

Top 10 Everything: WatchMojo and the Monetization of Fan Culture on *YouTube*

For much of the history of the internet, video remixes have existed at the edge of legality. The act of posting composites of copyrighted TV shows and movies online has often induced concerns over copyright infringement, resulting in these videos being removed from video hosting sites like *YouTube* (Hilderbrand 48). While remix culture was pitched as fundamentally at odds with copyright laws in the first decade of the 21st century (Lessig 85), the mid-2010s have seen media producers embrace user participation in the recirculation and repurposing of their media (Jenkins et al. 76). The liminal legality of fan-produced paratexts has also influenced the style of compilation videos, creating what Lucas Hilderbrand calls "bootleg aesthetics" (50).

Fan producers adopt bootleg aesthetics to protect their content from being removed from the *YouTube* platform. Currently, the site's efforts to curtail copyright infringement include content monitoring software Content ID. This software compares new uploads to copyrighted material that rightsholders have submitted to a database. As well, thousands of live reviewers assess material for copyright infringement and other infractions of *YouTube*'s terms of service (Wakabayashi). Yet in the past, superstitions about how *YouTube* policed their images through mysterious algorithms and crawling bots flagging videos for removal led to emerging visual and aural tactics (Atwood). Pirate users disguise media through changing pitch, adding music or distorting images with blurring, iris-ing, and tinting (Jackie-Ross Lavender; John Kroll). Fans making re-edits have adopted these tactics and developed other strategies to centralize the visibility of their fair use, ensuring their commentary was integral to the video's composition rather than relying on the video description field on each *YouTube* page. Strategies like framing the user alongside the original video they are commenting on in 'reaction-

style' videos, inserting intertitles or introductory segments, or quick cuts are elements of the genre of compilation video that make visible the claims for commentary. For these compilations, bootleg is both an aesthetic and a technical affordance.

Remixes and bootleg aesthetics are not exclusively a fan or even a cinephile practice, nor are they synonymous with low-production values. Video artists such as Candice Breitz have introduced remix and bootleg aesthetics to the art gallery with pieces such as *Her* (1978-2008) which featured a compilation of actor Meryl Streep's performances. Video essayists have built the special features commentary into a stand-alone genre, attracting interest from film festivals and cultural institutions (Lavik). Art galleries and film festivals are highbrow exhibition spaces, but, as a host for user-generated videos with little barriers to entry, *YouTube* exists outside these boundaries of good taste. Remix videos are part of a gift economy, where fans trade labour within a brand community for recognition from official and unofficial gatekeepers of the fandom (Jenkins et al. 62). Yet, not all remix videos are gifts. On *YouTube*, online video compilation makers such as ScreenRant (2014-), Looper (2015-), and Canada's WatchMojo (2007-) appropriate the bootleg aesthetics of fan viewing, yet comply with the interests of copyright holders, transforming a previously oppositional relationship into one of cooperation. WatchMojo's ubiquitous Top 10 videos have contributed to the consolidation of fan practices as dominant ways of viewing. Video content creators like WatchMojo have helped democratize the creative space of *YouTube*. However, by masking the interests of rightsholders as opportunities for cinephiles to share in fan viewing practices, WatchMojo ultimately undermines fan participation in a reciprocal gift economy and returns control of fan practices to media corporations who assert ownership of pop culture.

