I really enjoyed Matt Payne’s video essay ‘Who Ever Heard….?’ in the latest edition of [in]Transition (7:1 2020) and wanted to write about it for Will’s newsletter because I think the form of ‘Who Ever Heard….?’ can be useful for other practitioners. The video essay gave me particular pleasure because Matt and I were both part of the 2018 Scholarship in Sight and Sound workshop at Middlebury and it’s obvious to me how the aesthetic of the published piece, including its wit, has developed from the exercises Matt did at the workshop. Matt was already working at Middlebury with the looping and multiscreen (and humour) he has brought to such a high level of sophistication and effectiveness in ‘Who Ever Heard….?’.

In his creator statement, Matt talks of his goal being ‘to draw attention to genre repetition vis-à-vis editing repetition’ and ‘Who Ever Heard….?’ is constructed around sixteen looped 2” chunks from a scene from The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence (Ford, 1962). These sixteen looped chunks are organised in 6” units (3 x 2”) distributed across a nine-screen grid with special attention paid to the staggered superimposition of dialogue and other sound. Eight of the 6” units play just once; the rest are repeated from three to eighteen times. Here are the chunks, introduced in the sequence they appear in the video essay and numbered to correspond with the nine screens indicated in the annotated screen grab above.

1. Hallie’s rhetorical question, ‘Who ever heard of a man waiting tables?’, that gives the video essay its title and is for its creator ‘the piece's sonic and rhythmic spine’. 6” unit plays 18 times.
2. Hand picks up whip handle and cracks it down on table. This sound is timed throughout to follow like an exclamation mark Hallie’s question in 1. In fact, while the volume of chunk
1 is reduced from 3 onwards in order to foreground dialogue or other sound as subsequent units are introduced, the volume of the whip sound is maintained as a pulse until the final seconds. This can be seen in the sonic picture of the video essay below in which the tall regular verticals represent the whip sound. *Unit plays 16 times.*

3a. Valence’s sarcastic ‘Look-eee at the new waitress!’ Again, this statement is introduced at relatively loud volume and then lowered once 4a comes in. As far as I can ascertain, this procedure (relatively louder volume → relatively lower volume) is repeated throughout, with the exception of 2. *Unit plays 13 times.*

4a. Valence trips Stoddard—sound of breaking crockery and jeering laughter from Valence’s henchmen. Along with 7a, this is one of two chunks that appear to be looped in reverse as well as forwards. (In effect, this makes of 4a two distinct 6″ units that are ordered differently, with the second of the two beginning and ending with the reverse loop.) *Unit plays 11 times.*

5a. Doniphon: ‘That’s my steak Valance.’ *Unit plays 9 times.*

6a. Valence: ‘Three against one.’ Note how the strict 2″ duration of the chunks means that sound can be overlaid in a musical and absurdist fashion, as in the superimposition of ‘Three against one’ onto ‘That’s my steak Valance’, which becomes ‘that’s–my-three–against-one’. *Unit plays 7 times.*

7a. Valence turns to/from Doniphon, a chunk that is looped in reverse as well as forwards. No discernible sound. *Unit plays 5 times.*

8a. Pompey cocks his rifle. The fast click-click-click-click of the mechanism is audible but almost subliminal. *Unit plays 3 times.*

9a. Doniphon kicks Valence’s henchman. Sound of kick and grunt of pain heard only three times as this is the first unit (3 x 2″-chunk) to play just once, replaced immediately by 9b. *Unit plays once only.*

9b. Doniphon to Valence in two-shot: ‘You pick it up’. *Unit plays once only.*

8b. Stoddard: ‘Picked up!’ *Unit plays once only.*

7b. Valence plus henchmen in group shot, Valence’s open-mouthed insolent/uncertain smile (possibly looped in reverse). No discernible sound. *Unit plays once only.*

6b. Doniphon in implied reverse shot (eyeline match). No discernible sound. *Unit plays once only.*

5b. Same framing as 7b. Valence’s ‘Fresh steak on me’—for Matt, in his creator statement, a ‘charged, erotic’ remark. *Unit plays once only.*

4b. Doniphon in implied reverse shot, similar but slightly closer framing than 6b, says ‘Just try it!’ in jokey implied response to 5b. By this point, the staggered cacophony has begun noticeably to thin. *Unit plays once only.*

3b. Valence hits henchman with whip handle as they make to leave and shouts ‘Get out!’ *Unit plays once only.*

Matt describes the video essay’s looping of 2″ chunks ‘as a technical means of highlighting the kind of symbolic work that genres perform’. This seems to me persuasive, but I’m less interested here in Matt’s commentary on generic codes than in the form he has devised to expedite this commentary.

