led by all of the other structure that I'd already created.

But then that allowed me to rethink a little bit and expand my ideas of about consumption into you know all of the things that were happening right that right at that moment in the real world, which, you know, didn't make it any cheerier, but allowed me to have a little bit of fun with how I presented it, I suppose.

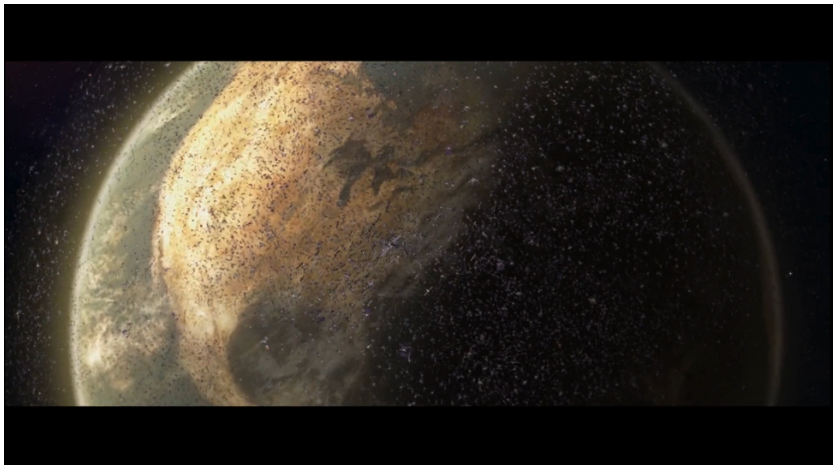

Figure 2: A shot from Andrew Stanton's WALL-E (2008) repurposed for *The Anthropocene Will Eat Itself.*

TB: Yeah, the space junk shot comes to mind. What was the source for that image?

CD: So, the end is the end is from WALL-E. That's actually the opening of WALL-E, but it's played backwards. It starts at the sun, and then it tips down and gradually gets closer and closer to the planet, and then eventually finds WALL-E, and I just took that, cut it into three sections and reversed it.

There was one piece in *The Sixth Extinction*, Kolbert's work. It acknowledges that extinction is on its way. And what's really interesting to think about is how many of those films, how many of those media objects, you know- I've just been playing a game called *The Long Dark* about survival in the post-apocalypse. I played it a lot over Christmas. The interesting thing is, there is a survivor. There's always someone, no matter, you know there's always someone there. There's always one person or multiple people. And okay, maybe when we leave them, things are probably going to go very bad, and maybe there won't be anyone after that. But there's always someone.

So, I thought, well, I want to end this with no one. I was like, *well, what do I know that has no one*? And WALL-E was the only film that I could think of, and it was a little bit of a cheat, because they're still out there. They come back. I thought, well, if I play it

backwards and just use this opening section. I don't necessarily want anyone to not recognize it, but by playing it backwards, we're leaving, you know.

We're leaving this empty planet in the way that we might have to. And this is another idea that Kolbert talks about, this idea that maybe we will leave. Maybe that's a solution.

An extended version of this conversation appears on the Caméra-stylo website.