Taste and Remix: fanvids, video essays, and compilation videos

Film clips serve a similar function to what Gérard Genette in his work on the paratext calls the note. For Genette, a paratext is media that guides a reader's entry into the text (2). Titles, headings, and prefaces are all paratexts that frame our access and understanding of the text. In particular, the note is a paratext that is situated within the text, navigating the reader away from and then back to a specific part of the document. As Genette writes, "the original note is a local detour or a momentary fork in the text" (327).

through a text. By leading viewers on guided tours of moving images, video remixes create arguments and observations. These commentaries take many forms, from comparative analyses of cinematography made by established filmmakers to highlight reels from DVDs rereleased by rightsholders (Rappaport; "Tarzan"). Fans make their own utilitarian videos such as "Top 20 Guest Stars on Friends" to illustrate points about favourite actors, favourite films or sequences (Ono Ramírez). Channels such as ScreenRant and Looper produce compilations of film clips that rank sequences based on categories like "Every Quentin Tarantino Film Ranked Worst to First" or "10 Movie

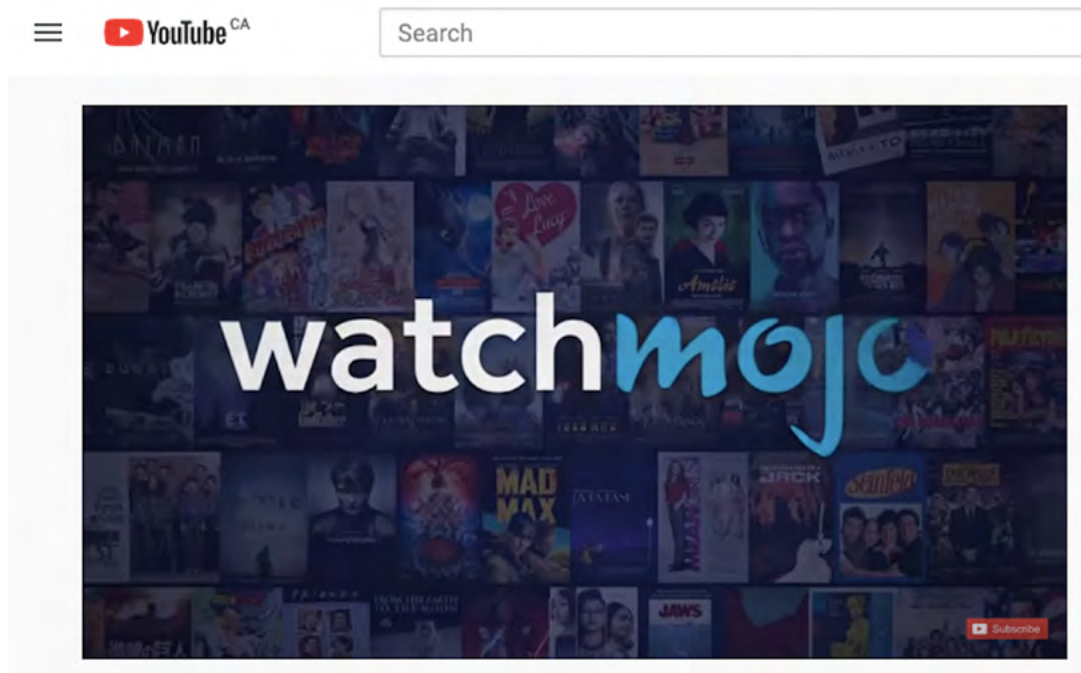


Figure 1. WatchMojo is a Montreal-based video compilation creator whose top ten videos are hosted on YouTube.

In a text, the note provides clarification, elaboration, or argument, from critics or the author, asking the reader to understand the text in light of a new layer of information. While it may seem intrinsically tied to the written form, the note can be compared to the isolated film clip, or film moment (Brown 78). Like the location-specific note, a film clip navigates the viewer to one particular point in the film text, casting aside the film's totality for the exemplary moment. The film clip emphasizes a particular edit, composition, or gesture, drawing attention to the film moment that is distinct from yet connected to the original. Edited together, film clips both point to specific locations in the film, and reflect intertextually on each other.