Let me contextualize and justify my emphasis on the form of Matt’s video essay in terms of the work of the French group of writers known as OuLiPo, short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Workshop of Potential Literature). Founded in 1960 to invent new literary forms and to explore constraint-based approaches to composition, OuLiPo is an important point of reference for...
parametric, algorithmic and deformative approaches to videographic practice (Mittell 2019). The ‘potential’ in the group’s name refers to the fact that the members of OuLiPo, initially at least, were less interested in writing as such than they were in developing generative structures to enable writing. An example of one of these is the cryptic fifteen-line poem form known as the ‘quennet’, named (by analogy with ‘sonnet’) for its inventor Raymond Queneau, one of OuLiPo’s co-founders. I won’t go into the specificities of the quennet here (see Burrow 2017 for a good description); the point is that the quennet form has been adopted (and adapted) after Queneau by several other poets. To some extent the ambiguous tone native to the quennet influences the ‘content’ of poems written in the form but in actuality the quennet has been put to quite diverse uses—a fine example is the ‘double quennet’ employed by Valérie Beaudouin to contrast the perspectives of patient and doctor in her ‘Body/Machine’.

In any case, what I want to suggest here is that one of the virtues of ‘Who Ever Heard…?’ is its provision of a form that, like the quennet, can be extracted and adopted for the work of other videographic practitioners. For me, ‘Who Ever Heard…?’ is an example of ‘potential videography’. It offers a form that can be put to many other uses even as its formal character—its use of repetition and its ‘Cubist’ faceting of space and time—will tend to influence the thrust of the analysis performed with it (but when is that not true of a methodology?).

I’m going to refer to the form that I extract from my analysis of ‘Who Ever Heard…?’ as ‘Payne’s Constraint’. This is a misnomer because the form is not a single constraint but really a set of constraints (actually, set of constraints’ is a good definition of form); but I hope the internal /æ/ rhyme connotes a playfulness I wish to retain from Matt’s work.

So, what is Payne’s Constraint? Well, here are the sixteen chunk-units of ‘Who Ever Heard…?’ represented diagrammatically as if on an editing timeline, with each unit given its own ‘track’. As you can see, represented in this way the structure of the video essay is revealed as an inverted ziggurat, and the number of multiples of the 6” units is easier to grasp. (I have standardised the final instance of unit 1 at 01:40 to six seconds but actually Matt truncates it at about three seconds so that the dialogue ends on his title, ‘Who ever heard…?’.)

![Diagram of Payne's Constraint](image)

This imagined timeline offers a crude schematic of Payne’s Constraint, which can be summarized equally crudely in words as follows:

- Sixteen units of a standard length are made from the one or more screen texts chosen for analysis. These units are constructed from (and divisible by) a number of multiples of smaller chunks, again of standard length. Thus, the length of these smaller chunks (corresponding to a visual or sonic motif) determine the length of the unit itself, and ultimately the length of the video essay as whole.
- The first nine units are sequentially introduced (added) on each of the screens on a 3x3 grid. The order of introduction is fixed: from left to right and from top to bottom.
• Once unit 9/screen 9 is reached, the units begin to be replaced and the screens ‘subtracted’. Units 3a-9a are progressively replaced on their respective screens by units 9b-3b (i.e., in reverse sequence). Unit 9a is played only once. Likewise, each unit 9b-3b is played only once before the unit and its respective screen disappear.
• Units 1 and 2 are not replaced, but screens 2 and then 1 disappear in sequence to end the video essay.

Note that I have omitted stipulating the treatment of sound and that I could have derived a number of further parameters from the analysis of Matt’s video essay given above. And note of course that a set of constraints like this can be followed more or less strictly—perhaps the demands of a particular analysis motivates a different order or placement of the nine screens, for example. But the key point for me is that the achievement of ‘Who Ever Heard…?’ has issued a challenge to other videographic practitioners. It says: take this form (call it Payne’s Constraint or whatever you like) and see if you can make with it, satisfying the parameters it imposes; see what can be made with it, allowing yourself to be surprised by the content it generates; and see what you can make of it, allowing the form itself to evolve and be refined.

References

Queneau, Raymond (1975), Morale élémentaire (Paris: Gallimard)

PS. I made a short abstract piece using a colour swatch and sound from a film I’m working on just to try an application of Payne’s Constraint. Here it is: https://vimeo.com/428597384.