Detours and forks through other film clips are the substance of video remixes, as images are manipulated and juxtaposed to diverge from the familiar pathway

Mistakes that Slipped Through Editing." *YouTube* presents professional and amateur videos side by side, mingling together videos that use authorized and pirated forms of copyrighted media on their homepage and each user's recommendations sidebar. Distinguishing between video essays and compilation videos is a question of taste. Having grown out of fanvids and cinephile culture, both remix subgenres share the bootleg aesthetics shaped by earlier questions of access, copyright, and the technical limitations of online video sharing. The video essay has graduated from the DVD special feature to become a high-brow product with considerable Bourdieuan cultural capital (Bourdieu 2). For scholars like Andrew McWhirter, the video essay is esteemed as an important evolution in direct, visual, and complex film criticism, taking over the spirit

of intense textual engagement that enraptured film critics in the 20th century (McWhirter 369). On the other hand, compilation videos by producers like WatchMojo are unabashedly for the mainstream masses, and thus perceived as low culture; the content creator identifies their videos as reaching out to a millennial male audience that cultivates pop culture knowledge as a pastime ("WatchMojo Advertise"). Video essays are heralded as art, remix videos are part of Lessig's counterculture, but compilation videos are advertised as mass market. Yet, these videos are remarkably similar in content and their engagement with audiences through fan viewing practices. At stake is whether the audience is small, niche, and marginal, or mass, general, and dominant.

Producing a steady stream of content that viewers flock to, WatchMojo has professionalized user-generated content and fan tactics into a cohesive, corporate identity. With over 22.2 million subscribers in 2020, making it one of the highest-subscribed channels on *YouTube*, WatchMojo bills itself as "an original video pioneer of the long form top ten format" ("About WM advertise"). The channel posts five new videos each day. Over 10,000 videos, with titles such as "Top 10 Most Paused Movie Scenes" and "Top 10 Crazy Rules WWE Stars Are Forced to Follow" are available to view ("Advertise @ WatchMojo"). One expression of fan tactics is the cult mode of viewing, which seeks out paratexts that create, as Hills suggests, "endlessly deferred narrative" within the universe fans are attached to (142). For Hills, fans are essentially marginal, positioning themselves, their objects of interest, and their intense patterns of endless watching against dominant culture (22). However, WatchMojo's success demonstrates that a fan mode of viewing that is oriented towards the detouring paratext and intense bouts of viewing is no longer a marginal experience, but a dominant and growing pattern of reception.

Video essays are sometimes called compilation videos, but although both genres are part of remix culture, WatchMojo's body of work would never be confused with the video essay. However, video essays, it can be argued owe their recent circulation to relationships forged by content producers like WatchMojo with rightsholders. The creator known as Roman Holiday, named by *Sight & Sound* as a top video essayist in 2017, chose hosting platform *Vimeo* as the home for "Title Drops," a 7-minute collection of clips from 150 films (Lee and Verdeure). This video, identified as a compilation video by *Slate*, is a stripped-down composition, where rapid-fire clips cut together actors speaking the title of each film and a single,

introductory title card gives context for the significance of the remix (Berman). As a paratext, the video creates a detour through the film canon, depending on a viewer's familiarity with children's films and Hollywood classics alike. If fans demonstrate mastery through complete knowledge of their fan object, "Title Drops" invites fans to show off this knowledge as it races through eighty years of film history (Hills 74). In fact, WatchMojo's channel features a similar 2015 video called "Top 10 Movie Title Name Drops." While WatchMojo's careful relationship with rightsholders may no longer be a prerequisite for the continued online presence of their videos, their legitimization and assimilation of fan aesthetics has helped ensure that high-profile compilations like "Title Drops," can appear on *YouTube* (*Slate*, "Title Bout").

Amid this permissiveness toward compilations of



Figure 2. WatchMojo's compilation video about films with title name drops gives credit to each film's distributor.

copyright images like video essays, *YouTube* is taking steps to limit the viability of user-generated media on its platform. New rules that restrict monetization of even highly-viewed videos for accounts without demonstrated regular viewers mean that individual producers are having what little money they receive for their participation in pop culture stripped from them, pushing them to rely on the goodwill of the gift economy ("*YouTube*"). WatchMojo has cautiously obeyed copyright, ensuring their continued existence on *YouTube*'s unreliable archive in a way that the fan video producers who inspired their success cannot.

WatchMojo and Fan Viewing

WatchMojo emerged in 2006 as a standalone video content producer with their own site, WatchMojo.com,

but in 2007 transitioned to using *YouTube* as a host. The earliest WatchMojo videos were eclectic, with content such as local Montreal sporting and fashion events, medical myths, travel advice, original skits, and, of course, “top ten” countdown compilations. Videos from a semi-professional group of contractors featured a patchwork of low production values, hesitant hosts, and a constant rotation of various series and sets. Due to the relatively short length of videos restricted by *YouTube*’s upload size, these videos were portioned into clips of two minutes or less, with not-yet-standardized best-of lists and Top 10s presented as a series of single entries. Although most videos were how-to guides for subjects as diverse as public speaking and diamond buying, the first series uploaded in April 2007 was a proto-Top 10, “Wonders of the Modern World” (“Guide to Diamonds”; “Tips for Public Speaking”) Although not explicitly called a Top 10, the divided, sequential format of the top ten translated well to the hosting limitations of *YouTube*.

Even in their early days, WatchMojo videos demonstrated careful respect for *YouTube*’s terms of agreement and copyright policies. Top 10 videos avoided copyrighted material. Movie reviews showed talking heads in a white or black studio setting, punctuated with press stills rather than clips (“Review of JARHEAD”). Emphasizing original content rather than appropriated clips, WatchMojo was attentive to the boundaries of copyright as part of their business model. At the time, CEO Ashkan Karbasfrooshan saw the future of WatchMojo as a video library with the potential to license products to other media companies (Kelly). To build a video library to which they unquestionably owned the rights, the content producer needed to walk the line between bootleg aesthetics and respect for rightsholders.

As they walk that line, WatchMojo videos give the impression of sharing credit between rightsholders and fan contributors. In 2011, WatchMojo established their current Top 10 model: a voiceover counts down a top ten in a given theme within a single video of 6 to 15 minutes in length, featuring clips from each film narrated by disembodied voiceovers. By 2013, each clip credited the distributor of the images (“Top 10 Superhero Movies (2012)”; “Top 10 Epic Movie Cameos”). In addition, descriptions on *YouTube*—as in “Top 10 Epic Movie Cameos”—can include shout-outs to Watchmojo.com users who submitted themes that inspired the final video. Registered on WatchMojo.com, users submit their Top 10 themes to be voted on by other members on the website. However, the vague criteria for Top 10s hides the limiting factor of

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copyright that determines which user-submitted lists are ultimately made into WatchMojo videos. Just as licensing permissions made the creators of fanvids and recuts wary of litigious rightsholders, copyright dictates WatchMojo’s “Top 10” content.

In a 2016 FAQ webpage for potential licensees for countdown videos, WatchMojo clearly state that they control “global rights for all platforms” and that they “own[ed] the content on the site” (“Corporate Licensing”). In the 2010s, WatchMojo focused on creating branded content for media companies (“WatchMojo Advertise”). Both video content and the contexts in which Top 10s are shown are tailored to create encounters between the viewer and client brands (“Advertise @ WatchMojo”). As well as “tagging” brands in video descriptions, pre-roll, and, the content creator produces “targeted and relevant video content” that includes the brand’s products in related video Top 10s (“Advertise @ Watchmojo”). In 2018 Paramount and Nintendo were listed as some of the “Brands We Work With” by WatchMojo, with corollaries in videos like “Top 10 Nintendo Switch Games that Look Promising” (“WatchMojo Advertise”). Professionalizing bootleg aesthetics, WatchMojo Top 10s distinguish themselves from user-generated content with slick graphics and narration by voice actors. The aesthetics remain, but the liminal legality that enforced bootleg tactics have disappeared: as part of their professionalization, WatchMojo has established brand partnerships and licensing permissions that formalize their access to the films and media products they profile.

On *YouTube*, WatchMojo and user-generated content are coterminous, linked to each other to create a seamless cult experience of intense and detail-oriented watching. The click-through patterns of viewing made possible by *YouTube* have transformed the intensity of fan viewing practices like the film marathon into the mainstream practice

of idle binge watching; indeed, the recommendations function is what drives prolonged viewing rather than direct searches (Solsman). WatchMojo attributes its success to the fact that fan practices are mainstream, proposing to advertisers that capturing the clicks of the fan viewer means capturing a massive share of *YouTube*'s audience. In 2018 advertising materials, WatchMojo explicitly identified their viewer as a fan user: the "super fan audience built under the radar" ("WatchMojo Advertise"). Audiences watching fan-produced content on *YouTube* could be diverted with a single click to licensed content whose commercial interests were flying under the radar. Initially, WatchMojo pitched potential licensees on capturing this click-through binge-viewer, creating residual value for existing media content (Karbafrrooshan). In this model, sheer quantity of media and breadth of subject matter cast a wide net for the viewer clicking "randomly" through *YouTube* (Karbafrrooshan). Yet, by 2011, WatchMojo had begun to identify the kind of "organic viewing time" the *YouTube* platform encouraged with fan behaviour, renewing their focus on a trivia-invested viewer and the Top 10s ("WatchMojo Advertise"). The changing description of their audience within WatchMojo's marketing materials suggests that they had identified the supposed randomness of viewing patterns on *YouTube* as, in fact, the spread of fan-oriented viewing practices. Rather than encouraging any particular fandom, the professional content creator served up a format that appropriated fan behaviour to create a service for interchangeable brands.

In compilation videos, opportunities for advertising are packaged for the audience as criticism, clarification, and fan viewing. While fans are usually focused around a particular object—whether a franchise, character or actor—WatchMojo and other similar content creators engage with multiple fan objects in an attempt to interest as many groups as possible. They enlist fan labour through their website to generate Top 10s, seeking legitimacy through fan recommendations and, more recently, even feature member voiceovers for their videos (WatchMojo, "Top 10 Crazy Rules..."). For video content creators and the brands they partner with, fandom represents a dominant way of interacting with media that is paratextual and transmedial. In the past few years, media rightsholders have embraced fans and fan labour instead of copyright enforcement (Jenkins et al. 62). As Jenkins et al. cautioned, this welcoming of fan labour has created an uneven gift economy, where fans receive little reward either creatively or

financially for their dedication. Fanvids initially tested the limits of copyright enforcement in the gift economy, and were often struck down from *YouTube* as violations of copyright. Compilation creators like WatchMojo created the Top 10 market only after they had established there was an audience for remix videos, following the emergence of intense fan viewing practices like binge-watching as an identifiable pattern on *YouTube*, and as rightsholders began to see the value of spreading their brand across media (Jenkins et al. 24). Convincing rightsholders of the profitability of the residual redistribution of their media for fans, WatchMojo has benefitted from and shaped the relaxation of the enforcement of copyright on appropriated images.

As paratexts, WatchMojo videos sit alongside a wider body of remix videos that adopt bootleg aesthetics and reflect fan labour given as part of a gift economy. Yet, Watchmojo's videos are far more visible than fanvids or video essays because of their legitimate relationship to rightsholders. While video essayists claim their work falls within exceptions for commentary and fair use, rightsholders continue to assert ownership of appropriated images. The ability of fan producers to distribute their remix videos remains subject to goodwill and good luck. Watchmojo, however, has safeguarded their library through reciprocal relationships with rightsholders. Like many fan practices, bootleg aesthetics have become mainstream, professionalized by content producers like WatchMojo who have taken them out of a gift economy and transformed them into a remix genre that reflects dominant modes of viewing.

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